

‘I’ll be Your Mirror’: The Velvet Underground as the legacy of Ziggy Stardust

Martin James and Johnny Hopkins

The rock critic Lester Bangs stated that ‘[m]odern music starts with the Velvets’ (Richman 2012), while Brian Eno once jokingly told an interviewer in 1982: ‘I was talking to Lou Reed the other day and he said that the first Velvet Underground record sold thirty-thousand copies in the first five years ... I think everyone who bought one of those thirty-thousand copies started a band!’ (McKenna 1982)¹. Popular histories initially sought to reduce the Velvet Underground’s messy emergence to a one-dimensional, heroic and celebratory master narrative, through identifying a teleological progression, from great creative visionaries to great events. Eno’s comment seems to hold some semblance of truth, with an MGM royalty statement showing sales of 58,476 copies² in the first two years of release (Gold 2013). It also echoes similar claims made for notable historical events such as the sparsely attended but culturally significant Sex Pistols gig at the Manchester Lesser Free Trade Hall in 1976, and as such denies the complexity of the creative networks that created the space for the Velvet Underground as a cultural artefact. Eno implies that the impact of the band’s debut album was relatively rapid, though in truth the force of its impact wasn’t felt until many years later. Indeed, it was with the emergence of punk that many artists publicly noted the importance of the Velvet Underground. But their initial discovery had been less of the band themselves, than of David Bowie’s performance of the Ziggy persona performing the Velvet Underground. For Bowie’s own fandom Ziggy’s performance of the band thus became a simulacrum – more real than the real thing (Baudrillard 1994). Indeed, the wider, post-demise popularity of the Velvets can be viewed as a legacy of Ziggy, which in itself was an expression of Bowie’s own commodified fandom. Ziggy in other words was his own answer to Warhol’s Pop Art, as a musical (per)form(ance) that embraced its own processes of

commodification and was created with a limited shelf life - the popstar as a can of Campbell's soup.

This chapter explores both Bowie's pre-fame 'discovery' of the Velvet Underground and his use of the band's mythology in the creation, adornment and performance of the Ziggy Stardust character. We show his attempts at performing subcultural capital (Thornton 1996) through the early recording of 'I'm Waiting for the Man' and the inclusion of the song in his live shows from late 1966, prior to the release of *The Velvet Underground and Nico*, through to mid-1967. We then explore Bowie's role as both 'productive consumer' (Jensen 1992) and 'cultural intermediary' (Bourdieu, 1984) in the production of the Velvet Underground as 'taste culture' (Bourdieu 1984). Bowie achieved this through adopting the identity of the objects of his fandom and subsequently associating them with his own assumed identity. In fandom terms Ziggy became the religious icon (Whyton 2014) through which Bowie performs the cultural and subcultural capital (Bourdieu 1984; Thornton 1996) gained through associations with, immersion in, and performance of the objects of his own active fandom (McCormick 2017). This commodifying process brought the Velvet Underground out of the shadows of rock authenticity into the artifice of pop culture that ultimately led to a generation of fans discovering the band. Bowie then performed the role of cultural intermediary through the performed identity of Ziggy Stardust long after the New York band in its original, authentic form had ceased to exist.

The Velvet Underground as Bowie's Biography

In late January 1971 the still relatively unknown David Bowie attended a Velvet Underground show at the Electric Circus on St. Marks' Place in New York. Reflecting on this Bowie (2004) stated that as the self-proclaimed 'biggest [Velvet Underground] fan in the

UK', his first experience of the band live found him 'at the front by the lip of the stage' making 'sure that Lou Reed could see that I was a true fan by singing along to all the songs'. The venue itself was steeped in Velvet Underground mythology having been the location for some of Andy Warhol's Exploding Plastic Inevitable happenings throughout 1966. For Bowie the fan, the setting couldn't have been more perfect. After the show he tells how he went backstage, knocked on the dressing room door and '[a]fter a few gushing compliments' asked if he 'could have a few words with Lou'. He enjoyed a ten-minute conversation with the singer before he 'left the club floating on cloud nine — a teenage ambition achieved'. It was only later he realized that Reed had already left the band and the singer he sat on a bench talking to was in fact Doug Yule who had replaced Reed as band leader.

By this point the Velvet Underground's flame appeared to be flickering to an end. Press reactions to their self-titled third album were not entirely positive and the fourth, *Loaded* (1970), was at best dismissed, at worst ignored. Any early hype around the band had dissipated, record sales had been disappointingly low and now Reed, the creative songwriting force and figurehead, had gone. The Velvets' position as an elite force of *avant-gardist* countercultural activity seemed over and, but for the Reed-less fifth album *Squeeze* (1973) - essentially a Doug Yule solo album - they were a spent force.

