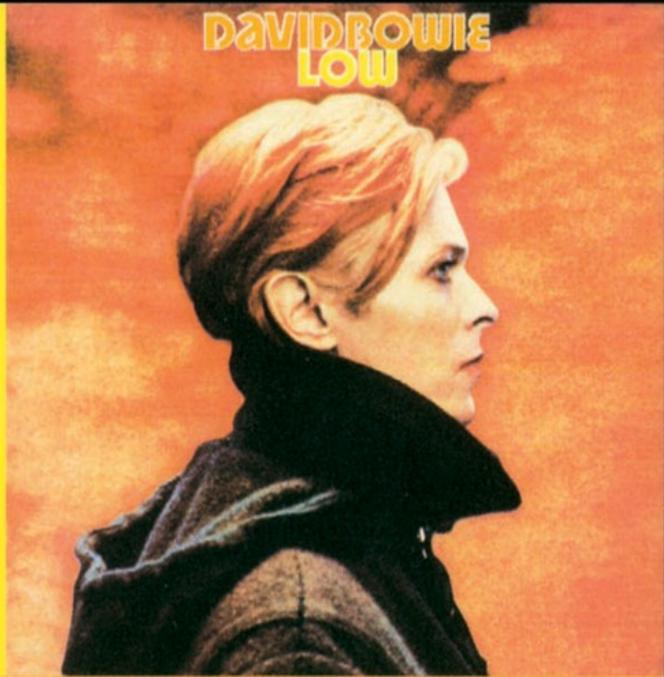


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**LOW**  
**by Hugo Wilcken**





## Low

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**Low**



**Hugo Wilcken**



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This book is dedicated to the memory of my friend  
Peter Meyer (1964–2003).

## introduction

I first heard *Low* in late 1979, soon after my fifteenth birthday. One of my older brothers had sent me a cassette, home-taped from the vinyl. I was far from my family and my native Australia doing a term of school in Dunkirk in northern France, ostensibly to learn French. Dunkirk was a grey simulacrum of a city. It had been destroyed during the Second World War, and entirely rebuilt afterwards according to the original plans. Every building contained the ghost of its bombed-out twin. At the city's edge, a wide desolate beach stretched out for miles. At low tide, you could see the wrecks of boats that had never made it across the Channel, during the desperate evacuation of Allied troops in 1940. Flanders is only twelve kilometres to the east, and the landscape around Dunkirk is similar—fluorescent green fields that are unrelentingly flat, quite disorientating for someone from hilly Sydney. In winter, the northern, pewter skies hung oppressively low, and the drizzle was constant. My French was approximate and communication difficult, accentuating the sense of isolation that is the natural state for a fifteen-year-old boy. Of course, *Low* was the perfect soundtrack.

Fifteen is the age of bedroom retreat, and three of the five *Low* songs with lyrics use withdrawal to a bedroom as a symbol for isolation. It's also the age of ravenous intellectual curiosity, of devouring books and art and music to access new worlds of the imagination. *Low* seemed to be a glimpse into such a world, one that I didn't really understand, subverting my expectations of what I'd understood a pop record should be. "Always Crashing in the Same Car" had the spooked feeling of a recurring dream; "A New Career in a New Town" had a yearning about it that looked both forward and back. The instrumentals on the second side weren't pop music at all, and had allusive titles such as the punning "Art Decade," "Weeping Wall" or "Subterraneans," which suggested fading civilisations gone to ground. The album left a haunting impression.

In the eighties, David Bowie forfeited a fair chunk of his artistic mystique in exchange for megastardom as a stadium entertainer, and my interest moved on to other things. Lately, he's redeemed himself somewhat, but it's only in the past few years that my attention turned back to what now seems to me to be a fascinating moment in the mid-seventies, when people like Bowie, Brian Eno or Kraftwerk were redefining what it meant to engage with the pop and rock genres. It was partly about injecting an experimental, European sensibility into a medium that was largely American in its conception. Of course, high and low art had been collapsing into each other ever since Warhol, Lichtenstein and the other pop art innovators had emerged in the early sixties. But if in the sixties it was art that was slumming it with pop aesthetics, the reverse was happening in the mid-seventies. Pop went arty. And *Low* marks the highpoint of this development, with its atmosphere of modernist alienation, its expressionism, its eclectic blend of R&B rhythms, electronics, minimalism and process-driven techniques, its suspicion of narrative.

