



Strange Stars: David Bowie, Pop Music, and the Decade Sci-Fi Exploded

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A Hugo Award-winner explores the massive influence that science fiction has had on popular music, particularly on David Bowie and the heady, experimental 1970s scene

In the 1960s and 70s old mores and lingering repressions were falling away, replaced with a new kind of hedonistic freedom that included sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll. Although it didn't factor into the stereotype, it also included science fiction.

Strange Stars tells the story of how incredibly well read artists--David Bowie, Jimi Hendrix, Pink Floyd, and many more--brought Sci Fi's cosmic flare to their lyrics, sounds, and styles, and changed pop music forever.

Strange Stars: David Bowie, Pop Music, and the Decade Sci-Fi Exploded Details

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From Reader Review Strange Stars: David Bowie, Pop Music, and the Decade Sci-Fi Exploded for online ebook

Jason says

Thanks to Melville House for an advance reading copy of this book.

In the acknowledgements to this book the author writes that if not for his editor he would have written an encyclopedia. He nearly did anyway, having created here a comprehensive, sometimes dizzying account of science fiction-inspired music and its democratizing effect on sci-fi within popular culture (with a little help from NASA, drugs, and "Star Wars").

Each year of the 1970s is given a chapter along with brief prologue and epilogue chapters of the adjacent decades, with David Bowie as the lynchpin: "Space Oddity" and its sequel "Ashes To Ashes" frame the decade. But Bowie is far from the only act covered as Heller recounts sci-fi-influenced artists from the obvious (Sun Ra, Parliament-Funkadelic, Hawkwind) to the obscure (MU), and all the novelty acts along the way. It's also interesting to watch the evolution of popular music from jazz to psychedelia to glam to prog to funk to soul to disco to post-punk and finally to techno, electro, and synthpop.

On the science fiction side of things Michael Moorcock, Robert A. Heinlein, Philip K. Dick, Samuel R. Delany, William S. Burroughs, and J.G. Ballard loom large as influences, but only Moorcock through his involvement with Hawkwind is profiled to any extent.

Dense with information but a lively, quick read, I recommend this to anyone interested in the intersection between these two pop culture forces. Bowie fans likely won't find anything new but might find interest in this cataloguing of his influence.

Trace Reddell says

A mind-exploding collection of albums inform this fascinating exploration of the intersection of music and science fiction.

Science fiction and music or sound is a woefully under-developed area of written analysis and history, and while a few existing essays, articles, or books (Eshun's "More Brilliant than the Sun," for one) may turn up the volume of an informed discourse, Jason Heller's "Strange Stars" is like Nigel Tufnel's famous amp plugged into a starship's drive -- it takes us right to 11! This is a thrilling, fast-paced flight through science fiction and the music of the '70s, linked together by the ever-evolving David Bowie, but touching on every genre of music that has some connection to sci-fi. Some artists discussed -- like Bowie, Devo, Meco, Paul Kantner, Gary Numan, Sun Ra, George Clinton and P-Funk, and many more -- are eager to make music a science fictional form in its own right. Others, like Boston or ELO, get caught up in the image of sci-fi on album art and stage shows but without necessarily writing sci-fi songs. But in either case, the author makes the important point that science fiction in image, word and sound, is more than a mere meme but an important means by which we navigate technically accelerated culture.

The book is relatively short, and my only wish is that at times the author had delved more deeply into the philosophical implications of his discoveries and observations before moving on from one artist or album to

another. With that said, the book is not only fun and informative but thought-provoking, and its smart focus on the '70s (with brief discussions on either side of the decade) leaves the reader plenty of room to think about ongoing connections between music in its many forms and the field of science fiction as something that goes well beyond pop culture to get at the heart of the human drive through technoculture.

Another bonus? I ended up with a hell of an awesome space disco playlist after reading this! How had I never heard Mandré?

