

BOWIEART: I WANT TO SOUND LIKE THAT LOOKS

Sam Coley

David Jones never attended art-school, although his alter ego gave the impression he had. Instead, as David Bowie, he drew on art-school philosophies by proxy, through friends, collaborators, the artists he admired, and the books he read. He took in the ethos of British postwar art-schools, their spirit of experimentation, interdisciplinarity, and the blurred boundaries between high and low culture, and applied these ideas to his own creative practice.



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This ten-track playlist offers a way to explore Bowie's dialogue with the art world, tracing influences, collaborations, and conceptual borrowings. Each selection considers both the song and its accompanying album, highlighting their connections to visual art and wider artistic movements. In doing so, we can map Bowie's shifting position as a consumer and creator of art culture. Many of these artistic milestones and partnerships are now part of Bowie folklore, familiar even to casual fans. Bringing them together helps to underscore the breadth of his curiosity and the diversity of his creative output.

The closest Bowie came to attending art-school was his years at Bromley Technical High School. This was not a liberal institution of freethinkers; according to Morley (2016), it was "a regimented, scholarly school requiring a uniform" (96). Yet, Bowie had the chance to take art in his third year and was fortunate to be taught by Owen Frampton (father of guitar-playing Peter), who himself studied at Beckenham School of Art in the evenings. Bowie's early management weren't concerned with the technicality of whether he'd attended art-school; but still wanted to associate him with 60s art-school cool. The sleeve notes to his debut album claim, "his early desire to create took him to art-school, but Little Richard turned him on to music as a more satisfying art form". It was certainly more lucrative. As a "pop-art saboteur à la Warhol", it's no surprise that Bowie wanted to make commercial art (Buckley, 2005, 461). Growing up in the depravations of post-war London, money mattered. However, Bowie wasn't flashy with his wealth. When he began to earn real money, he invested it in his curated collection of fine art, which, after his death, sold at auction for £32.9 million (Gleadell, 2016).

Bowie's artistic influences are too numerous to catalogue in full, but traces of German Expressionism, Surrealism, Conceptual Art, Dada, and Postmodern pastiche run through his music and the visual art that accompanied it. He was particularly drawn to 20th-century British artists like Gilman, Howson, Caulfield, Emin, and Hirst. "I want to sound like that looks," he once said of a Frank Auerbach painting in his collection (Kimmelman, 1998). Yet his eye roamed far beyond contemporary art. Ancient Greece statuary, Kabuki theatre, and the works of Old Masters all fed

into his creative imagination. Bowie had a particular fascination with the Venetian Renaissance painter Tintoretto, even naming his music publishing company after him.

The songs in this playlist help demonstrate how Bowie's work as a musician connected to his appreciation of visual art, performance, and art-school thinking. His collaborations with visual artists were central: from Vasarely's Op Art on the *Space Oddity* (1969) cover, to Edward Bell's collages, through to graphic designer Jonathan Barnbrook's use of religious iconography on *Heathen* (2002), culminating in Barnbrook's stark design for Bowie's final album, *Blackstar* (2016). Though not formally trained, Bowie's work consistently explored key art-school debates: artifice and authenticity, identity and image, and the interplay between artistic creation and performance.



Scuola Grande di San Rocco giftshop, Venice, Coley, 2025

1: "Maid of Bond Street", *David Bowie*, 1967

"Gleaming teeth sip aperitifs"

An early press release from Decca records described how Bowie seemed destined for "a career in graphic art", before finding "another means of expression ... like so many contemporary art students." His brief, doomed vocation as a visual communicator began in 1963 at the age of sixteen, when Jones/Bowie secured a conventional job as a trainee commercial artist at an advertising agency in London's New Bond Street. It was an "Orwellian" experience but introduced him to useful theories on branding and "the effectiveness of mass marketing" (Marsh, Broackes, 2013, 30). His early career as a musician took a while to steady itself. He had already released several flop singles before *David Bowie* (1967), his first full-length album. In many ways, the experience provided an art-school education: working on the album taught him how to collaborate with musicians, arrangers, and producers (in this case, Mike Vernon). It provided workshops on creative negotiation and how to translate conceptual ideas into realised forms. The album wasn't a bold artistic statement but more like a sketchbook — an opportunity to build on previous recordings and refine the technical and compositional skills that would underpin his future success.

The album itself was inconsistent and sounded like an experimenting artist in search of a distinctive voice. That said, it's bursting with ideas, and you can hear Bowie's early interest in characters, narrative, and the dystopian themes that would feature in his later work.

