

## *Moonage Masterpiece*

*Sydney Stern*

In glorious cinematic chaos, Brett Morgen's 2022 film *Moonage Daydream* illustrates the artistic evolution of rock pioneer David Bowie. The 135 minute visceral odyssey encapsulates Bowie's cosmic, cartoonish essence, compiling unreleased Beatles covers and never-before-seen fossil footage. Morgen is the first director to receive access to over 5,000 archives from the Bowie Estate, gifting fans the litany of their psychedelic dreams. The nonfiction filmmaker has developed his craft with an enormous repertory behind him, having created 2015's Kurt Cobain documentary, *Montage of Heck*, or *Crossfire Hurricane*, chronicling the Rolling Stones. Morgen has found a directorial method that produces an effect rather than traditional biography, telling *Time Magazine* of Bowie, "He can't be defined, but he can be experienced." (Carlin, 1)

The musical documentary strays from subscribing to a sequence, stylized as an arthouse monument of Bowie's career rather than boilerplate retelling. The opening credits fade to Bowie reciting a 19th century Nietzsche quote, proclaiming that humans must transcend their own morality, and become God himself. Clusters of Bowie kids' await their deity outside the venue, one girl weeping in distress as time persists without his appearance. The teens, both girls and boys, are concert-ready, dressed in adaptations of Bowie's spacey wardrobe and technicolor hair. Bowie's gender-bent space shuttle camp united fans in a place where they could embrace gray areas. He merged femininity and masculinity in his androgynous style choices, and ushered in a new era of neutrality.

Emerging from stage darkness, a man with striking cheekbones and alluring presence performs for the entranced audience. The concert is overlaid with an unconventional deep cut, 1995's "Hallo Spaceboy", which is revisited several times over and remixed with other tracks in the film. It's a less identifiable track for the general audience, compared to well-known radio hits like "Let's Dance" (1983), or the film's titular album "Moonage Daydream" (1972), though these appear in due capacity later on. If you've ever perused the glam rock section of a record store, you'll recognize the ethereal figure as Ziggy, a hybrid creation of rockstar and martian, leather-clad and dolled up in metallic makeup. Often heralded as the "chameleon of rock", Bowie's music is marked by constant reinvention. He dyed his hair a myriad of colors, wore nail polish and lash extensions, and shattered boundaries sonically and visually. The flame-haired androgynous alien looks like he's risen from the pages of a comic book, crossed with Cirque De Soleil. It's near impossible to discern a difference between his live angelic voice and the studio recording versions -- Bowie's talent ranges from showmanship to outstanding vocalist.

After seven years of traipsing through Bowie's abundant archival collection, Morgen assimilated the vintage footage into an artful collage. Interwoven into *Moonage* are clips of Bowie's cinematic references, like "Metropolis", "A Clockwork Orange," and "La Dolce Vita". An admiring Bowie kid himself, Morgen explains his artistic license in an interview with *Variety Magazine*, saying "I wanted the film to have almost no separation between Bowie's own constructions and the work that inspired and influenced him." (Saperstein, 1) In 2007, Morgen had pitched the treatment to Bowie, who passed away in 2016 from liver cancer, but didn't receive the coveted approval. An executive told him the news, explaining, "David enjoyed the

pitch but he's not at a place where he can do this right now." (Saperstein, 1). Years later, Morgen set about formulating a new treatment that would unfold like an stochastic exploration of Bowie and his surreal sci-fi odyssey.

One can imagine the pile of eradicated scraps in the production's discard bin, as Morgen refrained from performing a chronological role call of Bowie's stage personas. The pivotal Aladdin Sane, who first materialized in Bowie's eponymous album in 1973, doesn't receive a spotlight vignette, despite lofty presence in Bowie's musical canon. The origins of elegant Los Angeles dark heart, "The Thin White Duke," is also discluded from the film. Instead, Morgen focuses on three stages of Bowie's discography, beginning during the early 70s Ziggy Stardust era, followed by Bowie's tenure in Germany working on compilation album, "The Berlin Trilogy", and arcs during his wildly successfully '80s dance rock period, which was Bowie's internal creativity recession, as portrayed in the film. The unconventional, ambitious approach is entirely justified when considering the larger-than-earthly-life subject; how can one cinematize an extraordinary person without extraordinary experimentation?

Bowie's preliminary self-titled releases were somewhat evaded in the film, though the latter was a commercial breakthrough. From 1969's *David Bowie*, the psychedelic folk rock track "Space Oddity" circulated swiftly into the public's orbit. His songs were a cocktail of musical genres, strung and sung by a sulky alien named Major Tom. Bowie released his second album to coincide with the moon landing, a lucrative strategy to generate viewer traffic, and associate his brand with space. During BBC's 1969 coverage of Apollo 11, the five minute catharsis "Space Oddity" resonates in the background, indicating the scope of Bowie's influence. Lonely space

ranger Major Tom established Bowie's presence in his home country, the declaration of despair spending over three months atop British charts. It's impossible to discuss Bowie's legacy without recalling Major Tom, inspired by the Stanley Kubrick Film, *2001: Space Odyssey*. Bowie's infatuation with extra-terrestrials persisted in his discography, like '72's influential record "Starman," during which Ziggy prophesizes an alien in the sky awaiting communication. Dreamy clips of Bowie's martian-filled moonscapes are spliced throughout the film, derived from the ethereal Major Tom era and its successors. "Moonage Daydream" could well be the title of Bowie's entire cinematographic and musical canon, each era radiating otherworldliness.

