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Guitarist

Issue 404

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COLLECTOR'S EDITION

BOVIE

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Behind The Riffs

FEATURING

CARLOS ALOMAR

MICK RONSON

NILE RODGERS

EARL SLICK

& MORE...

+
*Recording
His Final
Album*



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Future

Changes



Like many others, I think everyone at *Guitarist* had more or less considered David Bowie to be immortal. Likewise, Lemmy seemed too much a part of rock's scenery to leave us so soon. As we went to press with this issue, we also learned the sad news that Eagles co-founder Glenn Frey had passed (look out for a full tribute next month), making this winter the worst in memory for losing legends. The only very slight consolation for all this is that it prompted us to listen again to the music that made them household names. In the case of Bowie, it was a reminder of the astonishing breadth and ambition of his music-making (see cover feature, p76). Rightly regarded as classic now, Bowie's music must have been sensational when he was starting out – and I'm sure not everyone 'got it' at the time. Passing years have a habit of making the new and strange in music feel comfortably familiar, and finally classic. That thought has been a reminder of the importance of seeking out uncommon sounds, and not just sticking to your comfort zone of old favourites. The charts may be filled with dross, but – believe it or not – there's more interesting guitar music being made now than ever, from St Vincent to Guthrie Govan. Embracing the spirit of change in terms of musical ideas is more rock 'n' roll than, say, smashing up a guitar, an act once brave and shocking and now just another rock cliché. So, in honour of all the heroes going to the great gig in the sky, I've decided to get out and see more live music this year – you never know when you might be watching the early gigs of another genius. See you next month.

Jamie Dickson **Editor**

Editor's Highlights



Golden Years

Bowie's guitarists relive the high points of riffing for the Thin White Duke. Fascinating stuff... **p76**



Slight Return

It's not the only true tape delay out there, but it's the first we've seen with tap tempo! Check out T-Rex's Replicator on **p126**



Rock Of Ages

We laughed out loud at the ribald advice of messrs Gorham, Beach, Hoekstra and Johnson on the skills you need to get ahead in hard rock **p62**

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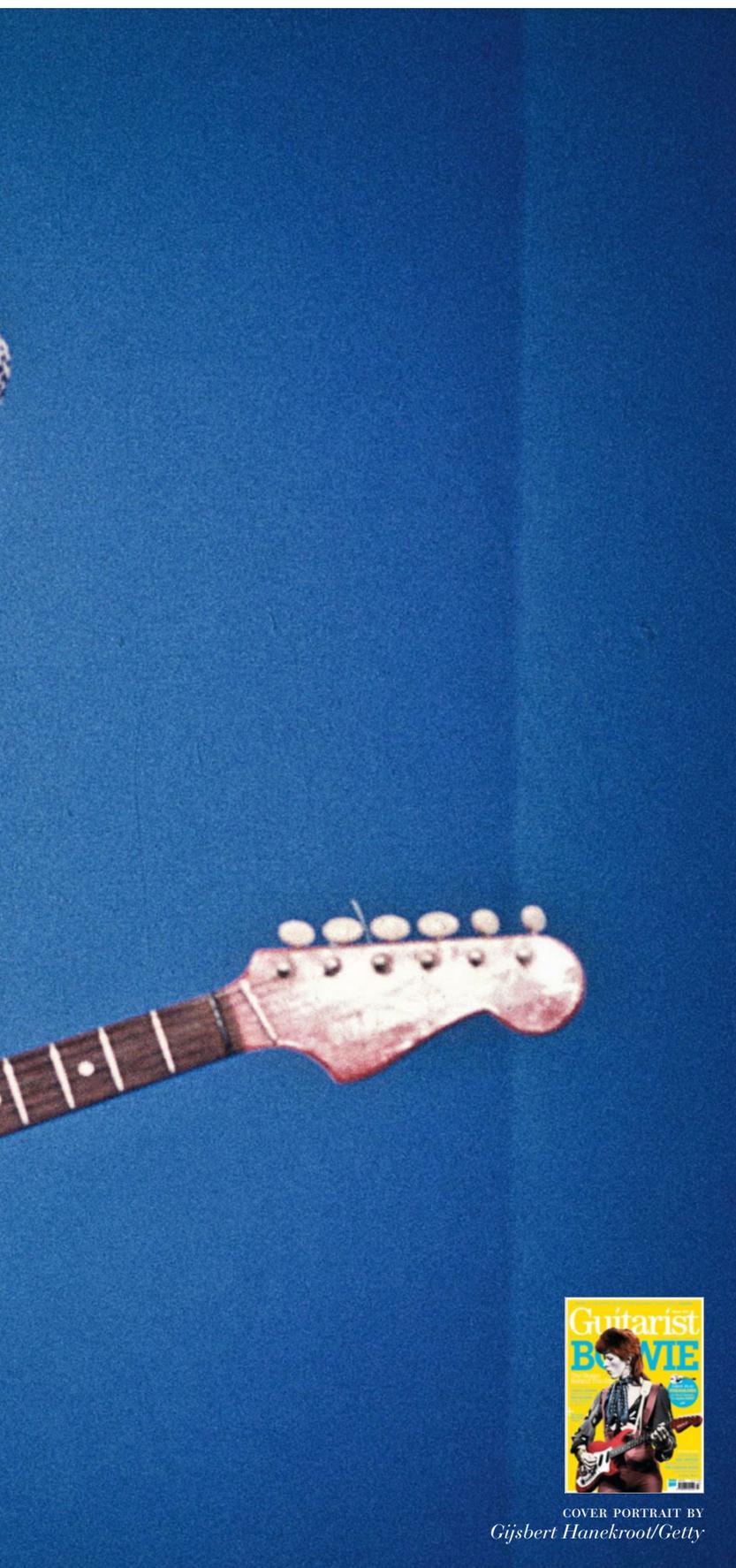
COVER FEATURE