"Maid of Bond Street" is a perky vignette from this period, informed by his first steps in the corporate world. The frenetic pace of central London with its stressed executives and his own daydreams of stardom are woven into a portrait of a young starlet's lonely existence. At this early stage in his career, Bowie arguably had more in common with the heroine's jealous boyfriend ("doesn't have a limousine, really wants to be a star himself"). Bond Street itself holds strong associations with the art world. The Fine Art Society, a prominent gallery for British Modernist artists, was based there. The Royal Academy of Arts is literally around the corner, while Cork Street, running parallel to Bond Street, has long been home to London's most notable commercial galleries. In 1995, Bowie held his first solo art exhibition at The Gallery on Cork Street, titled "David Bowie: New Afro/Pagan and Work 1975-1995" — just a five-minute walk from his Bond Street beginnings.

2: "Andy Warhol", *Hunky Dory*, 1971

"Put a peephole in my brain"

This track is an obvious choice, but a necessary inclusion, as Bowie owed a large debt to Warhol. Peraino (2012) considers Bowie to be "the Warhol of the rock world", observing how both artists navigated the boundaries between art and commodity, sincerity and irony, and surface aesthetics and deeper meaning (154). Both began their careers in advertising and understood the mechanisms of publicity, branding, and image control. Bowie also learned from Warhol's unapologetically commercial approach, which turned celebrity and consumer culture into tools for artistic expression. As Warhol (1975) famously wrote: "good business is the best art" (92).

"Andy Warhol" was originally written for Bowie's friend and muse Dana Gillespie, who released her own version in 1974. The *Hunky Dory* (1971) version is far superior. The 48-second intro is a sonic art piece, replete with electronic bleeps and the tape-spliced repetition of Warhol's name. Bowie corrects producer Ken Scott's pronunciation via an intercom, as he tries to record the track's tape identification. The recording process is deconstructed to reveal the frame behind the artwork. The song itself is a direct acknowledgment of Warhol's influence and a somewhat fawning homage. Warhol reportedly didn't like it and coolly received Bowie on his visit to the Factory in 1971. Nevertheless, Bowie's fascination and respect for Warhol was profound, resurfacing years later in his portrayal of the artist in Julian Schnabel's film *Basquiat* (1996).

3: "Sweet Thing/Candidate/Sweet Thing (Reprise)", *Diamond Dogs*, 1974

"When it's bad I go to pieces"

Diamond Dogs (1974) was originally conceived as an adaptation of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). However, when Orwell's wife refused to grant the rights, Bowie abandoned Big Brother's post-war Britain and created his own dystopian world, Hunger City, instead. He exerted more artistic control on the album, writing, producing, and even handling lead guitar duties himself. This self-sufficiency, coupled with copious drug use, resulted in a slightly unpolished sound, which ultimately defined the album's gritty aesthetic. Its iconic cover, depicting Bowie as a half-man, half-dog hybrid, is another link to the world of fine art, created by the Belgian Pop artist and illustrator Guy Peellaert. According to Miller (2007), *Diamond Dogs* successfully storyboarded "Bowie's

crude conceptual surrealism” while simultaneously expanding his sound. The triptych of “Sweet Thing/Candidate/Sweet Thing (Reprise)” was famously constructed using multi-media artist Brion Gysin’s cut-up method — a form of textual collage that freed Bowie from traditional songwriting practice. It was a compositional strategy more aligned with Dada and the Situationist practices of *détournement* than Top of the Pops, although the album still managed to reach number 1 in the UK charts. Bowie explained the process in the liner notes for *iSelect* (2008), a free promotional CD released with the Mail on Sunday, “You write down a paragraph or two describing different subjects ... cut the sentences into four or five-word sections; mix ’em up and reconnect them ... You can get some pretty interesting idea combinations”.

The *Diamond Dogs* tour, which accompanied the album, provides a further example of Bowie’s interdisciplinarity. The ambitious staging combined elements of German Expressionist cinema (*Metropolis* (1927) and *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920)) to create an elaborate theatrical experience of music, design, and performance. Yet Bowie quickly grew tired of it. This live version of “Sweet Thing/Candidate/Sweet Thing (Reprise)” comes from *Cracked Actor* (2017), a live recording from the 1974 tour. It captures Bowie at a point of transition, marking a mid-tour shift away from the oppressive glam of *Diamond Dogs* towards the slicker, soul-infused sound of *Young Americans*. A reinvigorated Bowie had already moved on, performing with a new lineup, a stripped-back set, and more soulful arrangements.

