



David Bowie

*The Rise and Fall of
Ziggy Stardust and the
Spiders from Mars*

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RCA Victor

On The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars

Julie Corbett

To my mind it was certainly recorded in black and white, grayscale with grainy pixilation. Sometime in the fifties when people wore hats and used handkerchiefs. Suitcases were no bigger than the holdalls we would pack for a gym session today. Every woman had a vanity case, every man a drinking habit. The moon was always bright until a sinister cloud veiled it and spies were two a penny or more likely 5 cents apiece. It was rock and roll, English not American but I still thought gangster moll and private eye. My first album, a cassette tape and a cassette tape player and recorder, the hard brittle clicking of the buttons, the pencil to re-reel the tape after it became caught in the playing heads. The cassette went from bedroom to living room, house to house and through six removals the last two with no means of playing it. The brittle case is gone, recycled to a friend's daughter's 'A' level art project. The tape and its companions remain in a wicker basket in the loft. But this is a misrepresentation of the album, but it is my emotional signature of the experience of listening to the tracks. I never bought the cd, downloaded (or is it uploaded) to an mP3 player. This is not an album I could ever put on shuffle.

The trouble with school summer holidays is that the remarkable always seems to be tragic. This story is no different. The sirens early in the morning, the eerie silence of the street. I was looking out from the bedroom window to the row of garages opposite. Firemen and policemen worrying at one of the metal doors until it swung open in a rush of smoke and grating noises. How do you know suicide? The screams of the running boy, pale blue pyjamas and nothing on his feet, now held back by neighbours I recognise. The grown-ups, my parents never said a word, I would ask them today about it, but they are not dead yet. If it happened in this street my parents of children would expect them to be debriefed, protected, cossetted and the school services would have some pastoral care and maybe even a helpline. This was the day I started to smoke, not for real but like the man from the album, like the lyrics of the song. Someone's world had fallen apart so close you could smell the smoke and only music could save anyone that hot day.

We still sat on the fence next to the garages a few nights later. Lest said soonest mended could have been the estates motto, we should have had it tattooed on our shoulder blades. The boy was too old for us to know, over sixteen and at college and too young for us not to have played block and marbles with him last year. At ten we knew cancer, accident, runaway, we even knew 'drunk himself to death and 'died of a broken heart' but suicide was a taboo. We only had songs, and whatever the man's musical taste had been it needed to be rock and roll. We tuned in to Radio Caroline and North Sea International those nights, batteries were a currency we would give ice-cream and comics up for. This was before cider and fags and weed, before the first nights out away from youth club and school disco. Our own playlist was a mixture of half learnt songs from the radio, recordings of the bands of the radio or television and real stuff, 45's LP's and cassettes. We even had some classic 78's when Phil graced us with his company. Phil had three older brothers who played the clubs and Phil was learning to play the drums. All of us had

asked for guitars, both boys and girls for Christmas that year. We thought up names for the group, set lists and tapped out rhythms to write songs to.

It was experimentation, The Spiders from Mars came from around here, these proto-legends lived in our nearby streets, well two of them did. I played side A as soon as the commotion ended outside, looking for a way to slow down the first track to listen to the leaden doom We could read anything we wanted into the moody cover art with its blue highlights, but *Five Years* was all you could fear without revisiting a war zone. That day was number one and I only had another few thousand to go, the proximity of death gave me a selfishness of youth. I had never seen a grown-up cry in real life and fat people were comparatively rare back then. Whatever was killing us, us humans and the earth was never explicit but the idea that you had the cram everything in to a life suddenly became too real. These were never sing along together songs and air guitar had barely been invented then, but we rocked this track with gay abandon.

Soul Love with the crescendo repeating then the falling away and indistinct voice was one I only listened to without much attention it seemed light after *Five Years* and let me off the hook for ruining the planet. 1972 and football hooligans rather than lovelorn encounters were the concerns for my parents when I wanted to go out anywhere off the estate. Gangs did not exactly roam all the streets of the town, but they did worry enough people that as twelve-year olds I and my friends had a limited geographical range at night. Mike Ronson had been the park keeper in the nearest park to our estate, Phil's brothers still saw his sister Maggie, we were nearly touched by fame. This did not make their music higher in our hierarchy of favourites and David Bowie had a short-lived supremacy with this little gang but that day it was the only album I listened too. I did wonder every time I heard *It ain't easy* whether I would grow up to be someone's 'Hoochie Koochie' woman and if she inspired the same devotion as Marilyn Monroe, Twiggy or Julie Andrews the odd man at No 28 sometimes shouted out to us as who we might care to aspire to be like.

I listened to the album again, tonight in the same city, rain slick on the street outside. Not on a council estate with its blond brick and pale concrete but red brick walls like those on the cover art. YouTube is a time travel tool straight to grazed knees and polyester tracksuit bottoms and *The Rise and Fall of the Spiders from Mars* is a forerunner of multiple identity crisis worn as star jumpers, Crombie coats, Purdie cuts, tartan and a rash of cheesecloth and tie dye. This will be the first time I have listened to the album probably in its entirety for more than two decades. The top national news one the BBC is the suicide of Sacked Labour minister Carl Sargeant. One of the other news stories is about Nicola Sturgeon offering an unequivocal apology to gay men convicted of sexual offences that are no longer illegal. The first minister's apology coincided with new legislation that will automatically pardon gay and bisexual men convicted under historical laws. The bill will also allow the removal of such convictions from criminal records. We have survived more than five years. I have survived more than five years even against the back drop of climate change and Donald Trump as the president of the USA. The world is still intact this evening.

It is forty-five years since I first played the album, that long since man last landed on the moon. By now I thought we would have personal jetpacks, live off pills and have space colonies on Mars. David Bowie and Mick Ronson are both dead. I am married with two grown up children. Ever lyric, every riff, every harmony and alto sax solo is as fresh to my ears as I recall. I can hear other bands and tunes overlying the work, Status Quo, Hawkwind, Clash, Duran Duran, and even a mash up possibility of Culture Club and Amy Winehouse. I recognise that I am waiting for *Starman* and *Rock and Roll Suicide* and they

hit me with unexpected emotion. 2001 A Space Odyssey and all the soppy, tear jerking movies with dying lovers or tragic suicides come to mind. I have had closer more intimate experience of loss since 1972. I have chosen different albums as soundtracks to healing in the intervening years, but I did not need to. These tracks are like the scar I have which I am pleased tells a story about an accident that could have had such a different outcome. Hard times come and go and so do the fragments of playlists I wrote in blue biro on the slips of paper placed carefully back into the cassettes I recorded back then. This album fitted right back in to the memory bank because it has a shape that has a home there. It is a freckled, red headed, skinny legged space of a twelve-year-old girl and evenings outside with radios and with no doubt a ready supply of Everlasting toffee and Parma Violets secreted somewhere.