Get Things Done:
The Commodification of David Bowie in 1983

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ABSTRACT

This paper employs David Bowie's 1983 album *Let's Dance* as a central focus to explore notions of authenticity and compromise within popular music and to question the concept of integrity for artists seeking mainstream international success. The analysis evaluates Bowie's career from a commercial standpoint, delving into the underlying financial motivations that may have influenced his creative decisions. The study utilizes a multifaceted approach, incorporating primary interviews, insights from biographical sources, and contributions from the field of Bowie studies. Furthermore, it integrates perspectives from business, marketing, and public relations theories to investigate the influences and decisions which shaped the *Let's Dance* phase of Bowie's career and its subsequent repercussions. The paper suggests Bowie's mainstream reinvention in 1983 can be seen as form of creative business endeavor, demonstrating astute business instincts and entrepreneurial aptitude. Despite subjecting Bowie to allegations of 'inauthenticity' and 'selling-out,' this strategic rebranding ultimately resulted in significant wealth accumulation and the consolidation of his star status.

Keywords: David Bowie, Let's Dance, Branding, 1983, Popular Music, Authenticity

INTRODUCTION

In early 1983, theatre and arts critic Pia Lindström interviewed David Bowie for WNBC-TV, New York. She came away somewhat surprised, commenting "it seems that David Bowie is

not just a kinky extrovert who flashed on the scene. He strikes one now as a somewhat shy, thoughtful, and rather serious person. I suspect we are seeing the transformation of David Bowie" (Tanaferry, 2022). At the time, the exact nature of this transformation was still unclear, but Lindström's assessment had presciently identified the emergence of Bowie's latest public persona. His 1983 reinvention would polarise both critical and public opinion, but it was undoubtedly a commercial success. The period had a defining impact on Bowie's career trajectory and, therefore, provides a useful case study to explore the significance of business and enterprise in the creation and presentation of popular music. This paper uses the *Let's Dance* album to illustrate how musicians may incorporate business acumen and entrepreneurial flair as an element of the artistic process. The interplay between music and commerce has been extensively investigated in scholarly literature on popular culture and music. However, in the wide-ranging, interdisciplinary field of Bowie studies, his underlying commercial motivations have been often overlooked or underplayed. This paper considers the tension between Bowie's business instincts and creative output while reflecting on the degree of artistic compromise required to achieve mainstream success. To appreciate Bowie's commercial proficiency, it is necessary to understand his early influences and motivations. I begin by discussing Bowie's initial exposure to commerce and his appropriation of Warholian business practices to obtain lasting success. This opening section suggests the creation of art can be a form of entrepreneurial practice, and therefore frames Bowie's career development and output as capitalist activity. I then consider the establishment, maintenance and commodification of Bowie's brand and sub-brands, before interrogating the production, packaging, and presentation of Bowie's *Let's Dance* album. This encompasses theoretical considerations regarding David Bowie's personal life and mindset during the early 1980s and how these factors may have functioned as catalysts for his transformative shift into mainstream appeal. The paper then discusses the accusations of inauthenticity and selling-out

which followed the enormous global success of *Let's Dance*. This section applies Keightley's (2011) concept of authenticity in rock culture by interrogating the production of *Let's Dance* through the lens of Romanticism and Modernism. The concluding section provides a review of the album's enduring impact on David Bowie's career trajectory, offering insights into its lasting implications on his artistic legacy.

The music industry seeks to turn music into commodities, and in doing so "turns musicians into commodities" (Frith, 1983, 134). This transformation is achieved through the creation of stars. In this respect, Bowie's move towards stardom in 1983 can be viewed as a premeditated, yet creative, act of commodification. Bowie's confident, almost mercenary approach is heralded in the opening lines of *Modern Love*, the first track on the *Let's Dance* album. Here, the protagonist lays out his manifesto for productivity: knowing when to "stay in" and "go out" in order to "get things done". According to Blake (2016), this assertive new Bowie presents himself as a metaphorical "Thatcherite go-getter […] on the trading floor after a lunchtime workout" (82). There was no longer time for oblique strategies, random cutups, or improvisation. Here was a level-headed, laser-focused Bowie, with a clear sense of purpose. His pithy "get things done" philosophy was "the voice of his new 1980s persona: the businessman, the man of the people, the man who sold the world" (Brooker, 2017, 211). For Buckley (2013) the album's introduction was a mission-statement which announced a renewed sense of purpose, "He knew how to party, but he also now knew that music was serious and that was his job - and that he meant business".

Figure 1. David Bowie, Serious Moonlight Tour, June 1983, Berlin Waldbühne, Bernd Schunack Mauritius Images GmbH / Alamy Stock Photo

BOWIE AS BUSINESSMAN

On occasion, David Bowie characterized himself as a business construct or consumer product: “I’m an instant star. Just add water and stir” (Halliwell, 2003). In the documentary *The Fine Art of Separating People from Their Money* (Vaske, 1998), which explored the links between creativity and commerciality, Bowie referred to the advertising dictum “product plus personality equals brand” and light-heartedly applied it to his own career. An interview with Q magazine featured another flippant retail comparison, “I'm more of a supermarket of things, rather than a craft shop […] I'm less corner shop, more your Woolworths” (Quantik, 1999, 92). While these comments were intended to amuse, they each contained an element of truth. While Bowie may not have enjoyed the business side of his career, he nevertheless approached it with a degree of creativity and valued its importance in terms of career development. The origins of his business ambitions and the first practical steps towards global success, can be found in his early associations with the world of commerce. To some

extent, showbusiness was in his blood. According to Kenneth Pitt (1983), Bowie's manager in the late 60s, his father, Haywood Stenton Jones, demonstrated a certain "entrepreneurial flair" (10). In 1933 Jones Snr had hoped to become an "entertainment impresario" by opening a piano bar in London (Marsh and Broackes, 2013, 28). When the venture failed, he then worked as a promotions officer for the Barnardo's children's charity, before being appointed head of public relations in 1956. Through this role, Jones Jnr was able to meet various stars of the day and witness at close hand the basic functions of his Father's job, such as the day-to-day planning and management of campaigns. In 1963, at 16 years of age, David Jones left school to start his first job at an advertising agency, where he was introduced to "new theories on amplifying the effectiveness of mass marketing" and learnt techniques to influence an audience (Marsh and Broackes, 2013, 30). Bowie's short-lived time in advertising was an "Orwellian" experience, which supposedly revealed the industry to be a "dark controlling force" (Dogget, 2011, 29). Yet, despite these early misgivings, Bowie's teenage association with advertising would subsequently alter how he viewed himself as an artist.

