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Lou Reed, 1975,
photographed by
Mick Rock



ADDICTED TO LOW

How Lou Reed sold me heroin in the 1970s

BY R.C. BAKER | PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICK ROCK

“I was talking to Lou Reed the other day, and he said that the first Velvet Underground record sold only 30,000 copies in its first five years. Yet, that was an enormously important record for so many people. I think everyone who bought one of those 30,000 copies started a band!” Thus spake musician/producer Brian Eno, delivering unto the *Los Angeles Times*, on May 23, 1982, one of the most legendary quotes about one of the most legendary rock ’n’ roll albums of all time.

But facts don’t always align with memory, and numbers can’t define artistry. Shortly after Reed died (on October 27, 2013, at age seventy-one), former Warner Bros. Records executive Jeff Gold posted a fascinating piece of memorabilia online — the first two years’ worth of sales figures for *The Velvet Underground and Nico*, the inaugural album from the band founded by Reed and multi-instrumentalist John Cale. Released fifty years ago this past March, the record con-

sistently ranks among the top tier of best rock ’n’ roll album lists and actually did better with the public than Reed remembered: In slightly less than two years it had sold, according to the royalty invoice Gold unearthed, 58,476 copies in the U.S.

Not Beatles or Stones numbers, to be sure — or the Monkees, who outsold those British behemoths combined for the number one U.S. spot in 1967 — but a respectable base for the career of a quintessential New Yorker.

Lou Reed is one of two reasons I live in New York City. (The other is painting.) When I was fourteen years old, living in Baltimore, 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 track — “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



Reed's contact sheet from photographer Mick Rock's studio in London, 1975



KODAK SAFETY FILM



KODAK SAFETY FILM



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KODAK SAFETY FILM





© Mick Rock

Reed and Warhol at the launch party for the *Rock and Roll Heart* album, New York, 1976

surely as if Reed had been peddling smack on the street corner.

The next day I walked to a local Korvettes department store and bought the only Velvets album to be found in their big Formica bins, the double-LP concert recording 1969: *The Velvet Underground Live*. The older teenager behind the register whistled at the raised miniskirt on the cover, adding, “That’s the good shit!” This convinced me, if I needed additional proof, that the Velvets were beyond cool. The caustic psychedelia of the live 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 Seventies, I began to pay closer attention to the lyrics and realized that the gritty ecstasy of the music was actually quite earthbound, and all the more compelling for it. The mad freedom of “I’m Waiting for the 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 drag queens and hustlers — were as yet

beyond my experience; plus, I was a teetotaler amid the cornucopia of substances that was Seventies America. But Lou’s music mainlined a cultural contact high completely in tune with my passion for painting, underground comix, and head-shop graphics.

