The Making of David Bowie: 1947–1968

> The past loads us with guilt. Annihilation can at least be guaranteed to exonerate us, to cancel all those inherited debts.
>
> Peter Conrad, cultural historian

I

David Bowie was born, under another name, in a city still bearing the visible scars of war. His family was the haphazard creation of desires indulged years before his birth; it bequeathed to him the psychological inhibitions and thwarted dreams that had restricted the lives of his father and mother. He emerged in 1963 in the planet's most vibrant city, in time to witness – and participate in – a brief flowering of creativity and freedom, which has passed into our collective myth as the era of 'Swinging London'.

In all human history, he might have reflected, there was scarcely a more welcoming time and place to be alive. He was young, attractive, creative, ambitious, self-confident, charismatic, flexible, impressionable, warm and – so one mentor after another declared – a star in the making. He might become a singer, a composer, a poet, a dramatist, an actor, a mime artiste, an advertising executive, a television personality, a sculptor, a painter, a model, a hero, an idol, or some fabulous collage of all these possibilities. Yet for most of the 'short' sixties, bar a fleeting period of public acceptance as the era closed, David Bowie was awkwardly out of kilter with the times. He was always there,

on the fringes of Soho or Carnaby Street, the King's Road or South Kensington, Mayfair or Piccadilly, familiar but strangely elusive, alive but never quite where he needed to be. He was held back not by any lack of talent – far more ephemeral and less attractive figures achieved far greater success during the 1960s – or determination; but by a void invisible to the naked eye, which nullified every move he made. He did not entirely know who he was, or who he was intended to be. He was a charming vacancy, an elegant decoration on the lapel of a decade overstocked with such fripperies.

No wonder, then, that when the artificial construct of a fresh decade was signalled on the calendar, Bowie was ready to create a persona more appropriate for the new age. He would cast off his past and fashion a renewed, endlessly fluid sense of self out of his own imagination. By becoming something *other*, he would refuse to be enclosed by gender, by race, by style or by reality. He would become a creature in a state of constant metamorphosis, no longer seeking to capture the spirit of the age but inviting the age to follow him. At the height of his fame, he would reassure his audience: 'You're not alone – give me your hands' [61], and then stretch out his own emaciated arms towards them, coyly allowing the tips of his fingers to graze theirs for an instant, before he withdrew, keeping their tantalising dream of contact alive while remaining ultimately aloof and alone.

Yet the David Bowie who formed and inhabited the shell of Ziggy Stardust carried the dubious inheritance of his troubled family in his genes. No matter how convincing his fantasy, and how often he boasted that he no longer related to his past, he was still the son of Haywood Stenton 'John' Jones and Margaret Mary 'Peggy' Burns; the half-brother of Terry, Annette and Myra; the child of Brixton, the schoolboy of Beckenham and Bromley, the cynical advertising trainee of the West End, the frustrated hero of countless adolescent dreams of transcendence and fame. Ziggy Stardust may have sold himself as a man from Mars, but he lived in Beckenham, an unambitious suburb of south London, in close vicinity to the family web that he had spent a decade struggling to escape.

II

The setting was mundane: the future David Bowie was born David Robert Jones, the son of a charity worker and a cinema usherette, in a three-storey terraced house in Brixton, a working-class area of south London that would soon become synonymous with its community of economic migrants from the Caribbean. He entered this world 17 months after the end of the Second World War, on 8 January 1947 – the twelfth birthday, so he would discover many years later, of a child from Tupelo, Mississippi, named Elvis Presley. The Brixton boy later claimed to have been 'absolutely mesmerised' by this coincidence: 'I was probably stupid enough to believe that having the same birthday as [Elvis] actually meant something.'

Like Presley, whose father spent much of his son's childhood in jail, Bowie's family was shaped by scandal. His parents were not married until he was eight months old, because his father was waiting to divorce his first wife. The social taint of illegitimacy marked out the Jones family, as both John Jones and Peggy Burns had already spawned children out of wedlock, amidst the moral confusion of a society at war. The young Bowie quickly became aware that 'belonging' was a complicated issue for his family, in which blood ties could be disowned or forgotten without warning.

