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“Can You Hear Me, Major Tom?”:

David Bowie Fans and Their Connections After His Death

David Bowie had just died. That is all I could gather from the flurry of social media posts happening on the morning of January 11th, 2016 while the shock set in. Despite only knowing his hit songs, when Bowie died I felt shaken to my core. After reading numerous posts written by friends and strangers online about his passing, I felt moved to share my own.¹ In doing so, we contributed to the conversation, the memory, and the legacy of David Bowie. Six months later in June 2016, I found myself in a London alley across from the Brixton tube station to visit a Bowie memorial. Brixton was a place I had virtually visited before in videos and photos of Londoners gathering there the night he died to celebrate his life. As I stood in front of a massive mural of *Aladdin Sane*² watching a street artist touch up his work with spray paint, an elderly gentleman in a suit covered in Bowie’s face came up to talk to my friend and me. He said he fell in love with David Bowie, but never told us his name, as he clutched a few flowers he intended to leave at the site. It is evident that Bowie’s death caused countless people to join together to commemorate and mourn both on the internet and in physical places, validating the loss one felt. Bowie’s death acted as a catalyst for fans to find one another, and reaffirm their identity as a David Bowie fan through participating in mourning rituals.

To begin to understand David Bowie’s fans and how they mourned him, we first have to define the word ‘fan.’ Mark Duffett, a professor of Media and Cultural Studies at

the University of Chester, defines a fan as “a self-identified enthusiast, devotee or follower of a particular media genre, text, person or activity” in his book *Understanding Fandom* (Duffett, 2013, 293). Being a fan is a personal experience with an “emotional investment” in the object of ones’ fandom yet despite being personal, the experience typically leads one to participate within a larger fan community (2013, 138). To be a David Bowie fan then, one only has to claim that is what they are and, likewise, to be part of the David Bowie fan community one only has to engage with it.

The day the news broke about David Bowie’s death, fans sought out one another on the internet. By sharing the news and their reactions to it and writing their epitaphs and eulogies on their social media pages like Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter those who felt similarly were able to find and interact with other fans. These actions allowed fans who may have felt isolated in their mourning or shock to connect with others experiencing the same stages of grief. The act of mourning on the internet is similar to how fans of Michael Jackson behaved following his death, as detailed by Didier Courbet and Marie-Pierre Fourquet-Courbet in their 2014 article in the *Journal of Celebrity Studies*. The engagement between friends and strangers over Bowie’s death online “reassured (them) that their affective and cognitive reactions are normal by comparing them to those of other members of the group they belong to” (Courbet and Fourquet-Courbet, 2014, 283). It also allowed fans to contribute to the “collective memory and history of the worldwide event” (2014, 284) since their posts and discussions were permanently saved in web archives and search engines alongside celebrities, organizations like NASA, and even the Vatican’s cultural advisor, Gianfranco Ravasi.³ The *Daily Mail* reported that over 4.3

million tweets had been posted on Twitter about David Bowie at the end of the day on January 11th, 2016 (*DailyMail*, 2016). In posting online, they found other fans to commiserate with, which afforded them an emotional support system. It allowed fans to cope with death better and confirm their identity as a David Bowie fan, and their belonging to the fan community at large (2014, 284-5). Here, fans were able to find something potentially lacking in their everyday lives – understanding from others who felt the loss and did not judge them for mourning someone they never met.

As Courbet and Fourquet-Courbet go on to explain in their Michael Jackson study, another function of mourning on social media is “‘support through action’ which enables fans to... meet up physically at ‘real-life’ events” (2014, 285). The action of finding other fans in the physical world to mourn and celebrate the life of a celebrity with takes the support system and community off the computers and mobile devices and gives fans something real and tangible to hold onto and be part of. Bowie fans followed this function of ‘support through action’ when their online congregating eventually spilled into the physical world. Twitter user Maddy Costa tweeted on the morning of January 11th, “right then: who’s up for a bowie brixton street party tonight? we could play all the albums consecutively in the space outside the ritzy...”.⁴ Brixton is the part of London that David Bowie grew up in (Bickerdike, 2015, 50) and the Ritzy is a cinema with an open public space in front of it, so this seemed a perfect plan. Another Bowie fan, Honor Louise, saw Maddy’s tweet and continued to spread the word with the creation of a Facebook event. The page instructed people to meet in front of the Ritzy from 7 PM onwards, saying “bowie’s time on earth may be over, but he sure left us some great music. today is a day

to gather together and celebrate. please share with anyone you think would be able to help with music or any other element of this event – bring instruments, speakers, food and most importantly love.”⁵ Louise told *Independent.co.uk* of the party: “it’s about the connectedness, the experience of people getting together with a shared cause and the emotion behind it. I’m taking my guitar and I hope others do the same,” (*Independent.co.uk*, 2016). And they did.

