

# A New Career in a New Town

## David Bowie in Berlin (1976–1978)

*Tibor Kosztolányczy*

### Abstract

In this paper, I tried to analyze the most important artistic and personal motivations, which led David Bowie to restart his career in Berlin in Autumn 1976. In semi-seclusion Bowie and his colleagues invented an experimental recording technique and produced a couple of superb songs ("*Heroes*", *Warszawa*). Nevertheless, we should not forget that the whole *Berlin Trilogy* is rather alienating for many of the listeners. But the oeuvre appears more and more inspiring from a philological point of view. I tried to reconstruct David Bowie's *one and a half years* in Berlin relying on the original sources.

**Keywords:** David Bowie; Brian Eno; Berlin-trilogy; "Heroes"

**Subject-Affiliation in New CEEOL:** Social Sciences – Communication studies – Media studies

**DOI:** 10.36007/eruedu.2021.3.106-112

## 1.

David Bowie seemed to be exhausted after finishing the five-month *Station to Station* world tour in May 1976. He had become famous in 1972, and he was highly successful in the following years, but hardly had any time to relax. After the tour, Bowie did not want to return to Los Angeles and decided to produce a solo album for Iggy Pop at the Château d'Hérouville recording studio near Paris.

Bowie and Iggy Pop started to work on the record in the summer, continuing it in Munich in August, and the band arrived in West Berlin a couple of weeks later. Bowie and Pop settled down in the Schöneberg district renting a seven-room apartment above a car spares shop at 155 Hauptstrasse.<sup>1</sup> Pop's album was mixed at Hansa Tonstudio 1 on Nestorstrasse in the Halensee neighbourhood. The record's title – *The Idiot* – was taken from Dostoevsky's novel, Bowie and Pop insisted that their friends too should read the book. (Trynka 2008, 33)

Most probably, drafting musical guidelines for the next Bowie musical project also started at the Château, though, for recording, they chose Hansa Tonstudio 2 at 38 Kötherner Strasse in Berlin (walking distance from Hauptstrasse). Originally, the building was a concert hall, but the rear wing was mostly destroyed by an allied bombing attack in November 1943. The bomb-damaged rooms were renovated partially after the war, but the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961 brought about

---

<sup>1</sup> On August 22, 2016, Berlin's mayor Michael Müller unveiled the plaque commemorating that David Bowie lived in the house between 1976 and 1978.

an abrupt end to all musical activities (the Wall at Stresemannstrasse was less than 100 meters from the premises). In the mid-1970s, Meisel Musikverlage (The Meisel Publishing Group) set up five Hansa recording studios in the building. (Brady-Brown 2012) The dancehall called Meistersaal was reborn as Studio 2, and the acoustics of the room were perfect.

In the meantime, long time Bowie producer Tony Visconti also arrived in Berlin. Bowie invited former Roxy Music member Brian Eno to work with them. Eno was well-known for his electronically inflected pop music. He believed “something musically interesting happened when a sound was ‘treated’—divided between two musicians playing the same sound.” According to Eno, “music should be intentionally confused and incoherent,” musicians with different artistic backgrounds should play together. “Musical accidents were to be left in, and instruments that were grossly out of tune were often preferable to those in tune.” (Edwards-Zanetta 1986, 354)

In the studio, Bowie and his colleagues used *Oblique Strategies* cards, which were developed by Eno with multimedia artist Peter Schmidt in 1975. The “messages” were to help artists break creative blocks, e.g. “A line has two sides,” “Don’t break the silence,” “Do the washing up,” “Imagine the music as a moving chain or caterpillar,” “You don’t have to be ashamed of using your own ideas.” (Eno-Schmidt 1975) The sessions lasted until 18 November 1976.

The new Bowie album was scheduled for Christmas, but the recording company was shocked. What the management at the Radio Corporation of America (RCA) heard from the master tapes of *Low*, was a kind of static, fragmentary, and incomplete music. (Edwards-Zanetta 1986, 358) The second side only contained instrumental tracks.

The band followed the same recording technique in 1977 and 1978 when working on the second and the third parts of the trilogy called “*Heroes*” and *Lodger*, respectively.