BOWIE TRIBUTE

76

David Bowie's guitar players offer insight into the creative process of the late musical legend





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Gijsbert Hanekroot/Getty

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*“Time: he’s waiting in the wings
He speaks of senseless things
His script is you and me...”*

Time, David Bowie 1973

DAVID BOWIE

1 9 4 7 - 2 0 1 6

When David Bowie released his final album, *Blackstar*, on 8 January nearly everyone here who watched the video of the title song shrugged and smiled and said something like, “Wow, that’s weird, even for Bowie.” Its dark, fever-dream imagery of deserted cities under an eclipsed sun were as striking as anything he had produced to date, but harder to decipher. Perhaps the jewelled skull inside the astronaut’s suit should have been a warning – Major Tom’s remains, slumped in the dust. Two days later, Bowie himself was dead.

Words Jamie Dickson **Photography** Gijsbert Hanekroot/Getty Images



*“You always
felt like you were on this
amazing journey with this
real, bona-fide artist.
That’s so hard to come by.
And it was always hysterical.
So good-natured. Just a joy”*

MARK PLATI

As the world absorbed the shock of his sudden passing, it also dawned that Bowie had pulled off a remarkable artistic coup, making musical theatre of his own demise – and then leaving the stage in a puff of smoke while the crowd gasped, like a Victorian conjuror. The boldness, the humour and the quiet courage of this final gesture were entirely characteristic of his life in music.

Born in Brixton in South London on 8 January 1947, David Bowie’s wild spark of creativity was kindled in the unpromising setting of drab post-war London. The records of Little Richard, Elvis Presley and others ignited his interest in rock ‘n’ roll, but the jazz of Charles Mingus also formed part of the musical backdrop of his teenaged years. He formed his first band, The Konrads, in ‘62 and, after a series of dead-ends with outfits such as The King Bees and The Manish Boys, The Buzz and The Riot Squad, he released the first single as a solo artist, *Do Anything You Say*, in April 1966.

A change of moniker from David Jones (his real name) to David Bowie followed and he released his eponymous debut on Deram in June 1967, which saw music hall collide with psychedelia and gender-bending lyrical themes, anticipating the theatrical and transgressive daring of his later work. He had to wait until 1969 for his first Top 5 hit, *Space Oddity*, from his second album, however. Mick Wayne (a former bandmate of Jimmy Page) played a jazzily sci-fi solo on the track with, reportedly, a borrowed guitar that slipped out of tune on the last note – a chance discordant touch that Bowie, typically, loved.

But it was Bowie’s partnership with guitarist Mick Ronson (see p84) as The

Spiders From Mars that marked the first classic phase of a career that saw him assume and discard musical personas at will. Uninterested in following trends, it’s arguable that Bowie wasn’t preoccupied with setting them either – the rigour of his artistic vision dictated what form the work took and he left it up to listeners to decide what they made of it. *Guitarist* contributor Charles Shaar Murray, writing for *Melody Maker* in 1972, summarised the timeless, yet somehow futuristic, quality that this seemed to lend to Bowie’s work when he described him as: “A man in the 70s, looking back on the 80s from a position somewhere in the next century.”

