

# ALADDIN SANE

By

Robert Rosen

The Thin White Duke watches from the wings of the stage as six notes, like birds of prey, circle ever more tightly round B minor, the harmonic root. A wave of blond hair falls over his unsettlingly dilated right eye as he remembers his seventh birthday. David Robert Jones, defiant brawler with the grit of coal dust in his mouth slid in socks across the polished wood floor. He and his sister Kristina were elves twirling to the beat of “Hound Dog,” for it was Elvis the King’s birthday as well. His father came through the door, arms full of 45s, the Teenagers, the Platters, Fats Domino. David dropped the needle on Little Richard’s “Tutti Frutti” and, for the first time, heard the voice of God.

Now the Duke, in a sharp tailored suit and loafers, no socks, left hand wrapped in a bandage, walks to center stage. Liver cancer’s consuming him, but he’s going down swinging as he raises a pale right hand above his head, snaps his fingers, and smiles. It’s showtime. He looks down at the six notes, reaches deep into the pocket of his high waisted pants, and produces a playmate, a chord arpeggio. It rolls about in his palm, alive with repeating roots, thirds, and fifths. He sends it tumbling across the floor that’s lit with a staff and a treble clef. The arpeggio stands and sways hypnotically across the five white lines, releasing sounds of hothouse orientalism as it wanders, a step and a half up to C, a step down to B, then hops percussively, six staccato chords, bringing the music to a full flirtatious stop. The Duke smiles with encouragement and tosses a red rubber ball across the stage. The creature gives chase across the C and B positions of the staff.

The Duke feels the unseen thousands and millions and billions of an audience out there in the darkness. Then a spotlight illuminates one last performance prop—an ancient kinoscope. He leans over, pressing his eyes to its grinning peephole, turns the crank, and hums. The first few sepia-colored cards flip by. White letters in an old-timey kernered font against the scratchy black background of the peephole are simultaneously projected on three 100-foot-tall screens behind him. They read *The Feast of St. Vitus, a nation celebrating the birth of its Serbian identity 600 years ago when the Ottoman Sultan Murad I was assassinated by a Serbian knight.*

The Duke has transformed himself. He’s Ziggy Stardust, psychotic rock and roller who believes himself an alien God. He’s stolen words from Evelyn Waugh’s

*Vile Bodies*, and now whispers them as, dangerously untethered, he turns the crank more quickly. There's something about a young man, an old bouquet of dead roses, saké, strange divine passionate young things all sliding away to war on sad glissando strings.

An iris eye opens upon the projected screen. Archduke Franz Ferdinand moves jerkily across the cobblestone plaza to take his proper place in the back seat of his brand new black Gräf & Stift convertible motorcar. Ferdinand was warned not to come, but the cockades and feathers atop his hat beckoned, swinging so regally in the wind as the motorcade dashes away along the ribbon of newly paved roadway to the opening of the Sarajevo city museum. Gavrilo Princip, Serbian nationalist, stands in line for a sandwich at Schiller's Delicatessen near the Latin Bridge. As the procession passes, the archduke's luxury touring car makes a wrong turn. The driver applies the brakes, the engine stalls. The song, with its drunken feelings of anarchy and divine passion sweep over Gavrilo, lifting him in one continuous motion across the street and onto the touring car's running board. For a moment he hangs frozen in space, arm forward and outstretched, hand tightly grasping a .38 caliber pistol pointed at the archduke, a solid man with a sad square face that falls comically across a large handlebar mustache.

Ziggy's voice echoes the mesmerizing gyrations. Something about a fellow called Aladdin Sane, about millions weeping at a fountain at sunrise. The kinetoscope sways rhythmically on its heavy cast-iron base as the photos flip by. The trigger is squeezed, the pistol jumps back, the bullet pierces the archduke's high-starched collar, severs his jugular vein, and splatters blood across his shiny brass buttons. The piano thunders out octaves in the low register, pairs of notes eight steps apart. The archduke holds up his head with the regal bearing of the heir to the Hapsburg throne of Austro-Hungary and Spain and bleeds to death beneath his medal-covered uniform. Chords, firsts, thirds, and fifths gather to mourn the archduke's passing, then pounce, Gm-F-Gm-F-Gm-F, assassinating the one hundred years of peace forged from the ruins of the French Revolution and the wrecked ambitions of the little French corporal Napoleon. Peace dies along with Archduke Franz Ferdinand and twenty million other souls.

