

# NOT EVEN PAST



## Two Bowies, One Knife

Tweet

by [Erika Bsumek](#) and [Penne Restad](#)

Bowie was a “tall, raw-boned man with deep set eyes, fair hair, and an open and frank disposition.” Convivial and generous, he was a man, it was said, who loved music. That Bowie was James, not David.



Street sign for Bowie St., Austin, Texas, changed by a fan the week of January 10, 2016, when David Bowie died.

Born in 1796, Jim Bowie was a speculator, a soldier, and an adventurer who worked [smuggling slaves](#) with his brothers. Bowie was ambitious and scheming. He gambled at cards and knew how to fight. His weapon of choice, a very large hunting knife, secured him a reputation as the South’s most formidable knife fighter. He famously disemboweled one opponent in a brutal fight. Noah Smithwick, who was with him at the Battle of Concepción, called him “a born leader.” He eventually made his way to Texas and, like other legendary figures, died in 1836 defending the Alamo.

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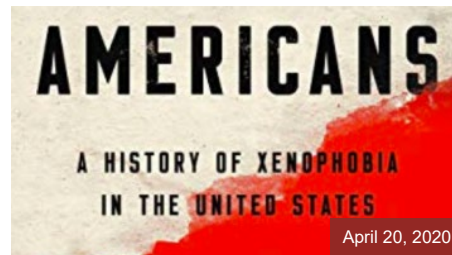


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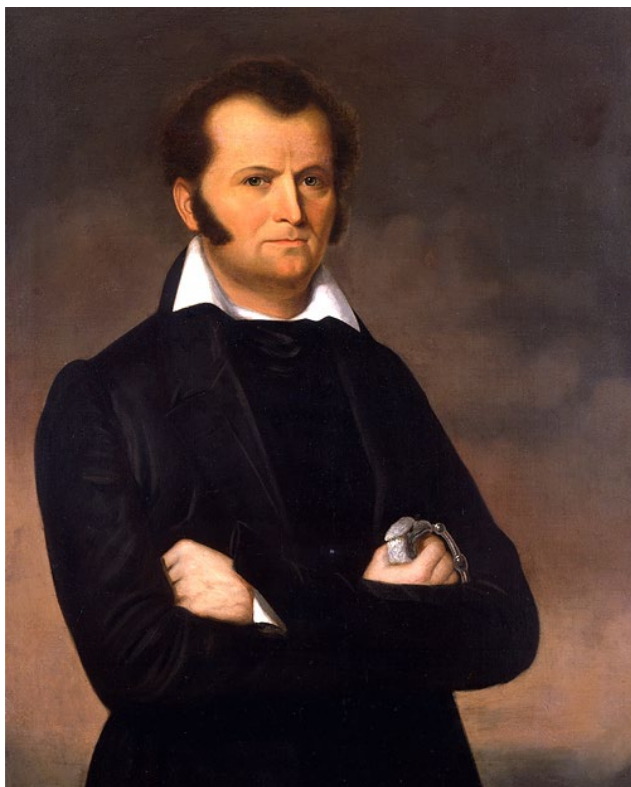


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James Bowie by George Peter Alexander Healey (c. 1820). Via Wikipedia

Even if Jim Bowie could have known that his name would live on, associated with the long blade he favored, he could never have imagined that his name would be adopted nearly two centuries later by a luminary of pop music—David Bowie. David took the frontiersman’s surname as his own and sought to create, as he told [Terry Gross](#) in a [2002 interview](#), “the 21st century in 1971.”



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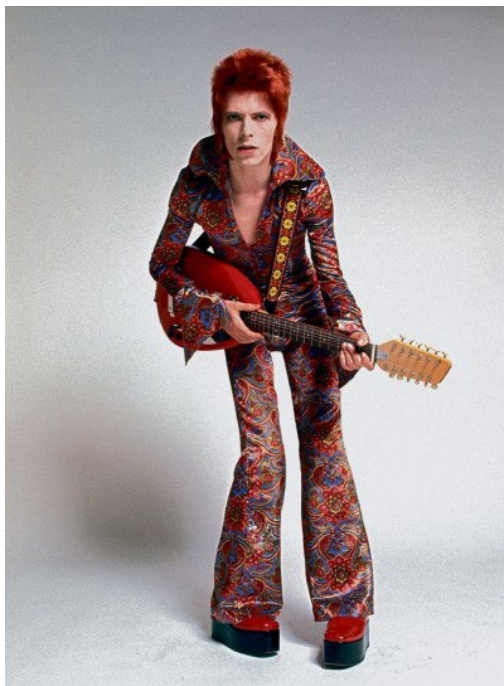
[Ayka \(Dir: Sergei Dvortsevoy, 2018\)](#)