Bowie understood and embraced music business concepts of identity production early in his career, "acquiring a highly reflexive understanding of himself as an object to be fashioned and marketed" (Bennett, 2017, 575). However, gaining mainstream recognition took time. After years of struggle, the song *Space Oddity* finally earned him acclaim in 1969. Yet Bowie and his management had been unable to truly capitalise on the song's popularity. The catalyst he needed ultimately came from the world of fine art. It was the influence of Andy Warhol and the Factory which provided the inspiration for Bowie's future success. Like Bowie, Warhol had worked for a time in advertising. Warhol had successfully drawn on his commercial know-how to combine the world of marketing with his artistic ability and, in doing so, generated

lucrative self-publicity for himself and his work (Fillis, 2002). Bowie effectively took Warhol's notion of 'celebrity' as an art form and repurposed it for the world of music. Here was a new approach which would allow, and even celebrate, interactions between entrepreneurial business practice and artistic creativity. By embracing mass culture his work could "be sold as art without being cheapened thereby" (Auxier, 2017, 38). The influence of Warhol and his Factory on musicians like Bowie helped usher in a post 60s movement in which "commercialization and consumerism were a means to a radical end" (Van Cagle, 1995, 14). Hoare (2013) goes so far to say that Bowie would not have existed without the inspiration that Warhol provided. His approach to art and marketing gave Bowie permission to be "an artist – a fine artist" (293). Bowie paid tribute with his song *Andy Warhol* in 1971 then, in the 90s, he portrayed the artist in the film Basquiat (1996). When Bowie's manager Tony Defries formed the MainMan Group of Companies in 1972, the initial staff were selected from the cast of Warhol's infamous play *Pork*, as well as Factory regulars. They became enablers who helped realise Defries' strategy of Bowie behaving like a star "in order to become a star" (Pegg, 2000, 291). The less-than-favourable contract that Bowie inadvertently entered with Mainman in 1971, which had a lasting impact on his financial well-being for subsequent decades, served as a pivotal reality check. The experience compelled him to recognize the critical significance of business acumen in shaping his career development. Nevertheless, Defries' management skills and promotional flair undoubtably played a part of Bowie's early success.

Instead of rejecting the commodification of rock as being corrupt, Harron (2016) argues that Bowie "openly used its machinery and hype to promote himself into its pantheon", while simultaneously telling his audience exactly what he was doing (162). Bowie's 1972 *Ziggy Stardust* album, mostly recorded after his first meeting with Warhol, told the tale of a famous rock star. This foreshadowing narrative was key in making him an actual rock star (Lampert,

2016, 154-55). Similarity, his presentation as a suave, successful, media friendly entertainer around the time of *Let's Dance* fulfilled its own prophecy, garnering widespread public acceptance and a subsequent fortune. However, the *Ziggy Stardust* character did not risk a sizable, already established fan-base. If the venture failed, he could always try again with relatively little cost. Conversely, Bowie's *Let's Dance* reinvention could have conceivably damaged his brand with far greater consequences. There was more to lose. The *Let's Dance* project was, therefore, informed by the capitalist principles of entrepreneurship: the development of new business in the hope of generating a profit, while taking on financial risk. For Scherdin and Zander (2011) the creation of art "captures the essence of entrepreneurial activity" (1). There is a need for imagination and an artistic vision to identify a financial opportunity and then conceive a plan to attain it. The venture may require lateral thinking, a calculated risk, or a willingness to bypass traditional thinking. Bowie had taken entrepreneurial approaches throughout his career, disrupting traditional methods of being "sold and marketed as a product" to great effect (Cinque and Redmond, 2019, 27). His initial fame in the early 70s had been achieved by "a radical shift in his creative strategy" (Bennet, 2017, 574). However, by the early 80s he was still regarded as a somewhat cult artist (Trainer, 2003). Bowie had tasted success and was largely feted by critics, but he had not yet gained broad mainstream recognition. Reaching the next level of stardom required another equally radical strategy. To capture a new global audience, Bowie was required to shed some of his existing fan base; those who might question a perceived pandering to mainstream tastes. From a business perspective, it was a risk that made sense. Marketing strategies which attempt to target both new and old customers are generally not effective (Rosenberg and Czepiel, 1984). The *Let's Dance* album and its presentation was an intentional move to reposition Bowie in the public eye and shift him towards a younger audience. This was largely achieved by distancing himself from the art presentation and stylisation of the past

(Hall, 2013). Walking away from his established brand as the "eternal outsider" of the 70s was a gamble, with no guarantee of success (Dogget, 2011, 289). There was an established precedent for this behaviour, as countering public expectation was a tried and tested Bowie strategy which had effectively become his trademark. That said, the *Let's Dance* project was certainly a radical break from his presentation in the late 70s and early 80s. Bradbury (2013) claimed the album effectively "took a blow torch" to the enigma he had cultivated throughout the 70s (121). Blake (2016) claimed that Bowie was ripping up his "manual" (82). In truth, he was closely following his manual for drastic reinvention, honing past strategies, and drawing on a wealth of first-hand marketing experience.

The creation and maintenance of a musician's brand is an essential element of their commerciality. This was certainly true for Bowie, who was open to diversification and not coy about deploying his brand for financial gains beyond the music industry. As Buckley (2013) observed, Bowie regularly allowed his name to be branded, "using stardom as a commodity" to transform his "cultural kudos" into revenue streams. Across his career and posthumously, David Bowie's image and musical works have been authorized and replicated in numerous commercial contexts (Cinque and Redmond, 2019). Bowie himself appeared in advertisements for consumer products and strategically sanctioned the use of his music in film, television, and commercial soundtracks. The following section explores Bowie as a brand and considers *Let's Dance* as a rebranding exercise designed to invigorate his flagging US profile in the early 80s.

BRAND BOWIE

Frew and McPherson's (2015) analysis of branding in the music industry argues that musicians are framed within an industrialised, neo-liberal ideology. The artist is part of a production line which takes musicians through stages of evolving from a creative individual

to an entrepreneurial artist, culminating in the attainment of a branded celebrity status. They describe the music industry as a mass market, where artists and their music have become managed commodities to be exploited for brand development. This is not a new phenomenon. Stars and their name have always been a form of brand. They are created and fuelled by multimedia strategies and require the ongoing circulation of perceived value to maintain their position in commercial music culture (Frith, 2011). The recognition and consistency of a corporate brand is highly valued and carefully maintained. And yet, Bowie's brand always championed change. He constantly altered his product by "tampering with the brand and switching labels" (McCarthy, 2019, 95). According to Welch (2013), Bowie consistently drew on an "exotic mixture of images, ideas and music" to ensure his brand would "remain both controversial and attractive" (8). His marque was essentially one of transformation. The early adoption of 'Bowie' as a stage name is perhaps the most obvious example of his representation as a brand. The creation of David Bowie was initially born from the need to differentiate himself in a crowded marketplace, but it also became a useful method of deflection. Bowie the "celebrity rock star" took the brunt of any criticisms "while David Jones maintains his distance" (Potter and Cobb, 2016, 123). Employing characters throughout his career added yet another layer of separation between the public and David Jones. The creation of his Ziggy Stardust, Aladdin Sane, Thin White Duke et al. personas reflect the business principle of sub-branding: the combination of an established name with another to develop a product with "its own brand identity in terms of a given market segment" (Rahman, 2013, 38). In retrospect, the Bowie of 1983 can be viewed as another character. He was, yet again, readjusting his brand to align with a new audience. However, this was unclear at the time. Critics and long terms fans questioned whether the new Bowie was indeed *real*, or just another persona. Was he finally appearing as 'himself' or presenting yet another exotic artifact (Sandford, 1997)? As Ammon (2016) suggests, while Bowie "may be a pleasant chap

