

David Bowie loves posing riddles. Many of his lyrics contain clues to his colourful, intriguing past, but Bowie rarely gives any help in resolving them. The same applies to the video which accompanies his new single, *Where Are We Now?*

Bowie has provided the groundwork by setting the video in Berlin, where he lived during the mid-1970s and recorded one of his most memorable albums, *Heroes*. Beyond that he has stayed silent, leaving fans and critics to grope for the specific references the video contains. While they have made some valiant attempts, I believe, none have grasped the key points.

The video contains several shots of a drab apartment block, some showing the whole exterior, others the entrance. Later there are shots of an entrance hall and a stairway. One commentator speculated that anyone who had lived in a Berlin tenement block would recognise this kind of hallway, complete with a resident handyman ready to tell you off.



155 Hauptstrasse - Bowie's Berlin home for two years

In fact this was no generic apartment block. It is 155 Hauptstrasse in the Schöneberg district of Berlin, where Bowie lived in 1976 and 1977. Bowie occupied a spacious seven-room apartment on the first floor, with panelled doors, high decorated ceilings and windows that opened on to a balcony above the street. His son Zowie - then a teenager, now Duncan Jones - lived there for a time, as did Iggy Pop.

The apartment was found by Bowie's assistant, Corinne Schwab, after a period when Bowie stayed in the Hotel Gerhus on the edge of the Grunewald Forest. The flair of the decor reflected the period it was built, the late nineteenth century when Berlin became Germany's imperial capital.

Although Bowie appreciated the architecture, he was drawn to the area because at that time it was far from fashionable. The apartment overlooked the same busy roadway visible in the video and had similar shops on the street-front. Bowie explained that he liked its ordinary, anonymous air, which meant that he could go out shopping without being recognised.

The video also contains shots of the Berlin wall, which divided the city between 1961 and 1989, and glimpses of a gun tower. The wall had profound significance for Bowie as it provided the inspiration and imagery for one of his most renowned lyrics, "Heroes", one of the theme pieces at the London Olympics.

Bowie has related how he was inspired to write the song after seeing a pair of young lovers meeting every lunchtime beside the wall, close to a watchtower. He suggested that they chose this forbidding background out of a sense of guilt.

The section of the wall Bowie was referring lay at the end of the street containing the Hansa Studios, where Bowie and his producer Tony Visconti recorded the *Heroes* album. But the story of its inspiration was a familiar example of Bowie's poetic exaggeration.



Hansa Studio (right), Köthener Strasse - Berlin wall at end of street

The "lovers" in question were in fact Visconti himself and one of the session singers, Antonia Maass, who were having a brief affair in Berlin (Visconti was married to Mary Hopkin at the time.) Visconti and Maass went for a walk together by the wall one lunchtime, and were spotted kissing by Bowie from an upstairs window. Bowie later confirmed to Visconti that this was where his idea for the characters came from.

The Berlin wall features again in Bowie's lyric for *Where Are We Now?*, in the reference to *bose Brücke* (which in German should be *Bösebrücke*). This has been identified as one of the crossing points in the Berlin wall but I believe there is far more to the reference than that.

Die Brücke (the Bridge) was the name of the radical expressionist art movement that held enormous appeal for Bowie. Its movement originated in Dresden in the 1900s

with key figures such as Erich Heckel, Emil Nolde and Ernst Kirchner. Bowie was drawn to their themes of urban anxiety, sexual boldness and emotional violence, often overlain with an air of melancholy.

He made frequent visits to the Brücke museum in Berlin, taking friends and colleagues such as Brian Eno. He bought works by Heckel and Nolde and invoked a painting by Heckel when he designed the cover to Iggy Pop's album *The Idiot*, which Bowie helped to produce in Berlin.

It is highly likely that another Brücke work helped inspire the imagery of "Heroes". Called "Lovers Between Garden Walls", by Otto Mueller, it depicts two lovers clinging to each other against a backdrop of stone walls. This painting made a powerful impression on Bowie and its theme is reflected in "Heroes". And the nostalgia and melancholy that pervade much the movement's work are echoed in Bowie's new video.

The lyric to *Where Are We Now?* contains the line "Sitting in the Dschungle". The Dschungle is one of several clubs and discotheques where Bowie spent the night, often after a supper of bean soup and hoppy German beer. Bowie had his favourite seat at the Dschungle, on a balcony overlooking the bar, where he could survey new arrivals and work his knack of using eye-contact to invite women to join him on the balcony.

Other Bowie haunts included the Exxcess, Harlekin, and Tolstefanz, all with a similar ambience. Bowie also liked the Lützwower Lampe, a transvestite club where he and Schwab were photographed at the bar with the club owner and several patrons. Bowie sports a short hair-cut which was administered by Visconti, together with a moustache, both intended to make him less recognisable when out enjoying Berlin's night life.

In another line, Bowie sings of getting the train from the Potsdamer Platz. The Potsdamer Platz was divided by the Berlin wall until 1989 and the East German side contained a "ghost" station - so-called because the trains running on lines which passed through parts of East Berlin did not stop there.

Bowie himself used to ride on the Berlin underground during his early explorations of Berlin, usually in the company of Schwab and Pop. They enjoyed clattering through the ghost stations and also rode the S-Bahn, Berlin's overground train, journeying into the suburbs to see what lay at the end of the line. Pop celebrated these journeys in the track *The Passenger* on *The Idiot* album, with its line "So let's ride and ride."

Apart from these particular references, which I am convinced Bowie intended, the overall Berlin theme is of enormous significance in the Bowie biography. He first saw Berlin as a refuge, after the excesses of his time in the US, when he was living to excess, heavily using drugs, and was dangerously close to a breakdown.

The depression he fell into is reflected in the album *Low*, whose last three tracks were recorded at the Hansa Studio. Once established in Berlin, Bowie began to take control of his key aspects of his life, which included terminating his contract with his latest manager and separating from his wife, Angie (they divorced in 1980). He was

sustained and supported by Schwab and Pop, and found great satisfaction working on Pop's album *The Idiot*.

He relished the sense of history and drama that Berlin offered, together with its myths and its art. Much of this is evoked in *Heroes*, together with more personal allusions, culminating in the triumphal air of the climactic title track. As for the air of nostalgia and longing which pervades *Where Are We Now?*, I believe that, following ten reclusive years, Bowie is looking back on one of the most fulfilling periods of his life, when he banished his demons, took hold of his career, and produced one of the outstanding albums of twentieth-century popular music.

*Peter and Leni Gillman are authors of the biography *Alias David Bowie*, first published in 1986