4: “Joe the Lion”, “*Heroes*”, 1977

“You’ll never know the real story”

As U2’s Bono once quipped, “other bands went to art-school, we went to Brian Eno”. It’s a pilgrimage plenty of musicians have followed, but few collaborations are as celebrated, or as enduring, as those between Brian Eno and David Bowie. Eno’s art-school background (Ipswich Civic College and Winchester School of Art) helped shape the writing and production of the so-called Berlin Trilogy (*Low* (1977), “*Heroes*” (1977), *Lodger* (1979)). These albums used audio collages, created with painterly sensibilities, to build abstracted and multi-layered sonic textures. The cover of “*Heroes*”, a photograph by Masayoshi Sukita, was similarly informed by the visual art world, deliberately referencing German painter Erich Heckel’s 1917 expressionist portrait *Roquairol*. Many of the tracks on “*Heroes*” were constructed using fragmentary pieces and improvisation. The instrumentals featured on side two, such as “Neuköln” and “Sense of Doubt”, ignored traditional approaches to songwriting and were instead built up from atmospheric synth textures, tape loops, and ambient drones. Side one had a more straightforward rock sound, but it was also underpinned by art-school concepts and interventions, including the infamous Oblique Strategies — a card-based system developed by Brian Eno and multimedia artist Peter Schmidt to promote creativity through random prompts.

Bowie referred to his work with Eno as “a new school of pretension”, which Buckley (2005) took to mean pop music that aspires to be art, the “deliberate lowbrow appropriation of high-cultural forms” (262). “Joe the Lion” doubles down on this art-school posturing, with lyrics referencing Chris Burden’s notorious 1974 performance piece *Trans-Fixed*, where Burden was crucified onto a Volkswagen Beetle. Musically, the track is a claustrophobic example of post-punk art-rock, prominently featuring Robert Fripp’s distinctive, unrehearsed guitar. The Berlin Trilogy may have cost Bowie a certain amount of commercial momentum at the time, but it secured his reputation for taking risks. A week before he died, Bowie sent Eno one final message, which ended: “Thank you for our good times, Brian. They will never rot” (Kreps, 2016).

5: "Look Back in Anger", *Lodger*, 1979

"It's time we should be going"

"Look Back in Anger" comes from the *Lodger* album, the last in the Berlin Trilogy, although recorded in Montreux and New York. The album's cover was Bowie's first collaboration with the British Pop artist Derek Boshier, a creative partnership that later extended to stage designs and the *Let's Dance* album artwork. Rock critic Charles Shaar Murray (1981) thought "Look Back in Anger" was "probably the low point" of the album, although other critics and biographers were more generous (106). O'Leary (2018) sees it as one of Bowie's strongest songs of the late 70s, drawing attention to Carlos Alomar's rhythm guitar work on the track, and ranking it among his "greatest moments on a Bowie record" (128).

The song also marks an interesting milestone, as it was the foundation of Bowie's musical collaboration with guitarist Reeves Gabrels. In 1988, they reworked "Look Back in Anger" for a performance at the Institute of Contemporary Arts. The project was a success, and the two continued to collaborate for the next eleven years. Gabrels was another art-school alumnus, attending the Parsons School of Design and the School of Visual Arts in New York. Gabrels commented on their shared language of sound when constructing guitar parts, drawing on architectural references like "Gothic spirals of sound." He continued, "This is where the art-school background really helps, because we rarely speak in musical terms" (Buckley, 2005, 386).

Another reason for including "Look Back in Anger" is the music video, which is packed with art references and theatricality. Directed by David Mallet (their fourth collaboration), the video features Bowie as a tortured artist holed up in a garret, obsessively painting an angelic figure. It's a sort of *Dorian Gray*-style story: Bowie's character unravels, smearing paint, rocking back and forth and generally losing his mind. It's weird, over the top, and well worth watching.

6: "Ricochet", *Let's Dance*, 1983

"March of flowers, march of dimes"

The *Let's Dance* (1983) album was a commercial juggernaut that can also be read as a conceptual artwork in its own right, a blockbuster installation designed for mass consumption. Its slick, accessible sound and visual branding irritated some of Bowie's older fans, who saw it as a blatant sell-out, but for Bowie, this wasn't about compromise. He was borrowing from conceptual artists who challenged commodification not by rejecting it, but by actively engaging with it. *Let's Dance* was a fusion of art and marketing: a Pop-Art experiment that paid off. Still, the decision to blend the Southern Blues of guitarist Stevie Ray Vaughan with the New York Disco sensibilities of producer Niles Rogers was a juxtaposition that only seems obvious in hindsight. Hidden amongst the radio-friendly hits and dancefloor fillers is "Ricochet", an unwieldy, unconventional track that O'Leary (2018) describes as "the only song on *Let's Dance* to suggest Bowie's art rock past" (192). The lyrics carry a veiled political message, referencing March of Dimes (Roosevelt's child health nonprofit from 1938) and features a distorted Welsh voice muttering about the grind of working-class life, in the style of an Idris Davies poem. "Ricochet" feels like an outlier, and Bowie evidently had some affection for it, even if he later admitted the final version didn't live up to his expectations: "Nile did his own thing to it, but it wasn't quite what I'd had in mind when I wrote the thing" (Isler, 1987, 64).

