

Cashing in on Death: The David Bowie Commemorative Extravaganza

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"Look up here, I'm in Heaven! I've got scars that can't be seen..." – David Bowie, "Lazarus" (2015)

Each age values its own species of celebrity. But each age also brings with it the phenomenon of reflected adulation. Cashing in on death, in other words, remains the business of business itself, the celebrity machine that draws out its replicas, its snivelling types, and its more rapacious breeds. David Bowie's passing presented a glowing opportunity, not to be missed.

The first use of the Bowie aura, and a fitting one at that, was by the man himself. Gordon Rayner and Hannah Furness of *The Telegraph* decided to see him as a cunning being, one who managed to redefine his own death artistically, and by keeping his impending demise at the hands of ravaging cancer under wraps. "David Bowie," opened the article, "spent his entire career defining the art of popular music and on Sunday he pulled off perhaps his greatest ever coup when he turned his own death into one last spellbinding performance." [1]

The release of his final album, *Blackstar*, was a performance "bordering on the supernatural". It constituted a requiem of sorts, with various "pointers to his demise," prophetically fulfilled two days later. There is much talk about morbidity and x-rays. The video of one of the first tracks, *Lazarus*, features the singer in a hospital bed, concluding with him vanishing into a wardrobe. Tony Visconti, Bowie's long-time producer, added some fuel to the mix. "His death was no different from his life – a work of art."

Bowie, however, was not to be left alone to his own bit of selling. Once dead, the adulation brigade would come out grabbing at every grain of the Bowie phenomenon with rampant enthusiasm. Such antics at times verged on the grotesque. They revealed the comingling of celebrity worship, political tribute, "reality" television and the desperation on the part of the entertainment complex to get the quick, financial fix. Such matters are all fair game.

Arguably the most notable political narcissist in the modern era, Britain's former prime minister, Tony Blair, certainly thought so. Having turned No. 10 into a celebrity processing factory during his stewardship seeded by spin, Blair could not help expressing his views in *The Times* on Bowie, of which he was "a huge fan."

Just as he did in office, Blair found skewing the account hard to avoid, continuing that ever disingenuous tendency he made famous with New Labour's "Cool Britannia" project. "From the time I saw his Ziggy Stardust concert as a student I thought he was a brilliant artist and an exciting and interesting human being." [2]

The Mail Online was more sceptical about Blair's university-Ziggy Stardust experience, though it did concede that Blair probably saw a Bowie concert at some point. "Blair was 19 when the Ziggy Stardust tour first visited Oxford for concerts in May and June 1972 – although Blair would not have been at the university yet." [3] He only matriculated at St. John's College in October that year.

Bowie's own views of "Cool Britannia" – Blair's vain effort to gather popularity from the pop and entertainment fraternity – dripped with scorn. In 1999, he would tell Jeremy Paxman that such a project was "so clichéd and silly and ineffective". His response was to meet Blair in high heels and a vicar's dog collar, neither of which the then fawning prime minister noticed.

In Britain, UK Celebrity Big Brother also found the Bowie cash cow irresistible, making hay by cornering the singer's ex-wife, Angie, on national television with news that the star had snuffed it. This, in turn, created a domino effect of Bowie publicity, stormily condemning Big Brother for its purportedly insensitive policies.

The entire revelation was broadcast from the habitually obscene "diary room camera". Initially, Angie says that she had not seen Bowie "in so many years" and could not "make a big drama about it, but... feel an era has ended". The frontal calm dissipates, leaving those Big Brother irritants known as "house guests" to comfort the distraught Angie. "The stardust has gone." A true spectacle!

Irrespective of the authentic emotional state of Bowie's former partner, the entire grotesquery was part and parcel of an industrial entertainment complex, one of collusion and collaboration. Those at Channel Five, which received a dozen complaints after the airing, would have felt it worth it. The Bowie name was too good to avoid streaming through the popular unconsciousness of the program, and reality television was there to make a killing. After all, Angie was largely there as a link to Bowie's name, a vicarious "celebrity" herself. And she was not, to the consternation of some Big Brother watchers, going anywhere.

Besides, suggested Angie's manager, Ray Santilli, the former model "had plenty of time to consider her position off-camera to process the news." The ambush, in other words, hardly counted as such. Big Brother had already readied her for a simulated emotional collapse. "She made the decision to go back into the house, she made the decision to be interviewed afterwards." [4]

It was time for Angie to take advantage of the Bowie name for another round. Television, even in its reality format, is ever an enemy of reality, a stimulant for dissimulation. Bowie would have understood that.

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Notes:

[1]

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/music-news/12093704/How-David-Bowie-turned-his-own-death-into-a-piece-of-art-after-keeping-terminal-cancer-a-secret.html>

[2] <http://www.tonyblairoffice.org/news/entry/tony-blair-pays-tribute-to-david-bowie/>

[3]

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3396514/Did-Blair-really-Ziggy-Former-PM-claimed-seen-Ne-wcastle-s-legendary-jackie-milburn-play-emerges-WASN-T-Oxford-Bowie-toured.html>

[4]

<http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/tv-and-radio/reality/david-bowie-dead-uk-big-brother-slamme-d-for-airing-angie-bowies-reaction-20160113-gm4kws.html>

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