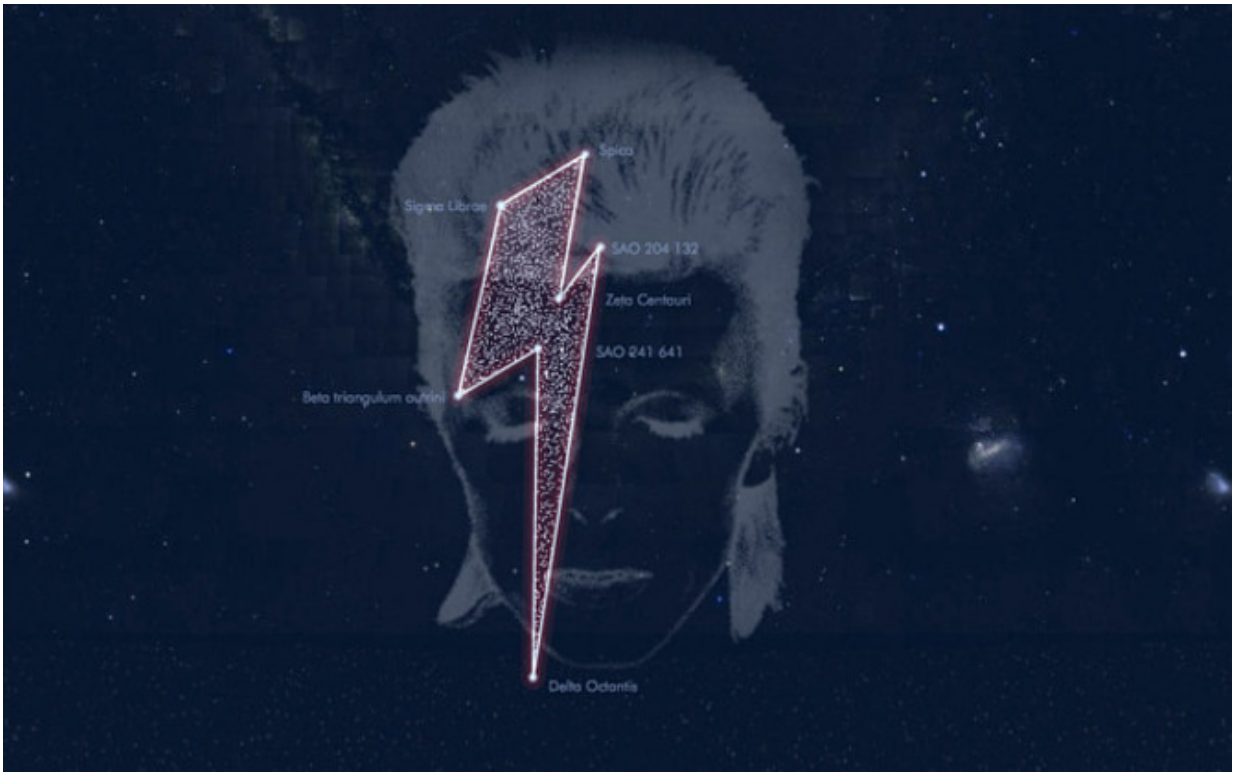
David Bowie 'constellation' – the surprising truth

January 21 2016, by Daniel Brown



Star man: Belgian astronomers reportedly registered a new constellation for the singer. Credit: www.stardustforbowie.be

The death of David Bowie has caused people to remember the artist in many different ways. Only recently a request for a Bowie Constellation was reportedly put forward by Belgian radio channel Studio Brussels and

the MIRA Public Observatory. Can this be done at all? And where can we see it?

Anyone watching the night sky will try to make out patterns in the stars. This aids in navigation and, over millennia, has allowed peoples to create myths and stories within the stars, making the sky a place that is sacred and important to them.

Modern astronomers, however, have a more pragmatic view of the constellations. They have defined 88 regions in the sky as "constellations", including those of the zodiac. Astronomers use the constellations as we on Earth use countries – to describe where something is located. On Earth, we can state where we live by giving the longitude and latitude, which is similar to describing a location in the sky with the "right ascension" and "declination" used by astronomers. But it's useful to be able to refer to a star in Cancer, say, just as we might first tell someone that we are from Britain, India or the US.

Crowded skies

So could we add a new one? Unfortunately, there is no space in the sky for a new constellation, everything has already been covered. Therefore, there is no process to request a new constellation. Additionally, the International Astronomical Union responsible for the definition of the boundaries of the constellations never received a request.

The "David Bowie constellation" was defined by the stars making up the unique lightning bolt from Bowie's 1973's Aladdin Sane Album cover. That would actually be something that astronomers call an "asterism", a shape made by stars, and not a region in the sky – or constellation – at all.

The asterism would encompass a vast region, starting with the brightest

star in Virgo, Spica, 10 times more massive and four times hotter at its surface than our Sun. It then encompasses Sigma Librae, Zeta Centauri and SAO 204132, Sigma Octantis and Beta Trianguli Australis, near the Celestial South Pole. It would contain parts of the zodiac, some considerably bright, named and well-known stars – but would also cross eight constellations.