The timing of Bowie's first and only experience of the Velvet Underground live and the mistaken identity that followed is significant. On returning to England Bowie willed that meeting with Reed into existence by penning his Velvets homage 'Queen Bitch'. *The Melody Maker*'s Michael Watts (1972) wrote that the song 'takes off to a tee the Lou Reed vocals and arrangement, as well as parodying, with a storyline about the singer's boyfriend being seduced by another queen, the whole Velvet Underground genre'. When Bowie launched his Ziggy Stardust persona live at Aylesbury Friars (15 July 1972) in front of fans and the UK and US media, the set included his New York trilogy from side two of *Hunky Dory* ('Andy

Warhol', 'Song for Bob Dylan' and 'Queen Bitch') alongside covers of 'I'm Waiting For The Man' and 'White Light/White Heat'. After the Friars gig Bowie hurried back to London to catch fellow Velvet acolyte Iggy Pop, one of his other heroes/charges, play with the Stooges at the Kings Cross Cinema (Rock 1995: 33). Bowie's self-elected role as a tastemaker meant he became a key cultural intermediary in the Velvet Underground's slowly emerging post-demise popularity. In becoming the messenger through cover versions, the Velvet-inspired 'Queen Bitch' and via his production of Reed's breakthrough 1972 solo album *Transformer*, the mainstream positioning of the Velvet Underground was mediated in the early 1970s through Bowie's own biography, including through his fetishization of New York as a mythological space that he would eventually call home - and where he would ultimately die.

Key to Bowie's status as a cultural intermediary was his questionable claim to have been the first artist to perform and record covers of the Velvet Underground's 'I'm Waiting for the Man' before *The Velvet Underground and Nico* had even been released. At a time when the first wave of rock aristocracy had embraced the peace and love ethos of mid-1960s psychedelia, the Velvet Underground appeared to redefine the frameworks of 'authenticity' in rock. Sonically they achieved this through a blend of disparate and seemingly oppositional styles that to the outsider appeared to capture the essence of the drug-fuelled hedonism of Warhol's Factory. Lyrically their celebration of drug abuse, sado-masochism and prostitution made the Beatles' LSD experiments appear relatively tame. Reed's explicit accounts of inner-city street life and social decay offered a voyeuristic description of life that would never be seen along 'Penny Lane'. To the British rock fan, the Velvet Underground's dystopian art-rock offered access to distant urban exotica existing in a world that was inaccessible to all but Warhol's New York art elite, in a city that appeared wholly alien. It was outsider music from which its audience were excluded, themselves forever outsiders from the Warhol inner circle.

Popular history suggests that Bowie was first introduced to the work of the Velvet Underground via an acetate of the yet-to-be released debut album (Pitt 1983: 61). Bowie's manager Ken Pitt had been in New York in November 1966, when former assistant Marian Fenn offered him the chance to meet Warhol through her friend Denis Deegan, who Gerard Malanga says 'knew just about anyone who was anyone on the planet. A true catalyst' (Malanga 2020). Pitt was keen to meet Warhol and on 10 November Deegan told him Warhol wanted to come to London with his new rock'n'roll group the Velvet Underground. Pitt was asked if he could facilitate this (Pitt 1983:60). Pitt and Deegan visited the Factory later that day where they met with Warhol sat beneath a huge yellow banana suspended from the ceiling. He also spotted Nico sat at typewriter who he remembered from being around during the Bob Dylan UK tour in 1965 for which he handled PR (Pitt 1983:60). For Pitt 'the most significant aspect of my visit to the Factory was my meeting with Lou Reed and being given an advanced acetate copy' of the Velvets debut 'banana' album (Pitt 1983:61). After his return to London on 16 December he handed the record to Bowie along with a Fugs album (Pitt 1983:70). However, there is some suggestion that Pitt may have given the acetate to Bowie at a slightly earlier date. According to Bowie his band the Buzz played 'I'm Waiting for the Man' as an encore at their last gig on 2 December 1966, stating 'not only was I to cover [a] Velvet's song before anyone else in the world, I actually did it before the album came out.' (Bowie 2003). However, in a 2002 interview Bowie's memory of the chronology of his performance of the song is further confused: 'I got Riot Squad to learn it in the week I got the album before it was out. We were doing it onstage before the Velvets had an album out.' (Du Noyer [2002] 2020: 68)

Despite Pitt's claims to have introduced Bowie to the Velvet Underground, it is likely he already knew of the band. In the 1960s a transatlantic network existed through which countercultural and music knowledge readily flowed. (Bockris & Malanga 1983; Unterberger

