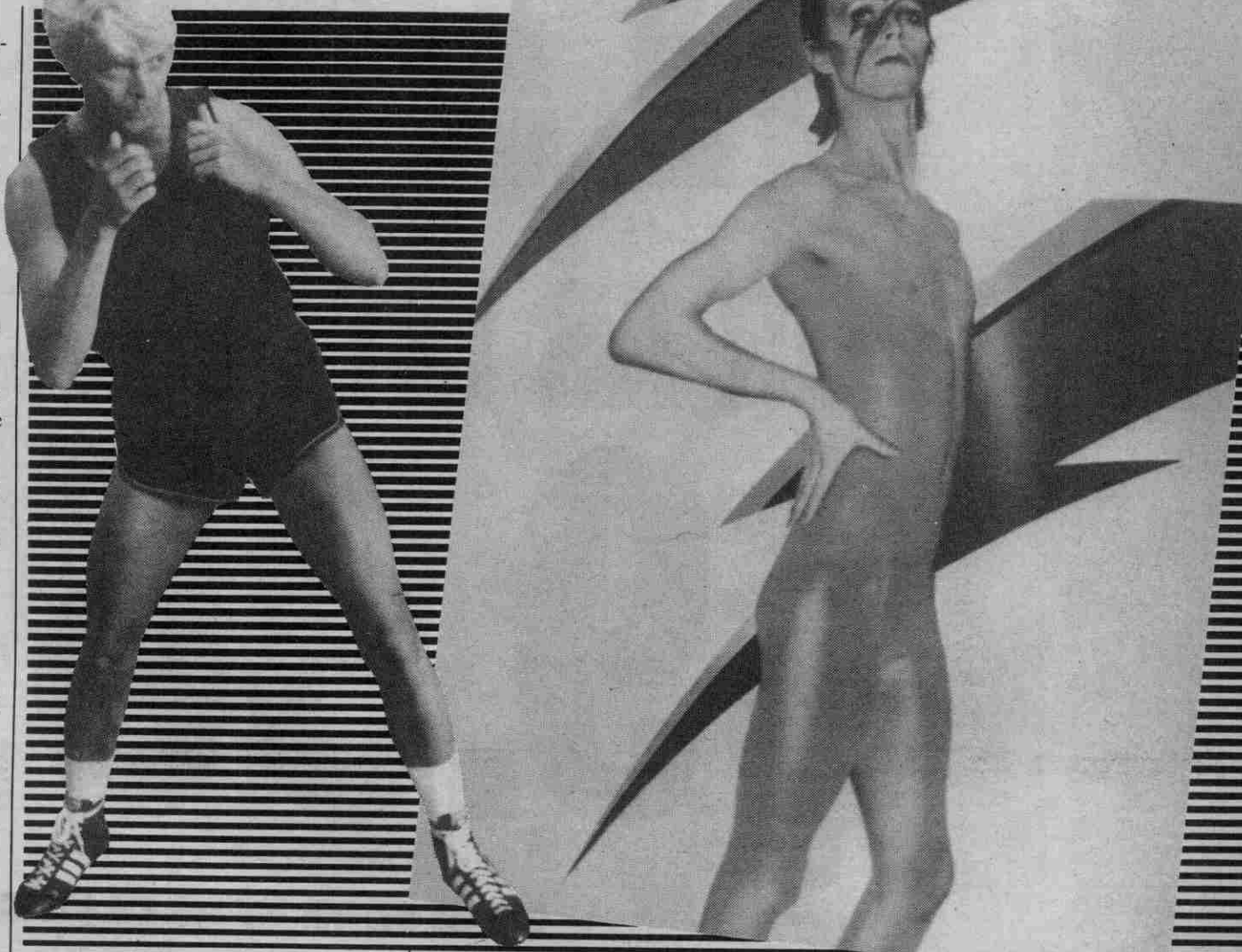


Disappointed fan Alan McGinty speculates on what's behind the "new" David Bowie



The scene on September 3 was by then a familiar one for me. Thousands of bodies packed together in the summer heat, waiting for the band, jostling for better positions, getting high. But this one was special, for it held the added excitement of a superstar. After a brief set by Rough Trade, it was finally time to realize one of my minor fantasies — seeing Him in person.

"Ladies and gentlemen," screamed the emcee as the band took their positions, "David... Bowie!" A thunderous roar rose up from the 60,000 people packed into Toronto's CNE stadium.

Naturally, the show was flawless. And seeing Bowie there at last in person made me look back over my own experiences with his music and image. I'd loved Bowie's music when I was in high school and had been intrigued by the fact that he seemed to "get away with" being gay. I must admit that at the time I was frightened by the prospect of being seen by my peers as identifying with him too closely. After all, I wasn't gay — it was just a phase, right? But as the years passed, it became abundantly clear that this was no phase. By the time I was 18, I started being more aggressive about liking everything about Bowie, especially his "style." I always felt oh-so-liberated when I'd casually endorse his gayness and strangeness during my frequent discussions on music and musicians. When I finally stumbled out of the closet last year, Bowie was still there, staring coyly from the cover of the *Scary Monsters* album.