While Bowie was not solely – or even primarily – a guitarist himself, his albums gave the world guitar riffs that are as memorable as anything from the back catalogue of The Stones or The Beatles. Think of Bowie’s own scalding intro riff to *Rebel Rebel* or Mick Ronson’s reckless, careering solo on *Suffragette City*. Or Robert Fripp’s noble, soaring refrain on *Heroes* – for which he had to mark positions on the floor of the studio to indicate the precise place to stand, relative to the amp, to induce specific notes to sustain. Stevie Ray Vaughan’s sparse but poised blues licks on *Let’s Dance* linger in the mind, too, while millions have swayed to Nile Rodgers’ and Carlos Alomar’s chrome-slick R&B riffs on tracks such as *China Girl* and *Golden Years*. Everywhere you look in Bowie’s back catalogue you find brilliant guitar parts, as propulsive and memorable as they are strikingly original.

Why has so much fine guitar work come out of David Bowie’s music? Perhaps

because the parts are often pared back to the visceral essentials – think of Mick Ronson’s fuzz-saw riff that slices into the speakers like an industrial laser as Bowie exhorts the listener to ‘freak out in a moonage daydream’. While the guitar grabs you by the lapels, your mind is left wondering what ‘freaking out in a moonage daydream’ would even look like – the classic Bowie double-whammy of killer hooks and dazzling ideas.

Also, Bowie had a talent for finding distinctive voices on guitar that suited the work in hand. When cosmic glam-rock was his aim, Mick Ronson was the perfect, tinsel-clad wingman on guitar. When streetwise soul was in, as on tracks such as *Young Americans*, ex-James Brown guitarist Carlos Alomar stepped up. Bowie was a judicious and eclectic bandleader with great taste in guitarists, moving on when it was time for a new sound but always treating players with respect, trusting them to do what they did best. They invariably rose to the occasion with top-drawer work.

In the days after his passing, we spoke with some of Bowie’s former guitarists to gain fresh insights into what it was like to play for the Thin White Duke – you’ll find their reflections and recollections of working on his music in the following pages. For the moment, however, we’ll leave David with the last word on his motives for exploring so many soundworlds – and stellar guitar styles – during his extraordinary career: “I realised that what I had to do was experiment. To discover new forms of writing. To evolve, in fact, a new musical language. That’s what I set out to do.” 



Bowie plays the Save Rave charity gig
at the London Palladium in 1969

Gritty, gutsy, unexpected – and always groovy – the guitar highlights of David Bowie’s work are many. But what was it like to work with such a mercurial talent? We spoke with some of the extraordinary guitarists who worked with him, who share their memories of adding their sound to his vision

Words Jeff Slate

Much has been written about David Bowie’s remarkable artistry since his death on 10 January from cancer at 69. But one of the things that is most distinctive about David Bowie’s recorded works that has been largely overlooked is the remarkable guitar playing on every one of his records, from *Space Oddity* to *Blackstar*.

From Mick Ronson to Earl Slick, Adrian Belew to Robert Fripp, Stevie Ray Vaughan to Carlos Alomar, and Reeves Gabrels to Gerry Leonard, Bowie’s songs are a masterclass in finding just the right part for his songs. “David was remarkable in the studio,” Ken Scott, who produced several of David Bowie’s early 70s albums, including *Hunky Dory* and *The Rise And Fall Of Ziggy Stardust And The Spiders From Mars*, told us just a few days after Bowie’s death. “But it was definitely a team effort and he knew the importance of a really great guitar part as a way to make a great, or even really good, song into a classic. And working with Mick Ronson during the period I produced him is the perfect example of that.”

“Ronson was the master,” Earl Slick agreed. “He was a great player but also a great arranger, too. He was perfect for David at that point in his career. And he also set the template for every one of us that came later. I think we all had to know that David expected a lot, and that he expected us to deliver something really special.”

“Ronno was absolutely brilliant for David at that point in his career, because he was in David’s brain,” Scott continued, clearly agreeing with Slick’s assessment. “He knew what to do even sometimes before it was requested of him. We’d start to tell him what we wanted and he’d say, ‘I know, I know...’ and then go down and do it on the first take. He knew what we were after even without us having to say it. For David, who was just finding his feet as an artist, that was the perfect relationship. But once he’d had some success as a songwriter and in making records he became really sure of himself, and I think that’s what he carried with him for the rest of his career: a real lack of fear in going wherever he felt he needed to go.”