2009; Hopkins and James - chapter 2 - in this collection). This network included professional services of management, promotion and record labels, and significant countercultural spaces and events inhabited by key bands, artists, poets, journalists, business figures and fashionistas from the London and New York undergrounds. The underground US rock press (e.g. *East Village Other*, *The Village Voice*) was easily available on import in specialist UK shops. The UK's underground press (e.g. *International Times*) and John Peel's radio show were also sources of transatlantic music news. Richard Williams, who wrote the first UK review of *Velvet Underground and Nico* in the *Nottingham Guardian Journal* explains: 'I had a music column in a page called 'The Younger Set' that appeared each week in the *Nottingham Guardian Journal*. This was a daily, then soon to disappear; perhaps leading a page with an ecstatic 600-word review of the VU and Nico helped it on its way to oblivion. But no one tried to stop me (Williams 2020). In further explaining how he first became aware of the band, he outlined how:

I read about the VU in the *East Village Other* (John Wilcock's famous piece) and *The Village Voice* (Richard Goldstein). These publications came, amazingly enough, to a bookshop in Nottingham, called *Bux*, where one could also buy *City Lights* volumes and the works of LeRoi Jones and Che Guevara ... So as soon as the album came out... I got hold of one. Disappointed that EMI had dispensed with the US gatefold and its peelable banana but only slightly so because everything else about it was so stupendous.

Bowie too was locked into the underground presses of the UK and the US as a regular attendee of many of London's subcultural spaces, and so is likely to have already been aware of Warhol's Pop Art, the Factory scene and the Velvet Underground. Like most people in the

UK, hearing the debut album would have been his first real experience of the band. Bowie was able to accentuate his subcultural capital by drawing attention to the fact he heard the album before most other people. 'Everything I both felt and didn't know about rock music was opened up to me on one unreleased disc... This music was savagely indifferent to my feelings. It didn't care if I liked it or not' (qtd. in Gilbert 2017: 34). Bowie's reaction made Pitt even more determined to bring Warhol and the Velvets to London, wondering: '[w]hat if they formed a mutual appreciation society, with Warhol and the Velvets singing David's praises in America?' (Pitt 1983:70).

Interestingly the work of Reed and John Cale had already inadvertently touched Bowie some six months earlier thanks to his long-standing admiration for the UK R'n'B act Downliners Sect. In 1964 he'd been in Davie Jones and the King Bees, with Downliner Sect among the band's influences (downlinerssect.com). That influence was audibly taken forward to his next two bands The Mannish Boys and Davy Jones and the Lower Third, both of which criss-crossed Downliners Sect on the UK gig circuit throughout from 1964-6. By early 1966, at the instigation of the music publishing company Campbell Connelly, Downliners Sect were including the song 'Why Don't You Smile Now' in their set. Attributed to Reed, Cale, Philips and Vance it was the product of Reed's period as a songwriter for the Pickwick record label; it was also the first song Reed and Cale collaborated on. Reed had demoed 'Why Don't You Smile Now' on 11 May 1965 at Pickwick Studios, Long Island, with Terry Philips producing in a recording session also including the song 'Buzz, Buzz, Buzz' and two early takes of 'Heroin'. Downliners Sect released 'Why Don't You Smile Now' on their April 1966 *The Rock Sects In* album. That Campbell Connelly had pushed the song towards Downliners Sect raises the question of whether they pushed other Reed or Reed/Cale songs to British artists. Interestingly, the Reed, Philips, Vance and Sims song 'You're Driving Me Insane'

performed by The Roughnecks was publicized as '[t]he sounds of England' despite actually being Reed and Pickwick session players.

After hearing the Velvet Underground via the acetate, Bowie's subsequent recordings have interest from a production perspective but as songs they were less than auspicious. On 13 December Bowie recorded 'Please Mr Gravedigger' at the Decca Studio 2 with producer Gus Dudgeon. Bowie had previously recorded a different version of the song two months earlier - then called 'The Gravedigger' - at RG Jones studio. Only the lyrics remained intact from that version. A month later on 26 January 1967 Bowie and Dudgeon began the first of four days of recordings across two months, with 'The Laughing Gnome' and tracks destined for Bowie's debut album. While both 'Please Mr Gravedigger' and 'The Laughing Gnome' show producer and songwriter employing found sounds and pitched tape loops in performances of *musique concrète* juvenilia, the latter is often regarded as one of Bowie's song writing low points. However, 'The Laughing Gnome' can also be viewed as his first of many attempts to 'match the drone of the Velvet Underground's 'I'm Waiting for the Man'' (O'Leary, 2015: 67). Carlos Alomar who appeared with Bowie live and on recordings from the 1970s to 2000s suggests simple chord structure in the song reflected his love for the Velvets: 'the same pulsation' exists in both 'The Laughing Gnome' and 'I'm Waiting for the Man' (qtd. in *David Bowie: Finding Fame*, 2019)

A month after completing the recording of 'The Laughing Gnome' Bowie secretly joined the Waltham Forest act Riot Squad. He had been label-mates with an early incarnation of the band through his deal with Pye, but they hadn't come into contact with each other until August 1966 when David Bowie and The Buzz supported Riot Squad at The Marquee Club in London. When Bowie joined Riot Squad he was waiting for his Anthony Newley-esque eponymous debut album to be released and didn't have a band to perform with. As he was

contracted to Deram he was forced to perform under the assumed name Toy Soldier, which he also used when the band were featured in the 8 July issue of *Jackie* magazine.

