



David Bowie, 1973. Photograph by Masayoshi Sukita. © Sukita/The David Bowie Archive. Courtesy of Brooklyn Museum.

# THE CREATIVE LEGACY OF BOWWIE

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ART EDITOR

It was an unseasonably warm weekend in January that followed the all-too-soon passing of rock and roll legend **David Bowie**. New York, the city that Bowie called home for over 20 years, was alive with people enjoying the unanticipated presentation of spring. Yet there was another element in the air that overshadowed the balmy weather. From every store the sound of David Bowie's music carried through open windows, restaurants had replaced their sandwich board slogans with chalked quotes from his lyrics, and apartment windows, normally empty, now featured makeshift memorials of **Ziggy Stardust and The Man Who Fell To Earth**. Bowie's name was in the air and the mourning of his loss was palpable.

In the city that never sleeps, the passing of an icon is not an infrequent experience, but this time it was different. Bowie was more than a star. For generations of artistic misfits growing up in sleepy towns, David Bowie was their inspiration and his creative legacy was the much-needed voice that encouraged them to follow their dreams. New York City is filled with such creatives and the outpouring was a demonstrative 'thank you' offered to Bowie for the generosity and impact that his spirit had made on their lives.

Keanan Duffy, the award-winning British fashion designer,

author and musician, just happens to be one of the aforementioned artistic misfits who credits David Bowie as being a life-long muse. Today, Duffy is the Founder and Creative Director of **Keanan Duffy Studio**, a member of the of the Council of Fashion Designers of America, Senior Fashion Editor at **SOMA Magazine**, author of **Rebel Rebel: Anti-Style** (Rizzoli, 2009) and Mentor to the Masters Styling program at **Polimoda**. Yet, while most artists only have the opportunity to study their muse from afar, Duffy found himself in a true full-circle moment twice. First in 2007, when he entered into a professional collaboration with David Bowie, creating a limited edition collection for Target inspired by Bowie's music and avant-garde fashion. Then again in 2016, when Duffy was selected as the stylist for the CFDA Awards tribute to David Bowie, featuring Tilda Swinton and Michael C. Hall, that showcased Bowie's original stage costumes created by Kansai Yamamoto and Donatella Versace.

IRK Magazine sat down with Keanan Duffy for an intimate conversation on the impact that David Bowie made on his life as a young fan growing up in the small mining town of Doncaster, England, what it was like to share the creative process with David Bowie as a designer and why David Bowie continues to be an endless source of inspiration for so many. **IRK: You**

Aladdin Sane contact sheet, 1973. Photo Duffy © Duffy Archive & The David Bowie Archive. Courtesy of Brooklyn Museum.

mention in your book *Rebel Rebel: Anti-Style* that David Bowie was the reason that you became a designer. If we could rewind back to a young Keanan Duffy growing up in Northern England in the mid 1970s, what was it about Bowie that first made such an impact on you?

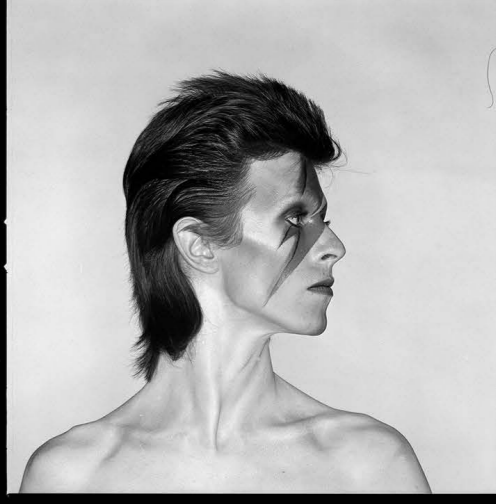
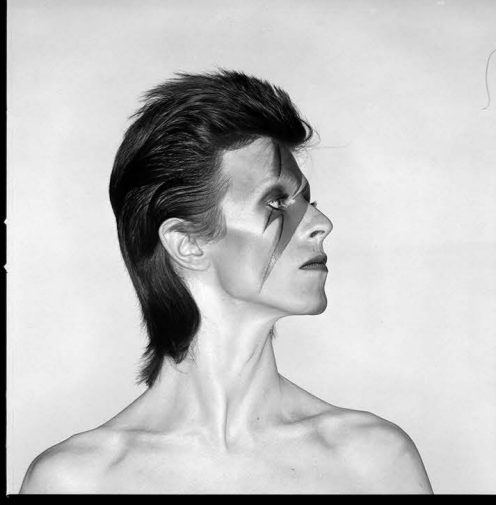
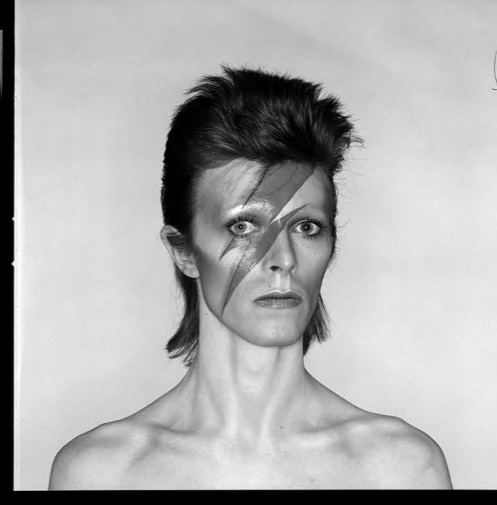
**Keanan Duffy:** I really started to get into Bowie around 1975. '75 was on the cusp of punk and Bowie was making records like *Station To Station*, *Low* and *"Heroes"*, which really struck a chord with me. I remember going to buy *Low* at this little record shop in town because it had such a striking cover image from the film *The Man Who Fell To Earth*. I was attracted to Bowie because of that image, the film and definitely the otherworldliness. At the time, I wasn't interested in fashion particularly. Fashion was something that people in Paris wore. I loved what musicians wore. What they wore seemed to be coming from another world and that's how I wanted to dress. Punk gave you the permission not to sew. You could get your flared trousers, cut them up and duct tape them into a new pair. Graphic designers could get a magazine, cut up words and make typography. I could pick up my guitar and didn't even have to tune it. It was great! Punk gave you permission to just do-it-yourself and mess up and Bowie's otherworldly image gave you the inspiration and permission to be creative. That's what turned me onto Bowie. It was that daringness of doing all of these different things that made me think it was possible to express myself artistically.