After Mick Ronson, Slick and Carlos Alomar are probably the guitarists most consistently identified with David Bowie’s sound.

Carlos Alomar was playing at the Apollo Theater in New York City when he first crossed paths with Bowie, who was looking to break free of Ziggy Stardust and Aladdin Sane, and was in search of a sound closer to the soul and R&B he’d loved growing up in South London. Alomar and some of his fellow Apollo alumni did just the trick, but the pair quickly developed a close working relationship that continued until the concept album *I. Outside* in 1995.

“I come from the school of playing where you have to come up with lots of ideas, and quickly,” Alomar told us when I spoke to him about working with his legendary client. “With David, he would play me his idea, or song, or I’d hear the track, and I

would just play whatever came to mind that seemed to fit. Then I’d play another idea, and another. Eventually, he’d say, ‘Go back to that third thing you played.’ He might have me add in bits and pieces from some of the other parts, too. He didn’t necessarily give you specific direction, but he knew immediately when you hit on something that he liked, or that he could work with.”

Perhaps his biggest contribution to Bowie’s canon was Alomar’s guitar work on *Fame*, which the pair wrote with former Beatle John Lennon.

“We were making *Young Americans*, and we had this song called *Footstompin’* in the set,” Alomar remembered. “We’d cut a track, but then he and John came up with the repeating ‘fame’ phrase, and we built an entirely new song around it, by cutting up what we’d done and rearranging it and developing it. But that’s often how David worked. He would take something he liked, filter it through his own sort of genius, and make it his own.”

But with all the tributes announced in the days following Bowie’s death, Alomar says he thinks his friend would want to be remembered directly through his work. “I don’t think David would want any part of some star of the moment crooning like Bowie at some karaoke concert,” he said. “When I first got the trilogy albums – *Low*, *Heroes* and *Lodger* – I turned off the lights and put them on on my headphones and just got lost in the music.

“So that’s how I think you can get close to where David is, and maybe someday I’ll put something together and I’ll perform those.”

Slick Performance

"David Live was the first time I ever worked with him," Earl Slick told us when we spoke just a day after he got the news that his longtime collaborator and friend had died. "That was in 1974, on the tour supporting the *Diamond Dogs* album. I was young and on stage with all of these great players, like David Sanborn and Michael Kamen and Mike Garson, so that was really cool. After that, I don't remember much about *Young Americans*, but *Station To Station*, which followed, was another amazing experience. For the song *Station To Station*, we set up this huge wall of amps at Cherokee Studios, stacked up in the back of the live room in the studio at two in the morning. David and I just stood in front of them, with everything up all the way, and coaxed this enormous groaning feedback out of them for the introduction. I'm not sure who played what, but there were two guitars going at the same time: a Stratocaster and a Les Paul. We constructed the solo in the second half of the song together, beginning with that Chuck Berry-type lick.

"We sat there with two guitars and composed that solo – it wasn't comp'd – but that was something we rarely did. So that was pretty memorable. But the song that most people associate with me, I think, was *Stay*. It was a riff I came up with because David had us working on a new arrangement of his song *John, I'm Only Dancing* in the studio. But what I came up with was such a huge hook that he immediately turned it into a new song. He just wrote something around that lick and that groove. I used an early 70s Black Les Paul through a late-60s 100-watt Marshall stack for the rhythm guitar and an early 60s Strat for the lead part. I only owned one pedal at the time, so I didn't use any effects. I just plugged straight into the amp, turned it up to 10 and blasted away. Old-school."

Slick and Bowie parted company after the recording of *Station To Station*, but Slick returned to the fold when Stevie Ray Vaughan dropped out of the Serious Moonlight tour, supporting the smash *Let's Dance* album, in 1983. He returned again after guitarist Reeves Gabrels left on the eve of the *Hours...* tour, playing on the tours in support of *Heathen* and *Reality* that followed, and again for Bowie's surprise return in 2013, *The Next Day*.