The Riot Squad were similarly in a state of stasis; their producer, Joe Meek, had murdered his landlady and subsequently committed suicide on 3 February 1967. They felt the need to move their sound in a new, more psychedelic direction, and having unsuccessfully auditioned numerous singers, bandleader Bob Evans suggested Bowie as a temporary solution. Evans offered him the job when the pair met in March at the Denmark Street La Gioconda Café. (Ceriotti n.d.). During approximately twenty-five gigs between 17 March to 2 May, Bowie encouraged the band to start wearing makeup and introduced theatricality to their shows, contributing three originals to the band's repertoire; 'Silly Boy Blue', 'Little Toy Soldier' and 'Silver Treetop School For Boys'. He instigated covers including The Fugs' 'Dirty Ol' Man', Frank Zappa's 'It Can't Happen Here' and a rendition of the as yet unreleased 'I'm Waiting for the Man'. O'Leary (2015) suggests that due to the locations of the Riot Squad gigs in towns like Harrow and venues such as London's Tiles Club, the Riot Squad dates with Bowie can be viewed as the birth of glam rock. Certainly their stage show drew on the performance of ambiguous sexual identity with Bowie's misunderstanding of the lyrics to 'I'm Waiting for the Man' resulting in a high camp comedy mime. At the start of the performance Bowie would set about painting the band's faces with the intention of unlocking latent homosexual tendencies. In response the band would move around the stage following each other 'in close contact' (*David Bowie: Finding Fame*, 2019). An unsophisticated performance of fluid sexual identity that was more *Carry On* than Jean Genet perhaps, but an early example of concepts that Bowie would return to with greater impact in the next few years.

The extent to which Bowie misunderstood Reed's lyrics became even more evident through the demo he produced with Riot Squad. After Bowie had convinced Gus Dudgeon to

let the band use downtime at the Decca 2 studio in London, they recorded four tracks on 5 April from 10 pm to 12 midnight. These songs included Bowie originals 'Silly Boy Blue', 'Silver Treetop School for Boys', 'Little Toy Soldier' - which featured liberal lifts from 'Venus in Furs' - and a version of 'I'm Waiting for the Man'. The underwhelming results were an 'exercise in cross-Atlantic sonic dilution' (O'Leary, 2008). Despite claims that this was the first recorded cover of a Velvet Underground song, the recordings remained unreleased until 2013 when Acid Jazz released the Riot Squad songs on the *Toy Soldier e.p.*. In fact the first commercially distributed covers of the Velvet Underground material emerged in April 1967, one month after the album's US release and contemporaneous with the Riot Squad's recording, when Dutch band The Riats released a single with versions of the Velvets' 'Run Run Run' and 'Sunday Morning'. Around the same time an American band called the Electrical Banana are reported to have released a version of 'There She Goes Again', recorded in a tent in Vietnam while on service in the US Army, though only a limited number of copies were pressed (Pyro, 2014).

If Bowie's recent career had been notable for his convincing appropriation of Anthony Newley's exaggerated cockney twang, then on his Riot Squad experiments he expertly showed his mimicry also extended to Reed's New York city drawl. Bowie's vocal on 'Little Toy Soldier' seems a shameless attempt at imitating Reed's deadpan enunciation. Even more shameless was Bowie's blatant steal from 'Venus in Furs' in the chorus, again delivered as a close impersonation of Reed, with the verses appropriating Newley's singing style. It was a performance of confused and duelling identities with the present Bowie already grappling with his future self. The major shift however can be heard in the lyrical content, which features a little girl called Sadie, a toy soldier and whipping - all of which is festooned with sound effects including cackles, whipcracks and creaking springs which descend into

whoops, explosions, shattering glass, coughing, and, just as in 'Please Mr Gravedigger', a loudly blown nose.

Bowie's claims to have recorded 'I'm Waiting for the Man' before its release may have been, therefore, a classic case of self-mythologising largely unquestioned by Bowie's numerous biographers (Sandford 1996; Trynka 2010; O'Leary 2015 etc.). *The Velvet Underground and Nico* was released in the US on 12 March 1967, the same day as Riot Squad's Bob Evans had met Bowie at La Gioconda Café and almost a month before the band recorded their version (although the Velvets album wouldn't get a full UK release until the following November). What is clear though is that Bowie's 'discovery' of the band was before the album's release. The most significant impact on Bowie at this time may have been that the Velvets eventually saved him from a career as a mainstream entertainer. Bowie was covering popular songs from film musicals in 1965 and 1966 with his band Davy Jones and the Lower Third and also when Pitt first met and saw Bowie perform with the Buzz in April 1966 (1983:51).