by all accounts" his work also has a "deeply cynical" aspect to it (27). For Morley (2016) the act of removing the mask, to reveal his real self, was in truth "still another mask, it's still strategic" (429). Tony McGee, a Vogue fashion photographer who shot promotional stills for the *Serious Moonlight* tour, agreed that Bowie's presentation during the *Let's Dance* period was that of a character, as carefully constructed as any of his previous incarnations (Doyle, 2018, 83). Bowie's rebranding required mainstream media coverage to reach broad global audiences. The revealing of his 'true self' was a useful media angle, which duly received substantial coverage around the world. In constructing communities of consumers, Frith (2011) identifies a key challenge for the music industry: "record companies depend on media that they don't control" (39). Magazine, newspaper, radio, and television outlets all required a compelling narrative, and Bowie's new look provided a convenient entry point for media interviews. By this point in his career Bowie was adept at providing interviewers with the content they required. As Morley (2016) states, even his most fervent detractors were forced to recognise his ability to generate publicity (27). The central purpose of the rock interview is fundamentally mercenary: to promote a product while selling the performer themselves. According to McCarthy (2019) Bowie used interviews to not only sell his latest album, but to simultaneously sell the "idea of Bowie-as-a-product" (97). The many television interviews conducted to promote *Let's Dance* projected him as a self-assured yet reflective figure. For US viewers, this was an entirely different character from the awkward, cocaine addicted Bowie who appeared on *The Dick Cavett Show* in 1974, (an interview his own website described as possibly his most bizarre).

The death of David Jones in 2016 mathematically marked the early 80s as his mid-life period. It is important to remember that the mid-life point in a person's life span is not the same as a midlife *phase* (Freund and Ritter, 2009). Nevertheless, it is worth noting some of the theories

surrounding the trials of middle age in relation to Bowie's personal and business circumstances at the start of the 80s. According to Lawrence (1980), prevailing philosophies about this life stage suggest it is a time when individuals face changes in their family and careers and may develop "a more certain knowledge of their degree of career success attainable" (37). The difficult dissolution of Bowie's marriage and a growing dissatisfaction with the RCA record label contributed additional stress to his early thirties. Whether or not these difficulties resulted in the early onset of a mid-life crisis is debateable, yet Buckley (2012) describes the period as being "a difficult time of his life […] his priorities had changed". The mid-life period can often cause a person to pause and "review their achievements, take stock of what they have and have not yet accomplished" and possibly take "drastic measures to fulfil their dreams" (Freund and Ritter, 2009, 583). By applying this contemplative process to Bowie's state of mind in the early 80s it is possible to view his move towards the mainstream as form of renewal, conceivably emerging from a period of self-reflection. The conclusion of Bowie's contractual obligations to RCA Records provided a new sense of freedom. He had parted ways with the company in 1982, at which point a deal with former manager Defries, which cost him half of his income and 50% of RCA album royalties, finally came to an end. Bowie's dissatisfaction stemmed from what he believed to be RCA's lack of interest in his *Low* album. Since 1977, relations had deteriorated to the point where both artist and record company made little effort to engage and were simply going through the motions. As Bowie would later state, "I was really quite glad when I was able to terminate that particular contract" (BBC Interview, 1983). 1982 was also notable as the year Bowie found Bill Zysblat, a business manager he could finally trust. Zysblat went on to become a loyal and valuable associate, taking on increasing responsibilities within Bowie business camp as acting as financial advisor of Bowie's estate. With all the pieces in place, it was now time to create an album which would exploit his newfound earning potential. Any profits would be maximised by his status as a tax exile, with official residence in

Switzerland since 1976. According to Bowie's close friend George Underwood, *Let's Dance* was an opportunity to tell the world "especially his ex-management who had left him almost broke" that he could still write hit records, "I think for the first time he was determined to make some money" (Doyle, 2018, 76). Lawrence (1980) believes the resolution of a mid-life crisis can bring about a "new approach to life" which can symbolise a change in out-look and represent "a radical departure from the interest and desires that characterized the first career" (39). In Ken Tucker's (1983) 4-star album review in Rolling Stone magazine, he refers to the lyrics of *Modern Love* as "a rock statement about growing up and facing commitments" (59). By addressing many of the personal and business difficulties he had faced up to that point, Bowie was ready to reenergise his brand and embark on a creatively fertile and financially lucrative period.

For Buckley (2013), 1983 marked a change in the way David Bowie was promoted; he had become "a guarantor of a certain left-field cool without being that confrontational". The presentation of a friendlier, more accessible persona was part of Bowie's normalization (Savage, 2013). He was now marketed as mainstream commodity, unlikely to offend the masses. The personal presentation of this new Bowie was, according to O'Leary (2011), that of a "hipster CEO figure" with a blond bouffant and designer suits. Shaar Murray (2007) described Bowie's urbane look as that of an "alternative Prince Charles" with immaculate suits "beautifully draped from his coat hanger shoulders". Excessive consumption in the 80s and a taste for expensive clothes were reflected in pop culture's return to a more glamorous look (Rettenmund, 1996). Bowie's affluent, suited appearance in 1983 was certainly in sync with the times. When negotiating his new record deal with EMI America, Trynka (2011) claims that record company executives at EMI America initially mistook the "elegant figure striding down their company corridors for a wealthy investor" (317). Frith (2011) refers to the clichéd rock

ideology of the artist battling against a gatekeeper as part of an established sales pitch. A narrative which presents the artist and their fans as ultimately triumphing by storming "the conservative commercialism of the suits" (44). That storyline was too predictable for Bowie, who decided instead to become one of the suits, albeit a more stylish one.

At the Claridge's Hotel press conference in London, held in March 1983 to promote the *Let's Dance* album, single and world tour, a rejuvenated, consumer-friendly Bowie was unveiled to the world. The thin, pale physique of the 70s had been replaced with a tanned, more muscular shape, while his light brown hair was now dyed bleach blonde. Gabrielle Pike (2023), a music journalist at the event, commented "none of us really knew what was coming. There was a glamourous looking David Bowie. Not your Ziggy Stardust, not somebody who looked a bit 'strange'. He just looked amazing. I think everyone took a breath when he walked in through the door." This new look was foregrounded on the album cover of *Let's Dance*. Literally fighting-fit, Bowie was photographed by O'Regan naked from the waist up. Wearing Everlast boxing gloves designed for sparring, his fists are clenched and raised in a boxing stance as he leaned forward into the light of a projected Derek Boshier painting. Four years earlier he had appeared as a broken-nosed victim on the cover of *Lodger*, another Boshier collaboration. With *Let's Dance*, Bowie had become the aggressor, or was at least ready to defend himself. This arresting new look was far removed from the Pierrot costumed, lipstick wearing character on his last album cover for *Scary Monster (and Super Creeps)*. The conceptual idea of the singer as a boxer was not new. Helen Shapiro (*Helen Hits Out!* 1964) and the Dutch singer, glamour model Patricia Paay (*The Lady Is a Champ*, 1977) had been there before. The Commodores' 1982 *All the Great Hits* compilation had featured a prizefighter on its cover. However, the image that may have caught Bowie's eye was the artwork on Iggy Pop's 1981 single *Bang, Bang*, where the singer stands in a boxing ring, wearing boxing gloves and Everlast shorts.

