

NET HEADS

BROADCASTING THEIR BELIEFS, REPORTING THE FACTS, TOUTING THEIR TALENTS TO THE WORLD.

DAVID BOWIE

I think the Internet embraces everything that we've done so far and expands upon it. It has the potential for enhancing all of our experiences.

Androgynous alien, actor, soul man, pop star, painter, Goldie's mate – David Bowie has changed persona more times than most Net users have changed underpants. But his latest incarnation is perhaps most surprising of all, because he has cast off the bondage of 30 years of rock iconography to get up to his neck in the Internet. Ladies and gentlemen, meet the latest competitor to Freeserve, TescoNet and AOL... Mister Day-vid Bow-eee.

Bowie on BowieNet

While most service providers are fretting over how they're going to compete with Freeserve's free service, BowieNet takes a different tack. Launched in December, it gives subscribers access to the Internet, a mainline to a wealth of Bowie material and, of course, an @davidbowie.co.uk e-mail address.

Extracts from every Bowie album track can be listened to on-line and you can even watch more than a dozen full-length videos, albeit in a two-inch-square window. But it isn't just a back-catalogue bonanza. Bowie himself makes regular appearances in the chat rooms and frequently updates his on-line diary, giving the service a welcome and infrequently found intimacy.

"Even though it's synthetic, the feel of the community is such an inherent part of what BowieNet is about," Bowie tells **.net**. "The idea that it's quirky, that you can pick up on these small autonomous portals and define your method, things that express how you are.

"Not everybody wants to be on AOL. There's always going to be the majors, but they're never going to have the kind of control that they can have over, say, cable television or radio. This is entirely new and I think quirkiness and the decentralisation is the thing that makes it most attractive.

He changed British music and now he's changing the Net

You want to go Slap a Spice Girl, or these days – what is it? – it's just become Punch a Hanson. Those are the things that you want to find – if you've got any kind of sense of humour or a verve for life, you want to go there."

But why bother to run a service provider? Why not just put the content on-line and let people subscribe?

"Because nobody's done it before. It is the sense of discovery, the sense that I really believe that small portals or ISPs are going to be the future, and I just wanted to show what it was going to look like. I wanted to be out there providing what individual, autonomous ISPs can. This doesn't even keep me in fag money.

"If I wanted the dollar I think I would set up somewhere in the area of Dell, because hardware is where it's at – that's where the money is, without doubt. ISPs? A well-known traditional non-money-maker, but BowieNet is keeping its head above water and increasing its possibilities every month. There are only seven of us running this, you're not talking about a million dollars.

"We don't take any advertising, so I don't have anyone to say what I should and shouldn't do on the site. Frankly, I don't know what animal it is yet. It's already become more than it was going to be. I'm more interested in the process of putting it together."

Bowie on MP3

The music industry has been up in arms over the spread of MP3, a file format that enables near-CD-quality music to be copied and played on computers. Until recently, it was very much a Net-based phenomenon, but the launch of Diamond Multimedia's Rio MP3 Player (<http://www.diamondmm.com/>) took MP3 off the Net and into the

mainstream. An attempt by the Recording Industry Association of America to have the Rio MP3 player declared illegal failed, sending record labels scurrying to their spreadsheets in an attempt to work out whether to embrace or fight the new music format.

"I think it's a fantastic delivery system," says Bowie. "I'm not a tech-head, though I do like gadgets – I've just got the MP3 player. A very nice little piece of technology."

Does he listen to his own bootlegs on it, or someone else's? "Oh, I would never dream of doing something as illegal as that, no," he says in a very measured voice. "I only ever load legal tracks."

But does MP3, as the pundits claim, have the power to change the music industry? "Without doubt. I think it's got to in a major way. Technology has changed how music is made and by definition has changed what music is. I think that will continue to happen, the more that we involve the Internet.

"Corporations will eventually realise that they're not going to be able to fight this at all and they'll end up delivering their own artists into a new kind of store, where you go in and you ask the assistant for the menu and you choose exactly what tracks you want. And then they'll be either burned into a CD – if you're that old fashioned – or put on a player."