Mourning and grief rituals vary from culture to culture though they typically include public ceremonies, so it is understandable that a spontaneous gathering like the Bowie Brixton Street Party had a reported 5.2K attendance rate, with 7.5K people marked as interested in the event, according to the Facebook event page. No one is sure how many people attended in actuality but *NME* reported that “thousands” participated. The Bowie Brixton Street Party took over a large portion of Brixton Road, which is the heart of this area of London. Fans sang songs while others played their instruments. The Prince of Wales pub along the high street pumped out Bowie’s hits with a speaker onto the street, and people danced outside of the Ritzy, which had changed its marquee to read “David Bowie, Our Brixton Boy, RIP.” When people were not singing, they were chanting his name throughout the streets, (*NME*, 2016). Images of David Bowie were projected onto buildings along Brixton Road (*Billboard*, 2016), and fans showed up in outfits or make-up inspired by the *Aladdin Sane* album artwork, declaring to the world through their appearance and actions that they were David Bowie fans. A fan even spray-painted a statue of Henry Tate, located in front of a library next to the Ritzy, with Bowie’s iconic lightning bolt across the face (*Facebook*, 2016). Further up the road is the portrait mural

by street artist Jimmy C., which immortalized Bowie as *Aladdin Sane* on the side of a Morleys.⁶ Here fans left flowers, candles, notes, balloons, and other offerings (*NME*, 2016).

The gathering that took place at the Bowie Brixton Street Party was cathartic⁷ for those who attended. Participating allowed fans to shake off some of the sadness over the death while focusing on celebrating the life of David Bowie, and walk away from the event feeling better and more connected to the Bowie fan community. For example, a fan named Claudia E. shared a video clip to Facebook of a seemingly unending sea of fans singing Bowie's well-loved track "Space Oddity" in front of the Jimmy C. mural with the caption "This is not death, THIS is life"⁸ (emphasis theirs). While the masses in Brixton were evidently heartbroken by the news of the day, Claudia E. centered her reflection of the event on the people who were there with them; all of them alive, loudly singing, and celebrating the life of another rather than silently and solemnly mourning a death.

Floriana T., another fan who attended the Street Party, posted a photo of the crowd in front of the Jimmy C. mural with the caption "we were there" to the Facebook page, exhibiting the importance of showing up for the community to aid in the healing process. The following day, January 12th, 2016, attendee Peter A. concluded "it didn't matter how you gathered, what's important is that you smiled to the person next to you and knew that there were others who felt the same way yesterday" (*Facebook*, 2016). Courbet and Fourquet-Courbet note that the flash-mobs that appeared around Jackson's death, which were similar to the Street Party, were more effective in helping fans cope than just the communication that took place online. The "direct social interaction" of being around

fellow fans who were going through the same emotional process validated them, and their identity as fans (2014, 285) which helped them cope with Bowie's death. Portions of the Street Party were live-streamed onto social media – allowing anyone, anywhere in the world to join in and feel like they were part of the collective memory and history. One may not be able to say, "I was there on Brixton Road," but one could alternatively say "I watched it happen live while I was thousands of miles away."

The night of Bowie's death was not the only time his fans descended upon Brixton. To some fans,⁹ making the journey to his hometown to pay their respects was an essential part of their mourning. This journey is known as a pilgrimage because Bowie's fans are traveling "to a place made sacred by the media" (Sumiala, 2013, 73). In her book *Media and Ritual: Death, Community and Everyday Life* Johanna Sumiala writes that sites of pilgrimage are "where community members can experience the existence of their community and its cohesive force;" noting that in religion, sites of pilgrimage are places of special importance and are sometimes considered holy sites. In journeying to these sacred locations, it is believed that "pilgrims can gain contact with the centre of faith, with God or Allah" – or Bowie – "but also with other pilgrims," or fans (2013, 73). Sumiala, referencing the celebrity studies of Rojek, argues that iconic celebrities similar to Bowie "should be perceived as having iconic abilities and, thus, the potential to satisfy spiritual needs and respond to personal notions of what we could call contemporary piety" (2013, 74). By holding a celebrity like Bowie in such regard, when fans make the journey to Brixton to mourn they are getting the same emotional and spiritual reward one might gain from a trip to Mecca. It brings them understanding and peace, and aids in constructing

their “imagined community¹⁰ via mediatized rituals” (2013, 75). When it comes to Bowie and his fans, they are following the path that many other fans have taken before by going on a ritualized mediated pilgrimage, and in doing so individually, they situate themselves within the David Bowie fan community.