Bowie would later cover the track on his 1987 album *Never Let Me Down*. Bowie's involvement in Pop's career has been referred to as a form of "sponsorship" (Trynka, 2011, 438), but the transactional nature of the relationship clearly went both ways.

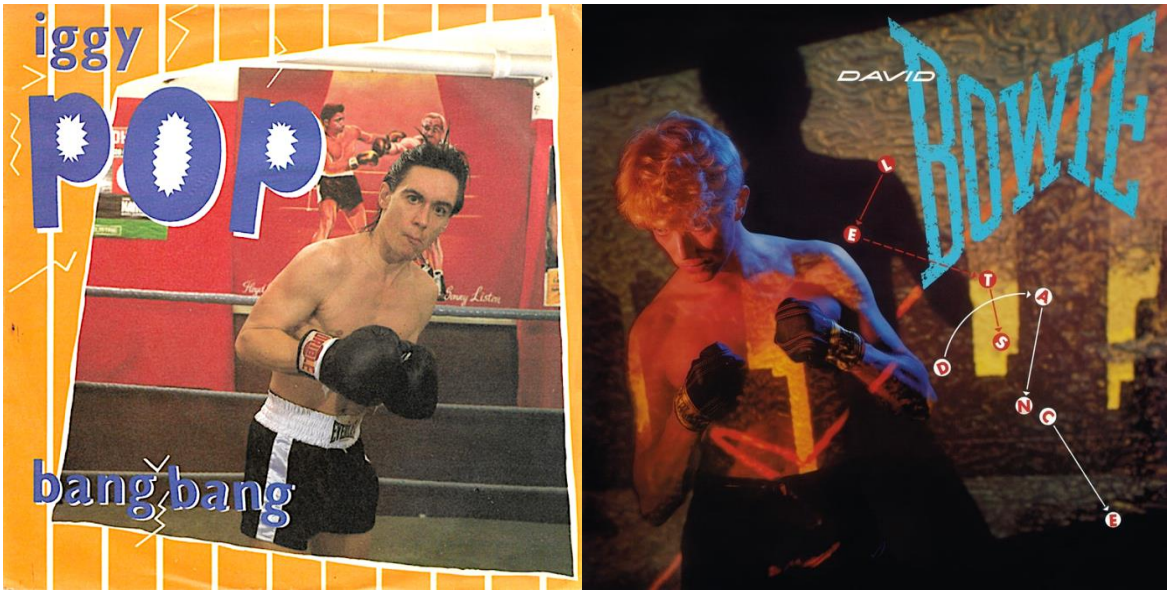

Figure 2. Bang Bang single cover, Arista, 1981; Let's Dance album cover, EMI America, 1983

The 1983 *Let's Dance* cover reflected a time when boxing culture was on the assent in the United States. By the late 70s there had been a lack of interest in the sport, but this was "resuscitated by a riveting series of bouts" beginning in 1980 (Kimball, 2008, xi). High profile US fights, such as Sugar Ray Leonard against Thomas Hearns in 1981 and Larry Holmes against Gerry Cooney in 1982, helped to elevate boxings status in the public's consciousness. Bowie's appearance as a boxer was more than just a timely, striking image. It was a visual metaphor for his renewed sense of focus and discipline. In the lead up to, and during, his 1983 *Serious Moonlight Tour* Bowie's daily health regime included daily boxing training. As he told reporters at the time, "I want to be in shape" (Pegg, 2000, 492). This physical transformation reflected the idealized male the early 80s, which had moved on from the "sensitivity of the seventies" to the "macho 80s" (Peberdy, 2011, 101). The hard-bodied aesthetic of the 80's was

personified by male Hollywood stars like Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone, whose bodybuilder physiques exemplified their hypermasculinity (Zaitchik and Mosher, 1993, 227). Tasker's (1993) study of exaggerated masculinity in American cinema, suggests the success of musclebound action film stars in the 80s can be read as a form of backlash against 70s feminism and represented a move towards political and sexual conservatism. This growing culture of repression was reflected in Bowie's recantation of his bisexuality in a *Rolling Stone* magazine interview in 1983, when he referred to his landmark 1972 *Melody Maker* interview as "the biggest mistake I ever made" (Loder, 1983). Bowie's more conservative presentation in the US was suited to an era where the liberalism of President Carter had given way to Reagan's more traditional home-town values (Hill and Williams, 1990). In essence, he was revising his more contentious history to present a public-friendly brand that aligned more closely with the political and cultural dynamics of the 1980s. Androgyny and sexual experimentation had given way to red-blooded heterosexuality and macho theatrics.

As the celebrated graphic designer Milton Glaser once stated, a corporate logo is the "gateway to the brand" (Wheeler, 2012, 35). This is true for the business of popular music, where an eye catching, instantly recognisable logo is an important element of most successful music brands. The Rolling Stones' lips and tongue logo has undergone various iterations throughout the years; nonetheless, its fundamental design has essentially remained unaltered since 1970. Queen's crest logo has stayed with the band since their first album in 1973. Bowie, conversely, has had multiple logos and typography over the course of his career, each dramatically different, reflecting a certain phase or specific album in his career. According to Peterson et al. (2015) changes to a corporate logo are a form of rebranding, often used to signal new positioning in the marketplace. Similarly, the launch of *Let's Dance* was a rebranding exercise, and therefore was deemed to be an appropriate time to introduce a new

Bowie logo. This began appearing in music press adverts ahead of the *Let's Dance* single in March 1983. Graphic designer Mick Haggerty, credited for 'package design' on the album, designed a logo which presented Bowie's last name in a low contrast slap serif typeface, in bold caps, distorted with an angular 3D lettering effect (Huot-Marchand, 2022). Appropriately, the style is reminiscent of the Everlast logo, a company renown for the manufacturing of boxing equipment. The logo successfully communicated a new phase in Bowie's career and subsequently became an enduring symbol of the *Let's Dance* era.