I don't want to put *Low* into any sort of canon of great works. That seems to me to

be imposing notions of worth from another age and a different cultural enterprise. Not a lot of modern culture can be treated in that way any more, and pop culture certainly can't. No single album can bear the weight of greatness, torn away from the support of all the other songs and all the other albums, the whole fabric of the hybrid culture that produced it. That's pop culture's strength, not its weakness. And that's why in this book I'm going to talk around *Low* almost as much as I talk about it—looking at how it relates to the other points on the cultural matrix, where it came from, how it fits with Bowie's artistic development. In short, what ingredients went into making an LP that Bowie once said captured “a sense of yearning for a future that we all knew would never come to pass.”

## from kether to melkuth

As far as the music goes, *Low* and its siblings were a direct follow-on from the title track of *Station to Station*. It's often struck me that there will usually be one track on any given album of mine which will be a fair indicator of the intent of the following album.

—David Bowie, 2001

I see *Low* as very much a continuation from *Station to Station*, which I think is one of the great records of all time.

—Brian Eno, 1999

The journey towards *Low* begins with the rattling pistons of a locomotive, opening the title track of David Bowie's previous album *Station to Station*, recorded in Los Angeles in late 1975. Retro steam train noises fade in then move across the aural landscape, literally, from the left channel to the right. (The album was actually recorded in quadraphonic sound—one of those forgotten hi-fi innovations of the seventies—with the train circling its way around all four speakers.) Bowie had pinched the train noises from a radio sound effects record, and had then further treated them in the studio, using equalisation and unconventional phasing methods, giving them that skewed, not-quite-real feeling that is emblematic of this strange album.

Those train sounds herald the theme of restless travel as a spiritual metaphor, also present on *Low* and the following albums of what Bowie calls his “Berlin triptych” (*Low*, “*Heroes*”, *Lodger*). Sonically, *Station to Station* is a voyage in itself, journeying from the mid-seventies funk of the New York disco scene to the pulsing *motorik* beat of experimental German bands such as Neu!, Can or Kraftwerk. In fact, those opening sound effects are pretty much an *hommage* to Kraftwerk's unlikely 1974 hit *Autobahn*, which begins with a car revving up and driving off, the sound also crossing over from left to right channel.

Like *Autobahn*, *Station to Station* is a veritable epic in rock/pop terms. Clocking in at over ten minutes, this is the longest track Bowie has ever written (the instrumental introduction alone outdistances most songs on *Low*). It's over a minute before Earl Slick's guitar kicks in, mimicking at first a train whistle, then the clunking sounds of engines and wheels on track. “I got some quite extraordinary things out of Earl Slick,” Bowie has said. “I think it captured his imagination to make noises on guitar, and textures, rather than playing the right notes.” That experimental groping towards sound as texture rather than chords and melody is definitely there all right, even if it's not really followed through on the rest of the album.

From there on, there's a gradual building up of instrumentation. A metronomic two-note piano figure sets up a self-consciously mechanical beat, which is almost immediately opposed by the R&B rhythm section of Dennis Davis (drums), George Murray (bass) and Carlos Alomar (guitar). Alomar's funk licks battle it out with

Slick's noise guitar, while the mellotron overlays a melody line against a chaos of bizarre industrial sound effects.

Already, before Bowie has sung a note, a musical agenda is being laid down. Alomar sees it as “funky on the bass, but everything on top was just rock 'n' roll.” That captures part of what it was: funk instrumentation with European-style lead melody. For Bowie, “*Station to Station* was really the rock-format version of what was to come on *Low* and “*Heroes*”. I was at the time well into German electronic music—Can, and all that. And Kraftwerk had made a big impression on me.” What Bowie was working his way towards was some kind of hybridisation between the R&B he'd already pastiched on *Young Americans* and the textures and beats of the German *Kosmische* bands (of whom more later), along with other experimentalists in both the rock and classical worlds. That hybridisation is mostly left suggested on *Station to Station*. But new territory is clearly being marked out, quite different from earlier successes like *Hunky Dory* or *Ziggy Stardust*, which, from a musical perspective, remain conventional slices of English rock.