So, there's a good chance we'll be seeing new Bowie material on BowieNet in MP3 format? "What a leading question. Well, it's not beyond possibility. We're still streaming a lot but the day will come. I'm not going to turn my head away from what's happening and I'll try to work with whatever the flow is and make it characteristically something that represents me."

MP3 also gives new bands a way to break into the

business by using the Net to get a global audience for their fledgling recordings. Gone are the days of hoofing it round record-company offices clutching a fuzzy demo tape; these are the days of a well-targeted e-mail with a link to an MP3-packed Web site.

"Well, that's the great thing about it. The only thing is that there's such an abundance around that it's still going to be hard for some bands to get heard." Maybe BowieNet could patronise new bands – in the nicest possible way, of course.

"You've hit the nail on the head there – that's something that we will be doing. One thing we want to change over time is that BowieNet started off as being about me, because I was a gateway to the whole thing. What I want to do is make it more music specific – David Byrne has written a piece for us, Lou Reed has done something and Frank Black is working on something. Over time, it won't just be an archive and resource network."

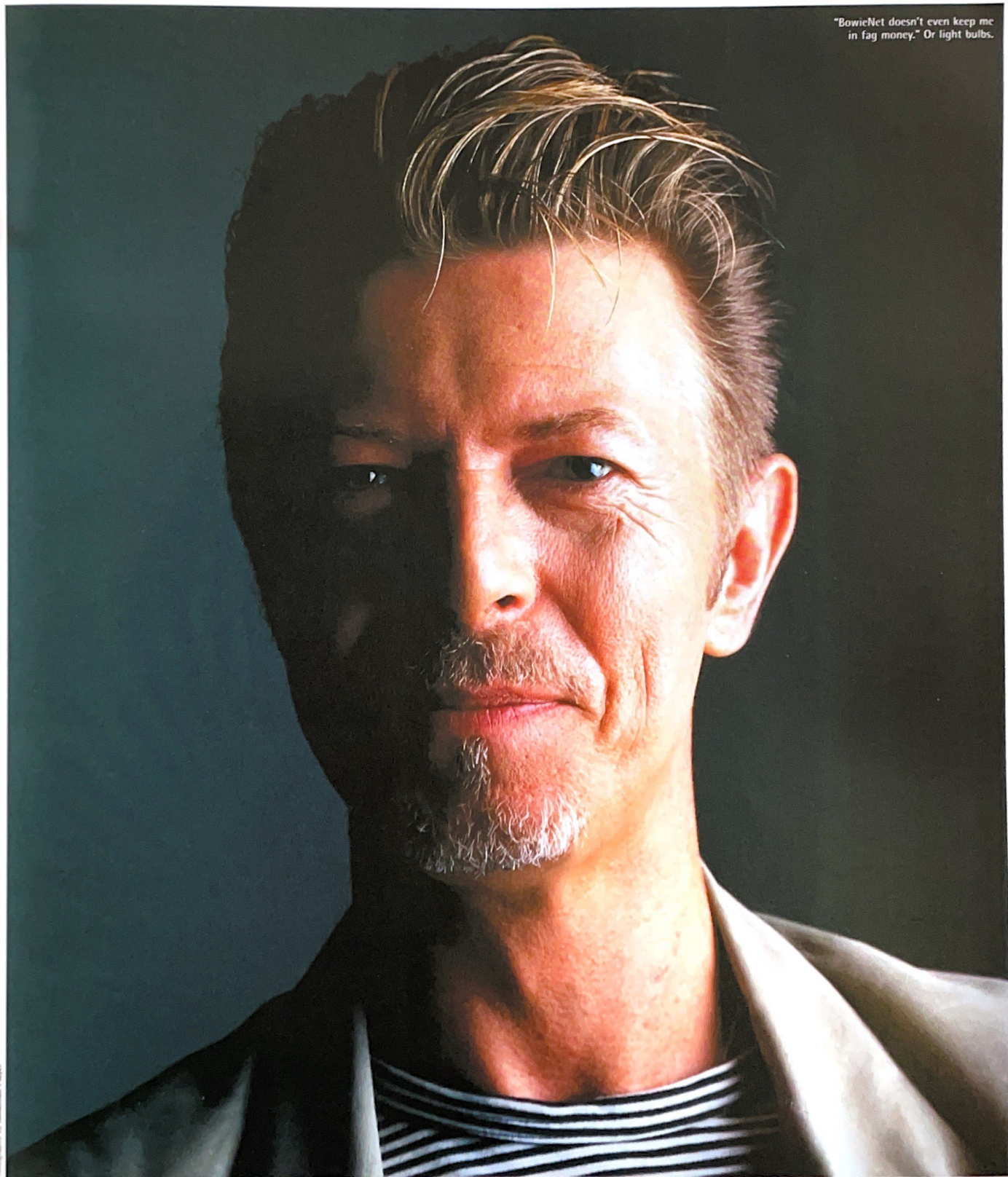
Bowie on bootlegs

Many artists and record companies are notoriously precious about having copies of their work put on Web sites, even if it's only scratchy 8-bit mono samples on a fan site. Bowie, on the other hand, actively encourages his file-making followers, taking the time to visit fans' sites and inviting bootleg contributions to a unique multimedia compilation on his Liveandwell.com site.

"I get on and see what's out there and take down demos and stuff that I haven't got, things that I've lost track of and now I've found them – it's terrific because it makes my own little collection complete. I shouldn't say that, really."

Does there come a time when a fan's collectormanias goes a little too far? How does he decide when someone has

"BowieNet doesn't even keep me
in fag money." Or light bulbs.



Photographs by Jonathan Pflieger

NET HEADS

“Corporations will end up delivering their own artists into a new kind of store, where you go in and you ask the assistant for the menu and you choose exactly what tracks you want.”

overstepped the mark? “I haven’t done yet. Maybe I turn a blind eye. I’ve got to tell you, I’m so excited by the actual medium itself – Christ, it’s great, isn’t it? And I don’t know what it’s going to do.