John Jones has been described as 'a withdrawn and emotionally stunted young man who found it hard to display his feelings', but this belied his reckless streak of romanticism. On the verge of inheriting a trust fund at 21, he met a young cabaret performer who billed herself as 'the Viennese Nightingale'. Rather disappointingly, her name was Hilda Sullivan, of Irish-Italian descent, but John was ravished by her talent and potential. He offered to marry her, and bankroll her career, a combination that Hilda found difficult to resist. Much of his inheritance was channelled into a touring revue in which she was the star. When this failed, he diverted the remainder of his fortune into a drinking club in London's bohemian district of Fitzrovia, exotically named the Boop-A-Doop. Within a few months, his money was exhausted, the club closed and – so Bowie alleged later – John Jones became an alcoholic down-and-out, before rousing himself as a hospital porter and then, in 1935, joining the Dr Barnardo's children's charity. (This swift turn of events suggests that Jones' alcoholism may well have been overstated by his son.)

Having separated during this period, husband and wife were reunited a few months later – whereupon Jones embarked on an affair that produced a daughter, Annette, in January 1938. Strangely, this mishap seems to have strengthened the ties between John and Hilda, who agreed to raise the child as her own. They were parted again while John was serving with the 8th Army in North Africa, and recognised that their marriage was over, but continued to plan for Annette's future. When he was demobbed, Jones returned to Dr Barnardo's, where he acted as publicity officer, persuading stars of stage and screen to lend their names to the charity's work. One lunchtime in early 1946, he was served at the Ritz Cinema café in Tunbridge Wells by a 31-year-old waitress named Peggy. Within weeks, they were living together; by April, she was pregnant.

For another woman, this might have been an unbearable disgrace, but Peggy Burns had grown used to outraging bourgeois morals. She was one of six children of a First World War veteran with a dubious record of heroism, and a mother who insisted that her bloodline was destined to be cursed by madness. Indeed, three of Peggy's siblings spent time in mental institutions. Her own history was tangled enough: she was reputed to have run with the 'blackshirts' of Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists, while simultaneously staging an affair with a Jewish Frenchman. She fell pregnant, and her son Terence – originally given the old family name of Adair, but later known as Terry Burns – was born in November 1937.

During the war, Peggy became involved with a married man, and had a second child, Myra Ann, who was swiftly exiled into adoption. When Peggy met John Jones, each partner must have welcomed the other's tarnished history as a means of exculpating their own. Indeed, John's life had recently become even more confused: he had bought a house with his estranged wife in Brixton, which they rented out with the intention of presenting it to Annette when she came of age. Hilda generously allowed John and Peggy to live there, while a divorce was obtained as speedily as the law would allow – which proved to be some seven months after David Jones was born.

There were now four children, then: David, the symbol of John and Peggy's union, who spent his entire childhood with his parents; an older son who was alternately accepted and rejected for the next decade; one daughter who had been adopted and forgotten; and an

older girl who was only sporadically a member of the household. Terry was belatedly welcomed into the Jones home when he was ten and David was a baby. Family witnesses from these years each had their own prejudices and agendas: Bowie's early biographers were told, for example, that John Jones resented Terry's presence under his roof, because the boy resembled his father too closely; and also that Peggy showed little affection towards her elder son, and began to erect an emotional barrier between herself and David once he became a child rather than a baby. She withheld physical affection from her children; John doted on his younger son but frequently scolded his stepson Terry; while the two boys, who shared a room in the Brixton house, established a tight bond.

Like Edward Heath, the British prime minister between 1970 and 1974, Bowie was raised as the favoured younger son: the cherished, blameless scion of family hopes, appearing all the more perfect alongside the flagrant flaws of the elder sibling, and carrying an assurance of entitlement into adulthood. His aunt recalled, however, that although Bowie relished his good fortune, he also felt guilty for prospering so blatantly at his brother's expense. Adolescence being a trial of identity in even the most well-adjusted family, Terry must have experienced extreme alienation from his parents, and from the outside world. His enthusiastic young brother became his ideal protégé, confidant and ward: as Terry's mental health declined over the next decade, so David inherited the cultural script that Terry had imagined for his own life.

Given the tender rapport between the two boys, it seems insufferably cruel that when the Jones family moved from Brixton to a succession of small houses in the borough of Bromley, Terry was not invited to join them. By the time he had begrudgingly been allowed into their home in Plaistow Grove, Beckenham, he was awaiting his compulsory National Service with the Royal Air Force. He was squeezed into the tiny box room alongside David's larger bedroom, and as soon as his call-up papers arrived, John Jones demonstrated his feelings by knocking through the partition wall, creating a more spacious room for David and effectively signalling Terry's banishment from the family.