After the extended funk/industrial workout, Bowie's vocals crash in, and things start to get weird. The first half-dozen lines pack in a bewildering array of allusions to gnosticism, black magic and the kabbala (a medieval school of Jewish mysticism). “The return of the thin white duke, throwing darts in lovers' eyes / The return of the thin white duke, making sure white stains.” This is for initiates only—the sexual/drug connotations of the “white stains” may be obvious enough, but the casual listener will hardly pick up that it's also the title of an obscure book of poetry by the notorious English occultist Aleister Crowley (1875–1947). “Throwing darts in lovers' eyes” also references Crowley, alluding to a no doubt apocryphal incident in 1918, when Crowley killed a young couple in a magical rite that involved hurling darts.

A mangled version of a famous line from Shakespeare's *Tempest* (“such is the stuff from where dreams are woven”) recalls another magician, Prospero, who is of course a duke, banished to an island (“tall in my room overlooking the ocean,” as Bowie puts it). And the “magical movement from kether to melkuth” suggests more than a passing interest in *The Tree of Life*, a kabbalistic treatise written by Crowley disciple Israel Regardie. The Tree of Life is a mystical diagram in which *kether* represents the godhead and *melkuth* the physical world, while the magical movement between the two enacts the Gnostic myth of the Fall. In the booklet of the current remaster of the album, an anaemic Bowie is to be seen sketching out the Tree of Life on a studio floor.

It doesn't end there: there are plenty of other occult allusions to be teased out—“lost in my circle,” “flashing no colour,” “sunbirds to soar with” all have their specific mystical meanings. According to Bowie, the song is almost a “step-by-step interpretation of the kabbala, although absolutely no one else realised that at the time, of course.” That's something of an exaggeration—intellectually, the mix of references is rather confused, although it works extremely well on a poetic level.

Crowleyism was not a rock novelty in 1975. Led Zeppelin's Jimmy Page was a disciple; Can's extraordinary *Tago Mago* (1971) alludes to Crowley; and arguably the most famous LP ever, *Sgt Pepper*, depicts Crowley on its cover. Previous Bowie songs also reference occultism (“Quicksand” namechecks Crowley, Himmler and the Golden Dawn society of which both were members), and traces of it subsist on later albums,

including *Low*. But never was it so blatant as on *Station to Station*. What are we to make of this? Certain critics make a great deal indeed. The late Ian McDonald (whose *Revolution in the Head* remains the benchmark of Beatles literature) grandly depicts Bowie as a Prospero figure executing an “exorcism of the self, of mind, of the past ....Bowie has ascended the Tree of Life; now he wants to come down to earth, to love,” and to “cast his occult *grimoire* into the ocean.”

There’s another, rather more prosaic reading of these black magic ramblings. “It’s not the side-effects of the cocaine,” Bowie opines a little further on in the song, but I think we can safely assume a case of protesting too much. Because the *Station to Station* sessions represent the high-water mark of Bowie’s prodigious drug intake. By this stage, Bowie had practically stopped eating and was subsisting on a diet of milk, cocaine and four packets of Gitanes a day. He was leading a vampyric existence of blinds-drawn seclusion in his Hollywood mansion, spliced with all-night sessions in the studio. There were times when he’d start recording in the evening then work all the way through until ten in the morning—and when told that the studio had been booked for another band, he’d simply call up for studio time elsewhere on the spot and start work again immediately. Other times, he could vanish altogether: “We show up at the studio,” says Slick. “‘Where is he?’ He shows up maybe five or six hours late. Sometimes he wouldn’t show up at all.” At this stage, Bowie could go five or six days without sleep, the point at which reality and imagination become irretrievably blurred: “By the end of the week my whole life would be transformed into this bizarre nihilistic fantasy world of oncoming doom, mythological characters and imminent totalitarianism.”

