



Bowie: The Biography

By Wendy Leigh

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Ziggy Stardust, Aladdin Sane, the Thin White Duke. Gender Bender. Rebel. Songwriter. Fashion Icon. Rock God. One of the most influential creative artists of his generation, David Bowie morphed from one glittering incarnation to the next over the course of five decades—an enduring superstar who remained endlessly enigmatic and always ahead of his time. Discover the man behind the myth in this intimate and in-depth biography—featuring a full-color sixteen-page photo insert.

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Through in-depth interviews with those who knew him best, *New York Times* bestselling author Wendy Leigh reveals the man behind Bowie’s myriad images—up to and including his role as stay-at-home dad, happily monogamous in his quarter-of-a-century-plus marriage to supermodel Iman. In this “sizzling” (*Radar Online*) new biography, Leigh brings fresh insights to Bowie’s battles with addiction; his insatiable sex life—from self-avowed gay to bisexual to resolutely heterosexual—and countless conquests; his childhood in a working-class London neighborhood and the troubling family influences that fueled his relentless pursuit of success; and much more. This exploration of an artist beloved by so many reveals the man at the center of the mythos.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Wendy Leigh is the *New York Times* bestselling author of sixteen books, including *Bowie*, *Prince Charming: The John F. Kennedy Jr. Story*, and *The Secret Letters of Marilyn Monroe & Jacqueline Kennedy*, and the coauthor of *Life with My Sister Madonna*, *Jeannie Out of the Bottle*, and *Shirley Jones*.

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Bowie

✘ TWO ✘

STARBOY

When David was about three years old, his mother caught him putting on makeup for the first time. Not hers, but makeup belonging to the tenants in the apartment upstairs; lipstick, eyeliner, and face powder, which he daubed all over his little face.

“When I finally found him, he looked for all the world like a clown,” Peggy Jones remembered in 1986.

Shocked and amused, she rounded on David and told him in no uncertain terms that he shouldn’t use makeup. If that edict had been handed down to him by his father, whom he idolized, and whose calm temperament he appeared to have inherited, he might have accepted it. Instead, David said, somewhat reproachfully, “But you do, Mommy. . . .”

In the spirit of fairness, Peggy agreed, but then hammered home her point that makeup was definitely not for little boys. It doesn’t take Sigmund Freud to analyze the ripple effect that Peggy’s ruling had on the three-year-old David when he grew up, feeling as ambivalent about her as he did. . . .

However, only a few years later, Peggy did back down and encourage David’s childish tendency toward theatricality, perhaps because she saw her own passion for singing reflected in him, and perhaps also because she intuited his nascent talent. After she sewed David a robe and headdress, and his father made him a crook for his role as a shepherd in the nativity play put on by Stockwell Infants School, which he first attended when he was almost five, Peggy observed how much he loved dressing up. “It was then that we realized that there was something in David,” she said.

That realization was compounded by David’s reactions when he listened to the radio, in particular to American entertainer Danny Kaye’s “Inchworm.”

“He would tell everyone to be quiet and listen, and then fling himself about to the music,” said Peggy, adding, “In those days we thought he might become a ballet dancer.”

However, David’s exhibitionist tendencies did not find favor with his aunt, Peggy’s sister Pat, who sniped, “He was a vain child, and he always tried to look different.” Clearly irritated by David’s childish vanity, Pat targeted his hair: “He always liked to comb it his way, forward, with a quiff by his ear. If you combed it, he

always had to do it again himself. He looked at himself a lot in the mirror,” she said.

David may have looked in the mirror a good deal, but only child or not, he wasn't in love with himself. Instead, his hero as a small boy was his half brother, Terry. Space in Stansfield Road was at a premium, and Terry and David shared the ground-floor bedroom. Consistently kind and loving to David, Terry compensated in part for Peggy's coldness and inability to express her feelings.