**IRK:** Yet 40 years later his influence hasn't lessened. Why do you think David Bowie has continued to connect with and inspire so many generations?

**Keanan Duffy:** Just like many people from my generation, particularly every kid that was a misfit looked to Bowie as inspiration and tuned into his creative process. That was the great thing about Bowie; he opened up a path for you to find your own creativity. It wasn't just his music; he turned people onto literature, fashion, film and other musicians that you wouldn't necessarily have known about because they were more esoteric. He was an amazing teacher and he inspired a lot of people who then went on to have careers expressing themselves in creative ways.

**IRK:** He did seem to have the uncanny ability to see where shifts in culture were heading and he utilized his music and stage personas as a means of communicating what was to come. What do you think it was about his creative process that offered such insight?

**Keanan Duffy:** Speaking from my impression, when you go to the David Bowie *Is* exhibit, there

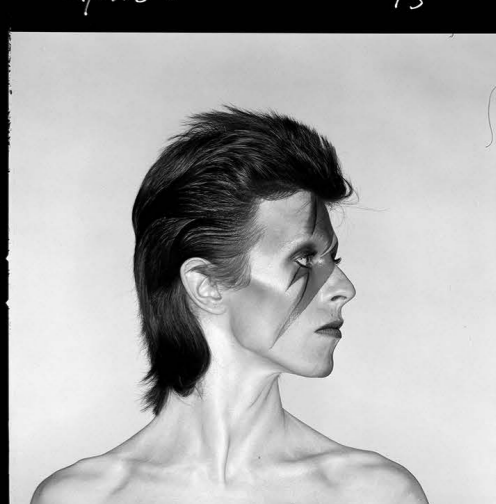


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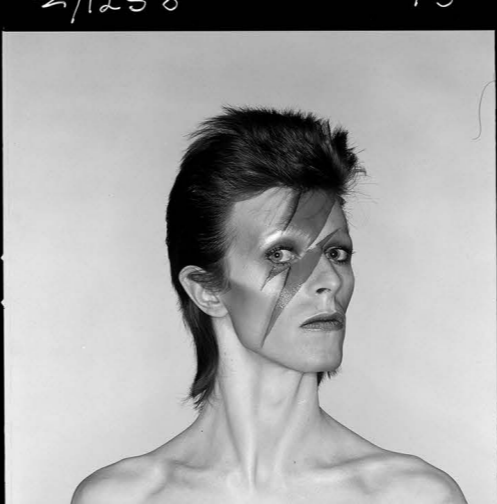
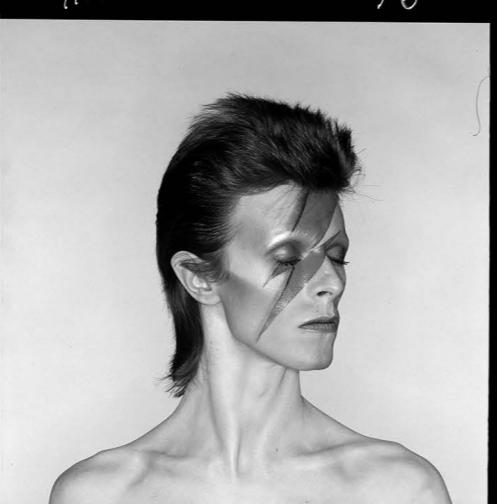
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This Page:  
*Iman* with *David Bowie* wearing a shirt from the *Keanan Duffy Menswear Collection*. Photo courtesy of *Keanan Duffy*.