Sarah Baker says

An intriguing premise that lead down many rabbit holes. Wish there had been more Bowie but I'll take what I can get. Deeper review to follow

Amanda Mae says

This was a heck of a lot of fun to read. My interest in sci-fi is fairly minimal, but it was delightful to read about how different sci-fi authors and stories and franchises influenced rock music, especially David Bowie - who is the main thread through the book. You better have YouTube or Spotify handy while you read because you'll be picking up lots of new tracks to listen to, and I finished with a small list of sci-fi novels I'd like to try. If you're a fan of Bowie, read it. If you like 70s rock, read it. If you like the sci-fi genre, read it. There's something for most everyone in the book.

Brad says

I enjoyed this book very much, but to me, it was the very definition of a mile wide and an inch deep. Heller tracks down and catalogs what seems to be every one of the hundreds of science fiction themed songs recorded during the 70s and duly notes if they were inspired by any specific book or movie. What's mostly missing is any sort of broader historical context as to exactly why any of this stuff was happening - beyond "Star Wars came out and was really popular," Heller doesn't seem too interested in getting at why certain themes emerged in music while others faded, beyond vague waves of the hand at topics like the death of 60s idealism, etc. What did any of this actually mean? Strange Stars doesn't really answer that, and that's what prevents it from being a great history book rather than just a really good one. Still, it's ridiculously well-researched and comprehensive, though there are a few irritating, obvious mistakes, such as attributing the Roger Waters-penned "Set the Controls for the Heart of the Sun" to Syd Barrett. Overall, though, this is a fun, very readable book that unearths a ton of music I never knew existed, even if it's not very concerned with explaining why it existed.

Elizabeth Judd Taylor says

Actually a 4.5, because I appreciated the amount of genres taken into consideration.

As the subtitle suggests, David Bowie fans will enjoy this book; and indeed his music is the anchor that holds the theme together. However, non-fans will enjoy it too, if they are music and/or sci-fi fans, as many

musical artists and genres are discussed, from folk to glam to funk to new wave to electronica to disco to hard rock to indie. Sci-fi novels and movies get a look in, too, as they serve as inspiration for the music. The period covered is the late 60's to early 80's, the book is really readable, and the author's passion for the subject shines through. Recommended for music fans and sci-fi fans.

Billie says

Great title, great cover, great concept, "meh" content. By the end, I really felt like Heller had had to dig to find artists and songs to support his thesis, relying heavily on the obscure and only vaguely sci-fi-ish. There was also a lack of first-hand research and/or personal interviews, which gave the book a dry, academic tone. In the end, the result is a book that a.) could have been a 50-page paper, rather than a 200-page book and b.) will likely have limited appeal to the general public, in spite of its subject matter.

Sarah says

This took a while to finish because I kept having to look up songs. I knew most of the Bowie stuff, but not a lot of the other stuff. Would've liked a little more anecdote/humanizing, but the connections themselves were enough in the end. Clever to structure it around the decade, more or less opening and closing it with Major Tom.

Nick Spacek says

it's fun and all, but i can't help but feel that it's just another in a series of books which follow such a particular pattern that certain aspects of it can't help but feel shoehorned in. i really wanted heller to tie bowie in more often to the other things he was discussing, but it seems like the throughline floats above the rest of it at too much a remove.

for all its flaws, dave thompson's children of the revolution did a better job of a similar task, using the story of marc bolan as the connecting thread for the history of glam rock. there's just too much listing here, rather than exploring connecting stories and themes.

i understand that it's all about sci-fi, but a discussion as to why so many metal bands looked to fantasy literature -- and especially tolkien -- instead of science fiction would've provided excellent contrast. there are also some interesting omissions.

for all the discussion of rare and obscure singles by bands which never went anywhere, leaving out brownsville station's 'martian boogie' -- which not only went to 59 on the billboard hot 100, but ties into the novelty hits of the '50s and '60s like 'purple people eater,' 'flying saucers rock 'n' roll,' and the like -- is a real missed opportunity.

Allison Thurman says

My teenage musical interests tended to be deep and specific. As I read more about 1970s pop music the more I realize that I'm ignorant of so much of it even now. This book filled in some very serious gaps.

