

PLATTERS

BOWIE: never no turning back...

Things are no longer hunky dory with David Bowie. Grim self-examination is the order of the day, the new music a radical departure. But will his audience follow him? Find out in this week's exciting episode . . .

DAVID BOWIE: "Young Americans" (RCA)

WHERE have all poppa's heroes gone? Living in New York, every one.

A hard city by reputation, but presumably it has its compensations for someone with sufficient pocket money. Exile on main street could never be that dismal for a guy with a thing in the charts — Or Could It?

Those who see Bowie's career in terms of a succession of shallow flirtations with other people's scenes will derive little pleasure from "Young Americans" — unless they're prepared to believe that the boy's latest fling (white soul or something) catches him in the middle of his final flirt.

That, in fact, this is (most of the time) for real.

If they can't stretch to that then the record will probably strike them as not only "dull", but also objectionably "calculating". As to the latter, that's a case of personal prejudice; the former might even be true — but "There's A Riot Goin' On" was a best-seller, so think on.

The main item on the menu is none other than ye olde Loneliness Of The Long-Distance Superstar — an odd one for Bowie considering he built a sizeable proportion of his reputation on exploring his divorce from stardom, being outside looking in on fame.

So what gives?

His detractors would say he's run out of angles, got lost, found himself trapped in his own myth — that the anguish embroidery in "Young Americans" is merely a privileged self-pity. Which is conceivably 50 per cent true.

But we can see the case for the defence more clearly if we avoid assuming that this album represents no more than Bowie's latest passing fascination.

To me, for example, it sounds more like a transitional piece, created in a melancholy and confused state of mind aggravated by outside pressures and compounded by a generous dose of (sure enough) the self-pity of the privileged. True to itself, nevertheless — and certainly worth following through, if maybe not actually worth buying. (I get LPs free, of course).

"Young Americans" itself is by far the most energetic, outgoing performance on the album — although, by comparison with its frequently downright grim colleagues, the song does come on a shade forced, particularly in the vocal department.

The prevailing mood of the album is of luxurious angst —

how's this for decadence, kids? of wine-and-roses, Philadeliac melancholy, widescreen emotional dissipation.

Bowie's voice is mixed far enough back to cause listener problems with the lyrics, and his over-all presence is notably short on the World-Domination-By-1956 up-frontness of recent efforts. Likewise, the instrumental arrangements are very low-profile, even lacklustre, at times — the music itself simplified into various three-chord permutations.

Nothing is given any special prominence in the mix (except Bowie's vocal on "Across The Universe" and David Sanborn's screaming alto, ranging free as a kind of voiceless shadow of the singer), and there are no "Diamond-Dogs" style multi-functional credits for the star; here he merely sings, plays some unnoticeable guitar and piano, and takes co-production honours on the album's three most personal and least satisfying tracks.

On the other hand, gone with the flash and the ego is most of Bowie's Peter Pan facility.

