

David Bowie Syllabus

Course Title: David Bowie: Glam Rock's Starman

Course Description: David Bowie defined British glam rock by combining an ever-changing extraterrestrial visual image with flashy hard rock, introspective songwriting, soul, electronic experimentation, and more. After “Space Oddity” marked him as a singer and songwriter determined to explore exotic territory, he rose to stardom with his Ziggy Stardust character. Then he moved into soul and eerie futurism with songs like “Young Americans” and “Heroes” before his biggest smash with 1983's “Let’s Dance.” This course highlights his peak fifteen years of his creativity between the late 1960s and early 1980s, the historical commentary amplified with both common and rare video and audio clips.

Week One

David Bowie in the Beginning: The Mid-to-late 1960s

Born David Jones in London in 1947, Bowie releases a half dozen flop singles and a flop album, moving from rock to theatrical Anthony Newley-styled music and back to rock. In mid-1969 his most impressive composition so far, “Space Oddity,” becomes a Top Five UK hit, although he’s still unknown in the US. But Bowie’s second album doesn’t sell well and he’s still virtually unknown in the US.

Week Two

David Bowie at the Beginning of the 1970s

With much encouragement from producer Tony Visconti, he moves toward a harder rocking direction with his 1970 album *The Man Who Sold the World* a diverse set of cerebral hard rock, in which his combination of theatrical pop and forceful rock truly takes off for the first time into something both impressive and with a distinct personality. His 1971 album *Hunky Dory* is more piano-oriented and less hard rock-oriented than *The Man Who Sold the World*, and has more of the campy androgynous flavor that would help define his glam image. Although it isn’t a hit, it attracts lots of positive critical notice, helps continue to build his underground following, and includes some songs that will become very popular, like “Oh! You Pretty Things” and “Changes.”

Week Three

Rise to Superstardom in the early-to-mid-1970s

Bowie's 1972’s *Ziggy Stardust* album, a quasi-concept record about the rise and fall of a star, it makes him a superstar in his home country, combined with concerts where he unveils his new orange spiky haircut and sci-fi-flavored glam costumes. He consolidates his British superstardom and glam-rock style with 1973’s *Alladin Sane*, but unexpectedly

announces a retirement at a July 1973 concert in London. Soon after the retirement announcement, Bowie's back at work, and 1974's *Diamond Dogs* builds his growing stardom in the US.

Week Four

Bowie in the Mid-1970s

Bowie gets into soul music by recording at Philadelphia's esteemed Sigma Sound Studios, and 1975's *Young Americans* album includes the hit title track and the hit "Fame," co-written with John Lennon. The 1976 album *Station to Station* has the hits "Golden Years" and "TVC 15." He takes his first and best starring role in 1976's *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, portraying an alien with some similarities to the characters he'd assumed as a rock star over the previous few years.

Week Five

Bowie in the Late 1970s

Moving to Berlin, Bowie immerses himself in electronic rock. Brian Eno plays keyboards and synthesizers on the first of what is often called the Berlin Trilogy, 1977's *Low*, some of whose songs don't even have vocals. Eno is also a prominent contributor to 1977's *Heroes*, which is somewhat more accessible than *Low*, in part because of the inclusion of the title song. He moves in a somewhat more mainstream direction with his final 1970s LP, 1979's *Lodger*.

Week Six

Bowie in the Early 1980s

In 1980, *Scary Monsters* gains widespread critical acclaim, retaining some of his electronic feel but adding more accessible songwriting than his Berlin records. "Ashes to Ashes" gives him a #1 UK hit, as a kind of downbeat sequel to "Space Oddity." After winning good critical notices for his starring role in the Broadway production of *The Elephant Man*, Bowie issues his biggest-selling album with 1983's *Let's Dance*. His most dance-pop-friendly effort, it includes four big hits with the title track, "China Girl," "Cat People," and "Modern Love."