

# LIFE ON MARS?

## DAVID BOWIE

APPEARS IN  
ROCK & POP  
2018

⚡ Released: 1971   ⚡ Album: *Hunky Dory*   ⚡ Label: RCA Records

### ABOUT THE SONG

'Life on Mars?' was first released on David Bowie's fourth studio album *Hunky Dory* in 1971. It was released as a single in 1973, reaching No. 3 in the UK Singles Chart. Written by Bowie at the piano in a few hours, the song features strange lyrics, described by BBC Radio 2 as 'a cross between a Broadway musical and a Salvador Dalí painting'.

In a 2012 Digital Spy poll, 'Life on Mars?' was voted Bowie's best song. The Daily Telegraph ranked it as number one in a 100 Greatest Songs of All Time list in 2015, and Pitchfork named it the best song of the 1970s in 2016. The track has appeared on numerous film and TV soundtracks and has been covered by a wide range of artists. Lorde performed the song as a tribute to Bowie at The Brit Awards in 2016.

### RECORDING AND PRODUCTION

A few weeks after writing 'Life On Mars?' at the piano, Bowie worked with Rick Wakeman and Mick Ronson to produce the 1971 album version. Wakeman embellished Bowie's chords and Ronson added the distinctive string arrangement, similar in style to that of 'Bridge Over Troubled Water', which had recently been released by Simon and Garfunkel. An accidental burst of piano and ringing phone was left in and can be heard at the end.

### COMPOSITION

In 1968 Claude Francois and Jacques Revaux wrote a stirring ballad 'Comme d'habitude' over a series of descending chords. Bowie wrote some English lyrics for the song and intended to release it. However, Paul Anka bought the rights and created his own version, which became the Frank Sinatra hit 'My Way'. No longer able to use his version, Bowie wrote 'Life On Mars?' as an attempt to achieve the same musical impact. With the verses in A minor and the chorus in A major, the complex chord sequence derives its strength from the movement of the bass, which rises in the pre-chorus and then descends in the chorus. The melodic climax of the song comes with the top A on 'Mars' at the end of each chorus.

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

'I STARTED WORKING IT OUT AT THE  
PIANO AND HAD THE WHOLE THING  
FINISHED BY LATE AFTERNOON.'

DAVID BOWIE



## THE VIDEO

A promotional video for 'Life on Mars?' was filmed and directed by British photographer Mick Rock, known for his iconic shots of music legends such as Lou Reed, Joan Jett and Blondie. It was shot backstage at Earl's Court in London in May 1973 to accompany the release of the song as a single. In the video, a heavily made-up Bowie performs the song against a white backdrop in a turquoise suit.

Bowie transferred the video rights to Mick Rock in the 1990s, and Rock re-edited his footage for an update to accompany Parlophone's *Bowie Legacy*, a greatest hits album released in November 2016.



## THE ALBUM

*Hunky Dory* was released in December 1971 by RCA Records and is regarded as one of Bowie's best works. It was the first production to feature all members of the band that would make up Spiders From Mars, the backing band to Bowie's alter ego Ziggy Stardust. The first single released from the album was 'Changes', which is one of Bowie's best-known songs, and was the last song he performed live on stage before retiring from live shows at the end of 2006.

**'A KALEIDOSCOPIC ARRAY OF POP STYLES, TIED TOGETHER ONLY BY BOWIE'S SENSE OF VISION...'**  
STEPHEN THOMAS ERLEWINE,  
ALLMUSIC

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

David Bowie (1947-2016) was born David Jones in south London, but changed his name in 1966 because the lead singer of TV pop group The Monkees was called Davy Jones. He chose the name Bowie after the Bowie knife, which was itself named after the American pioneer and folk hero James Bowie.

His first major hit was 'Space Oddity' in 1969. Bowie frequently changed his public persona and musical style. In 1972 he embraced glam rock with his Ziggy Stardust character, then moved on to 'plastic soul' in 1975 and to electronica in 1977, working on his *Low* album with Brian Eno. His commercial peak came in 1983 with the uptempo single 'Let's Dance'.

Bowie was also an actor, featuring in films such as 'Merry Christmas Mr Lawrence' (1983), 'Labyrinth' (1986) and 'The Last Temptation of Christ' (1988).

Bowie was a major figure in pop music for over five decades and is acclaimed by critics, musicians and fans for his innovative musical works. He died on 10 January 2016, two days after the release of his final album *Blackstar*.

**'I DON'T KNOW WHERE I'M GOING FROM HERE, BUT I PROMISE IT WON'T BE BORING.'**  
DAVID BOWIE

## MORE TO EXPLORE

**Songs:** 'Bridge Over Troubled Water', Simon & Garfunkel (1970), 'Changes', David Bowie (1971), 'Space Oddity', David Bowie (1969), 'Let's Dance', David Bowie (1983). **Albums:** *Blackstar*, David Bowie (2016), *Bowie Legacy*, David Bowie (2016), *Hunky Dory*, David Bowie (1971), *Low*, David Bowie (1977). **Artists & collaborators:** Blondie, Joan Jett, Lou Reed, Lorde, Mick Rock, Mick Ronson, Rick Wakeman, Simon & Garfunkel. **Trinity Rock & Pop syllabus:** Vocals, Grade 7 (Male).

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