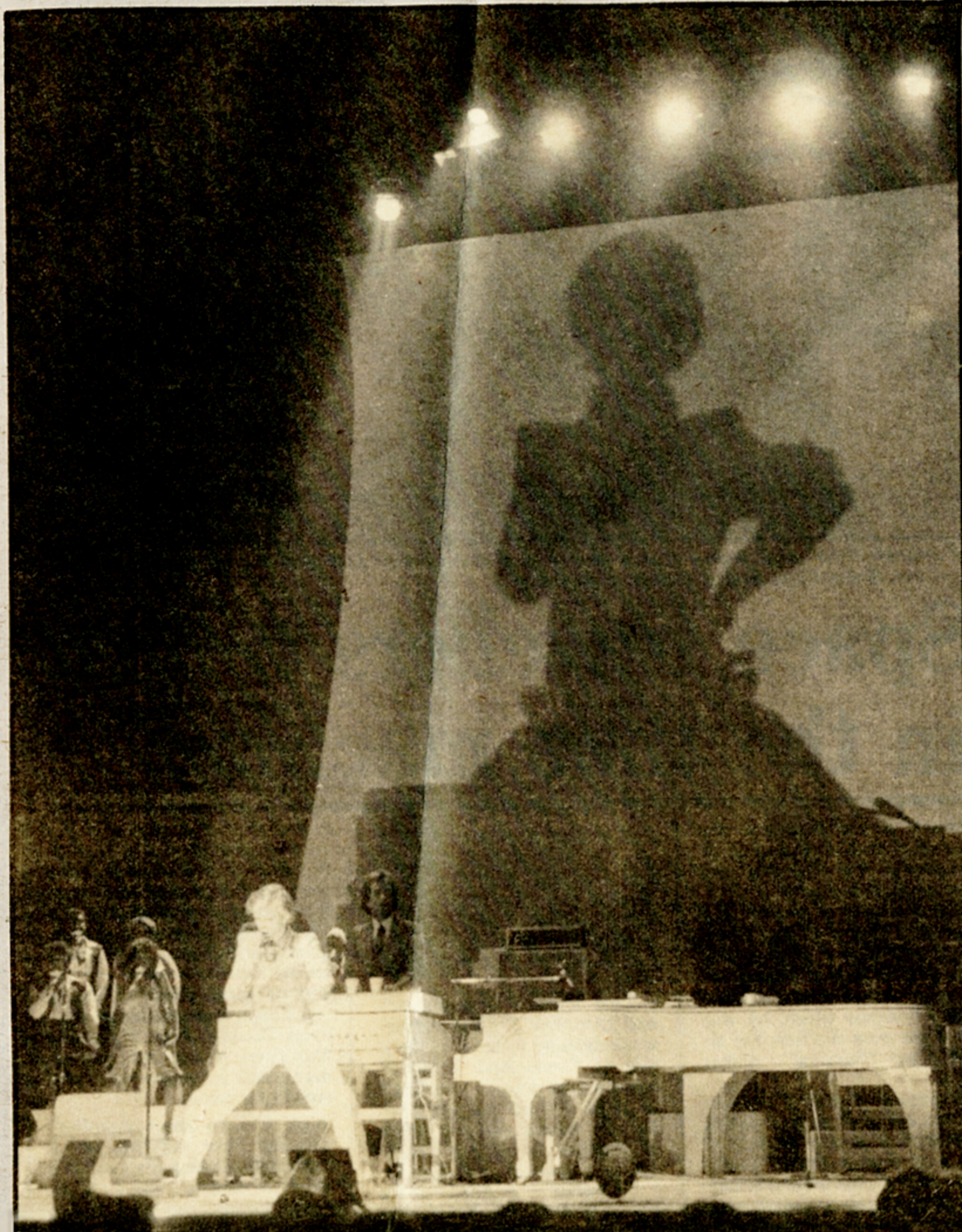
The parallel with John Lennon's unhappy, wifeless New York sojourn seems fairly clear. "Young Americans" even has the spaced-out loneliness of much of Lennon's solo work (particularly post-"Some Time In New York City") and the intro to, say, "Win" might easily have dropped in from the sessions for "Walls And Bridges".

Enough of the paperback psychology — Let's get to the trax.

The single starts the album and is the same version as the one currently in the charts at No. 11 (going down??) Bowie gives the query "Am I still too young?" to one of his characters, but, as usual, it rebounds back at him; his perspective seems, however, more penetrating than much of his stuff since "Hunky Dory", e.g. "She took his ring, took his babies/It took him minutes, took her nowhere/Heaven knows he would have taken anything."

"Win" is the first I-pity-the-poor-superstar exercise — a beautifully expansive piece, given a dreamy depth by an echoplexed sax rippling distantly from speaker to speaker. The words are generally to do with "All you've got to do is win/ That's all you've got to do/ When your smile is spreading thin/ And it seems you're trying not to lose/Saints are not supposed to grin/It ain't over . . ."

The point here is that, whilst Bowie's situation is one with which you could sympathise and that the problems of a star are doubtless just as real as anyone else's, the vantage-point remains limited. How many of us are super-stars? Is there anything a person such as myself might profitably learn from im-



ABOVE: the loneliness of the long-distance superstar. Could this be David's final flirtation . . . ?

mersion in the hang-ups of a millionaire? Etcetera . . .

You might even feel justified at this point in commenting that, if Bowie didn't realize he'd have to carry that weight, he shouldn't have joined; only the oblique accusations of venal superficiality in the press which form the song's second verse (culminating with the bitter, Neil Young-style "Someone like you should not be allowed to start any fires") lead this listener to forbear.

The man is, after all, being honest. "All you've got," he points out at the end, "is all you've got."

"Fascination" lets the audience in on Bowie's end of the "shallow flirtations" bit: "Fascination sure enough takes a part of me . . . Living the fever raging inside of me."

The music's up-tempo, but the mood remains depressed. "I can't help it," Bowie painfully explains. "I've got to use some every time fascination comes around."



Low-keyed cover art-work from young David this time.

Fair enough — and that's probably how his present white-soul-or-something phase came into being.

The central dislocation of this album is that, whilst Bowie correctly perceived his new idiom as an appropriate vehicle for what he felt he was likely to say, what he's actually said has turned out rather heavier than its musical setting.