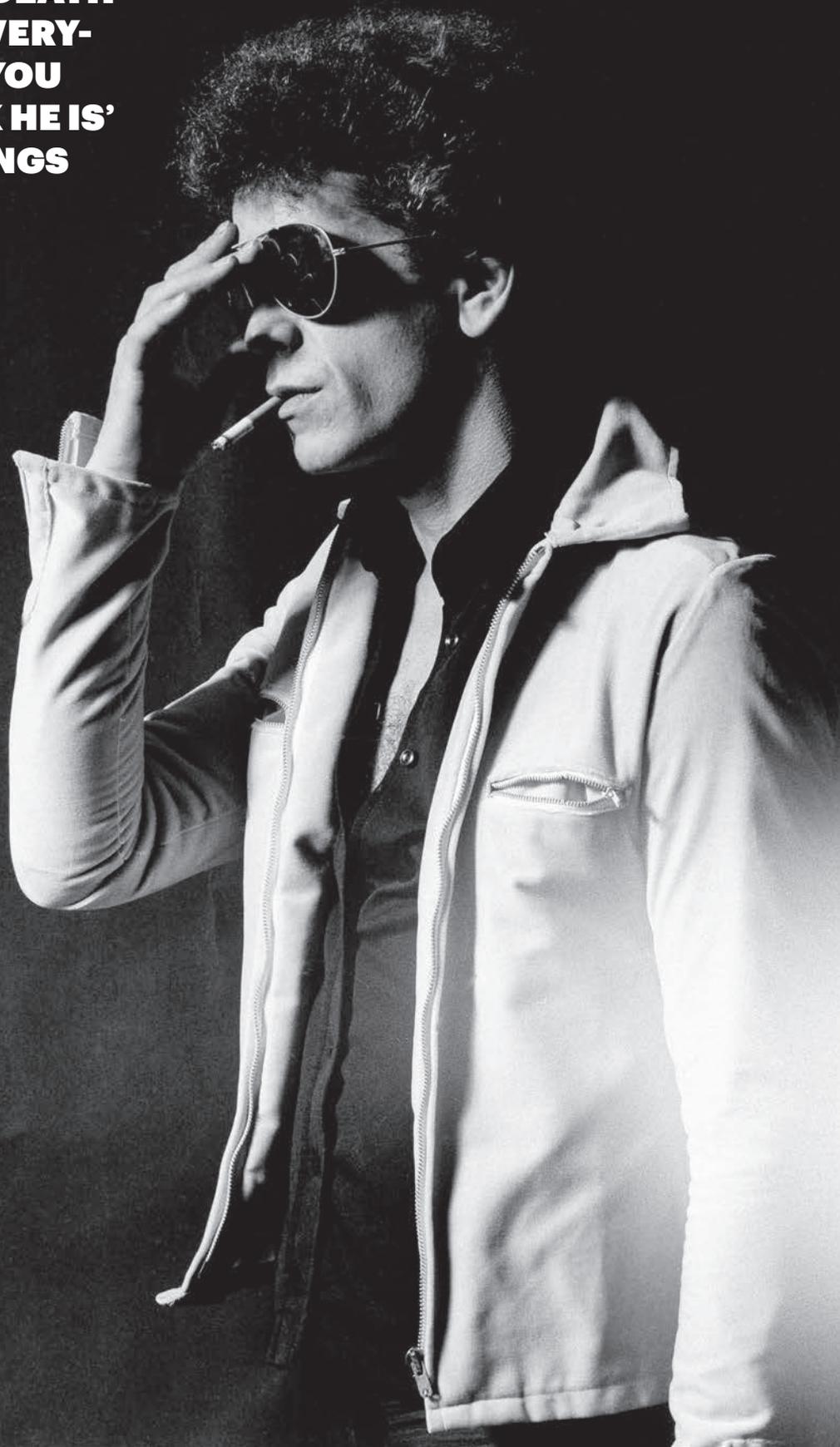
In my mid-twenties I moved to New York City. Everywhere I looked I saw Manhattan through Lou’s eyes: AIDS victims, corrupt politicians, callous cops, homeless Vietnam vets — all characters that would appear on his heartfelt 1989 album, *New York*, a musical novella combining humor and squalor, humanity 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* for more than a quarter-century, and for much of that time, our offices were two blocks from the hallowed spot where the Dom once sat. Often, when grabbing lunch and threading my way through the blankets, spread out over the sidewalk, that offered for sale used boomboxes, cassette tapes, and toaster ovens — all of it 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 writhing under cracking whips.

Reed was twenty-five when he masterminded that first Velvets album — he wrote all the lyrics and most of the music — and this past March, on what would have been his seventy-fifth birthday, the

New York Public Library announced the acquisition of his archive from his wife, musician and performance artist Laurie Anderson. Don Fleming, the archivist in charge of the more than two hundred boxes of Reed’s business papers, personal correspondence, photos, recordings on various media (some unreleased, a few sealed), and other clues to a life, says Anderson’s first thought was, “I want it all online — everything for everyone just to be able to enjoy it.” Fleming explained that such a project would take years, and that the most pressing goal was to find a home that could properly maintain and preserve such an important slice of cultural history. (Fleming is no stranger to the vicissitudes of music history. In addition to serving as the archivist for folk music preservationist Alan Lomax, he has performed in a number of bands, including the Velvet Monkeys and Half Japanese, and has been a record producer for acts as disparate as Sonic Youth, Alice Cooper, and Nancy Sinatra.)

