David Bowie has died at the age of 69. Even this final act communicates Bowie’s power as a visionary artist who has orchestrated his sonic and visual concepts — as well as his public selves — from beginning to end.

Born David Jones in 1947 in Brixton, the boy who became David Bowie always wanted to be a star. Deeply influenced by Little Richard who combined rock’n’roll music with flamboyant stage shows, Jones performed different styles of music in various bands through the 1960s before he changed his name to Bowie in 1967 and shifted to playing folk music.
Bowie’s first chart success came in 1969 when the BBC played his song Space Oddity during its television broadcast of the moon landing. The song was an early example of Bowie’s ability to tap into the zeitgeist. Over the following few years, Bowie moved to a harder rock sound and absorbed influences from diverse sources including Lindsay Kemp – with whom he studied mime, Japanese kabuki theatre and theatrical traditions of cross-dressing and gender play. Other key influences were his then wife Angie – a model and art student – his glam rock contemporary, Marc Bolan of T Rex, and the pop art guru Andy Warhol.

Bowie’s time with Andy Warhol, Iggy Pop, Lou Reed, and the drag queens and trans people who congregated around Warhol and the New York club Max’s Kansas City had a big impact on him. In 1971, when he was there, New York City was also a hotbed of radical feminism and the gay liberation movement.
The immediacy of the freedom politics around revolutionising gender roles and sexuality energised Bowie and influenced the content of his lyrics and his public presentation.

**Like a leper messiah**

In 1972, six months after London’s first gay pride parade, Bowie created a media sensation when he gave a magazine interview stating that he was gay and said in another that he was bisexual. With brilliant timing he then released the concept album and stage show *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars*.

Ziggy, Bowie's defining and culture-changing persona, was an androgynous rock star messiah, come to save the earth from environmental degradation and eventually destroyed by the excesses of ego, hedonism, and fan worship. The song about the title character was a commentary on the phenomenon of rock stardom – Bowie was deconstructing himself and the world of rock while simultaneously carving his own place in it.

Audiences were divided. Was Bowie infusing the corporate rock world with much-needed rebellion or was he a commercial charlatan? Through playing with notions of authenticity and identity, Bowie challenged ideas of normal and natural. He made explicit in popular music that identity could be imagined by individuals, rather than dictated by society. This, for many, was precisely the problem. As one man
wrote: “Why on earth do so many turn on to that freak-faced pop-puff David Bowie – one look at him surely makes you want to vomit.”

For others – especially those who felt alienated from dominant ideas about sex roles and sexuality – Bowie’s identity play signalled freedom and belonging. Through Ziggy Stardust and his multiple costume changes, Bowie literally and metaphorically took the closet to the stage, and proudly opened and flaunted it: with a feather boa draped around his neck he sang in a baritone voice “you are not a victim”.

In doing so, Bowie helped to empower audience members who felt different. By making androgyny and bisexuality fashionable in the public realm, Bowie helped to create a safe zone in which, by dressing up similarly, fans could explore their gender and sexual identities without necessarily being labelled or identified.

**Soul love**

Through shared taste in music and fashion, individuals who had been closeted by social norms were able to form connections and communities regardless of their individual sexual orientation. The experience helped to liberate people’s attitudes. As one fan remembered of a Ziggy Stardust concert:

> The atmosphere was extraordinary. I cannot recall ever witnessing such strange, exciting and weird surroundings. There were so many outlandish people, men wearing dresses, masses of silver and gold lame – totally outrageous but all good natured.
Ziggy Stardust’s androgyny and bisexual persona were significant at a time when homosexuality had just been decriminalised in Britain and some states in Australia, but not in the United States. By making gender and sexual-bending fashionable, Bowie helped to transform a public culture that was steeped in traditional ideas of how males and females should behave and what people’s sexual behaviour should be.

For his heterosexual female fans, Bowie’s gender-bending and bisexuality presented a newly desirable masculinity stripped of its traditional and off-putting machismo. As rock stars before him had done, Bowie appealed to women who sought a life beyond the suffocating confines of suburban family life. Yet unlike female fans of Elvis, the Beatles or the Rolling Stones, Bowie’s female fans dressed like him.
Perhaps Bowie presented to young women the subversive glamour of gender play, giving them hope for new feminine possibilities in an era when gender was changing but no one knew quite what its future would look like.

Bowie’s albums in the 1970s showed how rapidly his own interests and influences changed, from Aladdin Sane and Diamond Dogs, to Young Americans and Station to Station. In the mid-to-late 1970s he collaborated with Brian Eno on the critically acclaimed Berlin Trilogy, which featured one of his signature songs, Heroes. His 1987 performance of the song at an open-air concert in Berlin has been linked to the successful uprising against the Berlin Wall.

We can be heroes

His biggest commercial success was the 1983 album Let’s Dance, co-produced with Nile Rodgers. The title song’s film clip was unique in its positive representation of indigenous Australians.

In 2013, after a ten-year silence, Bowie surprised the world when, without warning, he released – The Next Day, his 24th studio album. It received widespread critical acclaim. And now, after giving us a final album, without warning David Bowie has gone.
Rock and Roll Suicide was the final song on the Ziggy Stardust album and was often performed as the final song of the Ziggy Stardust encore. Nihilism, meaninglessness, mortality and the inevitable end – these were among the themes of this song and the album.

Yet Ziggy offered a moment of connection and redemption when he exhorted with the passion of an evangelical preacher:

Oh no love you're not alone...  
no matter who or what you've been,  
no matter when or where you've seen...  
I'll help you with the pain...  
turn on with me and you're not alone."

In this, in the 1970s and now, Ziggy Stardust forgives and encourages connection, transgression and rebellion in his listeners. For many he has fostered communities of belonging and hope. In his various personas, David Bowie enabled the imagining of new selves. "It was not only music," one fan wrote of what Bowie inspired, "it was a way to be."

His legacy on record sings across time, space, and now mortality with this simple message: “You’re not alone”.

And we’re not.