As Reddi (2019) asserts, timing is an important factor in the preparation and execution of successful public relations and media strategies. Like all well planned campaigns, the release schedule for the *Let's Dance* album in April 1983, and its associated singles, videos advertising, media interviews, and world tour, were carefully considered elements in a precise long-term strategy, designed by a "sophisticated marketing man" and management team (Morley, 2016, 27). There was also a scarcity of Bowie product at the time, leading to the public's heightened desire for a new album. By 1983, Bowie's fan base was eager to see what he would come up with next. His last world tour, *Isolar II* (otherwise known as the *Stage* tour), had taken place five years earlier in 1978 and his fans had endured a three-year wait since the release of his previous album *Scary Monster (and Super Creeps)*. He had had little impact on US radio since the *Golden Years* single reached number 10 in 1976. Although *Ashes to Ashes* had brought him back to the top of the UK hit parade in 1980, the single had not managed to enter the Hot 100 Billboard charts in the US. It was deemed "too artful or *outré* for mainstream US tastes" (Doyle, 2018, 74). Similarly, *Under Pressure*, a collaboration with Queen, had been a UK number one, but only briefly entered the American charts, plateauing at 29. The original release of the single *Cat People*, recorded with Giorgio Moroder in 1981 and released in March 1982, managed to reach a modest 26 in the UK

charts, but only 67 in the US. From a business standpoint, there was a compelling commercial imperative for Bowie to demonstrate his merit in America: the world's largest music market.

THE PRODUCT

The *Let's Dance* album was recorded at the Power Station, New York in late 1982 and took just 17 days to complete. According to producer Nile Rodgers "it cost nothing to make – we did it so fast" (Doyle, 2018, 80). The decision to replace his trusted, long-time producer Tony Visconti with Rodgers was particularly significant. While Rogers has come to be respected for his impressive hit making credentials, in the early 80s his "stocks were low", tarred by the late 70s backlash against disco (Marsh and Broackes, 2013, 110). Rodgers had notable success with Sister Sledge, Diana Ross and his own band Chic, but by 1982 his "magic touch had deserted him", leading to 5 "flops" in succession (Trynka, 2011, 314). Therefore, Bowie's decision to employ him as the arranger and producer of *Let's Dance* was not without risk (Pegg, 2000). According to Rodgers (2011), the project's commercial ambitions were clear from the start, with Bowie specifically telling him "I want you to make hits" (187). At the time, Rodgers was disappointed by Bowie's populist objective. He had hoped the album would provide an opportunity to gain credibility from a white audience, "but no, David Bowie wanted, if not the Chic sound, then Nile Rodgers hit-making potential" (Buckley, 2013).

Bowie was adept at identifying and repurposing mainstream trends in music, such as Folk, Glam, Soul, German Electro, Industrial, Drum 'n' Bass, and had built a career on the "pop appropriation" of these "authentic" forms of music (Lampert, 2016, 152). Each style time-stamped his output with specific location and cultural mood. Similarly, the accessible sound and stylistic presentation of *Let's Dance* was in "perfect tune" with the 80s, which Doggett (2011) describes as the era of "Armani rock", when "rock rebellion became the sanitized

language of mass entertainment" (332). Yet, while the album may appear to be a straightforward move towards the middle-ground, there was a degree of jeopardy in Bowie's approach. As discussed, the choice of Nile Rodgers as producer had been a relatively bold step. While the collaboration may have appeared to be a "sure fire winner", according to Trynka (2011), "it was anything but". Bowie had also chosen to step away from his regular cast of studio musicians, largely placing himself in the hands of Rodgers talent pool. Bowie's previous album, *Scary Monster (and Super Creeps)*, had also been recorded at Power Station, so there was an element of familiarity. However, Bob Clearmountain, the engineer for *Let's Dance*, recalled that on the first day of recording Bowie "was actually more nervous than I was", uncertain about the prospect of working with a new team of musicians (Clearmountain, 2013). The *Let's Dance* album marked Bowie's return to the craft of song writing. There had been considerable time spent in preproduction with Rogers in Switzerland. The demo for the song *Let's Dance*, recorded at Mountain Studios in Montreux, is notable for the comment a clearly pleased Bowie makes as the track fades out. The version is only a rough approximation of the polished version to come, yet Bowie can clearly hear its potential, exclaiming "that's it, that's it, got it, got it!". This preparatory groundwork ensured the actual studio recordings in New York moved quickly and cost effectively. This was important factor in the album's execution, as Bowie was now out of contract and paying for the recording sessions himself.

Figure 2. Let's Dance backing singer Frank Simms outside the Power Station, New York. June 2012. S. Coley.

Clearmountain had been expecting to work on a follow up to *Scary Monster and Super Creeps*, and was taken aback by the "pop and dance oriented" sound of *Let's Dance*, "I learned that's what you don't do with David Bowie, you don't expect anything. He'll always surprise you. He took pride in surprising people and coming out with something no one expected" (Clearmountain, 2013). One of the album's key creative elements is the juxtaposition of Rodgers sophisticated New York dance sensibilities with the southern blues of lead guitarist Stevie Ray Vaughan. The decision to combine Ray Vaughan, a virtually unknown guitarist at the time, with Rodgers's slick sonic production can be seen as a form of experimentation equivalent to his more canonized efforts in the seventies (Buckley, 1999). As Blake (2016) commented "a white South Londoner, a black New Yorker and a good ol' boy from Texas sounds like to set up for a dubious joke. In fact, it was the catalyst for one of the best Bowie albums of the decade" (82). While Ray Vaghan's guitar contribution is easy to distinguish from Rodgers funky playing style, it becomes more difficult to identify some of the album's other musicians. The crediting of contributors was unusually vague and imprecise, an approach Rodger's had used on his earlier work with Chic. The performance credits on *Let's Dance* are

intentionally left open, echoing Warhol's Factory-style, where details were undefined and uncertain. It was impossible not to notice the aggressive and extended drum performances of Tony Thompson and Omar Hakim which featured on most tracks, but it was more difficult to decern which drummer was playing on certain tracks. According to Rodgers "no one knows what songs [drummer] Tony Thompson played on because I never put that in the credits" (Buskin, 2005). The surface sheen of New York disco does not conceal the album's masculine rock sensibilities, which helped the album's singles, *Let's Dance*, *China Girl* and *Modern Love* to become sizable radio hits, crossing over from mainstream US top 40 stations into Black and Rock FM formats in the US.

By personally funding the album, Bowie was a free agent, able to shop around the *Let's Dance* master tapes to various labels. In the end he signed with EMI America on the 27th of January 1983, for a reported figure of just under 17 million $US (Buckley, 1999). The decision quickly paid off for both parties, with *Let's Dance* reaching the number one position on album charts around the world just three months later. Ironically, it was the album RCA had always wanted him to produce. Bowie clearly relished his new freedom commenting "It's much better when nobody's actually telling me what to do" (BBC Interview, 1983). The album's eponymous lead single was released in the US and UK on March 14, 1983, before the launch of the album on April 14. By referencing Black American dance culture, the *Let's Dance* single ended the "previous misgivings of US radio programmers", giving Bowie the widespread airplay that had eluded him for years (Dogget, 2011, 289). The track reached number one on both sides of the Atlantic simultaneously. The first and last time a Bowie single achieved this feat. According to Buckley (1999) the song *Let's Dance* effectively changed the course of Bowie's career forever, while O'Leary (2012) identifies it as the turning point which transformed him into "the colossal celebrity that he had always intended, had always pretended to be" (O'Leary, 2012).

