

What Goes On?

How Lou Reed Once Sold Me A Nickel Bag

Lou Reed is one of two reasons I live in New York City. (The other is painting.) When I was 14 years old, living in Baltimore, Maryland, I heard the Velvet Underground's "White Light White Heat" album on a college radio station. The group, which Lou fronted and wrote most of the songs for, was already broken up by then, but the radiant aggression of the title song—"White light, white light goin' messin' up my mind / White light, and don't you know it's gonna make me go blind"—hooked my teen medulla as surely as if Reed had been selling nickel bags on the street corner.

The next day I walked to a local department store and bought the only Velvets album they had in their big Formica bins, the double-disc live recording "1969." The soul brother behind the register whistled at the miniskirted hindquarters on the cover, adding, "That's the good shit!"—which convinced me, if I needed additional proof, that the Velvets were beyond cool. The caustic psychedelia of the concert version of "What Goes On" set off sparks in my brain like a grinding wheel on rusty steel, conjuring an elastic reality (influenced by 1970s black-light aesthetics) in which Day-Glo pyramids cast strobe-lit shadows under skies of melting stained glass. Over the years I have splattered paint on huge canvases, made love, carved Halloween Jack-o'-lanterns, and enjoyed other transporting acts to the chaotic drone of "What Goes On," one of rock 'n' roll's greatest existential anthems.

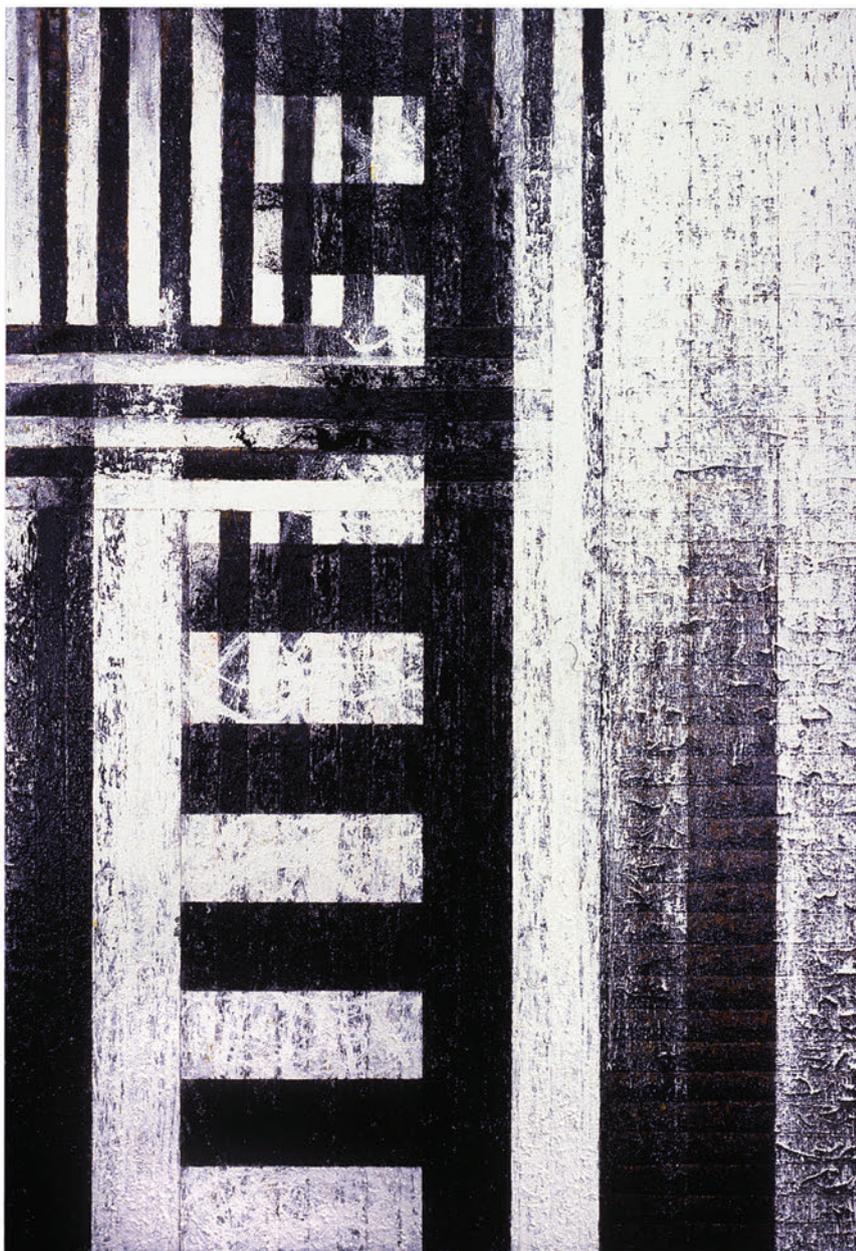
By the time I got to art school, in the late 70s, I began to pay closer attention to the lyrics, and I realized that the gritty ecstasy of the music was actually quite earthbound, and all the more compelling for it. The mad freedom of a tune such as "Waiting For My Man"—"I'm feeling good, feeling so fine / until tomorrow, but that's just some other time"—was a siren call from the streets of New York to a kid in a backwater town like Baltimore.