Essentially, Bowie was suffering from severe bouts of cocaine psychosis, a condition very similar to schizophrenia, with its highly distorted perceptions of reality, hallucinations, affectlessness and a marked tendency towards magical thinking. His interviews of the time are classics of messianic delusion, as he raves on about Hitler being the first rock star, or his own political ambitions (“I’d love to enter politics. I will one day. I’d adore to be Prime Minister. And yes, I believe very strongly in fascism.”). The flipside of messianic fantasy is of course paranoid delusion, which Bowie also displayed in spades. He imagined one of his advisers was a CIA agent; a backing singer was apparently a vampire. During one interview, Bowie suddenly leapt up and pulled down the blind: “I’ve got to do this,” he jabbered. “I just saw a body fall.” He proceeded to light a black candle then blow it out. “It’s only a protection. I’ve been getting a little trouble from the neighbours.” How much of all this was theatre and how much delusion? Bowie was evidently past making such distinctions. His wife of the time, Angie, recounts getting a phone call from him one day in 1975; Bowie was somewhere in Los Angeles with a warlock and two witches who wanted to steal his semen for a black magic ritual. “He was talking in slurred, hushed tones, and hardly making any sense and he was crazed with fear.”

Bowie was quite capable of camping up his “weirdness” when it suited him. And yet if only a quarter of the stories circulating about him from this time are true—of his keeping his urine in the fridge, of black magic altars in the living room, of professional exorcisms of his swimming pool and so on—this would still be a man with serious mental health issues, to say the least. On top of his cocaine addiction and related

delusions, Bowie was also physically cut off from any kind of “normal” existence. Life at Doheny Drive, where he’d taken up residence, resembled a kind of court, peopled with musicians, dealers, lovers, and a whole host of parasitic shysters and hangers-on. His assistant Corinne “Coco” Schwab acted as a gatekeeper, sorting out the logistics of his life, insulating him from situations and people that upset him. His ability to do anything for himself had become severely restrained. Fame, cocaine, isolation and Los Angeles (“the least suitable place on earth for a person to go in search of identity and stability,” as he’d put it later) had all conspired to spin Bowie off into a very dark place indeed.

Given this state of affairs, the wonder is that Bowie got anything done in the studio at all. And, in fact, by *Station to Station* there’s very much a sense of the artist as well as the man in crisis. It had been a year since the *Young Americans* sessions, and he’d done very little recording since then. In May 1975 he’d taken his friend Iggy Pop in to record some material, but the session had quickly become chaotic, with Pop and Bowie even coming to blows at one stage. This was at the height of his “stick insect paranoia look,” according to guitarist James Williamson, who’d found Bowie slumped at the control booth, enveloped in a hideous wall of distorted noise.

For *Station to Station*, Bowie went into the studio with only two songs, both of which were eventually changed beyond recognition. He was accustomed to working extremely quickly—the bulk of *Ziggy Stardust*, for instance, was done in a two-week period, itself coming only weeks after the recording of *Hunky Dory*. By contrast, the *Station to Station* sessions stretched out over two and a half months, yielding just five original compositions and a histrionic cover version of “Wild Is the Wind.”

“You retain a superficial hold on reality so that you can get through the things that you know are absolutely necessary for your survival,” Bowie mused in 1993. “But when that starts to break up, which inevitably it does—around late 1975 everything was starting to break up—I would work at songs for hours and hours and days and days and then realise after a few days that I had done absolutely nothing. I thought I’d been working and working, but I’d only been rewriting the first four bars or something. And I hadn’t got anywhere. I couldn’t believe it! I’d been working on it for a week! I hadn’t got past four bars! And I’d realise that I’d been changing those four bars around, doing them backwards, splitting them up and doing the end first. An obsession with detail had taken over.” It was yet another consequence of the psychosis, and that eerie, overwrought quality is all over *Station to Station*. It’s the cocaine album *par excellence*, in its slow, hypnotic rhythms, its deranged romantic themes, its glacial alienation, its dialogue with God (“Word on a Wing”), in the pure white lines of the album cover, in the hi-fi sheen that’s clean enough to snort off.