In addition to the various and countless internet posts fans created to eulogize David Bowie, they also began to graffiti messages at points of interest related to him. The Jimmy C. mural in Brixton was one place where this happened in earnest, and in the following days, months, and year after Bowie’s death, the messages have only continued to multiply (*London Calling Blog*, 2016). It is interesting that tagging¹¹ places related to fandom is a practice dating back hundreds of years, at least, and that it is a ritual that fans have always felt compelled to do because it demonstrates a universal action and need to connect with a physical space. In *Understanding Fandom*, Duffett writes that William Shakespeare’s fans’ love and appreciation for his work only grew after his passing in 1616 and that he “became the centre of one of the most enduring cultural phenomena after his death” (Duffett, 2014, 5). Shakespeare’s birthplace was opened to the public in the mid-eighteenth century and has been attracting fans ever since; fans that “scratch their names on the window panes or scrawl them on the inner walls of the cottage” (2014, 5). The visitors’ engravings are not that different from the messages Bowie fans left behind on the wall of Morleys in Brixton. The graffitiing of a site appears to be yet another crucial way for fans to connect with a real location related to the object of their fandom and a way to claim, like Floriana T. on Facebook, “we were there.” In making this claim, fans are not only attaching their identity to David Bowie but to the collective memory and history of the

mourning of David Bowie, too. Fans get to tell the stories of being there, and point to their name on a wall as proof of their participation. Fans become part of the archive of this mourning event.

Beyond just writing one's name, fans in Brixton have left behind notes to David Bowie, written like fan mail. The notes are written directly on the wall or printed on paper and left behind. Some messages feature simple sentiments, or are lyrics from Bowie's most popular songs. They are often repeated in various tags from different people and are not always signed by the author. Seemingly, to some the importance of their graffiti lies not with attaching their own name and an original message to the archive and memory but instead with the simple act of participating. It may not matter who wrote these messages then, as Bowie's fans are numerous, it matters that the messages were written, full stop. Some examples of these graffitied notes are: "RIP Starman," "My Hero Forever and Ever," "You will Live Forever," and "Hot tramp, I love you so" (*BrixtonBuzz*, July 2016).¹²

Other messages scribbled on the Jimmy C. mural read as letters and personal eulogies for Bowie and, unlike the others, are often signed with the authors' name(s) and where they are from; thus, attaching their identity as a fan to the memory and history of Bowie. Examples of these include: "This is not working for me, I still cannot believe you're not here and I doubt I ever will..." (*BrixtonBuzz*, May 2017), "My, the stars shine bright as you have now joined them. Trish & Karen," "...You told me I was not alone and you brought me back to life. Eternal love and gratitude, Freak Daddy from Boston, MA, USA," (*BrixtonBuzz*, July 2016) and "Dear Mister Bowie, we hope you are feeling fine and wish

you the best of trips across the universe. You are missed beyond words, this planet sucks without you... from Earth with love" (*BrixtonBuzz*, Nov 2017).

Not only are fans writing to David Bowie, but they are also writing to each other with these letters and they are further expanding the memory of David Bowie and the memory of Bowie-in-Brixton. The people of the town, tourists, and other Bowie fans stop to read the messages and see what items people have left behind, like flowers, notebooks, balloons, photos, guitars, etc. A local blog, *Brixton Buzz*, frequently documents the mural and what is there in photographs. Based on just a small number of photos featured on *Brixton Buzz*, the graffiti tells us that fans traveled from all over the world to visit the mural and pay tribute; from Israel, Italy, Scotland, the United States, Australia, and more. Posting the mural and tributes online allows fans at home to travel-without-moving to Brixton, which is also known as a symbolic pilgrimage. By reading the messages and seeing the alleyway, fans can imagine they are there mourning with all these other people they have never, and will never, meet but share something deeply with. In this way, not only are fans making a mediated pilgrimage to a place they may not ever get the chance to visit but they are also situating themselves as part of the imagined community surrounding David Bowie. As noted previously, before visiting the mural myself in June 2016 I had traveled-without-moving to Brixton in this same manner, and after doing so, it only made my desire to see the mural in person grow. I had engaged with the imagined community virtually but wanted to touch the physical space that united Bowie's fans. Participating in mourning rituals by visiting the mural in person, leaving behind something, signing the wall, or checking out the messages online on pages like

Brixton Buzz maintains a fans' identity as a David Bowie fan and unites them with the larger Bowie community.

A year and a half after Bowie's death, the posthumous engagement does not appear to be slowing down in Brixton. BBC News reported that The Lambeth Council was debating listing the Jimmy C. mural as part of an official memorial to David Bowie, or possibly erecting a statue in his honor near it (*BBC*, 2016). In the meantime, they had Jimmy C. update the mural with fresh paint in June and July 2016 (*BrixtonBuzz*, July 2016) and installed a sheet of Plexiglas over it to protect it from the elements, and from people who would have defaced the mural by writing directly over Bowie's face. The council appears committed to nurturing the memory of Bowie-in-Brixton by protecting the mural, which allows it to become a cultural site and destination for fans to travel to, even if the council never erects an official memorial. Brixton, in general, is no longer just a place to think about David Bowie's life and career, the location of his childhood home, or where this specific mural resides. In protecting these sites, Brixton also becomes a place to think about David Bowie's *fans*, and how he affected countless people around the world. The impact of Bowie's life is visible to all who pass by the mural. The council allows Brixton, and the mural especially, to become a secularized holy site worth paying respects to. The Lambeth Council reinforces the mural and Brixton as sacred locations where one can connect with both Bowie and other pilgrims/fans (Sumiala, 2013, 73).