Nonetheless, David's pain at his mother's failure to demonstrate maternal warmth toward him inevitably took its toll. “I was cut off from my feelings since I was maybe four years old,” he revealed.

Even then, as a very small child, David was already attracted to the limelight, and the limelight, in turn, appeared to be attracted to him. When David was five, his father had a brief stint working at Dr. Barnardo's office in Harrogate, Yorkshire, and David and his mother stayed there with him. Taken to an agricultural show that the new Queen and Prince Philip were attending, David managed to elude the adults with him and end up right in front of the Queen, who looked down at him, and said, in the kindest tones possible, “Oh, hello, little boy,” when a local photographer immortalized the moment.

Consequently, David made his debut in the media by appearing on the front page of a Yorkshire newspaper, which (according to him) ran the picture of him and the Queen, looking down at the little boy, slightly bemused. Sadly, that picture has proved to be untraceable.

And back in London, when his father took him to see a Christmas pantomime at a local theater, little David slipped out of his seat in the stalls and ran backstage, where he positioned himself behind the curtain, drinking in all the activities, watching the stagehands and, most important of all, the audience—and then, of course, there was the applause. Mesmerized by his first live show, David was equally enthralled by television. In early-fifties Britain, owning a television, even a black-and-white one, was a luxury, but John Jones, with his important job at Dr. Barnardo's, as well as his abiding interest in show business, didn't balk at getting one for the family. Almost immediately, it became clear to anyone visiting that David had commandeered the television; the choice of program the family watched depended on him.

Until 1955, when ITV—the Independent Television channel (which, unlike the BBC, transmitted commercials) was launched—British television consisted of just one channel, the BBC, which broadcast only in black-and-white, starting in the afternoon. With only one channel available, there were also very few programs, particularly for children. David's favorite show, *The Flowerpot Men*, a children's program featuring the puppets Bill and Ben, the flowerpot men, and their sidekick, Little Weed, was to become the highlight of his day.

He also developed a fascination with the science-fiction series *The Quatermass Experiment*, followed by *Quatermass II*, but which his parents decreed was far too adult for him, and forbade him to watch. Undeterred, while his parents watched the program, the resourceful David hid behind the sofa and watched wordlessly, most likely secure in the knowledge that even if his parents did discover him there, he would suffer few consequences.

He was undoubtedly his father's favorite, and poor Terry generally had to sit on the sidelines when John arrived home from work and recounted his day in detail to David, and just David. Even Peggy, as cold and remote as she was, nonetheless, favored David over Terry, as well.

When David was six, his parents sold 40 Stansfield Road, and after a year in Bickley, outside Bromley, in Kent (one of England's “home counties,” with South London its northern border and the English Channel its

southern one), moved to Clarence Road, Bromley. Finally, in 1955, David and his family moved to 4 Plaistow Grove, Sundridge Park, Bromley, a terraced house with four rooms, a kitchen, and an attic, where they would remain for fifteen years.

David's bedroom overlooked the back of a pub, but even though the noise of carousers could be deafening, especially on a Saturday night, he could always lose himself in his dreams, and in reading. "I was a kid that loved being in my room reading books and entertaining ideas. I lived a lot in my imagination. It was a real effort to become a social animal," he said.

When he was ten, he enrolled at Burnt Ash Primary School, in Bromley, joined the church choir, and was popular with classmates, who dubbed him a leader, not a follower, and he refused to take part in roughhousing with the other boys.

"I felt very protective toward him," said his neighbor, Barrie Jackson, who lived across the street from him. "He was very small and when all the boys gathered together . . . telling rude jokes, David sat in the corner mostly, not at all impressed."

Rude jokes might not have impressed him, but at the young age of ten, he was already aware of girls, and claims to have fallen head-over-heels in love with one of them. "She was the first girl in the class to get tits," he said succinctly: Clearly, he always remembered her—and them. "I went out with her years later, when we were about eighteen—but I fucked it up. On our second date, she found out that I'd been with another girl. I could not keep it zipped," he said.

