

## 16/MUSIC

# Boy, could they play guitar

Steve Harvey's version of Ziggy Stardust's demise went beyond tribute. It was art (the programme said). By Nick Coleman



Steve Harvey (left) announces his retirement - or rather David Bowie's - at the ICA last week, while (right) the real thing does the real thing back in 1973. David Coakland, Debbie Ross (Reflex)

**O**f all the shows on this tour, this particular show will remain with us the longest. Not only is it the last show of the tour, it's the last show we'll ever do." And with his thunderous words still ringing in our ears, Steve Harvey performed "Rock'n'Roll Suicide" for the very last time and quit the stage of the ICA. The audience screamed and looked at their watches. It was 10.30pm.

Remarkably, these were exactly same words spoken by David Bowie to a rather younger audience at Hammersmith Odeon 25 years ago to the very night, on the occasion of Ziggy Stardust's original conceptual disposal for death.

The significant difference between the two events, as far as I could see last Friday in The Mall, was that on the first occasion the artist didn't really mean it.

Steve Harvey certainly appeared to. His half smile was a half-closed, his sincerity was palpable.

Never, ever again would he get on

stage on the 25th anniversary of the last-ever concert by Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders From Mars" to re-enact that signal performance with his group in absolute detail, word for word, note for note, mime for mime, gasset for gasset. As rock'n'roll suicides go, it was really quite a moving one. No, really.

"Oh, yes," you may say, "you're only saying that because you've been drawn back, line and bra strap into the web of counterfeit, complicity and late-1980s TV irony on which all tribute bands depend." But you would be wrong.

I was moved because this wasn't a tribute band, it was art. It must have been art because it said it was on the programme.

"A Rock'n'Roll Suicide - a live art event by Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard", the programme announced, above the logo of the Institute of Contemporary Arts, sponsored by Kodak Advantix, Ford or Dead, the Gigs Club and Test & Gay. '80s Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard were not even in the group. They conceived the concept, as

artists do, and then let others fill out its skin. Hatchet-faced Steve Harvey and his counterfeits "Spiders" were the artists' gesture, enacting on their behalf the bossy old conceit

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that in a world in which authenticity is a construct, then only its heightened inauthenticity will we find truth - the simulacrum is reality, or something to that effect.

Speaking incidentally for myself, I was moved. Not touched according to rock'n'roll precedent, by the "Spiders'" ability to rock, not ob-

viously, withered by the spark of novelty that has always connected pop to showbiz; not, even, was I shaken by nostalgic feeling - I have no desire to return to 1973, when I was spotty but not yet ready to recognise the hermaphrodite within. No, I was moved by Steve Harvey's keenness, his accuracy, his attention to detail, the bloody-mindedness of his will to make believe that reality is just another skin.

Above all, I was moved by his conviction that if we all work together then, by jingo, something really may happen, even if it is only the collective recognition that we all live in a Baudrillardian ready-made. It's always moving when people reveal their vulnerability.

So what did we get for the price of our complicity at the ICA last Friday? We got the spectacle of several original Bowie people in the audience, who had flirted with independence by artfully creating their residual side-stories of hard, inevitably horns. We got fake Ziggy Stardust costumes re-made by the same person who designed and made

the originals. We got Trevor Hold or's original solebars, which must have been lowered into place on the bass player's head with a crane. We got Steve Harvey's bum, which is as proportionately fat, wide and unappetising as his thighs are grossly lithe, just like Ziggy's. We also got some terrific homoerotic guitar playing by "Mick Ronson", who was otherwise completely wrong if you can imagine Angus Deayton in a blond fright-wig pretending to be a gardener from Hull pretending to enjoy wearing Spiderex trousers, then you will see how "Mick Ronson" poses conceptual problems to the artist. I got an inchoate pleasure from finding "Woody Woodmansey" actually at traction, though the gradual realisation that "Woody" was, in fact, a girl was greatly disappointing - I really thought I was on for a new sensation for a while.

But perhaps the thing that was most in evidence in the blackness of the ICA's arts world was an atmosphere of collective knowingness, even self-congratulation, at the

bottomless transparency of the event, a feeling that beyond one window to another lay another, and beyond that another, and beyond the next yet another, and so on for ever, or at least until you got fed up with looking, the effect being that no one who took the trouble to look could feel at any stage that wood was being pulled over their eyes. In short, "A Rock'n'Roll Suicide" made smartypants out of the lot of us, which, as any dimwit knows, is one of the main uses of art.

There was, however, a disappointing postscript to the event. Firm in my belief that what had been witnessed was a singular manifestation of art's capacity to construct reality in an acceptable dose, I rang the ICA just to make that Steve Harvey had indeed killed off "Ziggy", and was not about to embark on a nationwide tour featuring Ziggy's death on a one-stop shop basis, with major sponsorship from Test & Gay. The ICA was tight-lipped. It would only confirm that "we have a suspicion that this may have been a fake suicide".