The album stands as a model of the artist-as-entrepreneur — although not in a neoliberal, exploitative sense. It was closer to the Warholian tradition of art that critiques its own commodification while participating in it. *Let's Dance* challenged the outdated divide between “authentic” artistry and “inauthentic” commerciality and still stands as the pinnacle of his mainstream success. This time, it was Warhol who came to Bowie, turning up backstage during the *Serious Moonlight* world tour in 1983 to acknowledge Bowie's ascension to superstardom.

7: Ramona A. Stone / I Am with Name, *1. Outside*, 1995

“I've been having a midlife crisis”

1. Outside (1995), snappily subtitled *The Diary of Nathan Adler or the Art-Ritual Murder of Baby Grace Blue—A Non-Linear Gothic Drama Hyper-Cycle*, was Bowie's first concept album since *Diamond Dogs*. Its sprawling, dystopian storyline imagines a future world where art has increasingly become extreme, transgressive, and deliberately shocking. The album was Bowie's last recording project with Brian Eno and remains one of their most challenging and artistically ambitious collaborations.

The inspiration for *1. Outside* partly came from a visit Bowie and Eno had made in 1994 to the Maria Gugging Psychiatric Clinic in Austria. The clinic was known for encouraging patients diagnosed with schizophrenic to create artwork as part of their treatment. Bowie's own brother Terry had struggled with the same condition and was institutionalised before his suicide in 1985. It's not hard to imagine that Bowie felt a particular connection to the Gugging clinic and the art produced in what was known as the “Outsiders' Wing.” He also saw parallels with Art Brut, the term coined by the French artist Jean Dubuffet for “outsider art” made by patients, prisoners, and other social outcasts (Schneider, 2018). The visit didn't just inspire the album's title; it also shaped Bowie and Eno's approach to the recording process.

The track “Ramona A. Stone / I Am with Name” is voiced from the perspective of Stone, the story's murder suspect, and her followers. It opens with one of the many “segues” that appear throughout the album, which Bowie performed as a series of monologues, often treated with digital processing. With its discordant piano and fractured rhythms, the track is musically a world away from “Let's Dance” — and probably hasn't been played at many weddings. Still, *1. Outside* was well-received by critics, who welcomed the reunion of Bowie and Eno, and their ongoing commitment to experimentation.

8: “What's Really Happening”, *hours...*, 1999

“Grown inside a plastic box”

Some critics mocked Bowie's *Earthling* (1997) album for its use of Drum and Bass rhythms, seeing it as a slightly desperate attempt to stay relevant. But with his next album, Bowie stopped chasing the zeitgeist. *hours...* (1999) was a strong collection of mostly reflective, moody songs — underappreciated at the time but now recognised as part of an important, if understated, period of his mid-to-late career.

Bowie used an unconventional approach to the lyrics for “What's Really Happening”. He announced a songwriting contest, inviting fans to submit lyrics for the chance to become a co-writer on the track. The winner, Alex Grant, received a co-writer credit, a publishing contract, a trip to New York to see the song being recorded, and a year's subscription to Bowie's Internet Service Provider. The

involvement of assistants and fabricators by contemporary artists like Koons and Hirst has raised questions about authorship. But, in this instance, Bowie's delegation of the creative process reads more like a one-off experiment, ultimately designed to promote his new album and his fledgling website. Letting a fan write some of the lyrics didn't seem to undermine the song itself, a solid, mid-tempo rocker that O'Leary (2018) describes as "a curio of noble intentions" (473).

The artwork for 'hours...' is another reference to fine art. The cover is a clear pastiche of Michelangelo's *La Pietà*: a young, long-haired Bowie cradles the limp body of his older, seemingly dead, short-haired self. It's a striking image for an album that reflects on themes of loss, mortality, and artistic rebirth.

9: "Where Are We Now?", *The Next Day*, 2013

"Just walking the dead"

"Where Are We Now?", the lead single off *The Next Day* (2013) album, marked Bowie's unexpected return after a decade-long absence from music. Unusually for him, the song seems to come from a first-person perspective. He looks back with a quiet sense of melancholy on the Berlin of his past, while pondering the passing of time. His voice sounds fragile, almost diminished, a deliberate choice that heightens the track's nostalgic tone. Musically, though, it's something of an anomaly; the rest of *The Next Day* is far more strident, even angry in places.