"My best recent memory of working with David was during *The Next Day*," Slick recalled. "He'd emailed me out of the blue to see what my schedule was and almost immediately we were in the studio, working. My favourite song from that album is probably *Valentine's Day*, because we cut it as a band, live in the studio, with me, David, Sterling Campbell on drums and



Hit Me

Legendary groove-maker Nile Rodgers, in a 2007 interview, recalled the challenge of transforming Bowie's ideas into dancefloor hits

"When David Bowie wrote *Let's Dance* I went to his house in Switzerland and he played it to me on a 12-string guitar like it was a folk song. I thought, 'You can play that, call it *Let's Dance* and get away with it?' I was shocked. In my world, if I called a song *Let's Dance* and it doesn't make anyone dance, it's a flop, period.

"Then he played *China Girl*, which he wrote with Iggy Pop. Again, I didn't think his incarnation of it could be a hit. He thought it was great and I was like, 'Oh man!' So when I got to work on this song with the band, we got things sorted. Trouble was, I was totally afraid because I thought he would hate it.

"So I pulled him aside and tentatively suggested how I thought the song should start. I played the intro guitar bit [the clean guitar part in fourths] and he looked at me and said, 'Wow, that's great!' So I said, 'You think that's great? Hey guys, let's do this!' and the band played the song. He really loved it and so we did it like that.

"That's the most nervous I have been in my life, but it turned out to be a million-seller. Bear in mind everything else on that album had been recorded already, either by Bowie or by somebody else. Somebody else had done *Modern Love*; he'd done *China Girl* with Iggy and *Cat People* with Giorgio Moroder.

"The point I'm making is that a lot of people only know my versions. As a producer, you have this framework to give a song a big life and hopefully a big audience. And that's what David asked me to do: 'Nile, I want an album of hits.'

"The truth is, I could not have done something like *Let's Dance* without David. With Chic, no radio station would have played it, but with David, the music was genius. That is what I love about being a producer. I can cross over political boundaries. It's not my face and reputation that's being sold. I can work behind the scenes and do my stuff, but it's people like Bowie who are presenting it to the world."





Ziggy Stardust And The Spiders From Mars (l to r): Mick Ronson, Trevor Bolder, David Bowie and Mick Woodmansey, 1972

Tony Visconti on bass. *The Dirty Boys* was good, too, but that was one I overdubbed on. They had Gerry Leonard doing his atmospheric stuff and wanted me to add my crunch to about six tracks, including that one. So we kicked around some ideas and put it down. We worked together so long that we knew when something was working, and we generally worked really fast and it was always really good.

"It was great to reconnect, and it was great to see him looking so good and hear him sounding so good," Slick said. "It was a really special experience working with David again."

Tin Men

"I grew up with him, and I also grew up going to high-school dances seeing Earl Slick play, because we're both from New York City," Reeves Gabrels, who first played with Bowie in Tin Machine and stayed until after the recording of 1999's *Hours...* told me. "So both David's music and that kind of guitar playing was all around me from very early on. Of course, I never thought I'd play with him."

The pair met by way of an art show Bowie was taking part in, but Gabrels said Bowie didn't even know he played guitar, which allowed a friendship based on a shared interest in art, literature and culture to blossom without the added weight of any musical relationship. "What I found with David, really, was that the guitar playing was almost the least of it," Gabrels said. "We had a relationship first, so a lot of the time I felt like my role was to be the guy that reminded the emperor of what he was really trying to do. When other people were 'yes man'-ing him, I decided my role was to tell him the truth."

Adrift after the heights of *Let's Dance* and the following lows of *Tonight and Never Let Me Down*, Gabrels found Bowie unhappy, and at an artistic crossroads. "I said to him, 'Do you have creative control? Does your label have to put out what you give them?' And he said, 'Yeah, they do.' So I said, 'Well, then, really it's all down to your ego. If you're willing to make the music you want to make, you should just do it.' That's how Tin Machine was born. But he said that for him that was a lightbulb moment, truly, because no-one had said that to him. So my role with him became musical director, co-writer, co-producer, and it just so happened that I was also the guitar player. That was great, because I felt like I was really helping someone who I looked up to and I wasn't just along for the ride."

As for their working relationship, Gabrels confirmed what Slick and Alomar recalled, that Bowie was always searching for

something new and different, but wasn't always sure what that was until he heard it. But, he says, the nature of their relationship also meant that the way things developed was slightly different.

