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Pinch of stardust: Bowie back with lost album of early songs

Left on the shelf for two decades following a dispute between David Bowie and his record label, lost album "Toy" is finally seeing the light of day this week. Known only to diehard fans, "Toy" was always a strange beast in the songwriter's long and storied career. It was recorded in 2000 in the honeymoon glow of his performance at Glastonbury Festival, which had re-energized his career after a difficult decade, and revisited songs he wrote before achieving global fame.

Bowie's estate is now releasing "Toy" in two phases: first this Friday as part of a massive retrospective of his work between 1992 and 2001 ("David Bowie 5: Brilliant Adventure"), which includes other live and studio recordings from the period. Then, on January 7, an expanded version of the album ("Toy: Box") will see it released along with alternative and acoustic versions.

'Very honest'

"Toy" mostly featured new versions of songs from the start of his career in the 1960s, before his breakthrough hit "Space Oddity" made him a star. "I still get really elated by the spontaneous event and cannot wait to sit in a claustrophobic space with seven other energetic people and sing till my tits drop off," he wrote in a message to fans at the time.



In this file photo British singer David Bowie performs live at the Olympia in Paris. —AFP photos

But things turned sour when it was presented to his label. They were terrible during the two years before I left," Bowie told his biographer Jerome Soligny in 2002. "Toy" was shelved in the fall-out.

Some of the tracks re-emerged on "Heathen" and on B-sides or compilations—and a low-quality version was leaked online in 2011 — but "Toy" has remained little-known to the general public. Soligny describes it as "a very honest album", the missing link between his 1999 album "hours..." and "Heathen". It also marks the passage of time for



In this file photo American historic producer of British singer David Bowie, Tony Visconti, poses during a photo session in Paris.

Bowie's voice, which had become more of a baritone since his original versions in the 1960s: "The years of cigarettes weighed heavily," said Soligny. Bowie's impetus for revisiting his early tracks began when he and his band tried out a version of his 1966 song "Can't Help Thinking About Me" during their touring in the late 1990s.

The artist wasn't impressed by his early lyrics ("the worst lines I've ever written") but liked the new arrangements. "We didn't really spend much

time listening to the old stuff," guitarist Earl Slick told magazine Rolling Stone. "I didn't even listen to the old recordings. I thought, 'If we want to do this new, I can't have the old one stuck in my head.'"

'Always liked freaks'

The album also marked a rapprochement with his former producer Tony Visconti during its recording in New York. They had not worked together since the 1983 single "Let's Dance". "Bowie wanted to work with him again, but only in little doses, to see how it went, since Tony and him were both strong personalities," said Soligny. It reignited their partnership and Visconti was back working with Bowie on his final album "Blackstar", released just two days before his death in January 2016.

For an artist who so brilliantly played with his image, the cover art is particularly arresting: a disturbing image of Bowie's adult face transplanted onto a baby. Soligny is not shocked. "Sometimes he worked with top fashion photographers to look as beautiful as possible," said the biographer. "But he always liked freaks, like on the sleeve of 'Diamond Dogs' (which featured Bowie as half-man, half-dog) or on 'Lodger', where he appeared with a broken nose." —AFP



In this file photo Canadian singer Justin Bieber arrives for the 2021 Met Gala at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. —AFP photos



In this file photo Musician Jon Batiste (right) performs with the Dap-Kings at the Monterey Jazz Festival in Monterey, California.



In this file photo Singer-songwriter Billie Eilish performs during the Austin City Limits (ACL) Music festival at Zilker Park in Austin, Texas.



In this file photo Olivia Rodrigo performs onstage during the 2021 MTV Video Music Awards at Barclays Center in the Brooklyn borough of New York City.

SYA, DEF JAM'S TABOO-BREAKING FEMALE MALAYSIAN RAPPER

Wearing sunglasses and a tiger print dress as she raps into a mic, Malaysian hip-hop artist SYA calls for empowerment while taking a sledgehammer to stereotypes of Muslim women. The first female signing for label Def Jam—the label behind superstars from Jay-Z and Rihanna to BTS and Justin Bieber—in Southeast Asia, her debut single "Pretty Girl Bop" tackles misogyny and acceptance in her Muslim-majority homeland. "I just want women to feel more comfortable in their own skin," SYA, whose long dark hair is uncovered, tells AFP. "I don't have to pretend to be somebody else just to fit what society deems is good."

The track, which also features up-and-coming Singapore artist Yung Raja, includes scenes of SYA dressed in white, and stroking a cat wearing a pearl necklace in a lavish bedroom. Underlining her desire that women should not be pigeonholed, it then switches to her holding a snake and wearing a leopard print jacket, as she defiantly raps: "I wanna be like me." She is among a crop of young artists from Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines who have been signed by global music giant Def Jam's Southeast Asian arm. Lauded by the industry as a rising star, the 25-year-old says she faces online abuse from those who believe her behavior is not appropriate for a young Muslim woman. "I've had a lot of disturbing comments," the rapper reveals, adding that she has been accused of being a

prostitute and had her faith questioned. "Is she a Muslim? How much per night? Why is she showing so much skin?"