Following disastrous sales of his debut album Bowie was dropped by Deram. By 1968 he was thinking of giving up music to become a dancer (Reynolds 2016: 89) and joined mime artist Lindsay Kemp as part of the touring *Pierrot in Turquoise*. Bowie played the part of 'Cloud' and augmented his mime with folk renditions of songs from his debut album. His next project was the mixed-media trio Turquoise (later Feathers) who debuted in September 1968. Mick Farren, who painted backdrops for Kemp, claimed that the mime artist's scene was as outrageous as Warhol's Factory. 'If you wanted to hang out (with Kemp's scene) you had to learn heavy manners. And David came in, learning moves. He was clearly learning a lot – mutating.' (Trynka 2010: 81) The songs Bowie wrote following his mixed media experiments with Feathers presented more evidence of the influence of 'I'm Waiting for the Man'. An early 1969 home demo version of 'Conversation Piece' reveals a similar

metronomic two-chord propulsion in the verse with first person lyrics discussing urban alienation and suicidal thoughts. By the time he re-recorded it for the *Mercury Demos* with John ‘Hutch’ Hutchinson it had been transformed into a Dylan influenced folk song in keeping with the rest of his pre -‘Space Oddity’ set.

Despite Pitt’s suggestions that he’d pushed Bowie towards the aesthetic of the Velvet Underground’s New York, it would appear his protégée was also attracted to the New York of Simon & Garfunkel, as evidenced in the demos ‘Life is a Circus’ and ‘Lover to the Dawn’ (later released in a fully reworked form as ‘Cygnet Committee’). Alan Mair, bass-player in the Beatstalkers (and later the Only Ones) was managed by Pitt at the same time as Bowie and the two became friends. Mair (2019) confirms that the Velvets sound ‘was the direction that Ken Pitt had been encouraging him towards during the 60s’ although Bowie didn’t fully deliver on Pitt’s hopes until the arrival of Ziggy Stardust in 1972.

The Myth of the First Live Performance of a Velvet Underground Cover Version

Bowie’s role as it developed into the 1970s can be understood by viewing him as a cultural intermediary of the Velvet Underground, with the band a ‘taste culture’ that is filtered according to positions of power and influence within particular ‘fields’ via layers of subcultural gatekeepers. Bourdieu defined taste-makers as cultural intermediaries that operate at the intersection of culture and economy and define what is good and bad in the marketplace. They perform key roles in the production and promotion of consumption through the construction of legitimization, authentication and value. The notion of the cultural intermediary is drawn from Bourdieu’s (1984) work on the ‘new occupations’ that marked out the post-1960s socio-economic landscape. Bourdieu (1984) presents cultural intermediaries as a group of tastemakers and need merchants in an economy that requires the

production of consumer tastes. For Bourdieu taste acts as a common ground that brings people and goods together and enables that taste to become situated in those goods. He argued that a new economy came into play that not only required the production of goods, but also the production of needs. This entailed an 'ethical retooling' of consumer culture that 'new class fractions' (1984) in society pursue. Bowie's performance of the role of tastemaker enabled him to work at the intersection of culture and economy. He performed critical operations in the production, promotion and consumption of particular artists as a construct of good taste, in the process constructing legitimacy and adding value to the artists he promoted and his own art and consumer goods (Matthews and Smith Maguire, 2014: 1).

As previously noted Bowie claimed to have first performed 'I'm Waiting for the Man' as early as December 2, 1966. Mick Farren also claimed to have performed the earliest Velvets cover with his proto-punk band the Social Deviants. Bowie seemingly learnt the Velvet's songs from an album acetate, but Farren's covers were of the versions of tracks from demo tapes that circulated in the UK in the two years prior to the album's release (Bockris and Malanga, 1983; Hopkins and James - chapter 2 - in this collection). However a band with a potentially stronger claim would be original mods The Yardbirds who were also a huge influence on Bowie. The Yardbirds connection cannot be underestimated as they were early cultural intermediaries key to Bowie's own developing cultural capital. Bowie, whose 1965 Manish Boys single 'I Pity The Fool/Take My Tip' included Page sessioning as lead guitarist, would cover two Yardbirds tracks 'I Wish You Would' and 'Shape of Things' for his 1973 covers album *Pin-Ups*. Following the huge US success of 'For Your Love' The Yardbirds embarked on a tour of the USA. According to drummer Jim McCarty they first came across Warhol when he was nearly refused entry to their record company reception in New York at the end of their first 1965 tour (Platt *et al* 1983: 78). Rhythm guitarist Chris Dreja noted that on their second 1965 tour they were 'pretty soon met by the current "in-crowd", notably the

Warhol clan. It was very bizarre; you'd arrive at a restaurant and discover Warhol and his entourage would be at the next table' (Platt *et al* 1983: 85). However, as McCarty reflected '[w]e always kept ourselves largely to ourselves.... [the NY scene] was a bit like meeting the Devil and being invited to join the Inferno' (Platt *et al* 1983: 85).