"The first thing we did together was a reworking of *Look Back In Anger*," Gabrels recalled, of the re-recording of the track from *Lodger* eventually released as a bonus track. "He said, 'There's two-and-a-half minutes at the beginning and the end, and the song in the middle for you to play guitar around.' Basically all he had was a drum machine and keyboard pads. He said, 'Maybe you could build German gothic cathedral architecture out of guitar.' And I just kind of went, 'Okay...' Then other times it was like, 'This should be like Jackson Pollock' or 'This should be like *The Persistence Of Memory* by Salvador Dali, but with melting guitars instead of melting clocks.' Or that it should feel like something written by Terry Southern. The reference points were rarely specifically musical. They were almost always visual or about feeling."

Guitarist Mark Plati came into David Bowie's orbit through a back door. When Gabrels and Bowie decided to do some demos at New York City's Looking Glass Studios, for what would become the *Earthling* album, they tapped Plati, who rented a studio in the space, to engineer. He ended up becoming a key player in the project. "I wasn't even a bass player or guitar player on *Earthling*, which is what I really am," Plati recalled by phone from Italy not long after learning of Bowie's passing. "I was the engineer, mixer, programmer and actually a producer and writer, even... It just fell out of the sky and I ran with it, as one should, I guess. The best part was that I got to really watch the writing process, and be involved in it, which was unbelievable, really. I don't think anything has ever surpassed that."

Typically, Bowie was looking for inspiration all around him, even turning to his new engineer for ideas.

"He and Reeves had asked me to come up with some tracks to play with," Plati recalled of the sessions. "We went through what I brought in, and Reeves had his own demos. David had riff ideas that weren't that worked out. So we pooled a lot of things together. A lot of times they'd take something of mine and they'd write a whole new chord progression on top of it. But it was different every time, and it was amazing how quickly it all happened. We'd get a structure going and David would be in the back with Post-it notes, writing lyrics. He'd be ready really quickly, and he'd be done on the first take. No guide vocals. It was absolutely mind-boggling."

“He took what was cool and made suggestions ... and he would twist it to go with some idea he’d have as a result”

MARK PLATI

Scatellite State

As for the guitar parts on the drum-and-bass-oriented *Earthling*, and its more acoustic-based follow-up *Hours...*, Plati says Bowie was always looking for inspiration. “He would put everything you suggested through his process,” Plati said. “He took what was cool and made suggestions. He took what you did and he would twist it to go with some idea he’d have as a result.”

An example of Bowie creating inspiration from thin air, Plati recalled, was on the track *Looking For Satellites*. “He told Reeves to do the solo on one string, only on one string. That was the limitation he gave him. It was really a great thing to set up. And Reeves pulled it off.

“There was a lot of freedom,” Plati continued. “It seemed to me that he really

wanted what you brought to the party. He was really interested in what you’d bring. He’d hear what you had, he’d make suggestions, then he’d send you somewhere with it. You’d think, ‘That’s not going to work.’ But you’d be surprised. So it was a tremendous experience for me in terms of opening my mind to any sort of possibility, because you’d never know what was going to work or where it would lead. And sometimes his idea wouldn’t quite work out, but it would lead somewhere else that was better. It was amazing to be in that process with him.”

Plati also said that he was grateful, and impressed, that when Bowie chose to shift gears dramatically, between *Earthling* and *Hours...*, that he stuck with him. “There was a point between *Hours...* and *Earthling* when I was wondering if I was even going to continue,” Plati recalled. “I had heard some of the demos and they were far more acoustic. I could tell stylistically that it was really a change and I figured that he must have assumed that I wasn’t the guy for that. But he kept me on. For me, it was amazing that he did that. He knew instinctively, I think, that I would be able to move with him and run up whatever tree he was going to run up. To me, that really says something about him.”

Ultimately, Plati’s memories of Bowie are fond. “He was always reaching. It was never rote to him. You always felt like you were on this amazing journey with this amazing performer who was a real, bona-fide artist. That’s so hard to come by. And it was always hysterical. So good-natured. Just a joy.”