Although David's thoughts may have started to stray toward girls when he was very young, those thoughts and anything else in his life were dwarfed by his rising passion for rock music. David was eight years old when Bill Haley & His Comets' "Rock Around the Clock" hit the top of the charts and swept Britain with its revolutionary sound, aimed exclusively at teenagers. And young as he was, David was set on fire by "Rock Around the Clock." As a result, he fixed his already considerable will on amassing a record collection. Fortunately for David, unlike most kids in Britain at that time, most of whom had to save up six shillings and eight pence in order to buy a 45 rpm of their chosen hit, he was in the privileged position of getting them for free, as his father, chief publicist at Dr. Barnardo's Homes, routinely brought him the latest records that well-wishers had donated to the charity.

And when Little Richard (complete with gold lamé suit, glittering from top to toe with gold jewelry) broke into the hit parade with "Tutti Frutti," David was in the seventh heaven when his father presented him with the disc. Little Richard became his idol, and David remained true to him and as an adult would always cite him as one of his favorite artists.

Little Richard and the other American singers whose discs John Jones gave David also provided him with his first taste of America, that far-off wonderland that seemed a million miles away from Britain. "I had America mania when I was a kid," David recalled, adding, "but I loved all the things that America rejects; it was black music, it was the beatnik poets, it was all the stuff that I thought was the true rebellious subversive side. What makes America great is its pioneer, independent spirit."

From the time when he received his first Little Richard disc from his father, America became his fantasy home, and from then on, at night he would often slide under the covers and listen to the American Forces Network radio station playing the top ten records and broadcasting plays based in Springtown, USA. "I would put myself into the play in my head and be living there, and drink sodas and drive a Cadillac and play sax in Little Richard's band and all that," he once said.

Little Richard didn't just represent the advent of rock and roll in Britain, or personify America for David, but as Richard also played the sax, David, who never did anything by halves, resolved to follow in his footsteps and those of Terry, who had always been a huge jazz fan and favored iconic saxophonist John Coltrane.

Determined to learn to play the baritone sax, David was not a little disappointed when his father gave him a white acrylic Grafton alto—not baritone—sax. Still, undeterred, he picked up the local telephone directory, found a number, and called renowned baritone sax player Ronnie Ross, who had performed with Woody Herman and other jazz greats—and, better still, as far as David was concerned, lived just a few miles away from him in Orpington, Kent.

Following the Pied Piper of his sense of destiny, David wasn't in the least bit shy in asking Ronnie to give him lessons. As he remembered: "I said, 'Hi, my name is David Jones, and I'm twelve years old, and I want to play the saxophone. Can you give me lessons?'"

Ronnie was taken aback by the request—his first instinct was to refuse. But somehow or other, David convinced him to meet, and when they did, he won the sax player over. David's Saturday morning lessons with Ronnie, which cost him the princely sum of £2 a lesson, lasted for three months, during which Ronnie was impressed by his pupil's diligence, persistence, and talent. And David, returning the compliment, judged Ronnie to be cool, and always remembered him fondly.

"Much later on," David recalled, "when I was producing Lou Reed, we decided we needed a sax solo on the end of 'Walk on the Wild Side'; I got the agent to book Ronnie Ross."

After Ronnie flawlessly completed his solo in one take, David, who rarely forgets anyone who has treated him well in the past, smiled and said, "Thanks, Ron. Should I come over to your house on Saturday morning?"

"I don't fucking believe it!" Ronnie Ross exclaimed when he discovered that David Bowie had once been David Jones, his talented pupil, the twelve-year-old with so much love for the sax, and so much ambition.

From the first, John Jones, the former nightclub owner, who had once been married to Hilda, the Viennese Nightingale, was fascinated by show business, and passed his passion for greasepaint on to his son, David, as if by osmosis.

"Uncle John enjoyed all the celebrities and . . . that touch of glamour," David's cousin Kristina observed.