But to get back to the title track. As the occult incantations of the first section end, the distorted train sounds make a brief return, and then comes a bridge at 5:17. The song abruptly switches tempo to a Neu!-like *motorik* chug; the instrumentation simplifies; and new melody lines break in, almost as if it were another song entirely—as it probably was originally (not a lot of detail is known about these sessions, due to the cocaine habits and memory holes of just about everyone involved). Now we’re looking back to some kind of lost idyll, a time when “there were mountains and mountains and sunbirds to soar with, and once I could never be down.” It’s here that

the restless, questing theme makes its appearance—“got to keep searching and searching and what will I be believing and who will connect me with love?”

A final section kicks in at 6:03, the rhythm changing yet again to disco-inflected beats, with rock guitar and piano hurtling along on top. “It’s not the side-effects of the cocaine,” Bowie now delusionally meditates. “I’m thinking that it must be love.” It’s as if the narrator is so alienated that he’s come out the other side, into something approaching passion (the title, Bowie has said, refers to the Stations of the Cross). And now a new incantation repeats itself to fade: “It’s too late to be grateful, it’s too late to be late again/It’s too late to be hateful, the European canon is here.” “It was like a plea to come back to Europe,” Bowie commented a few years later. “It was one of those self-chat things one has with oneself from time to time.”

That last lyric points to what the track achieved sonically. The train has travelled from occult-tinged, post-Manson Los Angeles towards a certain modernist Europe and its avant-garde pretensions, its experimental song structures, its fascination with sound as texture. A Europe where traditional popular music (British music hall, French *chanson*, German cabaret) had always privileged exaggeration and role-playing over authenticity and self-expression. “Towards the end of my stay in America,” Bowie has said, “I realised that what I had to do was to experiment. To discover new forms of writing. To evolve, in fact, a new musical language. That’s what I set out to do. That’s why I returned to Europe.” The Rimbaud-esque desire to create a new language is perhaps the upside of the messianism. There’s an irony in his inversion of the order of things: the conventional spiritual journey is from the Old World to the New, striking out for fresh horizons and frontiers. It’s the troubled aesthetes—Henry James, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound—who make the reverse trip.

This struggle towards Europe (along with the schizophrenic flavour of the two albums) is what connects *Station to Station* to its successor *Low*. The link is further underlined by the album cover, a still from Bowie’s first (and by a long chalk his best) movie, *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, which Bowie worked on directly prior to the *Station to Station* sessions. It shows him as the alien Thomas Jerome Newton entering his spaceship (in reality an anechoic chamber). The current reissue of the album has a full-length colour image, but on the original release it was cropped and black and white, giving it an austere, expressionist flavour redolent of the European modernism of the 1920s and the photography of Man Ray. The stark, red sans serif typography—the album title and artist are run together (STATIONTOSTATIONDAVIDBOWIE)—adds to the retro-modernist feel. Bowie himself hovers somewhere between America and Europe, his hair in a James Dean quiff, his tieless white shirt severely buttoned to the neck. The cover of *Low*, too, is a treated still from *The Man Who Fell to Earth*.

## the visitor

In December 1975, shortly after he'd signed off on *Station to Station*, Bowie was back at work on a soundtrack for *The Man Who Fell to Earth*—although ultimately it wasn't used in the film, and remains to this day unreleased. If *Station to Station* laid down the artistic groundwork for *Low*, its actual genesis came in these soundtrack sessions. Various *Low* tracks are reported to have been recycled from this time—Brian Eno has said that “Weeping Wall” started life there, although Bowie himself claims that “the only hold-over from the proposed soundtrack that I actually used was the reverse bass part in ‘Subterraneans.’” He is perhaps not the most reliable witness to the lost weekend of 1975 (Bowie on *Station to Station*: “I know it was recorded in LA because I read it”), but other hold-over candidates do seem to me to be ruled out on internal evidence.