Just a few nuggets from Reed’s archives (which will be opened to the public sometime next year) can summon raucous aural memories and trigger unexpected cultural connections. Reed could be prickly — one contract collected among his papers stipulates that promoters provide the star’s roadies with “one case of Coca-Cola (no other soft drink will be accepted)” — and sometimes could simply be a prick. That’s the implication of a list attributed to an anonymous member of Reed’s road crew: “The Ten Commandments of a Rock and Roll

**'LOU REED IS A
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— LESTER BANGS**



Band (according to Lou): 1. Subjugate the lessers on staff. 2. Instill division in the crew thru gossip and innuendo. 3. If there's a wrong note, blame the nearest technician. 4. Post-date all checks. 5. Make sure per diem [sic] is the wrong currency. 6. Always stray from set-list....9. Always order 12 person bus for a 14 person crew...." But a lime-green sweater-vest in the collection, adorned with clashing red portraits of Reed from the cover of his 1972 *Transformer* album, is a literal reminder that it is exactly the stark contrasts between his taciturn persona and his beautiful musical hooks that define his sui generis catalog. *Transformer's* "Perfect Day," with its sweet string section, is a perfect example of the flip side of Lou, beginning as the tale of a couple drinking sangria in the park, meandering to the zoo, and taking in a movie before wandering into melancholy at the end: "Just a perfect day/You made me forget myself/I thought I was/Someone else, someone good."

A newcomer to the legend of Lou might be taken aback at a concert photo of the musician (with a close-cropped bottle-blond 'do) apparently shooting up onstage, accompanied by the headline "Let Us Now Praise Famous Death Dwarves." Yet maybe the odd relic will initiate a Google search exposing this newbie to a PDF of ten yellowed pages from the March 1975 issue of *Creem* magazine — exuberant music critic Lester Bangs's knockdown, drag-out interview with a game Reed. Bangs prefaced the piece with the claim "Lou Reed is a completely depraved pervert and pathetic death dwarf and everything else you want to think he is. On top of that he's a liar, a wasted talent, an artist continually in flux, and a huckster selling pounds of his own flesh. A panderer living off the dumbbell nihilism of a seventies generation that doesn't have the energy to commit suicide." The discovery of such coruscating criticism — or a reminder to reread it in the Bangs collection *Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung* — is just the result archivists crave.

For those seeking a glimpse of Lou's gentler side, there are photos by Mick Rock of the "pathetic death dwarf" adopting a puppy. There is also a picture from Reed's high school yearbook, which ran with the caption "Tall, dark-haired Lou likes basketball, music, and naturally, girls." Indeed, one friend scrawled, "Sleez' — To the guy who could be called Freeport's gigolo" in blue ink near the clean-cut Lou's photo. Lou was born in Brooklyn, but his family had moved to the suburbs of Long Island by the time he was nine. While he was in college, he was subjected to electroshock treatments, an attempt to address his increasingly moody demeanor; there has also been speculation that his family was concerned he was gay. But Lou's sister has movingly written that their "blazing liberal" parents were simply acting on poor advice from a doctor, who'd told them extreme measures might improve his "de-

pressed, weird, anxious, and avoidant" nature.

This mix of "sleez," as it were, with emotional and physical violence came to the fore in the songs on *The Velvet Underground and Nico*. Reed, Cale, and "chanteuse" Nico offered listeners tales of urban debauchery: the "white boy" who feels "sick and dirty, more dead than alive," and so heads to Harlem to score heroin in "I'm Waiting for the Man"; the "whiplash girlchild in the dark" who stars in the ode to sadomasochism "Venus in Furs"; the "poor girl" who will wear a

LOU SUFFERED NO FOOLS. NEW YORK IS A HARD TOWN, AND HE EXPECTED EVEN THE LOSERS TO CARRY THEIR WEIGHT.

"costume fit for one who sits and cries" in "All Tomorrow's Parties." Warhol's famous peelable banana graphic graced the front cover; photos on the back featured leopard-skin patterns and polka dots projected onto band members' faces, evoking those Exploding Plastic Inevitable multimedia extravaganzas.