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Masayoshi Sukita (1972)



March 11, 2020

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While David Bowie never killed anyone, he did subtitle his concept album, *Outside* “the Ritual Art-Murder of Baby Grace Blue: A non-linear Gothic Drama Hyper-Cycle.” As the album title reveals, the two Bowies’ sensibilities and histories could not have been more different. Yet, they two men share much. Both were pioneers, both were fighters, both were adventurous, both collaborated with their equally famous peers, and both were political. Both Bowies are still controversial. And both were adept with the Bowie knife.



The “Bart Moore” Bowie knife. The Moore family claims that this was Jim Bowie’s knife, found at the Alamo.

David Bowie was born David Robert Jones. He played with several name changes, in part to avoid association with Davy Jones of The Monkeys. In 1966, he settled on Bowie. As he explained to *Rolling Stone*, the name came from the Bowie knife. “I was into a kind of heavy philosophy thing when I was 16 years old, and I wanted a truism about cutting through the lies and all that.” In any case, to Bowie—David—the Bowie was “The ultimate American knife. It is the medium for a conglomerate of statements and illusions.”

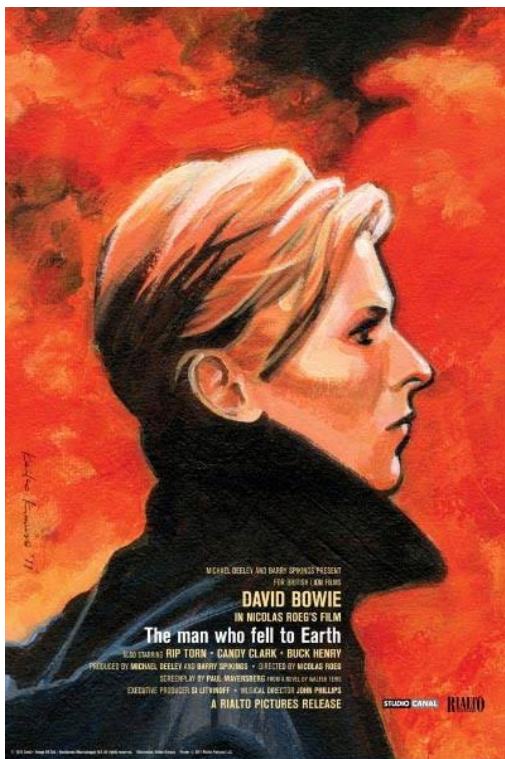


Western Tales (#32, March 1956). The Jack Kirby Museum.

In considering the connection between Jim Bowie and David Bowie we might reflect on how legends are made, die, and are reborn. James' out-sized life was commemorated in books, movies, and action figures, along with Davy Crockett and Col. William Travis as the lore surrounding the Alamo grew to epic status. Jim Bowie was transformed into a cultural icon, a symbol of the gritty determination of the American spirit. He lives on now as a hero to those who wish to restore an older, whiter version of Texas' past. David Bowie, master of alter egos, couldn't have picked a more ironic choice for a namesake.



By appropriating the name Bowie, he did what he set out to do. A bold adventurer, he slashed through cultural norms. He repeatedly created new identities and genres. He startled popular culture with his public declaration as gay in 1972, and a few years later, as bi-sexual. His choices and changes in music were equally daring. He embraced hybridization and androgyny. He mixed genres and did so self-consciously. David Bowie made his own legend, lived up to it, and then he remade it—numerous times over: Ziggy Stardust, the man who fell to earth, the sexual adventurer, glam rocker, fashion icon, Off-Broadway lyricist. He saw rock – and life — as theatre. In so doing, he showed those of us who grew up with his music how to be the hero of our own stories.



Perhaps, then, we've reached the logical end to an age of heroic action. After all, if each of us has become our own hero, how can we hope to become more than we already are? David Bowie's life suggests that we might reach beyond our own imagination. Although he apparently had a fascination with American culture, there's no indication that he particularly looked for meaning in the life of James Bowie and the heroes of the epic Battle of the Alamo. David Bowie instead chose the knife as his talisman — Jim Bowie's frontier weapon — and remade it into a cultural weapon. As it turns out, a dramatically effective one.



Posted January 15, 2016

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