

Mr. Bowie Changes Trains: *Station to Station*

Written for artist Doug Aitken's 2015 "Station to Station" art event

IN THE DAYS of vinyl album sleeves, rock music was always a synaesthetic experience, and David Bowie's *Station to Station* is nothing if not white: a white-out of cleansing and purging, if also of cocaine euphoria. *Station to Station* is also a bit red (the lettering) and a tad orange (the tangerine RCA label).

White seemed right for Bowie in 1975/76, at least until the "Thin White Duke" talked foolishly and ill-advisedly of fascism and Hitler and you wondered if it was the White of Aryan supremacy that he meant to convey.

Which of course it wasn't: half the Duke's group was black, for starters.

Bowie's whole career is a journey from station to station, and his tenth album *Station to Station* remains one of the most impressive of his musical junctions: intense, passionate, focused,

surging and urgently funky – stripped-back, too, just as its iconography is stripped-back and monochromatic after the hypertrophied dystopianism of *Diamond Dogs* and the funky-but-chic hustle of *Young Americans*.

Station to Station is also a miracle, given the physical/chemical state of the Skeletal White Duke in the Los Angeles of 1975. (Was there ever a less Californian rock god than Bowie?) "I heard *Station to Station* and I thought it was brilliant, absolutely mindblowing," recalled the former Deep Purple bassist Glenn Hughes, at whose L.A. home Bowie stayed in May and June of that year. "I was amazed how he could come up with that, having been in complete psychosis." [Glenn Hughes in John Robinson, "Run for the Shadows," *Uncut*, July 2010]

"It was probably one of the worst periods of my life," Bowie confirmed in 2006. "It's a blur, topped off with chronic anxiety bordering on paranoia." [Cameron Crowe, introduction to booklet in *Station to Station* deluxe reissue, EMI Records, 2010]

Compounding the ill-health and paranoia was Bowie's megalomaniac conviction that rock music was dead, and that his future lay instead in directing films. "Me and rock'n'roll have parted company," he announced grandiosely to interviewer Tina Brown two months before starting work on *Station to Station*.

Excessive cocaine use is seldom beneficial but it was especially bad for the boy from Bromley, who was a charming if rather affected fellow until stardom and Charlie turned him into a paranoid, cadaverous maniac whose fleshless hand Aretha Franklin refused to shake at the Grammy awards. Joni Mitchell once observed that cocaine "seals off the heart," and there are few more heartless albums than *Young Americans*, which may be hip and slick but is also – as its maker willingly admitted – a pointedly "plastic" record.

Station to Station is *not* plastic, and there are several reasons for that. The first is New York producer Harry Maslin, who knew how to craft a big rock sound in the studio. The second is

guitarist Frank Madeloni, whose cartoon moniker "Earl Slick" was as perfect as the blazing, blaring Gibson licks he played over the core funk unit of Carlos Alomar (rhythm guitar), Dennis Davis (drums), and George Murray (bass). (Like Maslin and Davis, Slick had worked on two of the *Young Americans* tracks, "Fame" and "Across the Universe," which both also featured John Lennon.)

"I got some quite extraordinary things out of Earl," Bowie told Kurt Loder in 1990. "I think it captured his imagination to make *noises* on guitar, and textures, rather than playing the right notes." [Kurt Loder, sleeve notes for David Bowie, *Sound + Vision* box set, Rykodisc, 1990]

More important than either of these, though, is Bowie's own desire to move away from the darkness of decadence and towards the light of – dare one say it – intimacy.

*Stay, that's what I meant to say or do something,
But what I never say is, 'Stay this time,'
I really meant to so bad this time...*

I've so often heard *Station to Station* talked of in terms of decadence – of *spiritual enervation* – but it never sounded like that to me. (Maybe I'm just perverse: I don't find Bowie's subsequent album, *Low*, very downbeat either.) It's true that there's darkness and occultism on *Station*, but all its urges and strainings are in the direction of hope and healing; they really *aren't* "the side-effects of the cocaine." "Word On A Wing," for instance, is *literally* a prayer for redemption, a beseeching to be rid of black magic and Kenneth Anger pentagrams and the horrorfest of cocaine hallucinations.

*Lord, I kneel and offer you my word on a wing
And I'm trying hard to fit among your scheme of things*

Station to Station is Bowie seeking a return to his better nature, desperate to escape the coke psychosis of Hell A and the malnourished fakeness of Hollywood Babble-On. Hence the explicitly religious allusions to the Kabbala and the Stations of the Cross, the metaphors of journeying and changing. "*Got to keep*

searching and searching/Oh, what will I be believing and who will connect me with love?"

The album opens with the phased and irresistibly exciting sound of a train engine. For Bowie there seemed to be a correlation between rail travel and ch-ch-ch-changing as new stations loomed in the distance. How perfect that his return to London from mainland Europe in early May 1976 was aboard the *uber*-romantic Orient Express, and how unfortunate that he had to mar the homecoming with a wave he claimed was misconstrued as a *Heil Hitler* salute.

A confused and often silly chap Bowie was, but what a musician! By that I don't mean a great guitar player or even a particularly great singer; I mean someone with a profoundly instinctive talent for organizing rhythms and melodies. The exhaustive and exhausting work he put into *Station to Station* at Hollywood's Cherokee Studios, just after playing the made-for-Bowie role of Thomas Jerome Newton in Nic Roeg's film *The Man*

Who Fell to Earth, belied his apparently fragile state. For this is magnificently muscular music, at least on the towering rock-funk-disco of its three most powerful tracks.