This book isn't just about songs that literally reference sci fi (though there is that - remember disco Star Wars?) but also about the interaction between sci fi authors and rock musicians (Hawkwind and Moorcock) and the fact that a lot of 70s prog and glam rockers were inspired in both sound and appearance by their love of science fiction (Bowie would watch 2001 repeatedly). Like a lot of aficionados of post punk I wrote off prog rock as overblown and didn't realize how much they innovated in terms of theme albums and use of synthesizers.

If you have an interest in 70s rock with a look at broader 1970s sci-fi culture, this book comes highly recommended. If you're interested in Bowie and his ilk in general this and Simon Reynolds' "Shock and Awe" are excellent primers for what to listen to and how it came about.

Todd Glaeser says

I'm disappointed in a way I have criticized others before in other reviews, in so much as I'm wishing this book covered things it doesn't.

I did enjoy what is there. It puts forth an interesting premise. But I think it misses things that should have been included: Chariot of the Gods, Zolar X, Kiss (previous to Phantom of the Paradise, which does get mentioned,) The Sensational Alex Harvey Band (Vambo Rools!) and Dhalgren by Samuel R. Delany.

Fahad Ahmed says

So, full disclosure, I love music (not as much as I love the person who gave me this book, though) and I'm a bit of a David Bowie obsessive. Seeing his face and name on the incredibly pretty cover of this book definitely got me interested

The cover and title actually happen to be a bit misleading, because the book doesn't really have all that much to do with Bowie, certainly not enough for him to get top billing. If you're looking for a biography of David Bowie, look elsewhere (The Age of Bowie is a good, if needlessly wordy, one). If you're looking for a book that dives into his music, there's a really great book that analyzes a great deal of his tracks whose title I wish I could remember. If you're looking for an outline of the relationship between science fiction and music throughout the 1970s, this is your book. As far as I was concerned, it was a surprise to be sure but a welcome one

It all began in the late 60s, when a lot of prog rock groups took inspiration from their favorite sci-fi authors and integrated elements from their work into their music. Then came the moon landing in 1969 and with it came Space Oddity, David Bowie's seminal single that began music's dalliance with sci-fi in earnest. And then came the 70s, and Jason Heller charts the relationship between rock and sci-fi and the spread of that influence to funk and disco and then waning of sci-fi's presence in popular music as 1980 rolled around, closing with a slightly deeper dive into the remake of Space Oddity and the release of Ashes to Ashes, David Bowie's ending bookmark of the 70s

This is a book about entire scenes of music that persisted through and past a decade. It would be so easy for a writer to get bogged down in the minutiae of sci-fi/prog rock or sci-fi/rock or sci-fi/funk or whatever, but Heller glides smoothly through the era, introducing us to the many individuals and bands that thrived in this era. These include acts that have become hallmarks of the genre - Bowie himself, Pink Floyd, Jimi Hendrix, etc - but it also includes bands that I'd never heard of before - Hawkwind is almost as big a player in this story as Bowie. I actually went ahead and made a big list of these acts that I want to listen to, and if you're also in search of some great sci-fi music, this book has got the goods. While you're at it, make a point to read the novels that inspired these artists as well, they must be pretty legit

The lack of Bowie in this book doesn't really bother me, nor did it come as a huge surprise. Though he's the face of sci-fi music, only a handful of his 27 albums are actually sci-fi, and of them, only a few were released in the period covered by this book. I'm glad that Blackstar got a mention at the end, **such a great album**

My only complaint with Strange Stars is that it does get a bit boring, which really shouldn't be happening in a book filled with 70s rockstars. I've read Bowie's biography and I'm familiar with all the insanity that happened in his life, but none of it shows in this book, and the same is true for all the other bands as well. The coverage of the Altamont Free Concert was so bare, considering what a defining moment that was for music as a whole. What does come across well in this book is the way so many artists wound up inspiring each other over the years. The music industry is a small world, as it happens

If the subject matter interests you, Strange Stars is an engaging and interesting chronicle of an era of music that occasionally leaves out some of the juicier details. That being said, if you want a deep dive into Bowie or any of the other artists mentioned in this book, you'd be better off searching elsewhere

Jason Diamond says

Heller uses sci-fi to tie together everything from Sun Ra to Bowie to X-Ray Spex and even some New Romantic stuff from the 80s. It's really all I could ever ask for in a book and possibly the most interesting music book of 2018.