Bowie worked with Paul Buckmaster (producer of his 1969 “Space Oddity” hit), who brought in a cello to accompany Bowie's guitar, synthesisers and drum machines. The sessions (at Bowie's Bel Air home) produced five or six working tracks, recorded on a TEAC four-track tape recorder. According to Buckmaster, the two were very taken at the time with Kraftwerk's recently released *Radio-Activity*. This album caught Kraftwerk at a transitional phase of their career, channelling free-form experimentalism towards more tightly controlled, robotic rhythms that are like the sonic equivalent of a Mondrian painting. *Radio-Activity* is a clear influence on *Low*, with its mix of pop hooks, unsettling sound effects, retro-modernism; its introspection and emotional flatness. The theremin-sounding synths of “Always Crashing in the Same Car” and the electronic interludes on “A New Career in a New Town” in particular have a *RadioActivity* feel to them.

Apart from that early run-through of “Subterraneans,” then, these sessions' real contribution to *Low* was that they got Bowie thinking about (and creating) atmospheric, “mood” music for the first time. In a career of over a decade, Bowie had yet to record a single instrumental piece. In this respect, the loghorrea of *Station to Station*—with its lumber room of loosely connected images—looks backwards rather than forwards, since more than half the tracks on *Low* ended up lyric-less, and the others are pretty monosyllabic. Until *Low*, Bowie had tended to follow some sort of narrative line, however elusive. On *Low*, even on the songs with lyrics, that narrative impulse largely falls away. And it was during the *Man Who Fell to Earth* sessions that, he later said, he first got the idea of hooking up with Brian Eno at some point.

There are conflicting accounts as to why the soundtrack project was abandoned. According to Bowie, his manager, Michael Lippman, had promised to secure him the rights to score the film and he'd started recording on that basis. When later told that his work would be competing in a three-way pitch, he withdrew from the process in a fury. That account doesn't quite square with those of others involved. According to Harry Maslin, who co-produced *Station to Station*, Bowie was by this stage so burned out that he couldn't focus on the work properly. Buckmaster seems to agree, recalling

one session where Bowie had practically overdosed and had to be helped out of the studio. “I considered the music to be demo-ish and not final, although we were supposed to be making it final,” Buckmaster told Bowie biographer David Buckley. “All we produced was something that was substandard, and [the film’s director] Nic Roeg turned it down on those grounds.”

John Phillips, who ended up doing the soundtrack, tells yet a different story: “Roeg wanted banjos and folk music and Americana for the film, which was about an alien who drops from the sky into the southwest. ‘David really can’t do that kind of thing,’ Roeg said.” This seems to me a better explanation for the rejection of the Bowie soundtrack—*The Man Who Fell to Earth* has a sci-fi premise but isn’t really a scifi film and a spacey, futuristic soundtrack would have set the wrong tone. As for the quality of Bowie’s work, those who did hear it were impressed. Phillips found it “haunting and beautiful, with chimes, Japanese bells, and what sounded like electronic wind and waves.” Bowie had the soundtrack with him during the *Low* sessions for work on “Subterraneans,” and at one stage played it to the musicians: “It was excellent,” recalled guitarist Ricky Gardiner, “quite unlike anything else he’s done.” Months later, Bowie sent Roeg a copy of *Low*, with a note that said: “This is what I wanted to do for the soundtrack.”

*The Man Who Fell to Earth* was English filmmaker Nic Roeg’s fourth movie. In the prime of his career in the mid-seventies, he’d received widespread acclaim for arthouse classics such as *Walkabout* and *Don’t Look Now*. And he’d already initiated one rock star (Mick Jagger) into the world of acting, on his directorial debut *Performance*. But for Bowie, *The Man Who Fell to Earth* turned out to be more than just his first major acting job. In many respects, Thomas Jerome Newton, the part he plays, was Nic Roeg’s projection of Bowie, and Bowie, in turn, confessed to “being Newton for six months” after the movie shoot, wearing Newton’s clothes and striking his poses. (“I’d been offered a couple of scripts but I chose this one because it was the only one where I didn’t have to sing or look like David Bowie,” he said at the time. “Now I think that David Bowie looks like Newton.”) Roeg had first wanted Peter O’Toole for the role but became interested in Bowie after seeing a documentary that Alan Yentob had made for the BBC arts programme *Omnibus*. It was entitled *Cracked Actor*, and caught a pale, stick-thin Bowie as he toured America. It impressed Roeg greatly, to the extent that a scene in which Bowie is having some sort of psychotic episode in the back of a limo in New York was re-created for the movie, with the same chauffeur and even snatches of the dialogue reprised. Other self-referential moments make clear the link between Bowie and the role he’s playing. Like Bowie, Newton creates music, and near the end of the film, he makes an album of spectral sounds entitled *The Visitor*. The scene in which a character buys this album shows a record store display promoting Bowie’s *Young Americans* in the background. An early screenplay apparently used Bowie lyrics as well.