"Golden Years," the single released just before Christmas, could just about have lived on *Young Americans*, while "Word On A Wing" and the cover of the Johnny Mathis/Nina Simone standard "Wild Is The Wind" – two tracks that alliteratively mirror each other as hymnal slow-burners winding up the album's original vinyl sides – are as fey and crystalline as they are ardent and heartfelt. But "TVC15," "Stay," and the album's epic title track are amongst the most supercharged items in the whole corpus of '70s rock. They're Bowie out on his own, streaking away from sagging balladeers and bloated prog-rock virtuosity.

In interviews Bowie liked to talk of his musicians as hired guns who owed him no allegiance, but both Dennis Davis and George Murray would play with him for another five years, and Carlos Alomar was still making cameo appearances with him as

late as the 2003 album *Reality*. Augmented on *Station to Station* by Slick and by the barrelhouse-moderne piano of Roy Bittan, the Alomar/Murray/Davis unit made for a fearsome engine-room. "Was there ever a funkier white man?" a colleague asked recently when "Stay" started playing on Spotify. Arguably, but few have funkied this convincingly without black musicians behind them.

Bittan's addition to the *Station* band was interesting in the light of Bowie's unlikely penchant for the songs of the pianist's boss Bruce Springsteen. One might have assumed that the New Jersey street romantic was in polar opposition to the alien meta-star of *Ziggy Stardust* and *Aladdin Sane*, yet Bowie covered at least two of Springsteen's songs, "Growin' Up" and "It's Hard to be a Saint in the City." Moreover, one wonders whether the white-heavy sleeve of Springsteen's breakthrough 1975 album *Born to Run* – like the Dr. Feelgood albums *Down by the Jetty* and *Malpractice* – might not have influenced all that white space on the cover of *Station to Station*. Or indeed the sound of *Station*

itself, which – though quite deficient in Springsteen's post-Van-Morrison rock 'n' soul swagger – is similarly urgent and romantic.

What, indeed, *is* the sound of *Station to Station*? Is it something like Springsteen + Mott the Hoople + Abba keyboard flourishes + sub-Sinatra "crooning" + Gibson Les Paul plank-spanking? Is it, as Bowie intimated in contemporary interviews, an amalgam of American rock-funk dynamics and the cool suaveness of the "European canon" he cites on the title track: Sigma Sound meets *Lou Reed Live* meets Kraftwerk (whose *Radioactivity* played over the p.a. before shows on Bowie's 1976 tours, and who would indirectly influence his decision to settle in Germany for *Low* and "*Heroes*")?

Is it indeed, in the words of *Creem* magazine's glamophobic reviewer Lester Bangs, "an honest attempt by a talented artist to take elements of rock, soul music, and his own idiosyncratic and occasionally pompous showtune/camp predilections and rework this seemingly contradictory mélange

of styles into something new and powerful that doesn't have to cop futuristic attitudes or licks from Anthony Newley and the Velvet Underground because he's found his own voice at last"? [Lester Bangs, "Chicken Head Comes Home to Roost," *Creem*, April 1976] That's certainly how this writer heard it as a 16-year-old who'd never been totally sold on Ziggy or Aladdin Sane. It was the first Bowie album I truly fell in love with, as I would in turn fall in love with *Low* and "*Heroes*."

Whatever *Station to Station* is, it's a singularity in the Bowie c.v., a distinct bridge between the apocalyptic pseudo-rock of *Diamond Dogs* (or the glistening disco of *Young Americans*, come to that) and the more mechanized Europa of *Low*'s first side. (Interestingly there's a faint premonition of the elegiac electronica on its *second* side in the dying strains of "Word on a Wing.") It's an album he remains proud of, and one he implicitly harks back to on *Heathen* (2002) and *The Next Day* (2013), his two best records of the past thirty years.

Though Bowie has described it as "extremely dark," he has also talked of *Station to Station* in terms that suggest it was a rebirth for him. "I do feel like I'm starting over again in a way," he told Robert Hilburn of the *Los Angeles Times* on its release. "I think there's a certain maturity now." [Robert Hilburn | *Melody Maker* | February 28 1976] To Lisa Robinson in *NME* he made it plain that the album was partly about thawing out and becoming vulnerable. "It's nice to know," he said, referring to himself in the third person, "that behind the callous, cold, iceman-cometh Bowie he's really pretty uncertain about what he's doing. I think that's poignant and very tender." [Lisa Robinson | *New Musical Express* | March 1976]

"I think the previous albums were of a colder emotion, and that this is one of a warmer emotion," Bowie added to *Phonograph Record's* Ben Edmonds. "It's got some kind of Godhead recognition, a feeling of empathy about it, yeah..." [Ben Edmonds, *Circus*, 27 April 1976]

One might almost say that by the time Bowie had finished his starkly expressionist tours of 1976 – the Thin White Duke as Sinatra-meets-stonefaced-Buster-Keaton – the Duke in question had fattened up and become almost human. Once he was in Berlin with his new best pal Iggy Pop, the tainted aristocrat was as dead as a vampire with a stake through its heart.

For the late Ian MacDonald, indeed, *Station to Station* was no more nor less than "an exorcism of self, of the mind, of the past." [*The People's Music*, London: Pimlico, p. 145] And for Cameron Crowe, who'd witnessed Bowie in LA a year earlier burning black candles and hallucinating bodies falling from the sky, the album was "a diary of a life saved, set to a soundtrack of vision and soul." [Cameron Crowe, introduction to booklet in *Station to Station* deluxe reissue, EMI Records, 2010]

Let's leave the last sentiment to Bowie himself, quoting from the effusively optimistic lyrics to "Golden Years":

*Don't let me hear you say life's taking you nowhere, angel,
Come get up my baby,*

*Look at that sky, life's begun,
Nights are warm and the days are young...*