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Bowie's legacy of life as a performance art

By: **KEVIN LEE** | January 20, 2016

I've rarely seen death result in such celebration, not when the deceased is beloved anyway. But I clearly saw the videos, crowds in Brixton's pubs and streets loudly singing in what looked more like joyous salutation than mourning.

"There's a starman waiting in the sky, he'd like to come and meet us ..."
David Bowie was dead at age 69 from liver cancer.

In the week after Bowie's death, a quarter of the albums on the U.K.'s Top 40 sales charts were his. They spanned his mythic four-plus decades as a cultural titan.

So why the Brits' buoyant undertones? Perhaps it's appreciation.

Why should I weigh in on something that's overwhelmed media for more than a week now? Because maybe there's something good in Bowie's death. Maybe it will give us new eyes and ears. Maybe now we'll perceive not only a pop musician, but the full-fledged artist he considered himself to be.

From an early age, educators noted Bowie's impressive creativity. His dancing, his musicianship, his novel approach to everything drew remarks.

When he chased professional music his precise course was unsure. He was mainly aware of what he didn't want.

"God, I hated the hippie period," Bowie told an interviewer in 2002. "They talked about being so creative, but there was so little creativity to it."

His burgeoning artistic ambitions were supercharged after a visit to the United States landed him in the midst of Andy Warhol's Factory scene. At the height of Warhol's zenith, it was also Bowie's introduction to Lou Reed, and the heady zeitgeist was transformative.

Bowie's incredible songwriting skills, his knack for hooks and multi-textured lyrics had been showcased in previous works. Post-NYC, he folded in his dance and mime backgrounds with kabuki theater elements. He enlisted the aid of costumer Alexander McQueen to manifest visual ideas.

He then created a central character to inhabit and a back-story for his band to create an overarching tale. Bowie turned pop music into full-fledged performance art.

An autodidactic intellectual who hated that description, Bowie was in constant exploration. He absorbed whatever possible.

Conversations with him could skitter across topics like generalism, relativism, 19th-century romanticism, existentialism or futurism. He would toss quick references to George Orwell, Baudelaire, Matisse, Martin Amis or Anthony Burgess.

He explored the visual work of others. Album releases would employ artwork by Belgian artist Guy Peellaert, Edward Bell and Victor Vasarely, the French-Hungarian godfather of the Op art movement.

He would pen lyrics inspired by Nietzsche or Evelyn Waugh. He would borrow from Dadaist visuals or German cabaret. He was just as easily

"I'm responsible for creating a whole new school of pretension," Bowie joked with an interviewer in 1978.

Even after losing some of his edgier cred in the 1980s, he still shifted through characters, styles and projects. Not only did Bowie collect art but he pursued his own painting and sculpture. He sat on the boards of art organizations and would go on to form publishing company 21, which specialized in art books.

Bowie extended his penchant for stage work by starring in a 1979 run of "The Elephant Man." As expected, it drew critical praise.

His numerous film roles were lauded and notable, though two seemed most apropos for the compelling iconoclast. One was his portrayal of mysterious scientific genius Nikola Tesla in Christopher Nolan's "The Prestige." The other was his depiction of Andy Warhol in a biopic of artist Jean-Michel Basquiat.

In recent years, his work received the most official stamp of the arts realm with a pair of museum exhibits. "David Bowie, Artist" opened in 2011 at New York's Museum of Art and Design. London's Victoria & Albert Museum curated the touring exhibit "David Bowie Is" at Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art a year ago. It is showing at the Groninger Museum in the Netherlands until March.

In the closing months of 2015 he oversaw the off-Broadway musical "Lazarus." Formed from his body of musical work and based on "The Man Who Fell to Earth" — the 1976 film with Bowie in the title role — it is still playing in New York City.

By now, it's well known about his last musical album, "Blackstar," with its haunting themes, the release on his 69th birthday and his demise 48 hours later. Everything was wrapped up with such panache in such a perfectly timed denouement that it made clear the man has basically used his lifespan as a medium for one massive piece of performance art.

"I think a lot of kids needed that sense of reinvention. Kids learned that however crazy you may think it is, there is a place for what you want to do and who you want to be," Bowie said years ago.

If Nietzsche was correct in that our best self is primarily an artist and our greatest project ourselves, then Bowie "really made the grade." It's just up to us to realize its breadth.