And you either get into that or you don't.

WHATEVER THE CASE for David Bowie there's "never no turning back", as the last track on Side One testifies.

This is "Right", including one of the best expositions of the call-and-response code employed by Bowie throughout the proceedings to cut up salient lines and thus present additional emphasis and ambiguities.

The central activity occurs around the phrase "Taking it right" (which crops up on the

album's penultimate track "Can You Hear Me?" in a very different context), but the coda, with the chorus left to their own devices for a couple of increasingly invigorating minutes, zeros in on "never no turning back" — achieving a powerful poignancy that discloses the emotional core of "Young Americans" as a whole.

People who hold that Bowie lacks commitment are invited to examine this track carefully.

Side Two opens out impressively into the powerful large-scale "Somebody Up There Likes Me", a richly expressive sound heightened by the barely-muted hysteria of Sanborn's sax.

The Perils of Superstardom Part IV: "Keep your eye on your soul/Keep your hand on your heart/Don't hurry, baby-/Somebody up there likes me." But what is this we hear before us? — A misunderstood star who "looked a lot like you and me/As anyone with sense could see".

Who would have guessed that when Aladdin was alone he cried?

Only the fierceness of Bowie's delivery gets him past this without provoking questions in the House of Commons — but sailing close to the wind is what it's all about. He gets away with it . . . and the best of British luck.

Once again the extensive coda presents a dazzling array of cut-up call-and-response with Bowie repeating "He's so divine/He's Somebody" to the echo of the chorus chanting "Somebody's a fool." Great.

The melancholic confusion ascribed to Bowie's mind earlier is nowhere more unnervingly demonstrated in the next track, "Across The Universe", featuring Big Brother John Lennon on harmonies.

It's an overkill extravagance of a performance along the lines of Derek And The Dominos' massacre of "Little Wing", Bowie letting rip with that impassioned howling number he usually reserves for the Jaques Brel faragos he includes in concert.

Oddly enough Lennon enters the spirit of the thing, so exit

Pic. BOB GRUEN

both stage-left, bellowing . . . (Only "Jai guru deva" has been changed into a guitar to protect the credibility.)

An astoundingly hammy miscalculation that only a rattled man would make. Calm down, Jim.

"Can You Hear Me?" is an initially rather faceless ballad/lament which begins to grow when you cotton on to who it's about. "Take it right" ends up embedded in an abrupt acappella closing line: "Why don't you take it right to your heart?"

And then it's the closer "Fame", the number guitarist Carlos Alomar worked into shape with Lennon and Bowie on the spot in Electric Ladyland. The ultimate step in the new inside-looking-out stratagem, it's a bitterly ironic view made extra uncomfortable by Lennonesque touches of surrealism in the production (viz an occasional addition of echo to the fuzz bass — resulting in debunking farts of sound — and the grotesque speed-modified voices at the end).

"Fame," wheezes Bowie. "Bully for you, chilly for me."

A downbeat finale to end them all.

SO THAT'S "Young Americans", presented with as much devil's advocacy as a Bowie fan can muster. Because y'see, I like the album.

Despite the awfulness of "Across The Universe", the general negativity of Side Two, and the stardom-fixated design.

Despite the looseness of the whole enterprise (some fades are minutes too long; "Fame" drags a little and the bassist doesn't quite know the changes; and there's a vocal false entry unedited for all to hear in the intro of "Somebody Up There").

Despite the fact that the album only comes to life when played at very high volume.

Despite the fact that it sounds virtually nothing like the Bowie we've all come to love or loathe.

I like it. A lot.

I can't, however, tell you whether it's "good" or "bad". It may not worry Dylan freaks to say "Blood On The Tracks" is good (or bad) but it worries me. On the other hand, it's certainly a Dylan album Dylan people have to hear — and the same goes for "Young Americans" where Bowie people are concerned.

Whether you like it or not, it's there, it's a complete departure (if not yet a new arrival), and from now on Bowie's music can never be the same — particularly since he's all but lost the top of his voice.

"Young Americans" isn't exactly a bundle of fun, and there aren't too many whistleable tunes in it — but, as a transitional work away from youthful fascination towards mature consideration, it's both very revealing and impressively uncompromising.

(Although not to put out a lyric-sheet with it is certainly asking for trouble from those still hoping for a drag-ball and fancy-dress party).

Key lines are: "I have never touched you since I started to feel" and "Somebody lied/I say it's hip to be alive".

David Bowie as Cosmic Buffalo?

Why don't you take it right to your heart?

IAN
MacDONALD