I’m Your Man

Dublin-born Gerry Leonard was introduced to Bowie by his friend Mark Plati. “When Mark was working on the [unreleased] *Toy* record with David, I was producing a little rinky-dink record in the B-room down the hallway at Looking Glass Studios,” Leonard recalled by phone from Dublin, where he’d recently appeared at a Bowie gathering, not long before his old boss’s passing. “Mark came down and asked if I’d do an ambient guitar track on something they were working on. So I took it home to my little Greenpoint, Brooklyn apartment and brought it back to him the next day. He played it for David and he loved it. So, later that day, I got the knock, went and walked in the room, and there’s David, large as life. Not too long after that, after I’d played a little bit on *Toy* and the *Heathen* record, David was looking to put together a band to do the Meltdown Festival in London in 2001. He needed a guitarist to fill the shoes of the Eno-esque sounds of Robert Fripp and Adrian Belew; the more

Boy Could He Play Guitar

We examine the technique and tone of the late, great Mick Ronson

Mick Ronson is arguably the best-loved and most iconic of Bowie’s guitar slingers. His playing techniques were eccentric, but they worked. One unusual attribute (shared with Dolly Parton) was that, unlike most other guitarists, he kept his left-hand fingernails fairly long, claiming that this enabled him to get his nails under the strings to create the kind of extreme vibrato (shown off to devastating effect on Bowie’s *The Width Of A Circle*) that led some listeners to believe he was using a trem, or extraordinary bends that sounded like he was deploying a slide. To this end, he kept his guitars subtly detuned, preferring to bend a slightly flattened string into pitch. Oddly enough, his idol Jeff Beck used to do something similar during his Yardbirds years.

Few major guitarists have ever seemed fundamentally less interested in gear. Though he did indeed carry backup instruments on tour (and did occasionally use them), Ronson concentrated primarily on one main guitar at a time. His most famous guitar throughout the Bowie years and beyond was his stripped-front black 1968 Les Paul Custom, which he had bought new in 1969 and played until it was literally worn-out – the neck had been broken and repaired one time too many – and Ronson eventually donated it to the Hard Rock Cafe in Australia. Thereafter, he switched to a Blue rosewood-board Telecaster, which sustained him through the remainder of his career (though studio pics shot during the *Heaven And Hull* sessions show him with a white, Floyd-loaded, maple-board, single-humbucker superstrat of unknown provenance). Nevertheless, he reverted back to Les Pauls, or other humbucker-loaded guitars, for slide work. His amp of choice throughout the Spiders era, during his ill-fated solo career, his even more ill-fated tenure with Mott The Hoople and during his first collaboration with Ian Hunter, was a 200-watt Marshall Major head (the same model favoured by Ritchie Blackmore) through a single Marshall 4x12.

When he relocated to the US, he discovered Mesa/Boogies and used them for most of the rest of his life (apart from a brief flirtation with Music Man amps during the sessions for Hunter’s *You’re Never Alone With A Schizophrenic* album and the subsequent tour immortalised on the *Welcome To The Club* live album), preferring a combo for studio work and a Mesa head with Marshall cab for live work. Despite using a Marshall Supa Fuzz and a ToneBender allegedly previously owned by Pete Townshend to generate added grit during his tenure with the Spiders, Ronson’s main tonal ‘secret weapon’ was his Vox Wah pedal, generally left stationary somewhere near the mid-point of its sweep.



Earl Slick's collaborations with Bowie span almost four decades, from 1974's *David Live* to *The Next Day* in 2013



(l to r): Carmine Rojas, Bowie and Carlos Alomar in Rosemont, Illinois in August 1983, on the *Serious Moonlight* tour

“David and Tony Visconti were interested in what you could give them really quickly. What would your first idea be. And then they’d move on”

GERRY LEONARD

kind of outside-the-box guitar players. Mark put me forward, but David wanted to make sure I could also rock. That was the big, burning question.

“I had a little trio I used to perform my own music with, kind of art-rock happenings, in this coffee house called the Living Room down in the East Village, so David came along to see that. He was a real good sport about sitting on a three-legged chair and just kind of hunkering down and watching this thing. He ended up heckling me from the audience, joining in the general kind of back-and-forth of things. I knew that he was coming, so I was very nervous, but at the same time, I was like, ‘Look, it’s do or die, just do what you do.’ After that, he came and asked me to join the band.”

As for the pair’s working relationship, Leonard said that Bowie was the ultimate teacher, but also spurred him to get more from his guitar than he ever thought possible. “He was very generous in allowing you to come up with your own ideas and parts,” Leonard said. “I think his way of working mainly was that, because he knew why he got you there, he just wanted you to do what you do. But the thing that I learned early on, and pretty quickly, in working with David and Tony Visconti was that they were interested in what you could give them really quickly. What would your first idea be. And then they’d move on. The first time I worked with them they said, ‘Okay, here’s the track’ and I told them right away that I had an idea. So they had me go into

the studio, they played the track from the top and I played my idea. So I said, ‘I think I’m getting somewhere. Give it to me again.’ And David said, ‘No, it’s done.’ So I learned early on that they wanted things pretty quickly and very much about the first idea and I learned to be a little more prepared going in from then on.”