“This is about much more than whether Columbia survives over the next five years. I couldn’t give a toss whether Columbia survives. It’s ‘What is the future of the Internet about?’ It’s exciting.”

Bowie on Web design

With only seven people working on BowieNet, it’s a case of all hands to the pump. Does Bowie actually roll up his sleeves and get his hands on the code?

“All right, I’ll come clean, guv. I’m not a tech-head, but I’m a great ideas man, so the techies can tell me what’s available and then I can often put things in combinations they wouldn’t necessarily have naturally thought of – I think that’s what makes it really good. I do get very involved with graphics. I know my way around Photoshop, I know what I want things to look like – I’m no stranger to that, so I work well with that.”

Is he worried that the Web will degrade the artwork? “Not really. Do you know what? You can get away with marvels at 72dpi resolution.”

BowieNet has such rich content – graphics,

sound and video – that you can’t help but wonder whether the Net’s really up to the job. “I’m scared we’re getting to a point where the whole fucking thing’s going to collapse,” he laughs. “Cable and T1 lines will probably revolutionise things.”

Bowie on the Internet

As well as making regular appearances in the BowieNet chat rooms and running lengthy on-line Q&A sessions, Bowie uses his site to ask questions of his fans. “What place or purpose does rock and roll hold at the end of the 20th century?” he asked in December, garnering replies that varied in length from a few sentences to screens full of text. It seems only natural, then, that we should ask the same (but different) question of Bowie: what place or purpose does the Internet hold at the end of the 20th century?

“Don’t you dare ask me that. I have a theory... Oh god. [Laughs. Silence.] You’ve got me silent, which is very hard to do, I might add. [More laughter.] Okay. I don’t think it replaces anything, I don’t think it destroys anything, but I think it embraces everything that we’ve done so far and expands upon it. It has the potential for enhancing all of our experiences.

“The one thing I can’t stand is when people keep saying, ‘Yeah, but kids don’t read any more, do they? They’re all on the Internet.’ Well, you’ve gotta fucking type well to be on the Internet, frankly. You’ve gotta know how to spell. You’ve gotta know how to spell to get anything out of an index or a directory, so I think that’s bullshit. I think that kids are far more literate, in a different way, but far more literate than the generation before them.