The movie is about an alien who travels to Earth from a drought-stricken planet, where he has left a wife and child. Using his superior knowledge, he starts up a high-tech corporation to earn the money he needs to build a spaceship, which would ship water to save his planet. Into his reclusive life comes Mary-Lou, an elevator operator, who introduces Newton to TV and alcohol. Meanwhile, his phenomenal rise to power

sparks interest from government agents, who find out about his space project and determine to stop it. They imprison Newton in a penthouse and subject him to medical examinations. Eventually they lose interest in him; Mary-Lou tracks him down and he escapes. He records *The Visitor*, which he hopes his wife, who may already be dead, will hear. Knowing he can neither go back home nor save his dying family, Newton descends into self-pity and alcohol. In a sense, he has become human.

Bowie is not called upon to act in any conventional sense (and when he occasionally has to, the results are fairly lame). He merely projects an otherworldliness that's already there in the alienation that's the result of rock star fame, drug abuse and a romantic conception of the creative life. "The basic premise is of a man forced to be in a position where he has to enter a society, not letting too much be known because then he'd be in continual isolation," explains Nic Roeg. "It had to be a secret self, a secret person. Emotionally, I think a lot of these thoughts appealed to David." Newton is like a refugee, "an astronaut of inner space rather than outer space. I remember David and I talking about that theme."

The second, "ambient" side of *Low* is partly about exploring Newton's vast interior landscapes, as Bowie's note to Roeg implies. The fact that two of Bowie's albums and numerous singles bear images from the film illustrate its importance. The role was a perfect feint for the Bowie persona, crystallising the metaphor of the alien, which Bowie continued to both nurture and fight against (his uninspiring "regular guy" schtick of the 1980s was something of a reaction to it). As late as 1997, the chosen title of his album *Earthling* resonates with an irony that goes back to *The Man Who Fell to Earth*.

## one magical movement

*Station to Station* was released in late January 1976. If it didn't do quite as well as its predecessor, *Young Americans*, it was still very much a commercial as well as a critical success, spending several weeks at the top of the charts and yielding a top ten single on both sides of the Atlantic ("Golden Years").

Following its release, Bowie decided (or was persuaded) to tour the album across the States, and then Europe. His previous foray into the concert halls had resulted in something of an overblown prog rock absurdity, with an elaborate, hugely expensive set. For the new tour, Bowie wanted something far simpler, if no less theatrical. The only real prop would be vast banks of harsh white light, creating a sort of Brechtian distance, and continuing the artistic journey back to Europe: "I wanted to go back to a kind of Expressionist German film look," Bowie has said. "A feeling of a Berlinesque performer—black waistcoat, black trousers, white shirt, and the lighting of, say, Fritz Lang, or Pabst. A black-and-white-movies look, but with an intensity that was sort of aggressive. I think for me, personally, theatrically, that was the most successful tour I've ever done." In the dramatic play of white light and shadow, others saw more than a hint of Nuremberg as well—an impression not discouraged by Bowie's provocative pronunciations on fascism during this period.

All in all, it was a distinctly arty affair. The show opened with a projection of Luis Buñuel's 1920s surrealist classic, *Le Chien Andalou*—the one with the excruciating eyeball-slicing sequence—which was accompanied by tracks from Kraftwerk's equally arty, equally un-rock *Radio-Activity* album. (Bowie had invited Kraftwerk to open for him, but they'd declined the offer, or perhaps hadn't even responded to it.) Bowie himself performed dressed in the style of a dissolute pre-war aristocrat. He was playing the role of the thin white duke referenced on *Station to Station*'s title track—"a very nasty character indeed," Bowie admitted later. The thin white duke was less sketched-out than other characters Bowie had inhabited; he was a chilly, Aryan elitist with Nietzschean overtones, and the morbid self-absorption of a nineteenth-century German romantic.