Bowie had effectively "exploded across 1983" (Buckley, 2013) and the widespread appeal of the *Let's Dance* album saw him quickly attain the status of international super-star. In that year alone he appeared in three films, released the album *Let's Dance*, and had three global hit singles with accompanying high-rotate music videos. Bowie capitalized on this success by embarking on an extensive world tour, which saw him perform across Europe, America, Asia, and the Pacific. At the time, the *Serious Moonlight* tour was the longest and biggest of his career. It visited 16 countries, with Bowie performing 96 shows and selling 2,601,196 tickets (Flippo, 1984). This impressive run of success of came to an end with the release of the album's fourth and final single *Without You*, which EMI America released in the US in November 1983. The song lacked the energy of its predecessors and only manged 73 on the US Billboard Hot 100. Nevertheless, Bowie's *Let's Dance* project was by any standards a success. The campaign had worked and by the end of 1983 Bowie had no financial need to work again. Aside from being contractually obliged to deliver two more albums for EMI America, he could continue to "live comfortably on his investment income alone" (Tremlett, 1996, 318). Rojek (2001) claims that celebrity culture is "irrevocably bound up with commodity culture" (14). It is therefore unsurprising that the height of Bowie's fame in 1983 was accompanied by a substantial increase in his wealth in the "decade of greed" (Thompson, 2006, 14). In one year, David Bowie had earned an estimated $50 million US (Tremlett, 1996, 316). As he succinctly put it, "All that money I'd gone through in the 70's suddenly came back to me" (Doyle, 2018, 84). Bowie had now entered the premier league of wealth and superstardom. However, this mainstream acceptance invited accusations of selling out and raised questions about Bowie's authenticity as an artist.

THE AUTHENTIC BOWIE

The concept of authenticity is widely discussed in popular music studies, but can be a difficult, subjective term to define. Frith (2004) suggests that 'bad' music is often deemed to be insincere or inauthentic, while 'good' music can be judged on whether it reflects a musician's sincerity. Authentic music is supposedly grounded in the virtue of self-expression and does not seek financial reward. Conversely, inauthentic music is made with an audience in mind, in the hope of renumeration. For Barker and Taylor (2007, x) authenticity in popular music "is an absolute, a goal that can never be fully attained". A common complaint levelled against the *Let's Dance* album was its perceived lack of authenticity. This was also a longstanding accusation Bowie had faced as a performer and public figure. Some critics complained he was inauthentic due to his constantly changing style: "from queer extra-terrestrial to synth-laced aesthete to blonde and poppy hitmaker" in the space of just one decade (Cooper, 2016, 139). Yet, as Critchley (2016) observed, Bowie's "truth" had always been inauthentic, "completely self-conscious and utterly constructed" (36). His sincerity was not at stake as Bowie had never claimed to be the genuine article. Indeed, he had constructed a whole career from a bricolage of popular culture. Another concern, closely linked authenticity, was the question of whether Bowie had sold out. Musicians who seek a more commercial sound are often forced to compromise. While they may manage to secure a larger mainstream audience, they risk alienating early fans (Klein, 2020). *Let's Dance* is a useful exemplar of this trade-off. While Bowie's pivot towards broad acceptance delivered him a sizeable international audience, some of his early adopters "cringed" at the populism of his new direction (Blake, 2016, 82). Hesmondhalgh (1999) describes the term 'selling out' as the abandonment of "previously held political and aesthetic commitments for financial gain" (36). As indicated, there was undoubtably a commercial imperative at the heart of *Let's Dance*. Yet the album was not a rejection of Bowie's commitment to artistic endeavour. That would come later. If anything, the album subverts the notion of selling-out, by repurposing it as a creative statement. Perhaps the charges of selling

out emerged from the mistaken notion that Bowie was a 'pure' rock artist - who had now become a pop artist. As Lampert (2016) observes, rock artists who are indiscreet in seeking fame, fortune and chart success are open to criticism, while no one would accuse a pop artist of selling out: "pop stars *are packaged and sold*" (160). In any case, Firth (1989) claims that Bowie was largely immune from any accusation of "selling out" as he had always focused on art as the invention of self and never performed on anyone else's behalf: "whatever he does is validated by the fact that he, David Bowie, did it" (132).

The manifestation of selling-out in *Let's Dance* is presumably found in the album's sonic qualities and its accompanying presentation. For Klein (2020), there are certain tropes that identify a more commercial approach to music. These include polished production, "trendy" instrumentation, mainstream content or changes in the language or accent of lyrics (54). Other non-musical concessions may include the artist's appearance, their choice of creative collaborators, or the production values of their touring stage show. *Let's Dance* reflects many of these signifiers. However, by 1983 the concept of selling out had become a somewhat vague and meaningless notion. The term had become increasingly irrelevant as the counterculture movement petered out in the early 70s. Without the illusion of Hippy revolutionary ideals, the world of rock had been revealed for what it truly was, "a commercial enterprise" that sold any message "no matter how anticommmercialist… for maximum profits" (Harron, 2016, 161). Those who labelled *Let's Dance* a sell-out had short attention spans, as Bowie was no stranger to harnessing the music zeitgeist to achieve his goals. This approach had been central to his early success. He had been quick to identify the potential of glitter rock. A movement which was indifferent to notions of authenticity, believing instead in the "aesthetic value of commercial pop" (Klein, 2020, 54). Glam provided the perfect vehicle for Bowie's newfound Warholian aesthetic: the artist's and audience's ironic self-awareness of inauthenticity,

"repeated at increasingly conscious levels" (Critchley 2016, 21). He had co-opted Glam for his Ziggy Stardust phase, exploiting it as means to raise his profile, before swiftly moving on. There was no subterfuge to mask this manipulation, as demonstrated by the song *Star* on the *Ziggy Stardust* album. A track which brazenly exposed the "grasping self-promotion" central to most popular music (Buckley, 1999, 133). In 1975 Bowie used a similar strategy with the *Young Americans* album. To break the US market, he had utilised the sound of Philadelphia Soul to reach the widest possible American audience. As Hill (2016) remarks, "not only was the album itself an extremely cynical bid for popular success in the American market; it says as much itself." (78). The plan worked, as *Fame,* the second single from *Young Americans*, resulted in Bowie's first US number one. He then repeated the formula with *Let's Dance*, an album which is often viewed as a follow up to *Young Americans*. Once again, the method worked. In May 1983, the eponymous single from *Let's Dance*, became his second (and final) US number one, remaining in the charts for a total of 20 weeks. Vogel (2018) defines the term "cross over artist" as a performer who manages to reach broad, mainstream multiracial audiences (4). In that sense, both *Let's Dance,* and *Young Americans* made Bowie a bona fide cross over artist, who could straddle both black and white music (Morley, 2016).