“Maybe grammar takes a back seat. We’d never have got such great hip hop if they’d have dealt with grammar. Grammar was losing its place in the market when

James Joyce came on the scene.”

Bowie on Blair

He mentions the 10 Downing Street Web site as one he admires, so we wonder whether Bowie has sent an e-mail to Tony. “I haven’t ingratiated myself quite that much,” he says. How about being invited round for a tea party, then?

“I’ve done one of them. A nice quiet one a few months back. The interesting thing is that Cherie is the one who’s really into the Internet. I had to say that I thought the Labour site sucks. I thought it was very bad, it was dry, not particularly imaginative and that it lacked scope. She said, ‘You’ve been to Number 10 Downing Street, have you?’ so I went there and it’s an eye-opener. It’s got chat rooms, it’s fantastic. It’s a very, very nice site.”

And is the Net a family affair in the Bowie household? “Well, yeah. [Whispers conspiratorially.] My wife is Windows. I’m Mac.” Why? “It’s the nature of her business – me, I just like drawing with crayons. It’s a pretty traditional breakdown. More business-orientated people go with Windows and the graphic people go with Mac. Once the world has Java we’ll be able to go from platform to platform.” Albeit very, very slowly.

Bowie on the Millennium

In a chat on BowieNet, Bowie said he will release new material in 1999 and then have a break until 2001. Is he worried about the Millennium Bug?

“2000 is going to be such an atrocious bottleneck. Everybody and his mother is going to be out there to flog his product. It’s going to be a nightmare. There’s going to be concerts all over the world with everyone saying, ‘We’re going to do the last song of the Millennium.’ Oh fuck it – you’ll be beaten by about 15 yards on another tiny island where some berk has found an orange box and stepped on it to sing ‘My Old Man’s A Dustman.’”

Bowie fans will probably have mixed emotions about his



BowieNet: £11.75 per month gets you Internet access and lots of Bowie-related goodies.

plans to resurrect Ziggy Stardust for a theatrical, cinematic and multimedia production, due for release in 2002. “I thought he was an interesting character – it gives me terrific scope to develop the story. I’ll develop him and his environment and his society. I’ve got three years, but there’s a lot of ground to cover.”

Is there anything fans can look forward to between now and then? “I’m probably going to do a 1999 memorabilia show,” he laughs. “I’m going to do a ‘Remember the 20th century’. Can you imagine all the 20th century merchandise? We’ve already ordered the Man Faces of David Bowie 20th Century Memorial Tea Towel.

Bowie on Bowie

“I have found that there has never been one poll has ever influenced me in what I do or what I buy. The popularity of something has never really interested me, maybe because I’m actually anti-mainstream. Whatever everybody else bought, I always went out and found something else – they bought Beatles, I bought Velvet Underground. I respond to things that are on the edge, the outside.”

What was it that inspired him to get on the Net in the first place. “The fact that it was uncharted waters. I never once ever ever looked at the porn. I leave that to my son! But I can’t blame Joe – he introduced me to it.” The Net, that is, not the porn. **net**

Richard Longhurst

It costs £11.75 per month to have a BowieNet account. You can have a content-only account for \$5.95 (about £3.60) per month. <http://www.davidbowie.co.uk/>

BOWIE HAUNTS

Adaweb

<http://adaweb.com/>

“A great-looking site and they always find good sites themselves, what’s happening in cutting-edge graphics.”

Jodi.org

<http://www.jodi.org/>

“You wanna talk code, baby? It is unreal. The kid’s a genius.”

Turux

<http://www.turux.org/>

“There’s also a companion one that I quite like called Turux.”

Internet Movie Database

<http://uk.imdb.com/>

“Of the more conventional things, I like the IMDb.”

Number 10

<http://www.number-10.gov.uk/>

“Tell you what’s quite nice: Number 10 Downing Street. I’ve got to say, it’s not a bad site.” **net**