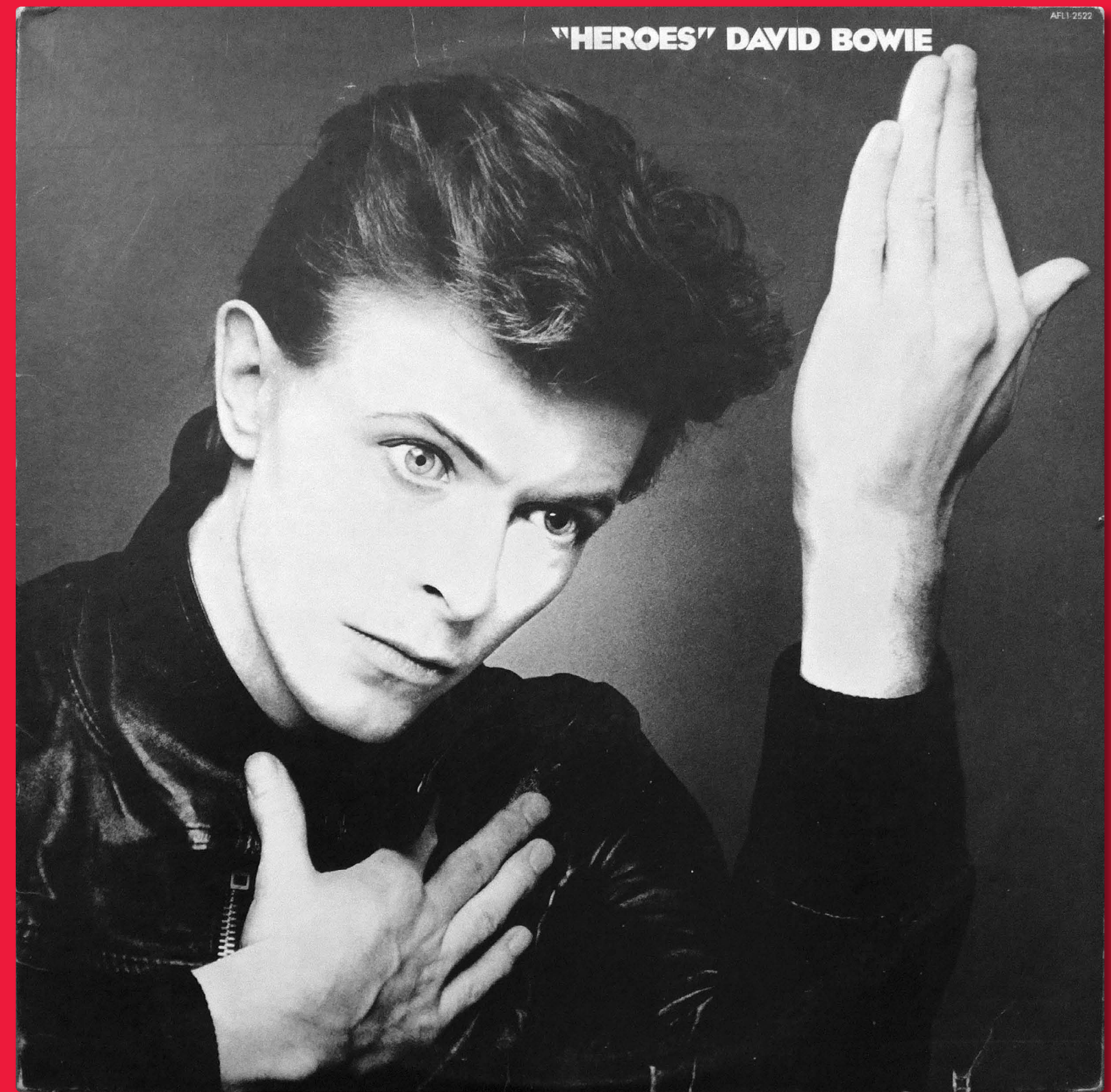


Just for one day — David Bowie's

Heroes, one of pop's greatest anthems, is 40 years old this winter. We tracked down Masayoshi Sukita who photographed the album's iconic cover and talked to him about this and his four decades of collaboration with the musical icon. Words by *Christopher Kanal*
Photography by *Masayoshi Sukita*