The album's cover art makes a bold visual statement about breaking with the past. It reworks Bowie's *Heroes* cover by overlaying a stark white square that obscures much of the original image. The new album title is bluntly stamped on the square. According to its designer, Jonathan Barnbrook, this gesture reflects the impossibility of fully escaping one's own history and highlights the necessity of moving forward regardless — "because we have no choice to" (Gosling, 2013).

The video for "Where Are We Now?" was another collaboration between Bowie and American multimedia artist Tony Oursler, who studied at California Institute of the Arts. The pair had previously worked together on *Switch* (1996), an installation shown at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington DC. Oursler's distinctive style shaped the video for Bowie's "Little Wonder" single and his *Earthling* Tour in 1997. Oursler also directed Bowie's 50th birthday celebrations at Madison Square Gardens. The two remained close: "David would often come over to my studio to look at art or we would go to the Frick, the Whitney or other museums together ... We talked about him coming over to my studio to perform in an art project because he has done that before and really enjoyed doing it" (Gallagher, 2013).

10: "Conversation Piece", *Toy*, 2021 (2000–2001 Version)

"I've spent a lot of time in education"

This final track circles back to Bowie's early career. "Conversation Piece" was originally written and recorded in the late 60s for inclusion on the *Space Oddity* album. However, it was left off and ended up as the B-side of "The Prettiest Star", a single that failed to chart in 1969. The song remained in obscurity until Bowie dusted it off in 2000, rerecording it for inclusion on *Toy* (2021), an album of reworked songs from his early catalogue. Unfortunately, his label wasn't impressed and refused to release it. Once again, "Conversation Piece" became an off-cut, banished to a bonus disc for his *Heathen* (2002) album. It deserved better. The original version has a jauntier, almost country feel, but the orchestrated *Toy* version is definitive. The gloomy, deadpan delivery and the weight of over

30 years' life experience give it a new emotional weight. *Toy* was finally released in 2021, technically making it the most recent addition to Bowie's official studio discography, although *Blackstar* remains his final album in terms of both chronology and artistic intent.

Bowie worked with a wide range of graphic designers and artists throughout his career, but *Toy's* unsettling cover was his own creation. It shows his distorted adult face, superimposed onto a baby photo of himself. While the *1. Outside* album cover had featured a self-portrait, it also involved a photographer and graphic designer. With *Toy*, Bowie is credited with the overall concept, the cover design, and graphics. The artwork is a digital collage, combining elements from different photographs into one jarring image, a tradition dating back to the avant-garde practices of the early 20th-century. However, its rough, almost amateurish digital execution places it within the field of contemporary visual culture. Reviews were mixed. The online music magazine Stereogum simply called the cover "grotesque" (Deville, 2021). A more forgiving fan on Reddit commented, "It's horrible, I love it". Others were less charitable, calling it "the worst album cover I've ever seen," "offensive to my eyeballs," and "Oh god why? ... it looks more like a joke than an actual album" (ebradio, 2021).

Final Thoughts

David Bowie's engagement with the art world was both practical and intellectual. It would be easy to dismiss his interest in art-school concepts as the dabbling of a bored rock star. But these ideas had a real influence on some of Bowie's most significant work. They shaped his processes and sustained him through important phases of his career. Beyond music, he founded an art book publishing house and joined the editorial board of *Modern Painters* magazine. Novelist William Boyd noted Bowie's seriousness in the role, describing him as "not just a celebrity on the board" but someone with a genuine, informed passion for the arts (Jones, 2016).

Bowie was not just a collector or commentator — he was an artist himself. He sometimes turned to painting to break through creative blocks in his songwriting. His visual output, from charcoal drawings and oil paintings to computer collages and sculpture, was showcased and sold via his website BowieArt.com. His method of working, spontaneous, instinctive, prioritising immediacy over refinement, mirrored the way he approached music production. Like Kandinsky or the Abstract Expressionists, Bowie favoured "first-take situations" over meticulous reworking: "I'm not good at working at something to make it feel right" (Orshoski, 2003).

Ultimately, Bowie's relationship with art was reflective of his wider creative ethos: a constant interrogation of identity, authenticity, and the intersections between high and low culture. He wasn't just a rock star — he was an interdisciplinary artist, able to channel high-concept ideas through the lens of popular music.



Bowie's star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, L.A., Coley, 2008

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