Many of the denizens of Lou's Gotham—those ubiquitous drag queens—were as yet beyond my experience; plus, I was a teetotaler amid the pharmaceutical cornucopia that was 1970s America. But Lou's music mainlined a cultural contact high completely in tune with my passion for art, underground comix, and head-shop

graphics. Throughout his career Lou believed passionately in 60s ideals of tolerance (in his case, for hookers, transvestites, hustlers, junkies, crack dealers), yet he suffered no fools. New York is a hard town, and he expected even the losers to carry their weight. Hence, the malevolent transcendence of such lyrics as "Why don't you grab your old lady by the feet / And just lay her out in the darkest street / And by morning, she's just another hit and run," from 1978's "Street Hassle." Or, even more succinct in its gleeful malice, "Here's a toast to all that's

good / And here's a toast to hate," from 1983's "The Last Shot."

In my mid-20s I moved to New York City, and everywhere I looked I saw Manhattan through Lou's eyes: AIDS victims, corrupt politicians, callous cops, homeless Vietnam vets—all characters from his heartfelt 1989 album, "New York," an aural novella fusing humor and squalor, humanity and the devil. Although I was too young to have seen the Velvets in their "Exploding Plastic Inevitable" glory at the Dom on St. Marks Place, I have worked at the *Village Voice* newspaper for a quarter-century, and for much of that time our offices were two blocks from that hallowed spot. Often, when grabbing lunch and threading my way through blankets spread on the sidewalks offering for sale used boomboxes, cassette tapes,



R.C. Baker
THE BELLS

1989, oil on canvas, 90 x 62"

Titled for a Lou Reed song I'd always loved. Some years later, reading Lou's lyric collection, *Between Thought and Expression*, I discovered that it meant a lot to him as well: "We had a beautiful instrumental track with no lyric. On mike I found myself singing this lyric. Unchanged it remains my favorite to this day."

and toaster ovens of highly dubious provenance, I'd flash on scratchy films I'd seen of those storied performances, with Andy Warhol providing the seizure-inducing light show and Silver Factory extroverts pretending (or not) to shoot up on stage. Even the posters for Velvet Underground performances glinted with a New York edge: a dark-green and purple placard for a 1966 Velvets show shares jagged affinities with Polish avant-garde graphics, in contrast to announcements for West Coast bands such as the Doors, which generally inspired Art Nouveau-like peacockery.

