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David Bowie taught us to be daring, dedicated

By Jeff Miers, Pop Music Critic



David Bowie performed a sold-out show on May 25, 2004, at Shea's Performing Arts Center.

What a final act.

On Jan. 8, his 69th birthday, David Bowie released "Blackstar," a dark and beautiful masterpiece, and one of the strongest albums in his nearly 50-year career. On Sunday, he died peacefully, surrounded by his family.

No one outside of his inner circle knew that Bowie had been battling cancer for 18 months. As he did consistently in his art, Bowie faced the end of his life with dignity, grace and bravery. He did it all on his own terms.

The floodgates opened immediately on the announcement of his death via Bowie's Facebook page. Tributes were everywhere on social media, for, as the official statement suggested, "many of you will share in this loss." Yes, it's hard not to feel that a light has gone out in our lives.

If we loved Bowie's music and lived with it – some of us for decades, through countless changes in the broader culture and in our own lives – then we know too well what that music meant. Bowie granted us the right to be daring, to be rebellious, to be transgressive, to be wholly dedicated to the ideals of artistic and personal liberation and reinvention. If we were artists, Bowie's work gave us the permission to pursue our visions with confidence, and demanded we be vigilant when it came to protecting those visions from the corrupting influence of homogeneity.

Bravery was the guiding light in Bowie's art, and he rarely slipped, rarely made a move that was not dictated by a pure artistic impulse, rather than a commercial one.

Like Bob Dylan, he invented himself at the outset, and like Dylan, he shed successive skins as he moved through his career, killing off commercially successful iterations and challenging his audiences to keep up with his remarkable reincarnations, time after time after time.

He started as essentially a rather twisted British music hall act. He became a psychedelic folkie in the post-beat tradition; invented a dark and knotty version of prog-rock and birthed glam-rock as Ziggy Stardust. He threw it all away to be reborn as the self-anointed king of blue-eyed soul and then teamed with fellow mavericks Brian Eno and Tony Visconti to craft the template for alternative rock, electronic and ambient music and synth-pop on albums like "Station to Station," "Low" and "Heroes."

He did all of this in his first decade as an artist.

Bowie's biggest commercial success came in the 1980s with the arrival of the tanned, elegantly coiffed and athletic "Let's Dance" character, but this incarnation was no more the "real" Bowie than was the orange "Spaceman Mullet"-adorned Ziggy. Bowie didn't plan on staying in that place for long, for atrophy was his greatest enemy. (See the "Tonight" and "Never Let Me Down" albums, which represent the only time Bowie repeated himself, and failed.)

The 1990s would find Bowie in a vital act of reinvention that would sustain him through the very end, beginning with the formation of the unjustly maligned art-punk ensemble Tin Machine, as Bowie rather gleefully confounded expectations across the span of two studio recordings and one live collection.

Post-Tin Machine, with albums like “The Buddha of Suburbia,” “Outside .1” and “Earthling,” Bowie would integrate aspects of industrial music, electronica, trip-hop, jungle and drum ‘n’ bass, all filtered through his own impeccable art-rock prism.

From that point forward, Bowie never let up. The albums “Hours,” “Heathen,” “Reality” and “The Next Day” boasted vitality and inventiveness, suggesting that Bowie had no intention of going quietly, or with anything even vaguely resembling desperation. He seemed incapable of running out of ideas.

While all of these latter-period Bowie works were either masterpieces or close to it, when “Blackstar” hit the ether on Jan. 8, it seemed that they were merely inspired preamble for an album that surely sits among the handful of his very, very best. I noted in my review that “‘Blackstar’ trades in bravery, of the sort that involves staring into the abyss, and risking failure by demanding excellence of a new and adventurous variety.” The depth of that bravery is now poignantly apparent, for Bowie was battling cancer when he made the album. The lyrics to the heartrending “Lazarus” now take on an elegiac tone: “This way or no way/You know, I’ll be free/Just like that bluebird/Now ain’t that just like me?”

To list the artists influenced by Bowie would be too daunting a task. Better to suggest that anyone making rock or pop music in the post-Bowie world who is not influenced by his work hasn’t been paying attention and should be ashamed of themselves.

In popular music and rock, Bowie’s only real peers were the Beatles. He has an analog in the world of jazz, Miles Davis, a man who, like Bowie, embraced change with a relentless stoicism, and altered the course of music several times in a career marked by consistent artistic integrity.

Bowie’s brilliant career proved repeatedly that rock music could be high art; that it could take influence and find inspiration everywhere and from anyone; that the narrow, separatist view of musical genres and idioms was for losers who lacked vision; that the only limitations on the artist were those imposed from the outside, and that these limitations should never be acknowledged; that the artistic imagination conquers all.

Even death.