There was the ukulele and tea-chest bass. Skiffle sessions with his friends where David Robert Jones, who did not wish to be confused with The Monkees' Davey Jones, played the piano. Stage impersonations of The King and Chuck Berry complete with gyrations described as "mesmerizing...like someone from another planet". His father's dreams of his son the entertainer. A trip to the Royal Variety Performance where David shook hands with Alma Cogan and Tommy Steele.

The screens darken for a moment, then white letters in 100pt Futura Font appear. *MOVIETONE NEWS: President Paul Ludwig von Hindenburg dies; Adolph Hitler declares himself Fuhrer, Chancellor of the German Reich.*

The Duke's voice becomes strident, then shrill, then a mad screech as the playful and charming Ziggy Stardust is replaced by the more disturbing David Bowie in the dark of the high registers. He sings of battle cries, champagne at sunrise, flying towards the hell that is now Paris in a motor car, of Aladdin Sane and clutches of sad remains.

Adolph Hitler, the uncertain corporal with piercing eyes, a thin dark comb over, and a toothbrush mustache looks up to the heavens on the screen and screams "Sieg Heil," Hail Victory, to the surging crowds and the Jewish conspiracy and the November criminals who capitulated at Versailles. He raises his hand in an awkward stiff-armed salute that sends the crowd into roaring ecstasy. "Sieg Heil!" He does it again, and a third time, each time with more assurance.

This little corporal remembers huddling in Hindenburg's trenches as he fought for the German new world, eyes squeezed shut against the fog of poison gas. Now, tired of inflation and reparations and rudderless democracy, an entire nation embraces the banality of evil to show its love for the man who unleashes his soldiers on a Halloween howl of a pogrom, Kristallnacht, Night of Broken Glass. He sends sensational motorized mayhem through Poland and Belgium and France to der Krieg, the Second World War, while he waits outside a railroad car at Compiègne, once the scene of Hindenburg's humiliating surrender. When he receives news that his armies march through the Arc de Triomphe fifty miles beyond in Paris he dances a jig, raises a glass in a champagne toast as the sun rises over a world where 50 million souls will soon perish.

*CBS EVENING NEWS: White House Counsel John Dean Cooperates with Federal Watergate Prosecutors, Telling Them of the Existence of the Watergate Tapes.* The kinoscope shudders and rocks as the photos blur, for time and music have become foreshortened. David Bowie asks, "Who'll love Aladdin Sane?" Over and over.

Up on the screen, a diminutive young man in a neat tan suit stands before the dais and raises his right hand. He's been a liar his whole life, but now he swears to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, and for the first time in his life, John Dean does. In that same moment a skinny boy with long stringy hair which falls across a dark dashiki shirt stacks copies of the soon to be smash hit record album *Aladdin Sane* on the display racks of a Middle Earth record store as he's engulfed in the sweet smell of burning hashish. On the stark white cover, a lightning bolt streaks across David Bowie's face, imposingly air brushed into androgyny. There's a form stuffed into the sleeve like dirty underwear requesting

name, address, “favorite film and TV stars,” etc., plus \$3.50 for membership in the David Bowie Fan Club, materials by return mail unspecified. The audience from the darkness roars the response, “We love Aladdin Sane, love Aladdin Sane.”

The album and its title song “Aladdin Sane 1913-1938-197?” are a play on words, a lad, insane. A homage to his maternal half-brother Terry Burns, plagued by schizophrenia and seizures, living alternately at home and in psychiatric wards. Ten years older, Terry brings Mingus and Coltrane, Buddha and Burroughs, Rasputin, and Nostradamus to his younger sibling. There are others in the family with schizophrenia spectrum disorders. An institutionalized aunt. A lobotomized relative.

Terry Burns stops taking his medication and is checked into Cane Hill psychiatric hospital as David Bowie, on the road and touring, watches Richard Nixon stand under the rabbit ears of the hotel television, arms spread across the viewing tube like Jesus on the cross. The padded shoulders of his rumpled blue suit jacket gather about his neck as his two fingers spread apart on each hand, V for victory or peace or something. As Nixon steps aboard the presidential helicopter for the last time, Terry Burns walks out of the hospital, crosses the road to Coulsdon South railway station, jumps down from the platform and lays his head upon the tracks. David Bowie leaves him a remembrance, “You’ve seen more things than we can imagine, but all these moments will be lost, like tears washed away by the rain.” It’s a quote from a Burroughs short story, “Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?” A story of human-created creatures on a quest to gain the one thing they are forbidden, a human life.