Unlike both Pitt and Bowie, The Yardbirds experienced the original Velvet Underground live, with bassist Chris Dreja taking photographs (Platt *et al* 1983:131-133). Just a few days after Pitt's Factory visit and about a month before Bowie heard the aforementioned acetate, The Yardbirds played with the Velvets in Detroit at Dick Clark's *Caravan of Stars* festival on 18 and 19 November 1966 (McCarty 2018; Platt *et al* 1983). McCarty notes that during the Yardbirds' extensive tours of Britain and the USA, 'we heard new music from new bands, and sometimes it registered with us' (2018:164). For The Yardbirds the 'highlight' of the [Detroit gigs] 'was the opportunity to learn a new song that would soon be appearing in our repertoire' (McCarty 2018:166). That song was 'I'm Waiting for the Man' and while McCarty (2019) confesses now that 'I wasn't crazy on the Velvet Underground, though they were 'interesting!'", he does concede that "'I'm Waiting for the Man' was a good song with 'street cred'". As documented on the *Last Rave-Up In L.A.* (1979) bootleg, the Yardbirds were still playing the song at the Shrine Exposition Hall in Los Angeles on 31 May 1968, one of their last gigs before Jimmy Page redefined the band as the New Yardbirds, a precursor to Led Zeppelin. McCarty (2019) concludes by saying that: 'We did meet Lou when he came to our LA show, and he was very impressed we played that song'.

The Yardbirds saw the Velvets play again at *The World's First Mod Wedding Happening* also in Detroit on 20 November, an event promoted by Motown publicist Allan Abrams (Cosgrove 2016: 86). Warhol gave away the bride with the entertainment at the reception including a Velvet Underground performance (McCarty 2018:164). As a further

example of the transatlantic cultural collision between darkest New York and Swinging London, the 'Mod Wedding' was a central feature of the three-day November 1966 *Carnaby Street Fun Festival* in Detroit.

When director Michelangelo Antonioni was making *Blow Up* (1966) his film about a hip young British photographer (based on David Bailey) he had wanted to feature the auto-destructive live performance of the Who in a club scene but they turned it down. The Velvet Underground were under serious consideration to step in, both because their vicious sound matched Antonioni's brief and the film company, MGM, owned the Velvets' label Verve. However, the cost of bringing them to the UK for filming was proving an issue (Fricke 1995:17) and Yardbirds manager Simon Napier-Bell instead negotiated the deal for his clients. It is intriguing to imagine what would have happened if the quintessential New York group the Velvet Underground had appeared as the live band in the quintessential Swinging London film.

The Velvet Underground as Ziggy's legacy

Bowie's fans expressed their fandom not only through their appreciation of the artist himself, but also through knowledge of his antecedents (such as Scott Walker, Jacques Brel and the Pretty Things). As Bannister (2006) notes: 'Such awareness of the past was (at the time) subversive. Unlike today... the 1960s were virtually unheard, a kind of secret.' (81) Bowie used his cultural and subcultural capital as subversive elements in his own self-creation. In so doing the artists he outwardly referenced and who informed his music and performances were subsumed into the Ziggy character as a piece of Pop Art. Bowie's attraction to the Pop Art of Warhol made perfect sense. Indeed in many ways the Ziggy Stardust creation was in itself a piece of Pop Art; one that aimed to challenge the elitist notion that 'real art' was somehow

separate from daily life and commerce. This romanticism was also central to the countercultural rock industry in which musicians were able to deny the commercial nature of the products they created through the illusion of authentic artistry that permeated the rock industries. This illusion was further endorsed and mediated by so-called 'golden age' music critics such as Lester Bangs, Jim DeRogatis, and Richard Meltzer who were implicit in propagating the illusory nature of rock-art over pop-commerce. These writers emerged through non-professional, highly ideological fanzine presses and structured their work in line with the interests and language of fans. In so doing these rock critics 'valorized authenticity and originality, and developed a mythologized account of rock musicians that considered their work as art' (Atton 2009: 53).