'Imposter syndrome hit me'

While Malaysia is a relatively affluent country, society remains largely conservative, with critics saying women's rights are not sufficiently protected and harassment is common. SYA says she is facing down the "patriarchal mindset" and "sexualisation" of those who don't conform to the cliched expectations of

undermining the faith.

For SYA—real name Nur Batrisya Mohammad Nazri—art and religion should be kept firmly separate, however. "What does (religion) have to do with me as an artist, and what I create?" she said. The artist, who spent much of her childhood overseas, burst onto the music scene almost by accident when she posted some of her work online, drawing the attention of well-known local rapper SonaOne.

He connected her with Def Jam, which had started a push

syndrome really hit me hard. There are other people out there, especially independent artists, who make music 24/7 and are still struggling to get signed."

'Be your own person'

Growing up, SYA took part in talent shows and listened to artists such as Britney Spears and Michael Jackson. She later drifted towards hip hop as it was "such an outspoken type of genre". Her parents are "getting used to the idea" of her becoming a star, she said, adding that her mum was her "biggest supporter". After months of only doing online shows due to a lengthy coronavirus shutdown in Malaysia, she now plans to return to live performing. SYA has yet to run into trouble with authorities but artists regularly do in Malaysia.

Rapper Namewee, from the country's ethnic Chinese minority, relocated to Taiwan after controversy over videos he made that critics allege insult Islam. Despite this, SYA still thinks male artists have far more freedom to rap about sensitive subjects in the conservative country without fear of being criticized. "For the boys, there are no limitations. If they want to rap about sex or weed, it is a pass," she said. "But for women, if you are Malay, you don't want to insinuate you are doing all of those things." SYA hopes her music inspires other women—not to emulate her, but to be more confident in themselves. "I don't want to be the perfect role model," she said. "You can take inspiration from me (to) be your own person." —AFP



This picture shows Malaysian hip-hop artist Nur Batrisya Mohammad Nazri, known as SYA, rehearsing after an interview with Agence France-Presse (AFP) at a studio in Kuala Lumpur. —AFP

Muslim women Most members of Malaysia's ethnic Malay Muslim community follow a moderate form of the religion and while the majority of women wear a headscarf, there is no law requiring it. But conservative Islam has been gaining ground, pushed by hardline politicians and preachers, accompanied by growing criticism of any activities and behavior seen as

into Southeast Asia, seeking to capitalize on a new wave of regional stars and a youthful demographic with increasing disposable income. "First and foremost, I consider myself a writer... writing was the reason I am doing all of this... I had never planned to be an artist," says SYA. The star confesses she was plagued by "self-doubt" and taken aback by her success. She recalls: "Impostor

JUSTIN BIEBER, JAZZMAN JON BATISTE ATOP GRAMMY NOMINATIONS

Justin Bieber, Billie Eilish and Olivia Rodrigo are leading a crop of pop stalwarts and newbies nominated for this year's Grammy awards. But it's Jon Batiste—the jazz and R&B artist, television personality and bandleader, whose prizes include an Oscar for his soundtrack to the movie "Soul"—who has the most chances at Grammy gold, snagging 11 nominations including in the top categories. Megastar Bieber will vie for eight prizes at the January 31 gala in Los Angeles, as will R&B favorite H.E.R. and singer-rapper Doja Cat.

Grammy darling Eilish is in the running for seven, as is Olivia Rodrigo, a former Disney channel actress who exploded onto the pop scene this year with her breakout "drivers license." The 64th annual show has once again expanded the number of nominees in its prestigious

general categories, taking the count from eight to 10, in the wake of perennial criticism that it lacks diversity. Lady Gaga and Tony Bennett, the 95-year-old crooner beloved for his big band and show tune standards, posted a strong showing with six nominations for work related to their album "Love For Sale."

And rap mogul Jay-Z—a regular critic of the Recording Academy, the body behind the Grammy awards—is now the most nominated artist in the show's history, with 83. He was previously tied with legendary producer Quincy Jones, who had 80. Kanye West meanwhile scored several nominations for his album "Donda"—facing off with longtime nemesis Taylor Swift in the best album category, where she has her sole chance at a 2022 Grammy for her record "evermore." —AFP

Key nominees for the 2022 Grammy Awards

Here is a list of nominees in the major categories for the 64th annual Grammy Awards, which will be handed out January 31 in Los Angeles. Jazzman and bandleader Jon Batiste leads the pack with 11 nominations, followed by Justin Bieber, H.E.R. and Doja Cat with eight, as Billie Eilish and Olivia Rodrigo nabbed seven. This year the Recording Academy, the body behind the gala, expanded the top four categories from eight nominees to 10, offering music's brightest even more chances at Grammy gold.