It was a formidable piece of expressionist theatre that received adulatory reviews. And yet, in the midst of this artistic success, and despite the iron self-discipline needed to formulate it and carry it off, Bowie actually seemed to be as deranged as ever. In Stockholm he regaled a journalist with the script he was writing about Goebbels, and the land he was going to buy to start up his own country. The messianic delusions had hardly abated; quite the contrary: "As I see it I am the only alternative for the premier in England. I believe Britain could benefit from a fascist leader. After all, fascism is really nationalism." Bowie later passed this off as provocation, which it obviously was, although the line between delusion and provocation had by then become gossamer-thin.

"That whole *Station to Station* tour was done under duress," Bowie later said. "I was out of my mind totally, completely crazed. Really. But the main thing I was

functioning on, as far as that whole thing about Hitler and Rightism was concerned, was mythology.” Essentially, Bowie’s interest in fascism wasn’t really political, it was just another offshoot of his loopy obsession with the occult: “The search for the Holy Grail. That was my real fascination with the Nazis. The whole thing that in the thirties they had come over to Glastonbury Tor. And naïvely, politically, I didn’t even think about what they had done....It’s hard to see that you could get involved with all that and not see the implications of what you were getting into. But at the time I was obsessed with the idea that the Nazis were looking for the Holy Grail.”

On February 11, after his Los Angeles concert, Bowie met up with the novelist Christopher Isherwood, a writer he admired. Isherwood’s best known novels, *Mr Norris Changes Trains* and *Goodbye to Berlin*, are in essence autobiographies of a bohemian young Englishman in Weimar-era Berlin (the latter was made into the movie *Cabaret*, starring Liza Minelli and Michael York). The Berlin cabaret life described by Isherwood—dancing in the face of imminent catastrophe—appealed to Bowie in the same way that Evelyn Waugh’s *Vile Bodies* had appealed and had prompted him to write “Aladdin Sane.” And of course it was exactly that kind of atmosphere that had influenced the look of the *Station to Station* tour. The two talked at length, with Bowie pumping Isherwood for stories about Berlin—clearly already on his mind as a possible European refuge. Isherwood was rather discouraging: Berlin was quite boring even then, he told Bowie. And the decadent bohemia he portrayed in his books? “Young Bowie,” Isherwood waspishly pronounced, “people forget that I’m a very good fiction writer.” Nevertheless, Bowie would end up living fifteen minutes’ walk from Isherwood’s old Berlin flat. And to some extent he’d play the same sort of “decadent Englishman abroad” games as the young Isherwood had in the early thirties (with Iggy Pop as Sally Bowles to Bowie’s “Herr Issyvoo”).

There were more Nazi shenanigans on April 2, when returning from a trip to Moscow, Bowie was strip-searched at the Russian/Polish border, and had biographies of Speer and Goebbels confiscated by customs officials (Bowie claimed it was research material for the Goebbels film). The *Station to Station* tour rolled into Berlin a week later, on April 10. Bowie had been there once before, to perform on West German TV in 1969, but didn’t know the city. He went into sightseeing mode, taking his presidential open-roof Mercedes on a tour of East Berlin, and then to Hitler’s bunker. Long after he moved to Berlin and had presumably outgrown his occult fixations, Bowie remained fascinated by the city’s Nazi past, seeking out remaining examples of Speer’s architecture, visiting the former Gestapo headquarters and so on. The Berlin tour stop found Bowie already slipping into the Isherwood role: it was then that he met transsexual cabaret performer Romy Haag (described by one biographer as “like Sally Bowles, only more so”), with whom he would later have a well-publicised affair.

Back in England for the first time in over two years, Bowie courted yet more controversy at London’s Victoria Station by seemingly giving a Hitler salute (May 2). Bowie claims that the photographer caught him mid-wave, which is probably true, but he’d certainly opened himself up to the misrepresentation. An interview with Jean Rook in the *Daily Express* catches him furiously back-peddalling on his fascist pronouncements of a few days before. Here, the emaciated, Dracula-pale Bowie comes