## 2.

When someone tries to analyse inspirations for a new film, a song, or a book, the process often ends up in doubtful results. What drives an artist to start a *New Career in a New Town*?<sup>2</sup> Sometimes it is just a word or a memory image, sometimes there are deeper motivations.

*Expressionism* is a background factor that led Bowie to Berlin. While studying at Bromley Technical High School in south-east London in the early 1960s, he was introduced to German expressionist art and Fritz Lang’s epic film *Metropolis* from 1927. “Since my teenage years I had obsessed on the angst-ridden, emotional work of the expressionists, both artists and film makers, and Berlin had been their spiritual home. This was the nub of the Die Brücke movement, Max Reinhardt, Brecht and where *Metropolis* and *Caligari* had originated. It was an art form that mirrored life not by event but by mood”, he remembered in 2001. (Bowie 2020)

<sup>2</sup> Recalling the last song on the first side of *Low*.

Bowie studied literature and art coming from Berlin before settling down in the city. Christopher Isherwood's 1939 book *Goodbye to Berlin* fascinated him. Likely, it is more than a coincidence that Isherwood too lived in Schöneberg for two and a half years in the early 1930s. His apartment at Nollendorfstrasse 17 was a short distance from the club scene he depicted in *Goodbye to Berlin*. (Doyle 2013) Isherwood's stories were adapted into the 1966 musical and 1972 film *Cabaret*, and he was on the guest list of Bowie's concerts in Los Angeles during the *Station to Station* tour. (Buckley 2010, 292)

The first pop record about West Berlin sung in English was created "in the neighborhood" of the Bowie oeuvre: *Berlin* by Lou Reed was released in 1973. The previous year, Bowie produced Reed's *Transformer*, and, after that, Reed wanted to go in a different direction. He wrote a chamber rock opera about a doomed couple, Caroline and Jim depicting "a walk on the real wild side of life". At the time of writing *Berlin*, Reed did not have personal experiences about the city. Allegedly, he first visited Berlin during Bowie's stay there sharing the flat at Hauptstrasse 155. So, where could Reed's idea have come from?

During the early period of the Velvet Underground—Reed's former band—, Nico was the lead singer, the frontwoman. Nico was German, born as Christa Päffgen in Cologne in 1938. When she was two years old, her family moved to Spreewald near Berlin. After the war, they settled down in Berlin, where Nico attended school until the age of 13 when her modelling career started. The Velvet Underground had an exceptional impact on Bowie, he started to play his own covers of the VU songs as early as the band's first LP was released. Brian Eno could not escape from the influence of the VU, either; he said ironically that he got involved with rock after he heard the Velvet Underground because he realized that none of the musicians could play. (Edwards-Zanetta 1986, 354)

Bowie was by no means a blind admirer of Berlin, he saw the bright sides and dark shadows of the city and its controversial role in 20<sup>th</sup> century history. He described Berlin as a city of creative vibe, "and you couldn't find a place with more tension than West Berlin [with its] factional elements, both musically and artistically", he confessed. (Shaw 2018) Iggy Pop thought that West Berlin comprised of a separate world like the volcanic islands in the ocean. "The opposing world powers created a kind of vacuum here, and you could easily disappear. It was fabulous," he said. (Trynka 2008, 239)

During their Berlin years, Iggy Pop and Bowie frequently travelled together to East Berlin in a Mercedes-Benz 600, though, it was not the first time they had visited the Eastern Block. In 1973, after his tour to Japan, Bowie embarked on a week-long journey from Vladivostok to Moscow on the Trans-Siberian express. He spent three days in Moscow, and saw the military parade on 1 May. (Devine 2016)

On 23 April, 1976, Bowie and Pop only spent seven hours in Moscow on their way to Helsinki. The previous day, their train had been delayed for a few hours at Dworzec Gdański (Gdansk Railway Station) in Warsaw, so Bowie went for a walk in Żoliborz district up to the Plac Komuny Paryskiej (Paris Commune Square).<sup>3</sup> Bowie

---

<sup>3</sup> Since then it got back its original name, Plac Wilsona (Wilson Square). In 2016, on the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary, a mural tribute by Dawid Celek near Wilson Square was unveiled commemorating Bowie's walk.

stopped at a record shop and bought a few LPs, one of which featured a composition called *Helokanie* sung by the folk ensemble Śląsk. The choral work was based on Polish folk songs and it was written by the founding leader of the choir, Stanisław Hadyna. (Sosnowski 2011)

The song *Warszawa* opens the “other” side of *Low*: evoking the fate of the once flourishing city, Warsaw. Bowie converted the herders’ song of *Helokanie* into a dirge.