Facing Page:  
*Keanan Duffy* backstage at the 2016, *CFDA Awards tribute to David Bowie*, alongside Bowie's original stage costumes created by *Kansai Yamamoto* and *Donatella Versace*. Photo courtesy of *Keanan Duffy*.

Installation view of the *David Bowie* Is exhibit featuring images from the *Ziggy Stardust Tour* alongside the 1972 Quilted Suit designed by *Freddie Burretti*. Photo Courtesy of *Brooklyn Museum*.

Installation view of *David Bowie*'s personal flight case of books at the *David Bowie* Is exhibit. Photo courtesy of *Brooklyn Museum*.

is a flight case that contains all of the literature that David carried with him to read on tour. It reminded me of what a curious personality he was, like a bit of a seeker. He was always learning and looking for whatever it was that would provide him with a new point of view in order to remain fresh and open. I think that's a trait of any great human being, to actively learn and have the openness and willingness to be influenced and have your mind changed. He also wasn't afraid to fail and that is a brilliant way to look at life. If you are not failing now and again it means you are not taking risks, and Bowie took a lot of risks from a career standpoint and a life standpoint.

**IRK:** Agreed! The introduction of *Ziggy Stardust* was definitely a risk and it went on to become one of his most impactful entities. *Ziggy's* alien androgyny along with Bowie's stardom gave Bowie fans the permission to explore androgyny for themselves. That had to be

groundbreaking at the time, no?

**Keanan Duffy:** Androgyny and blurring of gender has always been important to me as a person; wearing clothes, dying my hair, wearing makeup, things that were traditionally not the accepted male form of expression. Growing up in a coal-mining town, you were under duress a lot of the time for looking in any way different. I was really lucky that my mom was a hairdresser. She didn't care if I colored my hair, in fact [laughing], she would help me. But Bowie was always an entré into that exploration. It made a difference for a lot of kids like me who wanted to express themselves, as well for kids who wanted to express their emerging sexuality in a way that wasn't necessarily acceptable to their direct peers or their families. That kind of androgyny that Bowie introduced was really important, as was glam rock and the psychedelic movement before that. They were all so intertwined. If

you look at Syd Barrett [of Pink Floyd], his makeup and his effete manner very much influenced Bowie, and you can see all of those strands intertwining even though they are viewed as very separate subcultures. Characters like Bowie were very influential on culture in a very positive way.

**IRK:** It's very clear to see why David Bowie had such an impact on you in your youth, but it didn't end there. In 2007 you experienced a full-circle moment when you found yourself designing a collection with Bowie inspired by his career. How did that come about?

**Keanan Duffy:** The line that we developed began with a 3-year deal that I had at Target. I had contacted David's business manager with the idea of designing a limited addition collection and I created three different stories based on three different eras in Bowie's career: *Let's Dance* was very athletic inspired,

*Hunky Dory* was vintage and *The Man Who Fell To Earth* was all black and white and very dressy. The 'Bowie' ingredient was engraved buttons, embellishment on zipper pulls, little secret messages, embroideries, but all super subtle within each of the garments. We presented the design concepts to David, to which he gave feedback, we worked on them a bit more and then presented them back to Target. With Target we could only do one of the three stories and Target picked *The Man Who Fell To Earth*.

**IRK:** Whenever you are collaborating with another person, you always learn something from them that carries forward with you in your own practice. What did you learn from collaborating with David Bowie?

**Keanan Duffy:** As a musician, I've worked a lot with *Earl Slick* who played guitar with David Bowie for years, and what Earl Slick always said was, "David

did exactly this with me; this is the song, here are the chords, play it the way you want to play it." David wasn't afraid to share the creative process and that's something that I always try to instill when I'm talking to students. David was very generous in allowing you that capacity to make your statement that was obviously part of his statement. He gave you that permission to interpret what he was creating without micromanaging it, and it's something that I employ in my design process. I always try to work with people who are friends, but I really respect what they do. I think as long as you give very clear direction, which Bowie was very good at doing, you then get the best out of the team that you work with because they are free to express themselves. That's the one thing that I really do remember best, and in terms of our working relationship he was a really decent, kind, positive human being. In fact, he told me to make my name bigger on the label. The label

was "*Bowie by Keanan Duffy*". When we showed the initial graphic designs, David said to me, "Your name's not big enough." And I said, "But they're going to buy it for Bowie." And he said, "Yeah, but always make your name as big as you can!"

**IRK:** That warms my heart. He was looking out for you and your career.

**Keanan Duffy:** Yeah, it was very funny at the time, but it was so very kind because he was saying, we're sharing this. Obviously he knew he was a rock and roll legend, and here's this designer that nobody's heard of, certainly not in Target's audience, but what he was saying to me was, grab hold of it. Get your share! It's fine to get your share and get your name out there! And again, I think that was the generosity that Bowie embodied.

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