



● DAVID BOWIE UNDER REVIEW
1976—1979: THE BERLIN TRILOGY
85 Mins
MVD

Comprising the albums *LOW*, *HEROES* and *LODGER*, Bowie's Berlin phase of hard drugs and avant garde compositions either rate as one of his most interesting personal and professional periods (collaborations with Brian Eno, producing the classic Iggy Pop albums *LUST FOR LIFE* and *THE IDIOT*) or his most mystifying and dull, if, like a later generation you fell under the chameleon's spell during his "Let's Dance" phase and thought that "China Girl" was a great single (it's actually an old Iggy song). For those of us who grew up with David during the 1970s, his seemingly endlessly evolving wardrobe of personas matched our own rise (and fall) from childhood to the various stages of adolescence and beyond; from the heady let's-play-dress-up of Ziggy and the Spiders and the dark glam of *Aladdin Sane*, through the cold soundscapes of *Low* and the Berlin period; through punk and post punk and the *SCARY MONSTERS* album of 1980 (*CK*). As the promotion for *LODGER* stated, "there's punk, there's post-punk, and then there's David Bowie." Whichever phase you most identified with, or have the greatest affection for (there's a subtle difference there), the period of 1976—1979 certainly rates as one of true significance: as the commentarians on this disc agree, without these three discs—particularly *LOW* and *HEROES*—ambient music would not have entered popular consciousness, at least for many years.

Unfortunately, despite—or perhaps that's in spite—of all this, *DAVID BOWIE UNDER REVIEW: 1976-1979* turns out to be a particularly turgid example of the "Under Review" series, filled with pretentious and downright silly (Mark Prendergast), to opinionated and facile (Paolo Hewitt), to intelligent and thoughtful (ambient composer/musician David Toop) commentary. This is where the *UNDER REVIEW* series, and some associated documentaries like the *Zeppelin* one reviewed below) are hit and miss; it really depends on the quality of the "experts" enlisted to put the subject at hand under review. Example: Prendergast on the song "Sound and Vision" from the album *LOW*: "Most of it is sound; I mean, like it's a textured soundscape" (duh! The disc has just spent the last half hour stressing the ambient aspects of the album and the fact that a number of the cuts started life as works-in-

progress for Bowie's proposed soundtrack for the Nicholas Roeg film, *THE MAN WHO FELL TO EARTH* [1976], in which he starred). Hewitt, a renowned fashion/style expert who used to write some of the most demanding postmodern criticism in the *New Musical Express* in the early '80s, on the other hand, mumbles a largely nonsensical load of expletive-filled bollocks, and some of the other contributors were badly recorded when videoed and could do with subtitles.

Another problem with this series is the paucity of archive footage and the lack of quality of what there is. Since these are clearly low budget documentaries, the sparse footage is probably public domain and usually second or third generation in source (I don't want to suggest bootleg, but...). Still this Bowie doc has a nice snippet of David performing "Heroes" on the Bing Crosby Christmas Show from 1977 (the whole performance would have been cool, as would the clip of Bowie and Bing dueting on "Little Drummer Boy") and some live material from a German studio I've never seen, amongst others.

Verdict: there's a great documentary in here waiting to get out, but if you can wade through the verbiage, there are some interesting nuggets for both the curious and the Bowie die-hard.

- [\\$17.99 at Amazon](#)