Bowie’s statement on Berlin, “*Heroes*”, his most enduring song, can be found on the eponymous LP. The song is about two doomed lovers (again) living on the opposite sides of the wall. “Every afternoon, we’d sit down at the mixing desk and see Russian Red Guards looking at us with binoculars, with their machine guns over their shoulders,” explained Visconti about the times when they were working on “*Heroes*.” (There was an empty plot of land between the building of the studio and the Wall. The guards, mentioned by Visconti, must have been serving in the East German army.) The backing tracks were almost completed when Bowie asked his colleagues to take a break so he could finish the lyrics. Tony Visconti went for a walk by the wall with one of the backing singers, Antonia Maas holding hands and kissing. “David happened to be looking out of the window, and he saw us,” recalled Visconti. (David Bowie’s *Heroes* 2005, 53)

### 3.

When arriving in Berlin in 1976, Bowie’s commercial and critical stock was extremely high, though, personally, he was in trouble. “He was divorcing his wife, separating from lawyers and management—and it cost him a fortune,” recalled Toni Visconti in relation to the beginning of their stay in Berlin. “Because Berlin was cheap, it suited his financial situation at the time, as he was almost bankrupt.” (Shaw 2018)

Bowie bought ordinary, cheap clothing in department stores, and often wore a worker’s cap. (Edwards–Zanetta 1986, 356) He kept in contact with only a few people around him. His son, Zowie attended school in Berlin and lived with his father who wanted to conduct a moderate lifestyle.

In his semi-seclusion, Bowie realized that he was free to go to the music stores, to the cinema, or to the parks again. He was even able to do his shopping without being disturbed by fans. People did not recognize him at first glance. As mentioned earlier, Bowie was mesmerised by the works of the German expressionists, he admired the Brücke Group, and often visited the Brücke Museum on the edge of the Grönwald Forest. The album covers of “*Heroes*” and Iggy Pop’s *The Idiot* were both inspired by the same painting, Erich Heckel’s *Roquairol*, an expressionist picture from 1917. Bowie also regarded himself as an expressionist artist.

Bowie travelled with Iggy Pop a lot on the U-Bahn. Pop also used the S-Bahn almost every day. These trips, especially the lines that went out to the Wannsee, inspired his song *The Passenger*, a “hymn” to Berlin’s transport system. (Schneider 2013) “Wildness and decadence were in the air”, and it was not too difficult

to obtain drugs in West Berlin. (Edwards-Zanetta 1986, 356) Bowie could have continued his dangerous Los Angeles lifestyle. On the contrary, he tried to regain control of his personal life and artistic independence, step by step.

Berlin was too far from the US branch of RCA. When Bowie sent the master tapes of *Low*—which did not sound like masters at all—to the management in November 1976, he declared that from then on he would produce *his own* music. The next year, he returned to the concert halls, however, he appeared onstage strictly as the keyboardist in Iggy Pop's band. Iggy and his former band The Stooges were remembered as one of the seminal bands in the punk movement. Bowie had different personas during the previous years, though, none of them had anything common with punk. Starting to play together with Iggy, Bowie reintroduced himself as “the father of one of punk's founding fathers.” (Edwards-Zanetta 1986, 360)

After the tour, in the summer of 1977, Bowie recorded the LP “*Heroes*” with the contributors to *Low*. The sound was experimental, distorted, and often dissonant. However, among the tracks, there was the masterpiece, the song “*Heroes*”, by which Bowie demonstrated that he still could write hits.