Amid the Billy Name photos and quotes from such avant-garde luminaries as the *Voice's* Jonas Mekas — "[The Velvet Underground] remains the most dramatic expression of the contemporary generation" — printed on the album's gatefold cover, an observation from the *Chicago Daily News* might have caught a prospective buyer's eye: "Warhol's brutal assemblage — non-stop horror show....To experience it is to be brutalized, helpless — you're in any kind of horror you want to imagine, from police state to mad house. Eventually the reverberations in your ears stop. But what do you do with what you still hear in your brain? The flowers of evil are in full bloom with the Exploding Plastic Inevitable."

You'd buy it, right?

Next month marks another Velvet Underground golden anniversary: the recording of *White Light/White Heat*, which, legend has it, took only two days. If the first album spelunked the demimonde, this second ground further redlined the decadence meter — Reed described the lead character of the seventeen-and-a-half-minute "Sister Ray" as "a transvestite smack dealer. The situation is a bunch of drag queens taking some sailors home with them, shooting up on smack, and having this orgy when the police appear." The album is serrated by feedback and rimed with dissonance, chockablock with Cale's seesawing organ, Maureen "Mo" Tucker's clattering drums, Sterling Morrison's and Reed's pugnacious guitars. Few lyricists could reach back to their own youthful forays under the electrodes as Reed

did for "Lady Godiva's Operation" — "Shaved and hairless what once was SCREAMING/Now lies silent and almost SLEEPING/The brain must have gone away" — yet the pretty, undulating melody reveals his apprenticeship crafting knockoffs of Top 40 songs for Pickwick Records a few years earlier. For all the fuzz and Reed's mordant vocals, one can still sing along with this album. (Well, maybe it's tough to keep up with the rabid, single-take improvisations of "Sister Ray" and John Cale's cadaverous monotone on "The Gift.")

After several years on the road with Warhol — they'd parted ways earlier in that tumultuous year of 1967, with Reed also giving the boot to Nico — the Velvets considered themselves a live band and wanted to capture their onstage bedlam in the studio. They played so loud and raw that the engineer complained, "You can't do it — all the needles are on red."

"Just do the best you can" was the band's answer; many years later Reed told an interviewer, "It's aggressive, yes. But it's not aggressive-bad. This is aggressive, going to God." Inspired by hearing *White Light/White Heat* burning through the late-night ether, I went to New York instead. Over the decades I listened to many more of Lou's paeans to Gotham and came to understand how passionately he believed in Sixties ideals of tolerance — even for all the hookers, hustlers, junkies, and dealers of the five boroughs. That said, Lou 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 "Here's a toast to all that's good/And here's a toast to hate," from 1983's "The Last Shot." Lou wasn't afraid to gaze into the dark side, because he understood it to be as much a part of our humanity as the openness he praises in his biggest hit: "New York City is the place where they say/Hey babe, take a walk on the wild side."

It's no surprise that Lou's chiaroscuro visions entranced rebels of all stripes. In 1990 he traveled to Prague to interview Václav Havel for *Musician* magazine. The dissident playwright had become Czechoslovakia's president after the Communist government collapsed in 1989, during the Velvet Revolution. Although that name was coincidental, referring to the relatively bloodless changeover of power, the VU would have been part of the mix of Western rock music broadcast into Eastern Europe during the Cold War by such stations as Radio

Luxembourg — rock 'n' roll as propaganda for the West's sybaritic freedoms.

In his introduction, Lou wrote about the 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." When he and Havel were in a local nightclub, the president took out a small book of Lou's lyrics, which had been secretly translated into Czech during the Communist era. "There were only two hundred 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." The archives at the NYPL include a 2003 fax from Havel thanking Reed for some books the musician had sent him. The former revolutionary signed off with a heart doodle under his signature.

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," for which the ethereal jazz vocalist had provided backup on Lou's 1992 *Magic and Loss* album. Then came an encore duet on "Satellite of Love," Scott levitating that bittersweet ballad into a heavenly hymn.

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 NYC 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 Sixties, and that radio was middle-aged, and our own epoch's digital cacophony was no more than an inchoate fever dream in the mind of Steve Jobs.

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, I took a friend to 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. "Lord," I thought, "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.



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Clockwise from top: David Bowie, Iggy Pop, and Reed at the Dorchester Hotel in London, 1972; Warhol at the Factory, 1977; Reed and Nico at the Blakes Hotel in London, 1975.



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