Leonard joined Bowie’s band for the *Heathen* tour, but after Plati left following the recording of *Reality*, in 2003, he moved up to his friend’s position of musical director. But Leonard came to work most closely with Bowie on his surprise comeback, 2013’s *The Next Day*, on which he had several co-writes with the legend.

“When it came to making *The Next Day*, he got me in very early on in the sessions, because I think we had a relationship that had worked and he trusted me,” Leonard recalled. “I was very careful not to overstep my boundaries with David, but I was never pandering, because he didn’t like that. So I was direct with him, and I think he knew I could quietly and efficiently get things done, so that things were prepared when we worked. But he also really enjoyed being spontaneous – totally in the moment – because he liked getting those wonderful moments of creativity that working with someone like David, who was a real master, could get out of you.”

Bowie visited Leonard at his Woodstock, NY studio, where the pair would start the day at about 10, have some espresso, and be in the studio by 11. “Before he came, he

asked if I had a drum machine,” Leonard said, chuckling at the memory. “I said, ‘Sure.’ I didn’t have one, but I sure got one, lickety-split. So he came over and said, ‘Well, let’s work on some music.’ We ended up working that way about three times, starting at 11:00, and by 12:30 or 1:00 he was out the driveway with a demo of what we’d done in his pocket. Two of those songs ended up on *The Next Day*.”

“The first time he came over, he had an idea, so he sat down at the piano and started to play,” Leonard went on. “He just turned around at one point and said, ‘You want to play?’ Or he’d pick up the guitar and try something, because the song needed another section, and say, ‘What about this?’ I would come up with a chorus idea and he’d say, ‘Cool, let’s do this twice, this three times, and this twice.’ I’d come up in bands in garages so I knew how to feed off quickly on those ideas. It was kind of like that. But it was like that on a super-high level with David.”

He didn’t always like what Leonard had to offer, but there was often a lesson in failing, too. “I played something for a friend of mine once before David came over, and he said, ‘This is awesome, this is great rock ‘n’ roll.’ But then I played it for David, and after a minute, he said, ‘There’s nothing in this for me, Gerry’ and he walked out. It was like, ‘Whoa, okay, that’s it.’ When he left that day, I remember feeling really stupid. But I still had my guitar set up, so I started working on another idea. It was as though there was something resonating in the room from David being there. It felt good, so I found a tempo and hit record. I played this new riff that I’d just come up with on the spot or plucked out of the air. I put that down and put it away, and the next time he came over I played it for him. He immediately asked me to play it again. I did and he started singing this melody. So I gave him the mic and hit record.

“We spent maybe an hour, tops, and then he said, ‘We’re done.’ I did a rough mix, he put it in his pocket and went out of my driveway, and that was it. But that song – *Boss Of Me* – ended up on *The Next Day* record. I remember when he pulled it out in the studio later in front of Tony Visconti and all these proper, grown-up musicians, I was really proud. So in a sense, he’d shut me down, but in another sense, he hadn’t shut me down. He gave me another chance. And that’s how David viewed creativity: that you have to remain open, even to the most excruciating moments when things come to a screeching halt. If you remain open, that might be the right moment for the right thing to come along. But if you close down, then you’re only allowing one path to exist: the somewhat prescribed path of what you



Bowie plays Earls Court, London, in May 1973, on the Ziggy Stardust Tour

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think is going to happen, and very often, that’s not the best path. The creative path is a dynamic one. I certainly learned that from David. It’s about allowing things in.”

Leonard, being one of the last guitarists to work so closely with Bowie, has the last word. “David had a profound effect on my life, and I can see that now. He was a master and I was an apprentice. But he was very generous with that relationship and never treated me like an apprentice. When you were making music with him, he wanted it to be a level playing field. He didn’t want to be dominant over you. He wanted you to behave like an equal, or to try, at least. That’s an incredibly generous way to work, and it’s the most fantastic place to be as a guitarist: to feel that you’re wanted and that you’re there to do what it is you do. David made you dig deep; root your feet down as well as try to hit the highs. You needed to stay incredibly rooted and centred working with David, almost as though what you were doing was a martial art, in a sense. He was a master of that. You couldn’t help but be influenced by that. But most of all, he had a great surreal sense of humour, and most of all, I’ll miss his laugh.” 

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