In late 1977, Bowie agreed to take the leading role in David Hemmings's new film called *Just a Gigolo*. The result was a slow black comedy with little invention. (Some critics thought that Bowie's intention was to take part in his own *Cabaret*.) It was widely communicated, that Marlene Dietrich, who had not made films for seventeen years, agreed to do a cameo appearance only to play together with Bowie. In reality, the two stars did not meet. Dietrich played her brief part in Paris, where she lived, while Bowie's part of the same scene was shot in Berlin.

Bowie embarked on a new world tour called *Isolar* in March 1978. The first halves of the shows were devoted to music from *Low* and “*Heroes*”. Guitarist Carlos Alomar conducted the band using a baton, and presented Bowie as a composer. The staff realized quickly that the once erratic and moody Bowie was now “in total control of every musical and production element. [...] The musicians perceived him as down to earth, considerate, someone to be respected for his artistry and brilliance.” (Edwards-Zanetta 1986, 367) He tried to control his publicity too, the message was professionalism. He gave several television interviews, he seemed to be clean, and, without doubt, he was humorous and collected. Bowie often mentioned his son, depicting himself as a caring father.

Bowie insisted that RCA should count the double live recording called *Stage* as two records from the point of view of contractual commitments. The dispute was resolved, but it was evident that Bowie wanted to supply the required number of the albums as soon as possible. (Matthew-Walker 1985, 49) And in the long run, the conflict indicated too that he had started to look for a new record company, which would have the commitment and the financial strength to promote his future albums worldwide.

The first leg of the *Isolar* tour ended in July 1978, and in August, Bowie returned to Berlin. He packed up his belongings at Hauptstrasse 155, and moved to Switzerland. (Griffin 2021) The recording process, which finally ended in releasing *Lodger* the next year (the closing part of the *Berlin Trilogy*) started in Geneva in September. After a couple of weeks, the work was suspended – more or less due

to the lack of ideas. Bowie continued recording in New York the next year, and the album came out finally in May 1979. Since 1974, it has been the first Bowie record containing not less than ten songs with lyrics. It was a great relief for RCA that most of them sounded to be completed. (Edwards–Zanetta 1986, 371) However, the critics were disappointed that the record lacked the expected synthesis. Greil Marcus from the Rolling Stone called *Lodger* “just another LP”, one of Bowie’s weakest ones: “scattered”, a footnote to “*Heroes*” “. (Marcus 1979)

The *Berlin Trilogy* has never been a big seller. What David Buckley, Bowie’s most reliable monographist stated about *Low*, that “it is more talked about and admired than actually liked or listened to,” (Buckley 1996, 56) is relevant to all the three records. Though, Bowie taught important lessons to other superstars: one cannot live continuously in the limelight. Lacking the private side of life has a devastating effect on one’s psychological integrity. Artists should not be afraid of having a break to recollect creative energies. The scary thing is when someone compromises himself with weak products. Thanks to Bowie, West-Berlin became a synonym for fruitful artistic withdrawal, the Hansa Studios have acquired an almost legendary status among musicians. Rock bands suffering from artistic crises also inherited Brian Eno from Bowie.

#### 4.

Bowie’s next LP *Scary Monsters (and Supercreeps)*, in 1980, was a high-standard farewell to alter rock with some wonderful tunes (*Ashes to Ashes*, *Teenage Wildlife*). Bowie carried out different goals from 1983. He worked on a disco-oriented style in appearance and music. Albeit, his forthcoming records did not contain pure disco music but some kind of drum and funky bass, the pulsating rhythm, the bombastic horn section, the platitudinous lyrics proved to be almost unbearable for many of his former fans. Nevertheless, the trilogy of “disco” albums under his lucrative contract with EMI–Capitol brought Bowie worldwide mainstream success which lasted throughout the decade.

According to his later interviews, Bowie himself suffered from his own artistic mediocrity in the mid-1980s which ended in a serious burnout. The circumstances, in which he established the band Tin Machine in 1988, resembled in many ways the time that he arrived in Berlin twelve years earlier. For Bowie, the most important factor could have been to rejuvenate himself artistically. He recruited Tony and Hunt Sales from the rhythm section of Iggy Pop’s 1977 tour, and he declared himself just one of the four equal members in the band. They recorded their songs live (just as the Beatles had tried to do it, without studio trickery and overdubs, while working on the *Get Back* project in early 1970). Tin Machine left the sound unpolished in order to maintain the spontaneous feeling. But having spent decades in the music business would not help with playing authentic garage rock.