This implied division between the authentic artist and the commercial pop star was embodied in vinyl formats. Pop was animated via the 7-inch single - the life blood of the radio DJ, fuel for the charts and the product favoured by younger teenagers and, perhaps more significantly, female music fans. The 7-inch format drove the communal nature of subcultural engagement by encouraging public sharing. Following 1967's concept album *Sgt Peppers' Lonely Hearts Club Band* rock music increasingly prioritized private over public listening (Wald 2009). Rock music's serious nature was supported by notions of concept, cover art that might not feature the artist and performances that exaggerated the distance of authentic 'real' art. The serious art of rock aimed for a timelessness that transcended the fads and fashions of commercial taste. Pop music on the other hand celebrated style, artifice, commerce, disposable fashion and the star. Ziggy Stardust was created with a short pop life. It was the Ziggy moment in which influence and history collapsed into a performance of the Ziggy present. Ziggy as a product was defined by its own defined obsolescence, at the hands of its own consumers; a product that contributed to the wider growth of glam rock and spoke to fans through the medium of television. In 1971 91% of British homes had a television,

meaning that the ‘glam rock generation was the first to be socialized during a period when television, with its emphasis on the image, was pervasive and taken for granted. It was the first generation to be able to watch, as a mass, both working-class and middle-class, its rock performers on *Top of the Pops* and *The Old Grey Whistle Test*.’ (Stratton 1986: 16)

Bowie’s ‘coming out’ television performances as Ziggy performing ‘Starman’, which many have suggested was their own awakening to Bowie (Jones, 2012), personified the transition from folk artist to glam rock star, a performance discarding the authentic, real and remote of rock art to the artifice of the image driven, disposable and commercial works associated with Pop Art. Ziggy was the product of Bowie’s study of Warhol; and in many ways Bowie’s vision was more aligned with the mass consumption aesthetic of Pop Art than that of the Velvet Underground. Warhol’s suggestion of bringing Nico into the band and his infamous peel slowly and see banana cover were an attempt to provide the Velvets with Pop Art’s celebration of commodification. In truth the band’s aesthetic was initially more closely associated with the exclusivity of the avant-garde, the high culture of great poets and the elitist, counter cultural ethos of the Factory.

The Ziggy Stardust product also celebrated Pop Art’s connection to high camp to a greater extent than the Velvet Underground’s oeuvre did. As Stevenson notes: ‘[c]amp exhibits a relish for exaggeration, artifice and androgyny. It depends upon a playful rather than a serious disposition as well as the “victory” of “style” over “content”, “aesthetics” over “morality”, of irony over tragedy’ (Stevenson, 2006: 51). Bowie’s high camp, pop subcultural turn was an exaggeration of Pop Art’s own exaggerated camp. Lou Reed may have written the songs but it took the arrival of Ziggy Stardust to turn ‘I’m Waiting for the Man’ and ‘White Light / White Heat’ into Pop Art.

Bowie’s early embrace of the potential of these two songs³ meant that they would ultimately become central to the Ziggy Stardust mythos, despite the fact that he never

released his own versions of any Velvets material until 'White Light / White Heat', on the *Ziggy Stardust: The Motion Picture* live album in 1983. As Ziggy, Bowie cut another version of 'I'm Waiting for The Man' with The Spiders from Mars in January 1972 for early Velvets supporter John Peel's BBC show. 'White Light / White Heat' was recorded twice for the BBC with The Spiders. A third recorded version that had been slated for Bowie's *Pin Ups* collection was dropped, though Mick Ronson revived the recording for his solo album *Play Don't Worry* (1975).

The BBC sessions and live performances of the Velvet Underground's material again locate Bowie as a key cultural intermediary of the New York band's mythology. However, just as 'Queen Bitch' had shown Bowie writing himself into the Velvets' story, Bowie's 1970s patronage placed them in the centre of his own myth creation. Having finally met the real Reed in September 1971, Bowie hosted Reed's first UK performance. Reed's eponymous debut solo album had been released three months earlier to critical ambivalence. In this album Reed attempted to reclaim the Velvets' crown by releasing a set dominated by new recordings of unreleased Velvet Underground material. By the time of Reed's live debut as part of Bowie's show at a Friends of the Earth 'Save The Whale' charity event (8 July 1972 at the Royal Festival Hall), Bowie the student had usurped Reed the professor. Following a rendition of the Velvet's influenced 'Moonage Daydream' Bowie introduced Lou Reed to his stage and together with the Spiders they performed 'White Light/White Heat', 'I'm Waiting For The Man', 'Sweet Jane', as well as Bowie's 'Suffragette City'. The photographer Mick Rock, who had struck up a creative relationship with Bowie that grew from a shared love of the Velvets, took defining photos both of Bowie as Ziggy and later of Reed for the cover of *Transformer*. He gave an intriguing insight into the dynamics between Bowie and Reed at the Royal Festival Hall show, stating 'David never did join Lou at the mike [sic]. He completely turned off his charisma and became part of the backing band for

Lou. He respected Lou more than any other rocker: “Lou Reed is a master. He’s messed-up, but he’s a master” (Rock 1995: 28).