Keightley (2011) links notions of authenticity to the Romanticism and Modernism movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, citing them as crucial sources of the mass society critique and, therefore, having a major influence on perceptions of rock culture. The Romantic rock tradition emphasises live performance, direct expression, and the impression of the artist and fan's shared connection, coming from a working-class background. A Modernist approach tends to foreground experimentation within a recording studio environment, the use of multiple pop genres, an awareness of irony, and a sense that the artist is "part of a rock elite" (135). While some musicians firmly align themselves with

one of these movements, it is possible to move between these forms of authenticity over the course of a career, or to use both Romantic and Modernist concepts of authenticity together. The success of *Let's Dance* largely derives from Bowie's mutual use of these movements. On the surface, the album appears to be Romantic in its execution. Aside from the possible exception of *Ricochet*, the songs themselves are easily accessible, with traditional structures, R&B influences, tight harmonies, and musicianship supplanting experimentation. Despite the album's high production values, Tremlett (1996) considers *Let's Dance* to be "at its heart a simple, minimal album with its impact coming from musicianship rather than electronic effects" (317 - 318). It was also the first Bowie album on which he did not play a note. In terms of its use of Modernism, the album's lyrics draw on Bowie's typical impressionistic style. They are arguably more direct, yet still open to a degree of interpretation. However, it is the highly polished, radio-friendly production, provided by Rodgers and Clearmountain, which made the album so different from its predecessors and transported the traditional R&B elements into the 80s. The central conceit of the album is experimental and, therefore, rooted in Modernism. Prior to the album's release, there was no precedent for the contrast of Southern Blues guitar set against a backdrop of New York disco, or any assurance this creative decision would succeed. As Marsh and Broackes (2013) point out, the popularity of *Let's Dance* is often "retroactively assessed […] but at the time there was no guarantee that it would work" (110). Ultimately, the album follows Keightley's (2011) assertion that Romantic and Modernist notions of authenticity can be used against each other to "produce work that is celebrated for its complexity, energy and artistic innovation" (139). The use of both philosophies in *Let's Dance* helped to create a "deluxe fantasy of the mainstream potential of pop music" (Morley, 2016, 428).

Bowie's mainstream sound and visual re-branding provided an accessible entry point for an entirely new audience, who were unaware or unconcerned about the possibility of him selling out. This introduction would subsequently lead to many new fans then discovering (and purchasing) his sizable back catalogue. Broadcaster Mark Kermode suggests there is a generation of Bowie fans who saw everything before *Modern Love* as a preamble to the point at which he became "danceable and mainstream" (Broackes and Marsh, 2013, 292). Many of these converts were youthful Americans, who first became conscious of Bowie through the music videos created for the first three *Let's Dance* singles. These were played in high rotation on the newly established cable channel MTV, which had started just two year earlier. Popular music academic Jennifer Otter Bickerdike (2013) was twelve years old living in California when she first heard the single *Let's Dance* "blasting out of every house". She referred to the album as a "gateway", which inspired Bowie's new followers to investigate his back catalogue, "it introduced David Bowie to a completely new fan base, who would have never ever in a million years listened to him. Without *Let's Dance,* people of my age, the Gen X'ers of the world, probably never would have learned about him". To earn this new audience, Wilcken (2005) describes a transactional trade-off, in which Bowie forfeited his "artistic mystique in exchange for mega-stardom as a stadium entertainer" (2). While the album's success financially paid off in the short term, it was to cause him difficulties for the remainder of the 80s. By courting middle-of-the-road acceptance Bowie had stepped into unknown territory, which would ultimately threaten his integrity as an artist, "corrode his former glory" and eventually lead to subsequent "creative misfires" (Dogget, 2011, 332). For Egan (2013) *Let's Dance* represented a surrender to "fashionable empty gloss" and was part of a larger "career trough" (12). As indicated, many of Bowie's early fans were also dubious about Bowie's *Let's Dance* phase. The business world defines customer loyalty as a positive belief in the value of a company which, over the course of multiple interactions, leads to

increased purchases over time (Oracle, 2005). Similarly, Bowie's loyal fan base had built a sense of trust in his brand, which resulted in ongoing purchases despite, or because of, his ever-evolving style. The run of albums from *Station to Station* to *Scary Monsters (and Super Creeps)* had all demonstrated a large degree of risk and experimentation and had garnered critical praise, yet they had not given him a broad, international fan-base. The move towards a more mainstream sound was arguably in keeping with his tendency to second-guess his fan-base. But for many of Bowie's early fans, it compromised his artistic integrity. As Egan (2013) claimed, *Let's Dance* and the subsequent album *Tonight*, cost Bowie's hard-core fans "who could forgive any career direction except pedestrianism" (12). However, the prospect of losing fans was a calculated risk that Bowie evidently thought was worthwhile. In business terms, it was not a straightforward decision to make. According to Khan (2013), customer loyalty is a key factor in business success, as it costs "more than five to six times as much to obtain a new customer than to keep an existing one" (168). The safer option was to focus on satisfying hard-earned fans by continuing to produce more esoteric, 'cult' content. Nevertheless, the strategy to court new fans to reinvigorating his customer base was not an uncommon strategy in the early 80s. Rosenberg and Czepiel (1984) claimed this period saw many marketing companies lavishing resources on attracting new consumers, rather than satisfying their existing customer base. Nevertheless, Bowie appeared to be untroubled by any criticisms that followed his mainstream reinvention. Tremlett (1996) claims he was immune to any negativity and rose over the heads of those who dismissed *Let's Dance*. Bowie projected an upbeat positive outlook in various interviews and press conferences and, according to Shaar Murray (2007), seemed to be wearing "a permanent grin" throughout 1983. Backing vocalist Frank Simms (2008) recalled him being "always in a wonderful mood. Very happy, very up, very positive" throughout the *Let's Dance* recording sessions and the accompanying world tour. Denis O'Regan, the *Serious Moonlight* photographer,

agreed, commenting the period was “the happiest he’d ever been. It was the most successful he’s ever been. He really, really enjoyed it” (Eccleston, 2018, 78).