It's no surprise that European intellectuals such as Václav Havel were huge fans of the Velvets and of Lou's solo work, admiration he heartily reciprocated by interviewing the dissident playwright after Havel became Czechoslovakia's president, in 1990. In the introduction to the interview, Lou wrote about problems he'd had dealing with his Czechoslovakian contacts: "The line that made me nervous was when we were told with exasperation—the government will take care of you. I'm from New York. I wouldn't want the government to take care of me." During his visit, in a Prague nightclub, Havel took out a small book of Lou's lyrics, which had been secretly translated into Czechoslovakian during the Communist era. "There were only 200 of them," the president said as he handed the samizdat over. "They were very dangerous to have. People went to jail, and now you have one. Keep your fingers crossed for us."

Lou always inspired passionate devotion in his fans.

I twice saw him perform at Radio City Music Hall, a marriage of two New York musical icons. During one show he brought out Little Jimmy Scott to sing along with "Power and Glory," a song the ethereal jazz singer had backed up on Lou's 1992 "Magic and Loss" album, warbling "I want all of it / Not just some of it." Then came an encore duet on "Satellite of Love," Scott levitating that bittersweet ballad into a heavenly hymn.

Although there was no love lost between Lou and John Cale—the multi-instrumentalist whose droning licks gave the Velvet Underground its unique sonic propulsion—in 1990 the estranged duo wrote the deeply moving "Songs for Drella," a tribute to their former producer Andy Warhol, a friend to both, and, in later years, antagonist of Lou's. One track, "Work," captures the drive necessary to any committed artist, with Lou lamenting,

A wall collage that,
in various
permutations,
has traveled with me
to all my abodes in
Gotham.



"No matter what I did it never seemed enough / he said I was lazy, I said I was young / He said, How many songs did you write / I'd written zero, I'd lied and said, Ten / You won't be young forever / you should have written fifteen." Another tune, "Small Town," painted a vivid portrait of the wannabe from the sticks seeking glory in the big city: "I hate being odd in a small town / If they stare let them stare in New York City."

My admiration for "Drella" got me in a bit of trouble in February, 2014, when the *Voice* ran a cover story on the "50 Best NYC Albums." I lobbied hard for "Drella" over "New York," and my short article caused no small outrage among the readers. The editor asked me to respond, which I did online later that week: "'Songs for Drella' over 'New York' because it reunited Lou Reed with John Cale, creating, as those original Velvet Underground albums did, something much greater than the sum of rock 'n' roll. 'Drella' has everything 'New York' does—drugs and drag queens, love and pain, crime and punishment—and tells that most wonderful of Big Apple tales: Someone from somewhere else making it big here. Everyone knows 'New York's righteous polemics—more folks should know 'Drella's wry wisdom."

Now when I listen to "1969"'s rollicking version of "Rock 'n' Roll"—"Then one fine morning she put on a New York station / She didn't believe what she heard at all / She started dancing to that fine fine music / You know her life was saved by rock 'n' roll"—I realize I was pretty much fated

to live in New York from the moment I first heard those words. As a kid I wondered how anyone could have the audacity to use such a blunt title for a rock 'n' roll song. In later years, I came to realize that rock 'n' roll was still basically a teenager when Lou penned that ditty, in the late 60s, that radio was middle-aged, and that our own epoch's digital cacophony was no more than an inchoate fever dream in Steve Jobs's cortex.

Lou was as much orator and storyteller as singer, so it was no surprise that hearing him simply recite his lyrics could be as thrilling as one of his concerts. In 1991, my wife and I went to one of New York's cultural meccas, the 92nd Street Y, to hear him read from his just published book, *Between Thought and Expression*. (A Xeroxed proof from the publisher remains one of my most treasured possessions.) As we settled into our seats, it dawned on me that there was nothing but a podium with a single microphone onstage, and no backup musicians in sight. I thought, "Lord, what have I gotten us into, this'll be murder without music." And then Lou began an electrifying evening with a phrase that consciously echoed his intro on the "1969" album: "OK then, this is gonna go on for a while, so we should get used to each other."

Did we ever. —R.C. Baker

"What Goes On?"
will be published in 2015,
in an Italian anthology
exploring Lou Reed's
cultural influence worldwide.