Only five months later Reed released the Bowie produced and Ronson arranged *Transformer* album, in which Reed’s New York became fetishized by Bowie’s New York gaze. ‘Vicious’ sounded like Reed performing Bowie’s idea of the Velvet Underground, while ‘Satellite of Love’ was Reed as Bowie within an arrangement worthy of *Hunky Dory*. Lou Reed and the Velvets were thus subsumed into Bowie’s performance of Ziggy. When fans of Bowie found the Velvet Underground it was as an aspect of his performed identity, and not the Velvets as an entity unto themselves. Yet for many Bowie’s consumption would become a gateway to an authentic discovery of Reed and the band. For example, Douglas Hart, the original bass player in The Jesus and Mary Chain, discovered the Velvets through his elder brother’s love of Bowie (2019). Many fans would define the late discovery as a moment of epiphany. Vic Godard of Subway Sect outlined how:

I first heard them through being a Bowie fan. I used to buy bootlegs in Kensington Market and Bowie often did ‘Waiting for the Man’ and ‘White Light/White Heat’ in his live set in those days. Around the same time I heard Lou himself on the radio doing ‘Waiting for the Man’ and was immediately stunned. It was like everything you wanted to be on a record and no extraneous flab. It was comparable to hearing the Kingsmen doing ‘Louie Louie’ after knowing it by the Kinks, or hearing a Chuck Berry song after an English group’s version (2019)

Another example is the experience of Phil King of Felt, The Servants, Lush and later The Jesus & Mary Chain, who draws parallels between his and Bowie's experience as fans:

The first thing of note I remember reading was an article in a short lived music magazine called *Music Scene* - titled “BOWIE Superstar Who’s A Fan At Heart” - from 1972. It was just before Lou Reed’s *Transformer* was released. It had some fantastic colour Mick Rock images of Bowie, Lou Reed and Iggy Pop and in the piece it said that “Lou Reed is to Bowie what Chuck Berry was to The Rolling Stones... Bowie has released Lou Reed’s work from the greedy clutches of the esoteric underground circles which first hallowed his name.” (King 2019)

Bowie’s performance of Velvet Underground songs also became a key tool in enabling him to step away from the defined obsolescence of Ziggy’s disposable Pop Art into the artistic permanence celebrated in rock ideology. While Ziggy drew the disposable artifice from the Pop Art connotations of the Velvets’ work, Bowie later used them to underpin his own authenticity as a serious artist. ‘White Light / White Heat’ was a regular source of ideological redeployment. Versions ranged from the rock standard delivered by the Spiders from Mars to the funk rendition performed during the *Station to Station* tour, and on to the anodyne middle of the road recordings of his 50th birthday rehearsal demo that gained an official release in 2020. Bowie seemed to continually grapple with the song without satisfaction. It was as if he could never live up to it – forever the student, never the master.

Conclusion

Bowie’s early adoption of the Velvet Underground was as a performance of the ‘mod’ identity, which places huge emphasis on knowing and inhabiting the newly discovered and celebrates modernity’s forward-facing cultural production. However, Bowie’s true role as the Velvet Underground’s key cultural intermediary is through the creation of the Ziggy Stardust

persona, an expression of Bowie's fandom, with a defined shelf life at the hands of the fandom of the performance of his creation. This was a demise hardwired into the character's narrative through the *memento mori* theme of the title song, and later eulogized as the character's death at the hands of his creator in the final Ziggy performance at the Hammersmith Odeon, London on 3 July 1973. Witness the film of the show as Bowie performing Ziggy reaches out to the audience and urges them to give him their hands, to a fandom witnessing the end of a performance in which they are implicit. With the giving of their hands Ziggy dies by their hands.

Ziggy Stardust thus flattens history by consuming the past and then producing it as part of a temporary, temporally defined present that is all about the highly packaged Ziggy moment. The Velvet Underground thus become subsumed into the Ziggy character and commodified through that performance of this moment. In so doing Bowie the fan recreates and repackages all associated media as a piece of Pop Art. The fans may ultimately kill the man, but they retained his songs and seized on and then embodied Bowie's influences.

Endnote

1. This often-repeated quote first appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* (23 May 1982: 291) and was repeated in *Musician* magazine in October (available at <https://bit.ly/3G43dXx>) in Eno two features written by Kristine McKenna.
2. Film director Grant McPhee argues that selling almost 60,000 records by 1968 'was respectable for an era where the 7" still ruled'. (2021)
3. Bowie also recorded 'I'm Waiting for the Man' with The Hype in 1970 for the BBC.

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