1 (previous spread) Masayoshi Sukita: *Heroes*, 1977

2 Like some cat from Japan — David Bowie in Kyoto, 1980 © Photo by Masayoshi Sukita

3 Masayoshi Sukita: *A Day In Kyoto* — Hankyu Train, 1980

Towards the close of 1976 David Bowie left Los Angeles where celebrity, overwork and an engulfing paranoia fuelled by a dizzying appetite for cocaine had driven his world into freefall. The singer and actor, then known for his public persona Ziggy Stardust and the film *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, crossed the Atlantic and escaped into the seductive anonymity of Berlin. ‘There was light at the end of the tunnel,’ Bowie said of his arrival in the then divided city. ‘And it wasn’t a train.’

Like his hero, writer Christopher Isherwood, did in the Twenties, Bowie chose Schöneberg as his base – then and now a largely Turkish working-class district of the city. Bowie’s long-term assistant Coco Schwab found him a simple, first-floor apartment in an art-nouveau building above a garage and had the walls painted white so Bowie could put up his collection of paintings. His friend Iggy Pop moved into the same building.

Bowie, who died in January 2016, regarded this period from 1976 to 1979 as the most creative years of his life. It is a time referred to simply as the ‘Berlin Years’. It was here that Bowie created three albums – *Low*, *Heroes* and *Lodger* – with collaborators including Brian Eno and Tony Visconti. The album *Heroes* was released in October 1977.

The dark, dense, eerie forest that is Grunewald stretches westwards like the palm of a hand reaching out of Berlin’s periphery. Just before the forest is the Brücke Museum, which opened in the late Sixties and retains the heady atmosphere of the past. A regular haunt of Bowie, who regularly visited accompanied by Schwab, the museum has some 400 paintings and thousands of sculptures by members of Die Brücke Expressionist movement including Emil Nolde and Erich

Heckel – the latter’s haunting painting *Roquairol* of a young man with an angular arm in front of him, purportedly inspired the cover artwork of *Heroes*.

Despite the Berlin era permeating the celluloid of the *Heroes* cover, the iconic photograph was actually taken at a decidedly low-key session in Tokyo. The photographer Masayoshi Sukita never spent time with Bowie in Berlin. ‘Unfortunately not,’ says Sukita. ‘I only visited some places in Berlin related to David this year.’ Sukita shot Bowie 20 times over 40 years, the final shoot being in 2009 when he took the musician’s last official portrait. Theirs was a professional relationship that would document Bowie’s creative evolution as well as his chameleon-like personas. ‘This is a committed artist, a brilliant artist, I would call him a master,’ is how Bowie described Sukita in a statement in October 2015.

A quiet, genial man, Sukita, often dressed in black, could not be further from the clichéd personification of a rock photographer. ‘I define photography as “Now” and also as “Forever”,’ says Sukita. ‘I might be known as a rock or portrait photographer, but recently I’ve been trying to release my snapshots taken in 60 years of my career.’

The work of Sukita, who cites fashion and portrait photographer Irving Penn as a major influence, extends beyond fashion and music. Before he met Bowie he had filmed Shūji Terayama’s celebrated experimental drama *Throw Away Your Books, Rally in the Streets* (1971) and subsequently worked with filmmakers Paul Schrader, Hirokazu Kore-eda and Jim Jarmusch. Sukita took the stills for Jarmusch’s cult film *Mystery Train* (1989), where he struck up a friendship with

the film’s cinematographer Robbie Müller. Sukita was also involved in the filming of Schrader’s visually arresting biopic *Mishima: A Life in Four Chapters* (1985).

Proving his credentials outside of the rock arena, Sukita’s exhibition *Sound & Vision* in Tokyo at the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography in 2012 presented 300 works, ranging from the study of his mother he took as an 18-year-old to images of a survivor of the horrors of the Nagasaki atomic bomb. ‘This particular opportunity made me realise how difficult it was to take photographs of people and capture their lives in a portrait,’ he says. More recently Sukita has worked on black-and-white, city photography inspired by his childhood. ‘When I was a child, the alcove at my home was decorated with a black and white hanging scroll,’ he reveals. ‘It was just like at the art gallery. I have been devoted to expressing the world in monochrome ever since.’