Album of the Year

- We Are - Jon Batiste
- Love For Sale - Tony Bennett & Lady Gaga
- Justice (Triple Chucks Deluxe) - Justin Bieber
- Planet Her (Deluxe) - Doja Cat
- Happier Than Ever - Billie Eilish
- Back Of My Mind - H.E.R.
- Montero - Lil Nas X
- Sour - Olivia Rodrigo
- Evermore - Taylor Swift
- Donda - Kanye West

Record of the Year, recognizing overall performance on a song

- "I Still Have Faith In You" - ABBA
- "Freedom" - Jon Batiste
- "I Get A Kick Out Of You" - Tony Bennett & Lady Gaga
- "Peaches" - Justin Bieber Featuring Daniel Caesar & Giveon
- "Right On Time" - Brandi Carlile
- "Kiss Me More" - Doja Cat Featuring SZA

- "Happier Than Ever" - Billie Eilish
- "Montero" (Call Me By Your Name) - Lil Nas X
- "drivers license" - Olivia Rodrigo
- "Leave The Door Open" - Silk Sonic

Song of the Year, recognizing songwriting

- "Bad Habits" - Fred Gibson, Johnny McDaid & Ed Sheeran, songwriters (Ed Sheeran)
- "A Beautiful Noise" - Ruby Amanfu, Brandi Carlile, Brandy Clark, Alicia Keys, Hillary Lindsey, Lori McKenna, Linda Perry & Hailey Whitters, songwriters (Alicia Keys And Brandi Carlile)
- "drivers license" - Daniel Nigro & Olivia Rodrigo, songwriters (Olivia Rodrigo)
- "Fight For You" - Dernst Emile II, H.E.R. & Tiara Thomas, songwriters (H.E.R.)
- "Happier Than Ever" - Billie Eilish O'Connell & Finneas O'Connell, songwriters (Billie Eilish)
- "Kiss Me More" - Roget Chahayed, Amala Zandile Dlamini, Lukasz Gottwald, Carter Lang, Gerard A. Powell II, Solana Rowe & David Sprecher, songwriters (Doja Cat Featuring SZA)
- "Leave The Door Open" - Brandon Anderson, Christopher Brody Brown, Dernst Emile II & Bruno Mars, songwriters (Silk Sonic)
- "Montero (Call Me By Your Name)" - Denzel Baptiste, David Biral, Omer Fedi, Montero Hill & Roy Lenzo, songwriters (Lil Nas X)
- "Peaches" - Louis Bell, Justin Bieber, Giveon Dezmann Evans, Bernard Harvey, Felisha "Fury" King, Matthew Sean Leon, Luis Manuel Martinez Jr., Aaron Simmonds, Ashton

- Simmonds, Andrew Wolman & Keavan Yazdani, songwriters (Justin Bieber Featuring Daniel Caesar & Giveon)
- "Right On Time" - Brandi Carlile, Dave Cobb, Phil Hanseroth & Tim Hanseroth, songwriters (Brandi Carlile)

Best New Artist

- Arooj Aftab
- Jimmie Allen
- Baby Keem
- FINNEAS
- Glass Animals
- Japanese Breakfast
- The Kid Laroi
- Arlo Parks
- Olivia Rodrigo
- Saweetie

Best Music Video

- "Shot In The Dark" - AC/DC
- "Freedom" - Jon Batiste
- "I Get A Kick Out Of You" - Tony Bennett & Lady Gaga
- "Peaches" - Justin Bieber Featuring Daniel Caesar & Giveon
- "Happier Than Ever" - Billie Eilish
- "Montero (Call Me By Your Name)" - Lil Nas X
- "Good 4 U" - Olivia Rodrigo

Best Rap Album

- The Off-Season - J. Cole
- Certified Lover Boy - Drake

- King's Disease II - Nas
- Call Me If You Get Lost - Tyler, The Creator
- Donda - Kanye West

Best Rap Performance

- "Family Ties" - Baby Keem Featuring Kendrick Lamar
- "Up" - Cardi B
- "my life" - J. Cole Featuring 21 Savage & Morray
- "Way 2 Sexy" - Drake Featuring Future & Young Thug
- "Thot S***" - Megan Thee Stallion

Best Rock Album

- Power Up - AC/DC
- Capitol Cuts Live From Studio A - Black Pumas
- No One Sings Like You Anymore Vol. 1 - Chris Cornell
- Medicine At Midnight - Foo Fighters
- McCartney III - Paul McCartney

Best Pop Vocal Album

- Justice (Triple Chucks Deluxe) - Justin Bieber
- Planet Her (Deluxe) - Doja Cat
- Happier Than Ever - Billie Eilish
- Positions - Ariana Grande
- Sour - Olivia Rodrigo

Best Global Music Album

- Mohabbat - Arooj Aftab
- Do Yourself - Angélique Kidjo & Burna Boy
- Pa Pa Pa - Femi Kuti
- Blewu - Yo-Yo Ma & Angélique Kidjo
- Essence - WizKid Featuring Tems—AFP