The magical inspiration of the Berlin era was a unique gift.

I would like to express my special thanks to Viviane Harangozo for her help in the translation.

## Works Cited

- Bowie, David (2020): *On Kraftwerk and his Florian Tribute*. [www.davidbowie.com/blog/2020/5/6/bowie-on-kraftwerk-and-his-florian-tribute](http://www.davidbowie.com/blog/2020/5/6/bowie-on-kraftwerk-and-his-florian-tribute). (Accessed 20 Febr. 2021)
- Brady-Brown, Annabel (2012): *Hansa Studios Today: Bowie's Ballhaus*. [www.exberliner.com/features/bowie%27s-ballhaus](http://www.exberliner.com/features/bowie%27s-ballhaus). (Accessed 20 Febr. 2021)
- Buckley, David (2010): *David Bowie*. Transl. by Vizi, Katalin. Budapest: Cartaphilus.
- Buckley, David (1996): *The Complete Guide to the Music of David Bowie*. London: Omnibus Press.
- Devine, Carol (2016): *Station to Station. David Bowie on the Trans-Siberian Railway*. [www.calvertjournal.com/tiles/show/5291/bowie-trans-siberian-moscow-red-square-iggy-pop](http://www.calvertjournal.com/tiles/show/5291/bowie-trans-siberian-moscow-red-square-iggy-pop). (Accessed 21 Febr. 2021)
- Doyle, Rachel B. (2013): *Looking for Isherwood's Berlin*. [www.nytimes.com/2013/04/14/travel/looking-for-christopher-isherwoods-berlin.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/14/travel/looking-for-christopher-isherwoods-berlin.html). (Accessed 20 Febr. 2021)
- Edwards, Henry–Tony Zanetta (1986): *Stardust. The David Bowie Story*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Eno, Brian–Schmidt, Peter (1975): *Oblique Strategies*. [www.rtqe.net/ObliqueStrategies/Ed1.html](http://www.rtqe.net/ObliqueStrategies/Ed1.html). (Accessed 20 Febr. 2021)
- Griffin, Roger (2021): 1978. [www.bowiegoldenyears.com/1978.html](http://www.bowiegoldenyears.com/1978.html). (Accessed 6 March 2021)
- Marcus, Greil (1979): *Lodger*. [www.rollingstone.com/music/music-album-reviews/lodger-248873](http://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-album-reviews/lodger-248873). (Accessed 6 March 2021)
- Matthew-Walker, Robert (1985): *David Bowie. Theatre of Music*. Bourne End: The Kensal Press.
- Schneider, Martin (2013): *Iggy Pop in the Late 70s, Early 80s*. [https://dangerousminds.net/comments/iggy\\_pop\\_in\\_the\\_late\\_70s\\_early\\_80s\\_previously\\_unseen\\_photographs](https://dangerousminds.net/comments/iggy_pop_in_the_late_70s_early_80s_previously_unseen_photographs). (Accessed 5 March, 2021)
- Shaw, Des (2018): *Bowie's Berlin. The City that Shaped a 1970s Masterpiece*. [www.historyextra.com/period/20th-century/bowies-berlin-the-city-that-shaped-a-1970s-masterpiece](http://www.historyextra.com/period/20th-century/bowies-berlin-the-city-that-shaped-a-1970s-masterpiece). (Accessed 21 Febr. 2021)
- Sosnowski, Andrzej (2011): Warszawa. [bowiesongs.wordpress.com/tag/warszawa](http://bowiesongs.wordpress.com/tag/warszawa). (Accessed 21 Febr. 2021)
- Trynka, Paul (2008): *Iggy Pop: Open Up and Bleed*. Transl. by Dudich, Ákos–László, István. Budapest: Cartaphilus.
- [s. n.] (2005): David Bowie's Heroes. *Q Magazine* 2005/11, 52–53. p.