Jessica says

This is fantastic.

I was a child in the '70s and I am familiar with much of the music and books Heller discusses (not so much on movies although I do know Star Wars and Star Trek which was more than enough to get me through) so I figured this would be a fun "trip down memory lane," as it were.

Nope. Not one piece of nostalgic fluff in sight! (That's not a bad thing, in case you aren't sure.) I was so absorbed with the connections I hadn't considered (or wasn't aware of) that it was as if I'd never heard/read/seen/lived it. To have a new view of David Bowie's Space Oddity, for example, just seems impossible. It's decades old, overplayed, clearly in the cannon of songs that pretty much everyone knows, and yet here I am, listening to it with new ears and new insights. (The old lady in me is supremely happy about this since she will do something drastic if she has to hear one more auto-tuned piece of shit while searching for new music, but we'll talk about that some other time.)

That said, the list of unknown (to me) musicians and songs is embarrassingly long. I can't even begin to imagine how Heller found them all (it must be a personal passion.) Even more impressive is that despite the overlap of themes, topics, and names, despite the levels of influence from authors to musicians and back again, the timetable is seamless. Rather than feeling insulting, repetition is relevant and short, assuming the reader can remember something said twenty pages ago and be reminded with a little "shorthand."

I'm making it sound too academic. Really, this is a book I could not put down. It's encyclopedic in the content but it is also compellingly written. And did I mention it's fascinating?

Bowie, of course, takes center stage but we also see a good bit about Jefferson Airplane/Starship, P-Funk, Hawkwind and some other biggies I'm sure I'm forgetting. You're probably saying to yourself, "Yeah, but I bet he doesn't cover (insert obscure '70s band here)." If they wrote a sci-fi song, I'd put good money down that you're wrong. The only two omissions that surprised me were Frank Zappa and the Residents but neither of them could, in any reality, be considered pop.

I ended up with three pages of notes (mostly stuff I need to listen to, watch, and/or read) and can't stop obsessing over the topic so I think this has become a long-term commitment for me. I doubt it would be easy for anyone to read it and forget it.

Apparently it is good form to tell you that I received a pre-pub of this book for free, but as I like to point out, I get books from my library for free all the time, too, and you just need to look at my reviews to see that it doesn't seem to influence me.

Barry Martin Vass says

This is a fascinating treatise on the influence of science fiction on popular music from 1968 to the early eighties. David Bowie is the titular focus, although the book ranges from rock, to funk, to disco, to techno, and so forth. Bowie read so much, thought about and occasionally borrowed what he read, and was constantly reinventing himself and influencing others in the rock and pop world, that this is a good place to start (Example: Bowie saw 2001: A Space Odyssey in 1968 and the next year released his first single, Space Oddity. Pretty similar, huh: Space Odyssey and Space Oddity?) But Author Jason Heller is interested in the influence of science fiction from ALL media: from novels by popular sci-fi authors, to TV shows of the period (the original Star Trek ran from 1966 to 1969), to of course movies (Star Wars was released in 1977 and immediately caused as much a sensation in music as it did elsewhere). Here's an example of the writing: "(Gary) Numan never undertook a direct adaptation of the works of Dick, Coney, or any other writer.

"Influences, when used wisely, should be a series of little sparks that just ignite your own ideas," he said. Instead, he absorbed his favorite sci-fi books and movies, converting them into raw material to be molded into new yet hauntingly familiar shapes. In that sense, Numan exemplified pop music's relationship with sci-fi throughout the '70's: science fiction could be a direct source of subject matter, but it could also be a catalyst for one's own concepts and narratives." While this is fascinating stuff, a word of warning: Strange Stars is not light reading or something you would read on a whim. Author Jason Heller seemingly has an encyclopedic knowledge of popular music during this time, and the research to formulate this must have been formidable; at times the prose is dense, almost impenetrable. But, if you're a science fiction and/or music geek (and you know who you are), you will definitely grok this book.