Overall, the "David Bowie constellation" was a description of an asterism linked to recent events that spiralled out of control through misinterpretation. What it shows is that what we see in the stars is very much influenced by what happens to the people seeing the stars and a good example of "cultural astronomy". But even if it isn't a constellation, this asterism does offer us a chance to use it as a way to explore what lies within it.

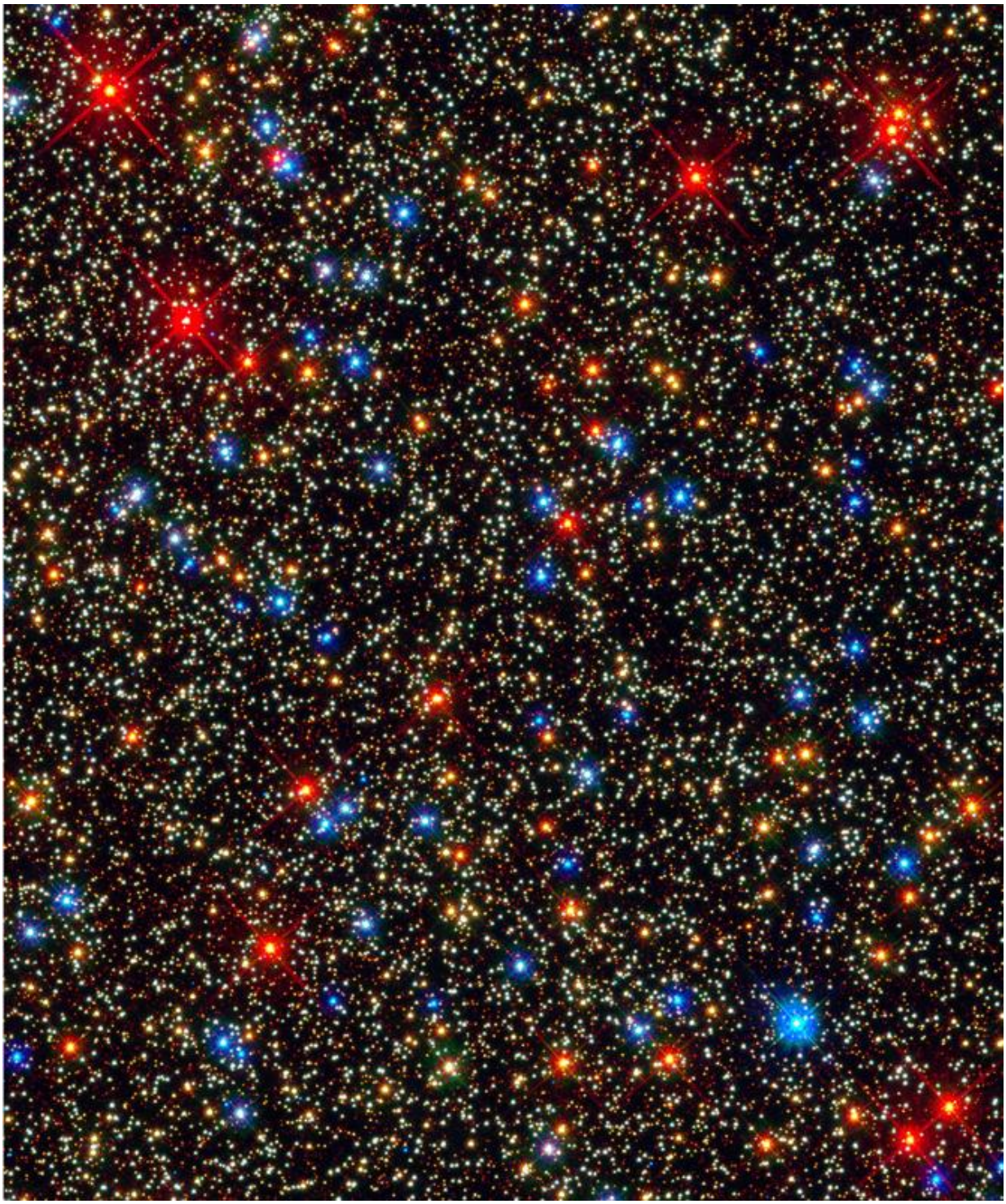
A glorious patch of space

The asterism, for example, includes the globular cluster Omega Centauri , which is nearly 16,000 light years away and has around 10m stars. It is so large that it is even thought to be the remains of a disrupted dwarf galaxy. It would also include the closest and brightest barred spiral galaxy to us – M83, also known as the Southern Pinwheel galaxy. It is 15m light years from us and possibly shows indications of a double nucleus, making it a fascinating object for astronomers.

Depending on where you live, you would struggle to see the entire asterism. At latitudes similar to those in Europe and the US, the tip of the lightning bolt would always be below the horizon. But while observing the south to south-eastern horizon at the end of January in the early morning hours, enjoying the morning planets display, you would be able to see the top of the asterism starting at Spica. However, its huge extent in the sky – ranging from declinations of -11 degrees to -80 degrees – would ensure that nearly anyone on Earth further south than

Svalbard at 80 degrees north, could see at least part of the Bowie asterism.

So enjoy observing the stars, try and find the unofficial Bowie asterism and see if you can make your own to help you explore the wonders in the sky and learn more about the stories in the sky and what they can say about us.



The core of Omega Centauri captured by the Hubble Space Telescope. Credit: NASA, CC BY-SA

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