

Wild-eyed boy from Bromley

Bromley Council and local people are commemorating the life of David Bowie, their former resident, who massively influenced contemporary culture. James Wood reports



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FANS ALL AROUND THE WORLD MOURNED the loss of one of popular culture's most prominent figures, David Bowie, when he died in January 2016. Since then, many have been poring over the influential life of one of the best-loved recording artists of the last 50 years. True fanatics are looking back to the singer's Bromley roots to trace his inspirational story.

This south London borough is proud of its most famous former resident and in recognition of his legacy, the council is promoting the restoration of a bandstand in Beckenham where the singer performed in the late 1960s – a concert widely remembered and admired.

Bromley was a big part of Bowie's early life and career. He attended its Technical High School for boys (now Ravens Wood School) as a teenager, where

01 Bowie performed at the Croydon Road Recreation Ground in Beckenham during the summer of 1969.
02 He was a struggling musician before finding international fame with the *Space Oddity* single.

“Bowie said: ‘There’s a lot of talent in the green belt. I never knew there were so many sitar players in Beckenham’”

he would achieve an O-level in art in 1963. Earlier, he had developed the eye condition anisocoria, allegedly after being hit in the face by school friend George Underwood. One of Bowie's pupils was left permanently dilated, giving him the impression of having different coloured eyes. What was not known then was that this teenage scuffle would later form such a key part of the Ziggy Stardust mystique.

Family ties were important to Bowie too and he enjoyed a particularly close relationship with his half-brother, Terry, who suffered from mental illness for many years and tragically took his own life in 1983. The fragility of the human mind and body is a theme to which Bowie would return right up until the end of his musical career and his brother's battle with

psychosis is said to have had a profound impact on the demons Bowie himself would later encounter, influencing his music and art.

Returning to Beckenham in 1969 after a brief spell in central London, the 22-year-old Bowie moved in with his then girlfriend, freelance journalist, Mary Finnigan, who worked for *The Sunday Times* and underground newspaper, *IT*.

In the very early days of the singer's career – the mid 60s – gigs would largely be confined to haunts in Bromley, with the singer performing at the Assembly Hall in West Wickham and the Hillsiders Youth Club in Biggin Hill. With his career beginning to take off – his first big hit, *Space Oddity*, would be released later in 1969 – Bowie set up a Sunday evening folk

club at The Three Tuns pub in Beckenham with Finnigan and friends, Christina Ostrom and Barry Jackson, which later became the Arts Lab.

During this time, he wrote to the late DJ John Peel, who was a champion of his early work, asking him to fund the project to support grassroots acts. As well as weekly performances from Bowie, the Arts Lab also featured (then) folk heroes Steve Harley, The Strawbs, and Keith Christmas.



01 Bowie lived on the ground floor of the now-demolished Haddon Hall in Beckenham in the early 70s. 02 Beckenham Place Park was the location for Bowie and his friends to rehearse street theatre performances.



Speaking to weekly music magazine *Melody Maker* at the time, Bowie said: “There’s a lot of talent in the green belt and there’s a lot of tripe in Drury Lane [the location of the first Arts Lab]...and I never knew there were so many sitar players in Beckenham.”

Regarded as a launchpad for Bowie’s success, the Arts Lab would continue until 1973, featuring poetry nights, light shows, street theatre, mime and dance. Finnigan later wrote a book about the period, called *Psychedelic Suburbia*.

In memory of these events, Finnigan and Ostrom unveiled a plaque at the pub in 2001, by then renamed as The Rat and Parrot. The venue later became a Zizzi restaurant, at which time the plaque was removed, but it was quickly restored to its original place following appeals from fans and residents. In 2016, after Bowie’s death, fans came to lay flowers as a tribute to those early years.

Back in the summer of 1969, a festival called Growth – hosting those

who had played at the Arts Lab – took place at the Croydon Road Recreation Ground, three days after the death of Bowie’s father, Haywood Jones. Despite grieving, Bowie performed at the park’s bandstand on the day, along with his long-time producer, Tony Visconti.

This is the bandstand that Bromley Council is seeking to restore. A 2014 project in partnership with Friends of Croydon Road Recreation Ground asked residents to support the project by purchasing a special legacy brick for installation, which they could inscribe with a tribute message.

Now, according to the council, restoration efforts have “been redoubled”. A council spokesperson says: “The Bowie

bandstand, once restored, is planned to not only become a permanent and fitting tribute to a superstar musician admired and missed by millions, but hopefully a site where future legends might also one day cut their teeth.”

Bricks can once again be purchased – for £100 – with those buying them encouraged to write personal messages, to Bowie or “to a loved one, to celebrate a special occasion, or promote a business”.

The council is also implementing a pavement feature consisting of a lightning bolt outside Zizzi to reflect Bowie’s connection with the venue.

Bromley is an important part of the Bowie story and one that everyone in the area clearly wishes to preserve.

“The Bowie bandstand will be a fitting tribute to a superstar musician”