David was rarely short of companionship after Terry's departure. At least two of the friendships he made in Beckenham have survived to this day, with George Underwood (musical collaborator and designer)

and Geoff MacCormack (backing vocalist and companion on Bowie's mid-seventies tours). At home, the family was augmented by the arrival of his slightly older cousin Kristina, whose mother had been consigned to a mental hospital. It was she who introduced the nine-year-old Bowie to the transcendent power of rock 'n' roll, as she jived around the sitting room to Elvis Presley's 'Hound Dog' with an abandon that David found both compelling and slightly disturbing. John Jones' job led him to meet British stars such as Tommy Steele, and he would frequently allow his son to accompany him and spend a few golden moments with these other-worldly icons.

In drab mid-1950s Britain, which was still cowed by the memory of Nazi air raids and food rationing, rock 'n' roll slapped luminous strokes of colour across the monochrome landscape. The Jones household was shadowy, musty, cramped, repressed; the flamboyant gestures of the early rock pioneers pushed back the walls, opening a world of possibility and pleasure that was painfully out of sync with middle-aged reality. A similar explosion of mental and sexual energy was being experienced in homes across the land. For the ten-year-old Bowie, the cannonball propulsion of Little Richard's 'Long Tall Sally' and the Alan Freed Rock and Roll Band's 'Right Now, Right Now' – or the menace of Screaming Jay Hawkins' 'I Put A Spell On You' and Bo Diddley's experiments with African rhythms – seemed as exotic as the science-fiction melodramas he watched on the minuscule screen of the Joneses' black-and-white television.

Bowie's world changed significantly when he was eleven. His cousin Kristina emigrated to America, and vanished from his life for fourteen years. Meanwhile, he moved to Bromley Technical High School – its name a sign that its pupils were expected to learn practical rather than academic skills. Two months later, Terry was demobbed from the air force, and arrived home to discover that his stepfather no longer wanted him in the house. He spent a year lodging in north London, before finding accommodation closer to Beckenham.

Terry now re-entered David's life as an influential force, described in one account as 'a man, handsome and muscular, witty and worldly-wise'. Working in the City, he gravitated towards the clubs, coffee bars and prostitutes of Soho, and on Friday evenings he would regularly escort David around central London's seamy nightlife, pointing out the call girls on corners and in exotically lit doorways, sneaking him

into jazz clubs, and buying his younger brother Cokes in bohemian bars. He also began to expand David's mental horizons, introducing him to modern literature and jazz. 'It was Terry who started everything for me,' Bowie recalled. 'Terry was into all the Beat writers, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, William Burroughs and John Clellon Holmes, and he'd come back home to Bromley with the latest paperbacks tucked away in a coat pocket. He was into everything, reading up the early drug writers, Buddhism, poetry, rock and jazz, especially the saxophone players John Coltrane and Eric Dolphy . . . His mind was open to everything . . . He was rebelling in his own way . . .' Bowie might have been talking about his future self. Once more, Terry was shaping his brother's mental terrain, providing the inspiration that had been so poignantly lacking from his own adolescence.

The education Bowie received from his brother was reinforced in 1960 when he was accepted into an experimental school programme masterminded by teacher Owen Frampton (father of future rock star Peter, who was three years Bowie's junior). Bowie would sometimes later pretend that, like many of his fellow British rock stars, he had attended art college, but Frampton's curriculum, based around art, handicrafts and design, occupied an equally pivotal role in his development. Frampton encouraged his naïve interest in Kerouac and Coltrane, and by 1961 Bowie had been introduced to the era's most symbolic literary influences, from Baudelaire to Orwell, Sartre to Colin Wilson. Nothing in his background had prepared him for this expansive artistic landscape.

