

Two pillars of music have fallen with the deaths of Lemmy and Bowie

In two weeks, two legendary British musicians have expired. They were of a similar vintage, and they were pioneering artists - going where no-one before had thought to tread.

I speak of Lemmy Kilmister, gravel-voiced singer and frenetic bassist of Motörhead, and David Bowie.

Bowie had been ill with cancer for eighteen months, managing to conceal it from the public during that time. Lemmy was diagnosed with an "extremely aggressive" form of cancer - which appeared to kill him swiftly. Although, for how long he was sick I do not know. Like Bowie, he carried on working till the end.

Bowie, of course, was the master of reinvention. His was a dazzlingly creative mind. He was like a time traveler, keeping pace with the present, defining culture and art as he did so.

Lemmy's story is more one of evolution. A look at pictures of him from the early seventies - when he played with Hawkwind - reveals a long-haired bloke with a bit of a beard, visually similar to other long-haired blokes. As the years went by, the final visual incarnation assembled itself: the mutton chops became a permanent fixture, as did the black shirts, the jacket, the hat, and the iron cross.

Ah, the Nazi memorabilia. In Lemmy's words:

"From the beginning of time, the bad guys always had the best uniforms. Napoleon, the Confederates, the Nazis. They all had killer uniforms. I mean, the SS uniform is fucking brilliant! They were the rock stars of that time. What you gonna do? They just look good."

Both Bowie and Lemmy held true to the maxim: "artists don't retire". Motörhead's last album was released in the summer of 2015, and their last gig was played in Berlin in December - just a little over two weeks before he died. Bowie released his twenty-fifth and final studio album on January 8th - his birthday, and just two days before his death.

I haven't yet listened to Bowie's album, but I have seen the music video for "Lazarus", the second single. It's a haunting self-penned epitaph to Bowie's life. We see him in a hospital bed in an austere little room, wearing a bandage over his eyes. The bandage has two buttons attached to it, one over each eye. There are little dark crosses within the buttons - like the cartoon eyes of a character drawn in death.

Bowie has managed to capture so much of his life in this song. Mixed with the enormity of facing up to his own mortality, there is a soaring sense of hope, of transcendence, embodied by the "bluebird", and the freedom it represents. There is recognition here of the limits inherent to the life of one human being, but there is also a profound sense of reluctance to let go - illustrated by his awkward and protracted shuffle into the wardrobe at the end of the song. His expression never changes, and his eyes remain fixed on the camera lens, even from the darkening recess within, as the door slowly closes.

Motörhead's final song, from their twenty-third - and final - studio album, is a cover of Sympathy for the Devil by the Rolling Stones. While Lemmy would have expected to record more songs with his band, his voice reveals signs of age, exacerbated by fifty years of shouting

into a microphone, and other oesophageal abuses. He must have known the wagon couldn't keep rolling forever.

There is an almost bottomless depth of emotion in Lemmy's voice. It is like the output of an ancient machine that has been running since forever, that has almost shaken itself to pieces through constant use, that has far exceeded its design limits, but that still carries on - because this is what the machine was built to do. Music was as important to Lemmy as it was to Bowie - take it away, and the reason for existence is gone.

Where the two of them diverged, of course, was in the kind of music they created: Bowie was emphatically not a rock n' roller. He said so himself, when pressed: "I am not a rock star." Lemmy emphatically was. He prefaced every gig with the immortal words, "We are Motörhead. And we play rock n' roll." He was a rock star through and through, just like Bowie was a man of pop to his very core. They were two singular pillars of British music, representing wildly diverse approaches, who inspired devotion and fierce loyalty in their fans, who have influenced countless musicians, and who will continue to do so long into the future. Their final recordings hit a sublime note, which sound to me like their lifetimes' work completed.

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