Sukita was born in 1938 in Kyushu, a small coal-mining town in Fukuoka prefecture in the south-west of Japan. His father, who was killed on the front line in China two days after the Second World War ended, took photographs during his service in the Japanese Army. Sukita has a vivid memory of one photo, now lost, of some of his fellow soldiers having a bath in an oil drum, relaxing together. Sukita’s own passion for photography started after he received a Rolleiflex camera as a gift from his mother, who became his first subject. ‘I was a curious kid. Firstly I shot my mother’s portrait, then my family, pets, neighbours and things around me,’ he says. The portrait of his mother remains Sukita’s favourite photo.

The post-war American occupation of Japan and the

Marshall Plan also brought with it rock ‘n’ roll and the rebel youth movies of the Fifties, which began to seep into the fabric of Japanese post-war culture. As Sukita reflects: ‘Elvis Presley or the movie stars like James Dean, I think they totally led me to the photography.’

Sukita went to the Japan Institute of Photography in Osaka to study commercial photography after twice failing his university entrance exams. He often missed classes to go to the cinema, where he discovered the French New Wave cinema of Jean-Luc Godard and the films of Michelangelo Antonioni and Luis Buñuel.

After working as an assistant to an established photographer in Osaka, Sukita moved to an advertising agency in 1961. From there in 1965 he moved to Tokyo and worked for a production company whose commissions included fashion photographs and shooting television commercials. In 1970, Sukita went freelance. Two years later, aged 32, he headed to London with his friend, the stylist Yasuko Takahashi, staying at the Portobello Hotel, then a hang-out for Seventies’ rock royalty. Takahashi knew Marc Bolan’s manager, Tony Secunda. Takahashi arranged a meeting for Sukita with Bolan, who agreed to a photoshoot.

At this time Sukita had never heard of David Bowie. He saw a poster advertising an upcoming Bowie gig and asked people on the street who he was. Sukita was intrigued enough to catch a Bowie concert in London, where the singer was performing on a double bill with Lou Reed. Sukita had an immediate instinct to contact him: ‘I wanted to shoot him,’ he says. Sukita sent his portfolio to Bowie with a request to photograph him and got the simple reply: ‘Yes’.



On the day of the shoot Bowie was being photographed by David Bailey. Sukita's first ever meeting was scheduled for the evening at the Rainbow Theatre. 'I knew who he [Bailey] was, so there was pressure,' he remembers. To break the ice and settle his nerves Sukita found out what Bowie's favourite wine was and brought along a bottle.

Bowie was learning dance with Lindsay Kemp in this period. Sukita was impressed by his balletic sense of movement. Also at this time, Stanley Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey was setting a cultural mood, so Bowie was into space and fantasy music and combined these elements with his physical performance. Sukita found this unique combination enthralling.

When in 1973 Sukita shot him again in New York at RCA Studios, Bowie wore specially commissioned stage clothes by Kansai Yamamoto. He met him in Tokyo later that year when he arrived for his first Japanese tour. Sukita took official portraits of Bowie in 1980 and then between 1989 and 2002 for the promotion of the Heathen album. He also realised the cover for the debut, self-titled, release from Bowie's short-lived band, Tin Machine (1989).

The relationship settled into a pattern that whenever Bowie was in Japan, he would call up Sukita, but photoshoots were never pre-planned. They often shot film in the old imperial capital Kyoto, which Bowie loved, and a collection of some of the thousands of photos Sukita took of Bowie were published in the limited-edition book Speed of Life in 2012.



4 Masayoshi Sukita: I Saw You Again — David Bowie backstage at his concert at The Rainbow Theatre, London, 16-18th August 1972

5 Masayoshi Sukita: Watch That Man III — David Bowie in the striped bodysuit designed by Kansai Yamamoto for the Aladdin Sane tour, 1973

6 Masayoshi Sukita: David Bowie — The Same Old Kyoto

5 & 6 - MASAYOSHI SUKITA / COURTESY OF SNAP GALLERIES





7 Masayoshi Sukita: David Bowie 1977
Heroes session — contact sheet

The Heroes shoot – Separated by the Berlin Wall in the Cold War, the East and West Berlin of the Seventies were within touching distance of one another but they might as well have been on different planets.