The Lambeth Council preserves the messages on the wall and collects the papers and items left behind at the mural to be kept in the council archives (*BBC*, 2016), further protecting not only the memory of David Bowie but the collective memory that fans have

created and contributed to through their mourning. *Brixton Buzz* wrote in a November 2017 blog post that the council appears to be clearing away items that can't be archived, like flowers, on an almost daily basis but this has not stopped fans from leaving them at the mural (*BrixtonBuzz*, Nov 2017). Before doing so, the items left behind would slowly clutter up the alleyway the mural resides in. One could assume this is a way for the council to maintain some control of the area and make it safe for the amount of foot traffic it receives. However, it does not matter that the items left behind are cleared away daily – to fans, it does not seem to matter if they are preserved or not – what matters is the act of leaving something, a piece of themselves, behind in memory and respect of David Bowie. Participating in the mourning rituals are what is important to fans because that participation is what attaches their identity to the site and the memory of Bowie, and to other fans.

All these rituals demonstrate the legacy of David Bowie, and how people have and will remember him as the days continue to pass. Celebrities and average people still perform tributes to him at concerts or other large gatherings, he is still written about on social media, and people continue to purchase his albums and stream his music. Bowie's career was vast, it influenced many in the decades since his first break-out hit, and through constantly reinventing himself and his music he became an icon¹³ of authenticity and originality in life and music. Bowie is dead, but he will continue to live as long as fans play his songs, reflect upon his life, and share both with other people. Through ritualized behavior those who loved him will keep his memory alive within themselves, and indeed alive in the world, and this is how David Bowie truly becomes immortal.

While he was alive, many fans believed he was an alien, or the “Starman” himself.¹⁴ After all, David Bowie sang so much of space, and surrounded himself with myth in his various self-reinventions. Some fans have clung to this myth even more so in his death, insisting that Bowie did not die, he just went home – back to outer space. Perhaps Bowie was never an alien, but the character of Major Tom from “Space Oddity,” one of his most popular songs.¹⁵ If one accepts that idea, then while fans are here on Earth in the role of “ground control,” and Bowie is floating in his tin can “far above the moon,” there is nothing they can do but repeatedly reenact these rituals, further immortalizing and mythicizing him in the process. The entertainment industry, fellow celebrities, friends, and families will never let Bowie die. Fans will continue to sing his songs and attempt to connect with him and each other for years to come. Everything they do is a way of reaching out into the void of space asking David Bowie, “Can you hear me, Major Tom?”

End Notes

1. (@valderie) 1:39 PM EST, 11 Jan 2016
2. *Aladdin Sane* was an album released by Bowie in 1973 (Bickerdike, 2015, 51), and features his most iconic album artwork: a portrait of Bowie, with a pink and blue lightning bolt across his face.
3. (@NASA) 11 Jan 2016, 11:32 AM EST; (@Space_Station) 11 Jan 2016, 6:42 PM EST; (@CardRavasi) 11 Jan 2016, 3:35 AM EST
4. (@maddydeliqette) 11 Jan. 2016, 4:21 AM EST
5. From the Facebook Event, “BOWIE TRIBUTE BRIXTON STREET PARTY”
6. Morleys is a department store chain in the United Kingdom.
7. *Merriam-Webster* defines “catharsis” as “a purification of purgation that brings about spiritual renewal or release from tension.”
8. The video clip was posted directly to the Facebook event page for the Street Party.
9. Based on a questionnaire conducted through *Google Forms* of 188 self-identified David Bowie fans in the autumn of 2017, entitled “Mourning Bowie Questions.”
10. All fan communities are “imagined communities,” which is a community that is not, and cannot be, based on face to face interactions of its’ members, for more see Duffett (2013).
11. “Tag” is another word for “graffiti.”
12. “Starman” is reference to the song of the same name; “Hot tramp...” is from the song “Rebel Rebel.”
13. Mark Duffett defines “icons” as “stars who have acquired their own myths and mythologies” (2013, 213).
14. “Starman” is a single from the 1972 album *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* (Genius Music Group Inc., 2017)
15. “Space Oddity” is a single from the 1969 album *David Bowie/Space Oddity* (Genius Music Group Inc., 2017).

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A personal photo of the Jimmy C. mural in Brixton, London. Taken May 2017

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