As soon as David was old enough, John Jones gave him an autograph book and did all he could to help him fill it with the signatures of stars. And as Dr. Barnardo's press officer in charge of recruiting celebrities to help raise funds for the charity and also to interact with the children in it, he also was able to afford David an early glimpse of stars and stardom. When David was still a child, his father took him to see entertainer Tommy Steele onstage and took him backstage to see Tommy afterward. Born Tommy Hicks, like David, south of the Thames, Tommy Steele would become somewhat of an inspiration for David, and the blueprint for a facet of his initial show business image: the cheeky, chappy Cockney singer, part Tony Newley, part Lionel Bart, essentially a slightly disreputable character of the ilk of the Artful Dodger, of *Oliver Twist* fame.

The outing to see Tommy Steele was one of many that John Jones arranged for David. "Uncle John wanted David to be a star," David's cousin Kristina noted.

“He thought his son was absolutely marvelous. He always said he was going to do something great and talked about him all the time,” said John’s secretary, Winifred Bunting.

In short, instead of having a classic show business mother, a Mama Rose, exhorting him to “sing out,” David was blessed with having a show business father, one who would, through his teens, guide him, help him, and teach him the ways of self-promotion and image making.

As David dreamed of Little Richard and America, he dreamed from the perspective of postwar Britain, where he grew up. America became his Mecca, seemingly as far away from Bromley as Earth was from the moon. For although it may seem hard to believe today, Britain in the late fifties and on the cusp of the sixties still resembled a war zone. Food wasn’t particularly plentiful, and steak was a rare treat in a country where food rationing only ended in 1954, so as a ration-book baby, David would have been fed dried eggs and other ersatz produce.

When it came to music, artists like Ernest Lough, Danny Kaye, and Petula Clark dominated the radio waves. Rock music wasn’t played at all on the BBC Light Programme, and apart from the American Forces Network, only Radio Luxembourg aired rock music on Sunday nights at 11 P.M., when Pete Murray spun the top twenty records. It wasn’t until the pirate station Radio Caroline was launched in March 1964 that rock really exploded in Britain.

By then, David, characteristically, was ahead of the game, having seen Little Richard perform onstage in person. Moreover, he was also well aware of the band opening for Little Richard, the Rolling Stones, and its lead singer, one Mick Jagger, who had an instant impact on him.

“I’ll never forget this,” David recalled. “Some bloke in the audience looked at Jagger and said, ‘Get your hair cut!’ And Mick said, ‘What—and look like you?’ It was so funny.”

As David fell about in his seat, laughing at Mick’s bon mot, he couldn’t know that he had come face-to-face with the man who was destined to become his friend and his rival, and, now and again in certain arenas, including his choice of lovers, his doppelgänger. Only four years apart in age, and coming from the middle class, not the working class, as they so often projected themselves, David and Mick actually grew up less than ten miles apart—Mick in Dartford, Kent, and David in Bromley, Kent, and both of them had fathers of Yorkshire descent.

Away from his show business ambitions, David grew up in much the same way as many an English schoolboy of his time. At ten, he enrolled in the Wolf Cubs (the American equivalent of Cub Scouts) signing in with the 18th Bromley Cubs at St. Mary’s Church, where he was to meet his lifelong friend George Underwood, a good-looking local boy, the son of a greengrocer, who also nurtured ambitions of becoming a singer. Tall, cool, and stylish, with his hair arranged in a hot and happening Elvis style, George had charm and self-confidence, and, his classmates agreed, was tipped to the top of any career he chose to follow.

With George and their fellow Wolf Cubs, David spent one vacation at a summer camp by the seaside in Bognor Regis, Sussex, and another with his parents and George staying in a caravan in Great Yarmouth, on the Norfolk coast. He also went on vacation to a family holiday resort called Pontins, in Camber Sands, where his next-door neighbor was the then well-known British comedian Arthur Haynes.

