

# The Sydney Morning Herald

ENTERTAINMENT MUSIC

## Bowie in Berlin brought to life

By **Jessie Cunniffe**

December 20, 2016 – 3.16am

January 2017 will be a big month for David Bowie fans.

It marks the first anniversary of Bowie's death, and what would have been his 70th birthday. It is also the 40th anniversary of the release of *Low*, the first album in the so-called Berlin Trilogy.



From left Max Sharam, Kim Salmon, Dave Graney, Mick Harvey and Ron S. Peno are all keen to bring something new to *Bowie in Berlin* while remaining faithful to the original work. JUAN CASTRO

Fitting, then, that some of Australia's most experienced musicians have gathered to perform a tribute called *Bowie in Berlin*, touring Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne and Perth.

Produced by Shock Records founder David Roy Williams, the new show is a collection of highlights from the star's late-'70s catalogue, which deserves to be in the spotlight, Williams says. "This was a defining period of Bowie's life, where he abandoned – not for the first time – where he'd been. Taking on the influences of Krautrock and Brian Eno, he took a lot of risks for a commercial artist, and created quite astounding music."

Williams collaborated with the show's musical director Mick Harvey (of the Birthday Party and Nick Cave's Bad Seeds) to select vocalists and instrumentalists who had a special affinity with Bowie's work.

"There needs to be a personal connection with the work for the artist to deliver something a little more than just singing a song," he says. "Someone like Kylie Auldist is a massive Bowie fan – he was a major influence on her. It's also why we have vocalists like Ron S. Peno, Dave Graney, Kim Salmon – a lot of what they were doing in the '80s grew out of those big changes that were happening in music because of Bowie."

Given the multiple significant dates, a variety of tributes will probably pop up, but Williams says *Bowie in Berlin* will be a unique concert experience.

"Bowie tribute shows tend to take a scattergun approach across his entire career, focusing predominantly on hits, but we want to do something that drills a little deeper. It made sense to focus on one particular era," he says.

After wowing the world with Ziggy Stardust, a fame-weary and drug-riddled Bowie sought isolation and anonymity in the brutalist landscape of Berlin. The move allowed him to recalibrate, quit drugs and create three iconic albums: *Low* (1977), *Heroes* (1977) and *Lodger* (1979).

The Berlin Trilogy divided critics and fans with its avant garde exploration of soundscape, melded with dance-rock and pop. While some, including Bowie, consider these albums his best work, for others they were less accessible. Performing these iconic experimental works is surprising and intriguing, Harvey says.

"They sound pretty wild. In some ways they're not constructed traditionally, but there's a simple two- or three-chord song inside there a lot of the time. That's really nice to discover."

Bowie was known for giving his musicians creative freedom in the studio, relying on his casting choices more than musical direction. Harvey too is working with a cast of musicians who bring their own experience, talents and ideas to the Berlin Trilogy.

Guest vocalist Max Sharam is a multi award-winning Australian singer-songwriter who has travelled from her adopted home city of New York to sing in the show.

"Bowie opened all the doors for me," she says. "I discovered him when I was about eight, because of my older brothers. I was reading all the lyrics, mesmerised by the album covers, the image. The thing I personally connect with is the sense of magic, the sense of unreal. Finding Bowie was like discovering *Alice In Wonderland* – but it was more colourful."

She also has an affiliation with Berlin. "I've lived there and I go there a lot, so I feel like I can understand where Bowie was at," she says. "Berlin brings a completely different element – a darker side. A lot of the general public wouldn't even know this corner of Bowie's mind."

Fellow vocalist Kylie Auldist, lead singer for Melbourne funk/soul bands The Bamboos and Cookin' On 3 Burners, admits some trepidation covering such iconic songs. She admires the Berlin Trilogy's scope.

"Bowie was experimenting with music in a way that only somebody who is up to albums 11, 12 and 13 can do. He didn't have to worry about making a pop song, he

wasn't thinking, 'I have to make music for my audience'. There's a certain amount of freedom in that," she says.

While each musician is keen to bring something new to *Bowie in Berlin*, the original work is at the forefront of everyone's minds.

"You know that you're performing to Bowie fans and this is such an important thing – they cherish this music and you want to do it justice and respect it," says Auldist. "We want to take the albums that you knew and loved and that nobody else has made enough fuss over. To bring something out of the dark that you were like, 'Oh, I thought they were forgotten about.'"

*Triffid, Brisbane, Friday, January 6; Enmore Theatre, Sydney, Saturday, January 7; Hamer Hall, Melbourne, Sunday, January 8; Regal Theatre, Perth, Saturday, January 14. \$79.90 to \$119.90, [davidroywilliams.com](http://davidroywilliams.com)*

---