THE AFTERMATH OF *LET’S DANCE*

Bowie’s impressive earnings and global celebrity in 1983 chimed with what Page (1992) called the heightened materialism of the 80s. For Hewitt and Elmes (2012) the success and financial wealth which accompanied *Let’s Dance* were wholly justified. Bowie had offered his audience so much in the 70s that it was permissible to take something for himself in the 80s. From a commercial standpoint, *Let’s Dance* remains Bowie’s most popular album. However, as discussed in the previous section, it inevitably had its detractors and has since become a contentious marker in his career, signalling the end of an imperial phase and the beginning of a creative decline. Many reviewers and biographers have retrospectively questioned Bowie’s move towards a mainstream audience, who were “willing to buy the whole Bowie package” (Tremlett, 1996, 317). Sputnik Music (2011) described the album as a mixed effort which, aside from the opening salvo of hits, was uncompelling, and the first point since before the 70s, when Bowie wasn’t “ahead of the curve”. In a BBC music review, Quantick (2011) described *Let’s Dance* as “often mundane”. Dogget (2011) was equally unconvinced. Although he commended the album as being “impeccably crafted and effortlessly commercial” he was dubious about Bowie’s motives, stating he “questioned nothing, risked nothing, stood for nothing” (332). There was also a concern that the album represented a decline in Bowie’s song writing abilities, given that several tracks were not original compositions. Both *China Girl* and *Cat People* were re-workings of past releases. In Bowie’s defence, the inclusion of *China Girl* was a deliberate move to improve the co-author Iggy Pop’s dire financial situation at the time. This was not a simple handout. By revisiting the song Bowie was “hedging against the decline in his songwriting in the eighties” (O’Leary, 2019, 34). On *Tonight*, Bowie’s next album, his

growing writer's block was addressed by the inclusion of 2 cover versions and 5 tracks co-authored by Pop. Their professional relationship continued until 1986, when Bowie co-produced Pop's *Blah Blah Blah* album, their final collaboration. This was another blatantly commercial enterprise, which succeeded in earning Pop his first top 50 hit, *Real Wild Child (Wild One).* Appel's (2018) criticism of *Let's Dance* focused on the recording of *Criminal World*, a cover of a 1977 track by the English band Metro. Bowie's version made lyrical changes which removed the original song's suggestion of bisexuality. In doing so, Bowie typified the narrative of "artistic decline […] establishing a triple equation between Bowie's global commercial success, lack of transgressive content, and 'heterosexualization'" (205). Sheffield (2016) claims the album "squandered years of hard-earned mystique" and began "a long phase of Let's Not Dance" (163). According to Pegg (2002) the album is "perhaps Bowie's least challenging album" which lead to an "immediate and detrimental effect" on his career (239). As discussed in the previous section, the album raised questions about Bowie's supposed authenticity and brought accusations of selling out. Yet he was immune to these charges. 'Selling out' was not the abandonment of artist credibility. It was part of a modus operandi, strategically employed throughout his career. In many ways, Bowie was open about his use of the mainstream as a trojan horse for his artistry. Johnson (2015) noted that Bowie's commercial appeal and "slick professionalism" were often seen as an indicator of artistic compromise, yet his "creation of sophisticated and eminently saleable work can be more convincingly and coherently interpreted as part of the process of becoming a 'medium'" (15). For Klein (2020), Bowie used his established credibility to "chip away at the foundations" of outdated notions of selling out (54). In the postmodern age, there was little differentiation between commercial and artistic production (Cooper, 2016). This blurring of boundaries had been largely initiated by the pioneering work of Andy Warhol decades earlier. Warhol was unashamed in commodifying his creative endeavours, stating "being good in business is the most fascinating kind of art.

Making money is art and working is art and good business is the best art" (Warhol, 1975, 92). From this perspective, the *Let's Dance* album can be viewed as the ultimate manifestation of Bowie's Warholian aspirations - a seamless amalgamation of artistic expression and financial judgement. Nevertheless, Bowie's mainstream metamorphosis was more than a money-making marketing strategy. It was also an expression of his personal evolution and a move towards middle-age which reflected the stabilising of his personal life and business dealings. Buckley (2013) refers to *Let's Dance* as an attempt to "strip away the layers of artifice, and to become a more caring and humanitarian human being". Bowie himself noticed a new sense of maturity, commenting "there's a period when you have to decide not to try and grasp frantically for the feelings of desperation and anger that you have when you're in your mid-twenties. If you can relax into the idea that being in your mid-thirties is quite a nice place to be with an amount of experience behind you" (Jensen, 1983).

It is important not to underplay Bowie's ability as an artist and this paper does not suggest his motivations were purely financial. While his business endeavors co-existed with his creativity, they were not central to his ambition. Bowie's financial acumen served as a means to an end, functioning as a tool to afford him the freedom to live a desired lifestyle and to pursue projects aligned to his interests. Looking back, producer Nile Rogers viewed the success of *Let's Dance* as the result of a carefully considered plan to create hits, commenting "the fact that it's the biggest record of his career is not an accident; it's what he wanted" (Turner, 2013). Global success may have been Bowie's ambition, but it was never a certainty. His pivot towards the mainstream was an entrepreneurial gamble, requiring considerable self-belief and creativity. In this respect, I argued the *Let's Dance* album represented a degree of risk and experimentation, of equal status to other more celebrated records in his canon. The success of Bowie's mid-career reinvention underscores an adept understanding of business and marketing practices.

Throughout his career Bowie and his management team continued to deploy his brand across a range of lucrative entrepreneurial enterprises. He demonstrated prescient awareness of the threat posed by digital media to the established music industry and took proactive measures to offset potential lost revenues. Numerous endorsements and sponsorship arrangements, credit card ventures, online subscription and music services, interactive CD-ROMs, a video game, and his speculative 'Bowie Bonds' initiative all demonstrate an ability to capitalize on marketing opportunities.

Considering popular musicians as corporate brands does not diminish their achievements. In Bowie's case, he was fully cognisant of his place in the music landscape and "almost painfully aware of his own brand" (Morley, 2016, 27). Woodward (2017) asks whether the concept of 'celebrity' is essentially a corporate construct led by financial motivation and self-interest, and questions whether Bowie is "just a set of fabricated images, which are reiterated and reinvented in the pursuit of celebrity?" (504). But for Lampert (2016) there is no confusion: ""David Bowie" has always only ever been an "image"" (152). The musician Bowie exists only as a brand. While questions were raised about his supposed sincerity at the time of *Let's Dance*, it seems churlish to doubt the authenticity of yet another character in a long line of media constructs. Indeed, the element of "truth" in Bowie's art "is not compromised by its fakery. It is enabled by it" (Critchley, 2016, 46-47). The *Let's Dance* album may well have marked the 'normalization' of David Bowie, yet Marsh and Broackes (2013) suggest "there is another side to that story" (110). *Let's Dance* was the "smart, efficient work of a superstar singer with a superstar producer, knowing how to play to a superstar audience" (Morley, 2016, 426). As Klein (2004) points out, interpreting whether an artist has 'sold out' or 'gone commercial' requires a certain amount of guess work. Artists can always justify their decisions as being governed by artistic vision, rather than a quick opportunity to cash in. Whatever the motivation,

Let's Dance provided Bowie with a sizable new international audience, alongside financial security. The album also distanced him from the pressures of constantly having to reference youth culture. He was at last "freed to be what he is: an individual and an adult" (Marsh and Broackes, 2013, 110). For critics like Perone (2007) *Let's Dance* can be viewed as "something of a double-edged sword" among Bowie's albums, while his accompanying transition from outsider to insider was "a decidedly negative career move" (90). Bowie himself recognised the difficulties the album brought with it but did not identify it as a misstep, stating "I like *Let's Dance*. I don't include it as one of the crap 80s albums. It just put me in a place where I shouldn't have been" (Perry, 2013, 88).

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