Imagine my shock, then, at my gay hero's "new" image, which emerged last spring with the *Let's Dance* album and tour. In the May 12, 1983 issue of *Rolling Stone* — the one with the cryptic cover that read "David Bowie Straight" — he told us all that "The biggest mistake I ever made was telling that *Melody Maker* writer that I was bisexual. Christ, I was so young then. I was experimenting...." This revelation prompted the smug interviewer to state authoritatively: "So he's not gay, whatever he may have blurted out in 1972. Nor was he ever a transvestite, thank you."

It would be sheer speculation to try to determine why David Bowie would choose to reject his earlier homosexuality and sexual ambiguity. What makes this rejection most difficult to understand is that it seems so unnecessary. Bowie had already made it in a very big way in spite of — if not because of — his gayness.

Whatever Bowie may be saying today, it cannot be denied that he was indeed perched on the cutting edge of the sexual revolution and the whole wave of questioning sex roles that marked the early '70s. Through the vehicle of his music, Bowie flaunted an alternative lifestyle in the face of the mainstream middle classes of the Western world.

While rock musicians had always tended to bash the establishment and stretch the limits of parental approval, Bowie played this part to the extreme. His "role" of Ziggy Stardust was the pinnacle: Ziggy, the ultimate rock star, obviously gay. It was in the midst of the Ziggy years that Bowie, at the age of 25,

made his celebrated "bisexuality announcement," and it was after that that he and his band adopted dyed hair, make-up and odd clothing as a trademark. It was also then that Bowie was including the "electric blowjob" in his act. This little routine saw David fall to his knees in front of his lead guitarist, grasp his ass and simulate cocksucking for the enjoyment of his audience. Although Bowie claims that he never went on stage in full drag, he did produce a couple of album covers in drag, or showing facial shots of him in very heavy and feminine make-up. And he was in full drag again in at least one video — "Boys Keep Swinging." This song's lyrics weren't gay, but feminist, noting that men have a distinct advantage over women in our society. Bowie performed most of the song in a suit and tie with a macho air, but in full drag in each of the three choruses, where he takes off his wig and smears his make-up. This was apparently too much for the British public, who saw the video aired on the BBC's "Top of the Pops." Sales of both the single and *Lodger*, the album it was from, plummeted after the showing, and *Lodger* went on to become known as a flop.

With the 1980 album, *Scary Monsters (and Super Creeps)*, Bowie retreated to simple "weirdness," shying away from any analysis of sex roles or sexuality. The album produced two hit singles worldwide and was a great success.

But the earlier theatrics, combined with Bowie's powerful and stylish brand of rock, saw to it that every aware teenager and rock fan in North America

knew what David Bowie was all about. There can be no question that for thousands of sexually confused kids like me, trapped in middle-class suburban high schools, Bowie provided a welcome relief from the steady diet of macho hard rock that defined (and still defines) cool for the high-school set. Not only was Bowie a rock-and-roll rebel, he was a sexual rebel. Given his widespread appeal, he was no doubt the first exposure many teenagers had to an alternative lifestyle and sexuality.

With all this in mind, we are left to wonder why the "new" David Bowie felt he had to deny his homosexuality (or bisexuality, anyway) to *Rolling Stone*.

If one looks closely at the *Let's Dance* album and "Serious Moonlight" tour, there seems to be a well-thought-out, if horribly cynical, rationale at work in Bowie's "heterosexuality announcement." He made it just before the North American portion of the tour commenced, and probably did it to put the heterosexual masses at ease so that the maximum number of tickets could be sold. Bowie himself admitted that the tour was designed to make money, and as much of it as possible. And there's plenty of evidence in the album that Bowie has straightened himself out, the most notable of which would have to be the song "China Girl," with its clearly heterosexual lyrics. The video for this song removes all traces of doubt: it includes a scene with a naked David Bowie (a first, apparently) fucking his "China Girl" on the beach.

Yet, in his film roles, from *The Man Who Fell to Earth* in 1976 to the current

Merry Christmas Mr Lawrence, Bowie seems not to have sold out to get mainstream approval. That is to say, he hasn't chosen typically straight Hollywood leading-man roles, but ones that are filled with sexual ambiguity.

So: we are left completely perplexed. David Bowie eschews his bisexuality for the rock audience, which had already shown in previous years that it was OK by them, and then he fails to take a clearly heterosexual stand in his motion pictures, which would seem the logical place to want to remove all doubt. The vast majority of movie roles, and the novels from which future movies — especially "popular" ones — might be drawn, require heterosexual characters. Especially perplexing if one assumes that Mr Bowie wants a long and prosperous film career, which is a reasonable assumption.

As I mentioned before, one can only speculate as to exactly why David Bowie is doing what he's doing, since he seems far from ready (or willing) to tell us. It's possible that this is just another change in his chameleon-like public persona. Could he merely be trading on ambiguity once again? Is he simply trying a new twist in his old game of keeping the public guessing?

Only David knows for sure. But let's hope that's it. For us Bowie queens, it's just too depressing to think anything else. □

Alan McGinty, who works as a clerk at Toronto city hall, is an avid follower of the British music scene.