“I used to go over and try and get his autograph. I went over three mornings running and he told me to fuck off every day,” David recalled in a conversation with Alexander McQueen, published in *Dazed and Confused*. “That was the first time I met a celebrity and I was so let down. I felt if that’s what it’s all

about . . . they're just real people.”

It was an early lesson he would never forget, and when he became famous, he would always endeavor to stay true to it and remain real.

At eleven, David took the 11-plus exam, which British children then took in the last year of primary education, and the result of which governed their admission to various types of secondary school, and won entrance to Bromley Technical High School. An above-average student, he still counted music as his main interest.

Meanwhile, John Jones continued to encourage David to raise his head above the parapet, and, young as he was, to make his mark on the world. When the thirteen-year-old David developed a passion for American football games, which he monitored religiously on the short-wave radio purchased for him by his father, John encouraged him to write to the U.S. Navy's London headquarters, detailing his passion for football and asking if they could send him some magazines about the sport.

David's letter, as masterminded by his father, elicited not only American football magazines but the gift of a helmet, a set of shoulder pads, and a football. Whereupon John immediately wrote a press release and sent it to a local newspaper, which duly published the story about young David Jones and his fascinating preoccupation with American football.

Fortunately for David, one of his other primary interests, art, was fueled by the head of Bromley Technical High School's art department, Owen Frampton, whose son, Peter Frampton, would find fame as a guitar player and go on the road with David on his Glass Spider tour, and also play on his Never Let Me Down record.

“David was quite unpredictable,” Owen Frampton remembered. “He was completely misunderstood by most of my teaching colleagues, but in those days, cults were unfashionable and David, by the age of fourteen, was already a cult figure.

“I was thoroughly used to very individualistic pupils and was rarely surprised by anything that occurred. Even when David varied the color of his hair or cropped it short, or plucked his eyebrows, I accepted his actions as a means of projecting his personality, and of that he had plenty!”

By the age of thirteen, David was engaging, handsome, and charming, and girls were already flocking to him like homing pigeons. On a school trip to Spain, such was his sex appeal that afterward, in a school magazine article, he was dubbed “Don Jones, the lover, last seen pursued by thirteen senioritas.”

Aware of his power over girls, even in his early teens, David manifested a streak of ruthlessness whenever a girl took his fancy, riding roughshod over any competition. When he double-dated, he thought nothing of jettisoning the particular girl he was with in favor of the girl who was with the other boy in the foursome, whereupon that girl immediately went off with him, lamblike, leaving the girl he was supposed to be dating feeling rejected, lost, and alone.

However, his propensity for assuming that any girl was fair game for him, no matter who else had already laid claim to her, led to one of the most seminal events in his life. In the spring of 1961, when David was just fourteen years old, a girl named Carol would inadvertently be the architect of the first tragedy of his life—one that would ultimately become the cornerstone of his image, and in many ways would lend him his unique trademark aura of dreamy otherworldliness.

His classmate and best friend George Underwood had fixed his amorous attentions on Carol, then still at school, and arranged a date with her. David, who had designs on Carol himself, told a massive lie to George, declaring that Carol wasn't interested in George and therefore wouldn't be going on the date he had set up with her.

When George learned the truth, outraged, he took a swing at David and caught him in the eye. David stumbled and fell down. At first, George assumed that he was kidding, as the punch hadn't been hard. But by some malevolent quirk of fate, his punch had caught David's left eye at an odd angle and scratched the eyeball, causing the muscle that contracts the iris to become paralyzed.

The end result was that, even to this day, David's left pupil remains permanently dilated, giving that eye the appearance of being a different color from his right eye. It also left him with damaged depth perception, so that when he drove, cars didn't come toward him but just appeared to get bigger.

His unmatched eyes also lent his gaze a hypnotic quality, and although it took him some time to adjust to the fact that his eyes were no longer identical, and he thought that he looked "weird," he admitted, "I quite enjoyed that as a badge of honor."

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