The song Heroes is about a young couple who live on opposite sides of the Wall but who are so determined to be together that they meet every day under the watch towers of Die Mauer der Schande. The story goes that during the recording of the song at Hansa Studios, Bowie wanted time alone with his thoughts to write lyrics. His producer Tony Visconti left the studio and walked towards Potsdamer Platz and met backing vocalist Antonia Maass by the Wall. At the time Visconti and Maas were lovers. As they kissed, unbeknown to them, Bowie was watching from the studio window. Two hours later the song was finished.

It was April 1977. Bowie had produced Iggy Pop's new album *The Idiot* in Berlin and the two went to Japan together on a promotion tour. Bowie called Sukita to request a short photo shoot for each of them. It was a general session, not an album-cover shoot. Sukita used just simple lighting, a simple set-up and shot on his trusted Hasselblad camera. 'It was a very relaxing mood for both of them,' recalls Sukita.

Bowie instinctively started moving on his own. 'He moved very fast in front of my camera without my direction,' Sukita reveals. 'I just concentrated on capturing these private moments.' Following his transformative time in the anonymity of Berlin, Bowie had shed the glam-rock persona for a lo-fi look that deliberately avoided any reference to fashion – he wore just a simple leather jacket. On the claim that Bowie was making

visual references to the work of painter Erich Heckel during the shoot, Sukita says Bowie never revealed anything to him. 'The shoot was done with his ideas and I never asked him,' he says. After the shoot Sukita sent Bowie the contact sheets. A month later Bowie called and told him the photo he had chosen for the album cover. 'I was very excited about it,' smiles Sukita. 'I was very lucky they gave me the chance of the session. Heroes let my name be known internationally.'

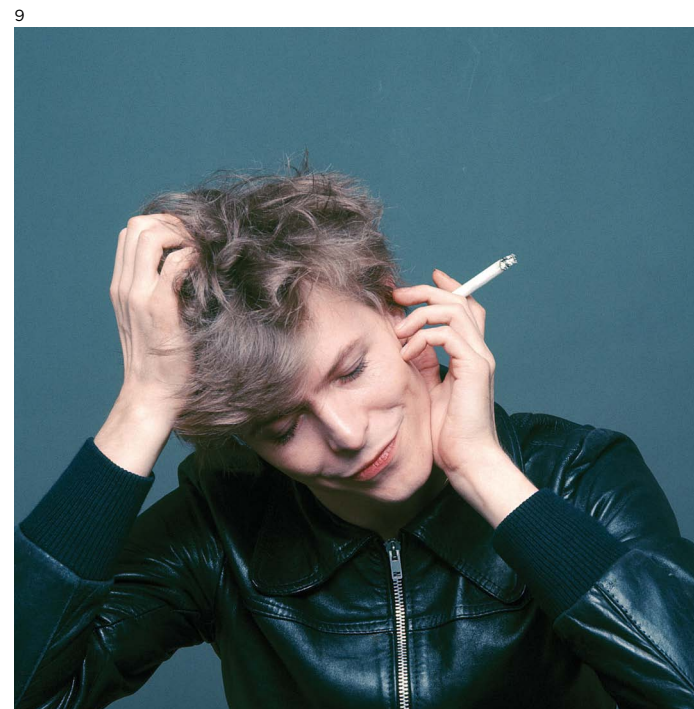
Commenting on their enduring creative partnership in *Speed of Life*, Bowie exclaimed: 'It's very hard for me to accept that Sukita-san has been snapping away at me since 1972 – may he click into eternity.' ■



8 Iggy Pop, *The Idiot* promotional tour, Tokyo, April 1977 © Photo by Masayoshi Sukita

9 V-2 Schneider – A colour photograph from the Heroes session, Harajuku Studios, Tokyo April 1977 © Photo by Masayoshi Sukita

10 Masayoshi Sukita: David Bowie – Sense Of Doubt, 1977 © Photo by Masayoshi Sukita



7 & 10 - MASAYOSHI SUKITA / COURTESY OF SNAP GALLERIES



'Sukita-san has been snapping away at me since 1972 – may he click into eternity'

11 Masayoshi Sukita with his Heroes cover image