

My favourite album: David Bowie's Diamond Dogs

Written by Alex Sharpe, Professor of Law, Keele University



David Bowie performs on his 1974 Diamond Dogs world tour. [Hunter Desportes/Flickr](#) , [CC BY](#)

Diamond Dogs, David Bowie's eighth studio album released in 1974, was the first Bowie album I heard. I had just turned 13.

The album represents Bowie's attempt to create his own post-apocalyptic soundscape after the George Orwell estate refused him the rights to 1984 for a [TV musical](#) . However, Bowie references Orwell through songs like Big Brother, We Are the Dead and, of course, 1984:

They'll split your pretty cranium, and fill it full of air, and tell you that you're 80, but brother, you won't care, you'll be shooting up on anything, tomorrow's never there.

But despite its dystopian themes there is something wonderfully hopeful about Diamond Dogs. The album followed Aladdin Sane (1973) and Ziggy Stardust (1972), the latter having established Bowie as a star(man), come to deliver us from the emptiness, the dreariness, the heteronormative fetters of English suburban life. Like these albums, only more so, Diamond Dogs homed in on that other-worldly quality that Bowie seemed both to embody and so sublimely express.

As was typical of Bowie, sound was preceded by vision. On Diamond Dogs, the extraterrestrial messiah that was Ziggy is gone and we encounter Bowie as half-man, half-dog. Perhaps more preternatural than supernatural (though in European times past the dog symbolised the devil), the image is arresting. Yet, in Bowie's hands, somehow urgent, necessary. Through the image he appears to embrace hybridity, difference, to move beyond our limited conception of what it means to be human.

And how he delighted in it! He did ambiguity with such certainty and style that it no longer seemed adequate to be "normal", which was fine and dandy with me. Bowie carved out a space for us freaks and it was both overwhelming and delicious.

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As a young trans person, long before “trans” had any real cultural currency, that is, before I could name myself, listening to Diamond Dogs changed everything. Like Bowie, I’d “found a door which let’s me out” (When You Rock ‘n’ Roll With Me). At first, I was semantically shocked (“something kind of hit me today” – We Are the Dead), then undone. It was simultaneously: recognition, connection and hope, that moment when we sense something more, something different, something richer.

Musically, the album creates a tension between dark and light, sinister, yet seductive. Positioned somewhere between glam rock (or in Bowie’s case art rock), soul/funk and the soon-to-arrive punk, Diamond Dogs is a transitional album. Bowie was always on the move.

It’s not an album for purists or genre-junkies, but that was never Bowie’s shtick. Rather, Diamond Dogs is an assemblage of styles, a montage. It is symphony and cacophony. It opens with spoken word accompanied by synths (Future Legend), pays homage to the Stones (Diamond Dogs), and closes with the hypnotic Chant of the Ever Circling Skeletal Family. In betwixt, we move from Frank Sinatra-like crooning to German composer Karlheinz Stockhausen. When you listen to Diamond Dogs, it ain’t just your mother who’s in a whirl.

The best part of Diamond Dogs, and arguably the greatest piece of music Bowie ever produced, is the nine-minute triptych that lies in the middle of side one: Sweet Thing, Candidate, Sweet Thing (Reprise). These songs are highly emotional. They trade in vulnerability and longing, but they also transport and delight. This is Bowie at his best, accompanied by Mike Garson’s sublime piano. “If you want it, boys, get it here, thing.”

Diamond Dogs creates a sense of vertigo, an out-of-kilter state through which we gain access to something sacred. Vocally, Bowie sweeps from a deep register to a soaring falsetto.

The album is lyrically opaque. In the past Bowie had relied on his own dreams, a practice that was both instinctive (think *Hunky Dory* 1971) and consolidated by his familiarity with the writings of psychoanalyst Carl Jung (see *Memory, Dreams, Reflections* 1965). Diamond Dogs marked a shift in Bowie’s approach to writing. From here on in he would adopt the cut-up technique (where a previous text is rearranged) popularised by William Burroughs.

Bowie is the tasteful thief and the studied faker, laughing at the hubris of the hippies and the

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prog rockers, at their illusions of “authenticity”. Yet, while preferring surface to depth, he captures a deeper embodied truth, one we feel riff after riff. It just feels so right. The fragmentation of his music and his lyrics are us. They point both to the multiplicity of who we are and who we might become. They call us to move beyond ourselves, our received identities. This is especially so in relation to gender and sexuality, themes that loom large on the album.

For me, Diamond Dogs was a mirror experience. Listening to it today, “I’m in tears again” (When You Rock ‘n’ Roll With Me).

Alex Sharpe does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the academic appointment above.

Authors: Alex Sharpe, Professor of Law, Keele University

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