Bowie enjoyed performance like any theater arts student, and the film includes behind the scenes footage of him acting and directing works of his own. Bowie, seemingly always on stage or sprawled on the floor of a studio immersed in his work, filled notebooks with sketches of his next costume design, or a screenplay for a celestial film. For the Bowie kids who believe they've scoured every square foot of his opus, *Moonage* uncovers several archival rarities. A scarcely recorded duo performance with rock guitarist Jeff Beck, segments of 1974's nostalgic "Soul Tour", and unreleased live covers of "The Jean Jeanie" and the Beatles' "Love Me Do" are played in the film. The segments are meshed with footage that devoted Bowie kids have viewed enough times to write a transcript for, like 1975's documentary, "Cracked Actor", and D.A. Pennebaker's concert film "Ziggy Stardust". The traditionalist rock fan will be delighted to see Bowie's directorial debuts that have become cult favorites, among them horror picture "The Hunger" and sci-fi feature, "The Man Who Fell to Earth". Like slides on a projector, the scenes flip through Bowie's endless stream of videography. You'd have to conclude he created art and music in his sleep to acquire such a body of work, spanning the length of a lifetime. That

includes 26 studio albums, 31 EP's and concert albums, a gallery of postmodern artwork, and a healthy cache of feature films.

Instead of context, an attentive sensory system is necessary to best appreciate the experiential film. *Moonage* blends a trinity of distinct musical eras, inter cut with Sci-Fi snippets, cultural soundbites, kaleidoscopic visual effects, and most memorably, intimate audio of the virtuoso's voice, steeped in introspection. The mixture of clips unfold formlessly— Bowie reflecting on his rich artistry — from the songwriting process to reconnecting with himself in rural Asia. Fizzling in and out of focus in vibrant tessellations, Bowie takes care of the daily routine. He faces himself in the mirror applying elaborate stage makeup, and then striking the electric guitar onstage circa '83 garbed in neon tuxedos, and a less youthful, more 21st century Bowie, bare-faced and performing an interpretive dance. The steady pulse of the film, in the absence of a typical chronology, is his resonant, thoughtful candor.

“We are false prophets,” Bowie coyly confesses, referencing the tendency of listeners to attach their own interpretations to his work. The long-haired '70s generation identified with his liberating exhibition of self-expression, gender fluidity, and integration of the highly topical Space Craze, which it rode in on from the late '60s. Between “Space Oddity”, Ziggy Stardust, and his post 90s' releases, which are scattered throughout the film, Bowie interjected a bit of galactic matter.

Bowie delivers a brief synopsis of his familial history, which carries less emphasis in the film than other front and center subjects. His older half-brother Terry introduced him to classic jazz

artists like Coltrane and Mingus in his childhood, catalyzing his developing musical interest. After returning home to London from the war, Terry began showing symptoms of hallucinatory psychosis, a devastating sight for his admiring adolescent brother. Bowie kept these founding influences alive in his work, which encompassed blues folk rock, glam rock, and pop synth, commemorating his shared love for music with his brother. As for his relationship with his mother, Bowie coolly explains the distance as mutually respected, telling TV show host Dick Cavett, “We have an understanding”. The disconnection within his family contributed to his internalized loner identity, expressed most explicitly by Major Tom. Aside from a brief string of photo album shots from his boyhood in postwar Brixton, there’s not much investigation into his past.

The second branch of Bowie covered in the film was his two-year residency overseas, during which he worked on *The Berlin Trilogy*. Drawing inspiration from the restless German metropolitans, Bowie released “Low”, “Lodger”, and “Hero” together in 1977. During the production of the euphoric, experimental rock album, Bowie enjoyed a rapture period, shown smiling for miles walking into Hansa Studios with collaborator Brian Eno. He reinvented his songwriting style and excelled, inspiring other artists like *Joy Division* and *King Crimson*. The film suggests Bowie’s overseas artistic pilgrimage was followed by a self-identified creativity dry spell in the early 80s. Audiences familiar with ‘80s rock n roll will recognize the international commercial success “Let’s Dance”. The infectious uptempo track was released in 1983 –and skyrocketed Bowie’s legendary record making capacity again—the man had reincarnated for a third time. Despite establishing himself as a multi-platinum artist, and having a career summit of four top singles in the same decade, he felt artistically unfulfilled.

The energetic chain of milestones in Bowie's career stuttered to a restful stop towards the last trimester of the film, the rock icon asserting that he's entering the 90s with a different agenda.

Taking a semi-hiatus from music, still pursuing complementary passions like sculpture and acting per usual, he redirected his focus towards enjoying his marriage to Somali supermodel, Iman. The finale uses music and video material from Bowie's *Blackstar* era, with more reels of manmade moonscapes enveloping the screen.

*Moonage* includes everything and the kitchen sink in terms of visual-audio stimuli, but there are certainly substantial gaps in time. The film skims over significant life events that don't contribute to the portrait of artistry that Morgen sought to capture. The storyline ignores Bowie's marriage to his ex-wife Angela Bowie, which lasted ten years and had a profound influence on his lyrical composition. Morgen semi-erases the "sex and drugs" narrative that Bowie has confirmed was an ongoing issue several times in his career, confessing to *Rolling Stone* in 1993 that he has "an addictive personality." The Thin White Duke's never concealed his vices. Informed fans can grasp the implication of the unseen events, when he's shown mumbling haphazardly, at three times normal speed, twitching inside a limousine. Movie-goers anticipating a play-by-play of Bowie's 40 year career will instead witness the philosophical planes of Bowieism unfold in a wayward dreamy entropy that manages to click seamlessly.

*Moonage Daydream*, which premiered in theaters September 16th, is a scintillating portrait of Bowie's psychedelic folk rock universe, welded into the background of his spoken testimony. In

this dazzling experiential film, the most successful selling artist of the 20th century reflects on his “favorite form of worship”... life.