

## TUNE INTO ENGLISH

David Bowie's  
Life on Mars?

LOWER INTERMEDIATE B1

ON CD 5

## GLOSSARY

- 1 **to send away:** cacciare
- 2 **loudly:** ad alta voce
- 3 **to argue:** litigare
- 4 **on her own:** da sola
- 5 **chorus:** strofa
- 6 **to assault:** aggredire, attaccare
- 7 **line:** frase
- 8 **plea:** supplica
- 9 **beyond:** oltre
- 10 **cash cow:** gallina dalle uova d'oro (*lett. mucca da contanti*)
- 11 **to pun:** fare un gioco di parole
- 12 **to diss:** parlare male
- 13 **to claim:** affermare
- 14 **sensitive:** sensibile
- 15 **bitterly:** aspramente
- 16 **chords:** accordi
- 17 **instead:** invece
- 18 **god-awful:** orribile
- 19 **mousy:** castano chiaro
- 20 **to yell:** gridare
- 21 **sunken:** affondato
- 22 **saddening bore:** noia deprimente
- 23 **to spit:** sputare
- 24 **fools:** stupidi
- 25 **to focus on:** concentrarsi
- 26 **sailors:** marinai
- 27 **lawman:** poliziotto
- 28 **to strike:** scioperare
- 29 **on sale:** in vendita
- 30 **out of bounds:** fuori luogo
- 31 **clowns:** pagliacci
- 32 **brow:** sopracciglio
- 33 **forehead:** fronte
- 34 **mice:** topi (sing.: mouse)

In questa canzone lenta che appartiene alla fase Ziggy Stardust di Bowie si fondono elementi del glam rock a un testo ricco di simbolismo e analisi sociale, oltre a presentare una discussione esistenziale sul potere dell'arte per evadere dalla realtà.

Perhaps the most emblematic of David Bowie's songs, 1973's *Life On Mars?* is about a girl who has already become disillusioned with life. Sent away<sup>1</sup> by her father as her parents loudly<sup>2</sup> argue<sup>3</sup>, she goes to the cinema on her own<sup>4</sup>. She is, however, irritated when the film does not provide the escapism she is looking for. In the chorus<sup>5</sup> Bowie describes violent scenes on the screen, from a fight at a dance to a policeman assaulting<sup>6</sup> an innocent man. This, ironically, is just what the girl is trying to get away from. The final line<sup>7</sup> is a plea<sup>8</sup> for something beyond<sup>9</sup> what the girl is familiar with.

In the second verse Bowie criticises how society has evolved. Mickey Mouse is now a cow, sacred and untouchable, or a cash cow<sup>10</sup>, a commercial entity. He puns<sup>11</sup> on the names Lennon and Lenin, indicating communism has also become commercialised, and disses<sup>12</sup> tourism, where millions escape to the same place. He also claims<sup>13</sup> patriotic Britain is inaccessible to the working classes.

Lyricaly the song is mostly in the present simple, with some present continuous and present perfect. Discussing the song, Bowie said it is "a sensitive<sup>14</sup> young girl being told that there's a far greater life somewhere, and she's bitterly<sup>15</sup> disappointed that she doesn't have access to it." The chords<sup>16</sup> used are those of French song *Comme d'Habitude* by Claude François; in 1968 Bowie was asked to write English lyrics for it, which were rejected. Instead<sup>17</sup>, Paul Anka adapted it and wrote *My Way*, a song made famous by Frank Sinatra. ☺



David Bowie performs on the Dutch TV show *TopPop* in 1974.

**Her friend is nowhere to be seen:** this implies she often spends time alone.

**hooked to the silver screen:** to be very interested in something; the correct usage is 'hooked on'. -the screens in early cinemas were painted with reflective metallic paint, and the silver screen became a synonym of the film industry.

**for:** this is often used poetically to mean 'because'.

**Look at those cavemen go:** cavemen are primitive. Bowie took this line from the 1957 song *Alley Oop* by The Hollywood Argyles.

**to beat up:** a phrasal verb meaning 'to assault'.

**wonder if he'll ever know:** the subject 'I' is not used with 'wonder' here, as it is implied. This is very informal and the subject is often omitted from verbs in songs.

It's a god-awful<sup>18</sup> small affair  
To the girl with the mousy<sup>19</sup> hair  
But her mummy is yelling<sup>20</sup>, "No"  
And her daddy has told her to go  
But her friend is nowhere to be seen  
Now she walks through her sunken<sup>21</sup> dream  
To the seat with the clearest view  
And she's hooked to the silver screen

But the film is a saddening bore<sup>22</sup>  
For she's lived it ten times or more  
She could spit<sup>23</sup> in the eyes of fools<sup>24</sup>  
As they ask her to focus on<sup>25</sup>

Sailors<sup>26</sup> fighting in the dance hall  
Oh man, look at those cavemen go  
It's the freakiest show  
Take a look at the lawman<sup>27</sup>  
Beating up the wrong guy  
Oh man, wonder if he'll ever know  
He's in the best-selling show  
Is there life on Mars?

It's on America's tortured brow  
That Mickey Mouse has grown up a cow  
Now the workers have struck<sup>28</sup> for fame  
'Cause Lennon's on sale<sup>29</sup> again  
See the mice in their million hordes  
From Ibiza to the Norfolk Broads  
Rule Britannia is out of bounds<sup>30</sup>  
To my mother, my dog and clowns<sup>31</sup>

But the film is a saddening bore  
'Cause I wrote it ten times or more  
It's about to be writ again  
As I ask you to focus on

Sailors fighting in the dance hall  
Oh man, look at those cavemen go  
It's the freakiest show  
Take a look at the lawman  
Beating up the wrong guy  
Oh man, wonder if he'll ever know  
He's in the best-selling show  
Is there life on Mars?

**tortured brow:** a brow<sup>32</sup> is a forehead<sup>33</sup>. America is suffering because of commercialism.

**mice**<sup>34</sup>: this refers to tourists. An old proverb "a man or a mouse" refers to being courageous or cowardly.

**Norfolk Broads:** a group of rivers in the south-east of England, popular with holidaying working-class Londoners.

**Rule Britannia:** an 18th Century patriotic chant.

**writ:** an incorrect abbreviation of 'written'.

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Scan this QR code with your smartphone or tablet and listen to the official song on YouTube while reading the lyrics.

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