A piano solo erupts. A terrifying reflection in a funhouse mirror. A Jackson Pollock splatter that’s all at once jagged, dissonant, daring, wistful, and backward-looking. It’s Black April, Operation Frequent Wind. A CIA officer, the last witness to the end of the Vietnam chaos has one foot on the helicopter skid, the other on a concrete water tank. He reaches back and grabs the next in a long line of panicked Saigon evacuees as General Văn Tiến Dũng rides into Saigon and renames it Hồ Chí Minh City.

The backing soundtrack isn’t blues or rock and roll, or jazz, but Avant Garde musical suicide, random notes tumbling, dizzyingly, up and down the keyboard. The impatient chug of the electric guitar gently clashes with the wilder, more extreme flailings of a culture dying on the piano. Photos of Ives and Stravinsky float by as history tumbles along with the song.

A spring-loaded spray-painted whiteboard sign, “NO GAS TODAY,” is flattened, then enveloped in the rolling Rust Belt wave of dust forced from under three fifteen-story-tall blast furnaces that once produced the iconic stuff of Pan Am

707 jets, finned Cadillac El Dorados, the UN Headquarters, as it's dynamited off at the knees.

A recognizable melodic phrase bursts from the musical anarchy when a concrete slab section of the Berlin Wall tumbles to the ground. Gordon Gecko's giant red Rolling Stone smiling lips silently mouth "pleased to meet you," as thousands of battle tanks race across desert sands to Baghdad. The Enron "E" at first frozen in an off-centered tilt, now collapses on and pops the Internet Bubble, ejecting rusted detritus that punctures the Housing Bubble, which deflates with a giant whoosh.

The music begins to fade as the images on the screen and in the peephole morph to black and white and become jerky once again. The forward flow of time now ebbs, turns, and flows backwards as circus wagons pulled by trains of draught horses, heads sagging, disappear down a rutted road. Carnival freaks wave from the back of the wagons, eyes closed, mouths wide open in toothless black smiles. The music subsides in a pattern of low register bass notes that cycle to a regular rhythm, *thunk-thunka-thunk-thunka, thunk-thunka-thunk-thunka*, as a new song, "On Broadway," oozes out of a saxophone in some twisted minor key.

The kinetoscope peephole goes black, and the stage and the 100-foot screens are dark and silent. Now the rustle of unseen hands reach out and the kinetoscope whirs to life once again. Jacob Anthony Angeli Chansley, QAnon Shaman Yellowstone Wolf, sits at the top tier of the dais of the congressional chambers in Washington, D.C. His tattooed chest is thrust forward under a helmet adorned with bison horns. Wraps of buffalo fur drape down his head and body. His face is covered in red and white and blue paint. In his mind's eye, televisions and radios are emitting inaudible frequencies affecting our brain waves. Freemasons have designed Washington, D.C. according to ley lines that amplify the Earth's magnetic field. The QAnon Shaman howls into the cavernous, empty room. His words echo back, "Who'll love a lad insane?" The walls, the seats, the balcony, the dome come alive with light and sound as the mad chorus responds, each time louder, "We'll love Aladdin Sane! We'll love Aladdin Sane!" The foundations of the Capitol shake and crumble.

Notes in the lowest register strike like tolling bells. Triplets tinkle from the highest registers. Bowie raises his head from the peep hole for a moment. His undilated eye stares at you, a black star of collapsing dark energy. A tear shuffles sadly across his cheek. He doesn't want to die. We don't want our world to die with him.

Robert Rosen has spent the better part of a life as a technologist and mathematician with a front row seat to the technology revolutions of our time and the attendant social convulsions. Rob plays guitar, keyboards, and sings vocal harmonies with several local groups, and is a huge fan of David Bowie's music. Rob's also a member of the Historical Novel Society, The Burlington (VT) Writers Workshop, and has had essays and fiction published in the local newspaper, and a short story published in *Mobius Boulevard*.