There were now two contrasting but reconcilable strands to Bowie's life: his fascination with existentialism, beat and the bohemian lifestyle; and his immersion in US youth culture, via movies, rock 'n' roll and jazz. In his early teens, his father gave him an alto saxophone – in white plastic, like that played by free jazz innovator Ornette Coleman. His teacher, Ronnie Ross, encouraged him to listen to Charlie Parker, the bebop pioneer who built dynamic dimensions of sound on the foundation of Broadway standards and familiar blues changes. Parker's conscious steps into atonality were the missing link between the orthodox harmonies of 'trad' jazz and the fearsome sheets of sound unleashed by Terry's jazz hero John Coltrane. Not that Bowie's education ended there: Terry also encouraged him to soak himself in the

daredevil rhythms and unfettered melodicism of Eric Dolphy, whose most ambitious album (*Out To Lunch!*) was released just as Bowie abandoned his commitment to jazz in early 1964. 'I tried passionately at that time to believe I liked Eric Dolphy,' Bowie recalled. 'I'd been forcing myself at first to listen to modern jazz, fighting myself to understand what it was I loved about it, but I really didn't know. I couldn't digest it yet.'

Besides the iconoclastic music suggested by his brother and his teacher, Bowie was exposed to more direct showcases for the saxophone. Many of the early rock 'n' roll records, by Little Richard and the Coasters, Lloyd Price and Elvis Presley, featured the 'yakety' staccato sax of King Curtis, or the guttural roar of Boots Randolph. Although the British 'trad jazz' heroes of the age, such as Acker Bilk, Kenny Ball and Chris Barber, often excluded saxophone from their arrangements, there were many showbands on the club circuit who offered a danceable medley of big-band jazz, R&B, rock and pop – Peter Jay and the Jaywalkers, for example, or Sounds Incorporated – and when Bowie saw them in early 1960s package shows at the Odeon cinemas in Lewisham or Streatham, he could imagine himself on stage. 'I spent my days thinking about whether I was gonna be a rock 'n' roll singer or if I was gonna be John Coltrane,' he recounted many years later. Emulating Coltrane required genius and technical prowess that was beyond him at 14; and he wasn't yet confident about his voice. A few weeks after his fifteenth birthday, with a year or more of school ahead of him, he joined a budding local showband, named the Kon-Rads, as saxophonist and occasional vocalist.

The surviving photographs of the group, in their matching blazers with grammar-school piping, identify Bowie as the youngest and, so it seemed, cheekiest member, his hair crafted into an approximation of a quiff, an Artful Dodger smile flickering across his face. 'He was a very charming, pleasant young man, who quickly developed real aspirations of stardom,' remembered the Kon-Rads' drummer, David Hadfield. 'The Kon-Rads gave him the opportunity to help him create a mental picture of his own career. With us, he started to evolve his own ideas of image and theatrics – the first sparks of what he later became. He could see real potential in what we were doing, but he was young and impatient.'

When Bowie joined up, it was still nine months before the Beatles

would release their first single; eighteen until the Rolling Stones' debut. For a rock group, the successful template was the Shadows, all guitars and matching dance steps; so Bowie's only apparent route to fame involved seizing the spotlight as a vocalist. By October, when the Beatles' 'Love Me Do' was issued, Bowie was styling himself David Jay (the resemblance to Peter Jay was not coincidental) and singing approximately a quarter of the Kon-Rads' live repertoire: lightweight American pop for the most part, with only Joe Brown's ballad 'A Picture Of You' betraying even a hint of his London origins. This was teen entertainment that wouldn't upset elder members of the family, with none of Coltrane's startling cacophony or Little Richard's audacious swagger. There was applause and even adulation, however, and like any 15-year-old, Bowie relished the sexual attention sparked by his performances.

Bowie's enthusiasm for school soon paled by comparison. He was still reading voraciously, and filling sketchbooks with designs for stage uniforms, but none of that coincided with his school curriculum. Neither was there a clear connection between the controlled exuberance of the Kon-Rads, neatly parcelled into unthreatening three-minute vehicles for teenage romance, and the limitless horizons that tantalised him in the pages of his brother's beat literature, or in the transcendent and frankly unsettling vastness of Coltrane or Dolphy's saxophone solos.

Several events in the summer of 1963 altered Bowie's sense of himself, and his potential future. He left Bromley Technical High School with a single O-level qualification in art – evidence of his failure to engage with academic requirements. In a time of virtually full employment, and a booming economy desperate for teenage fodder, he found it easy (with Frampton's assistance) to secure a job as a trainee commercial artist in a Bond Street advertising agency. If he'd been asked to symbolise the spirit of the age, he could hardly have manufactured a more convincing image: by day, he helped to fashion the dreams of consumerism; by night, he lived out the wildest of those dreams as – within the London borough of Bromley, at least – a pop star.