

The Story of Pop

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POP IN 40 WEEKLY PARTS

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PART 21
30p
EVERY THURSDAY

AUSTRALIA 80c NEW ZEALAND 80c SOUTH AFRICA 80c NORTH AMERICA \$1

Lou Reed

Out of the Underground

"Good evening. We're called the Velvet Underground," Lou Reed introducing a Velvet's set at Max's Kansas City: "You're allowed to dance in case you don't know. This is called 'I'm Waiting For The Man', a tender folk song from the '50s — about love between man and subway. I'm sure you'll enjoy it."

Lou Reed on songwriting: "I write through the eyes of somebody else. I'm always checking out people I know, and then I write songs about them, and then I *become* them. When I'm not doing anything I become kinda empty."

Lou Reed is in many ways music's man of the '70s. He had the good fortune to realise this in 1966 and still be around in 1972 when the rest of the world finally caught up. Like his close friend David Bowie, Reed managed to weld together meaningful lyrics, down-the-line rock, and an intensely theatrical stage presence. All this, and as well, he at last managed to throw all the cloying 'underground' image which had for so long prevented his music from reaching 'overground' audiences.

The moment Andy Warhol sprang the Velvet Underground on an unsuspecting and unprepared world, Reed was branded weird, outrageous and decadent. He is.

Middle-Class Graduate

Contrary to the public image, he wasn't born and bred in a New York street gang. His childhood was spent in the midst of a middle-class family who supplied his every need, as the saying goes. When he did move from New York State to the city it was to the university not the subway scene. He emerged with a B.A.; a love-hate relationship with the city; and a powerful curiosity kindled by the scene springing up in New York in the mid-'60s.

Reed said on 'Loaded', the final Velvet Underground album, "It's the beginning of our new age." Neon was everyone's favourite colour, Jackson Pollock and Allen Ginsberg were *passé*, and the black leather, bi-sexual drug culture was coming to the surface. Reed, straight out



Roger Perry

of school, was working as a professional songwriter — hammering out a couple of surfing songs before lunch and, as an extra, a couple of hot-rod songs and a ballad.

For Lou it was waiting time, a time that ended when he wrote a song called 'The Ostrich'. That same day he picked up a copy of the *Herald Tribune*, turned to the fashion pages and discovered that ostrich feathers were in vogue — it was the cue he needed.

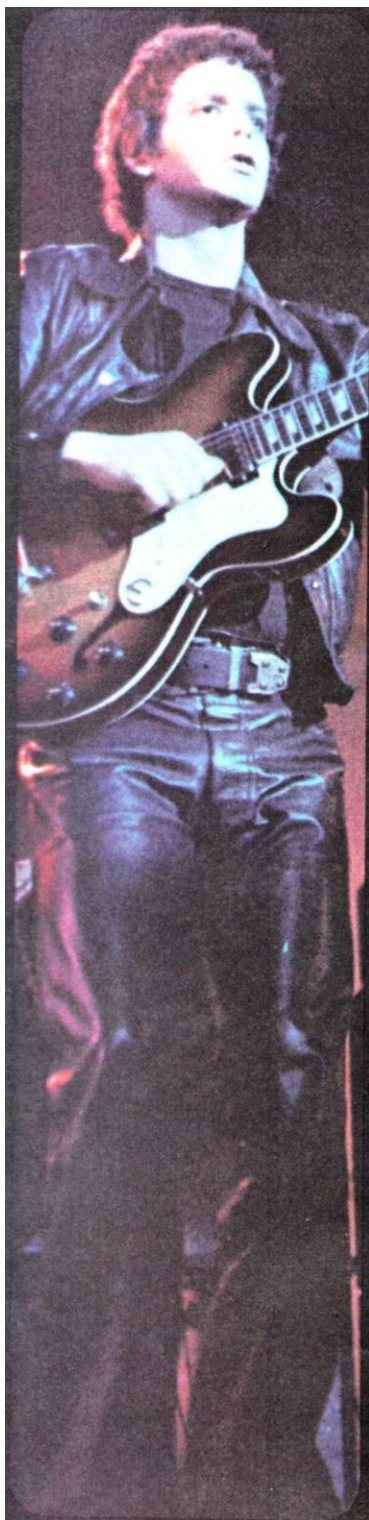
He called up *Vogue* magazine, told them about his song, and arranged a photo session. In 1965, young musicians with long hair were still good value and *Vogue* jumped, just like Reed knew they would. Now all he had to do was find a band. And the musicians he called up for the photo session included a young expatriate Welshman called John Cale. The group quickly recorded the song and even took a trip to Philadelphia to lay it down for the *Dick Clark Show*. Nothing came of the song, but for Reed and Cale it was the

inspiration for the Velvet Underground.

For Reed to have his own band was nothing new. The first one was the Shades, put together when he was just 14 and the lead singer needed a stool to reach the microphone. But with Cale, Lou for the first time progressed beyond the teenage hoodlum era. With Mo Tucker, Sterling Morrison and later Nico, Reed in fact formulated a whole new school of rock.

The legend came later. First the Velvet Underground had to work through their apprenticeship. Their first gig — in a New Jersey high school — netted them 75 dollars, and half their audience walked out on them. Then came the break. They began to play a sort of residency at the Café Bizarre, attracting an audience of New York's avant-garde. One night a member of that audience was film director/producer Barbara Rubin, who was from then on constantly hustling her friends down to see the leather band who played with feedback 'like they'd been suckled on it'.

One of those friends was poet Gerard



Malanga, who just happened to be a close friend of New York's latest and brightest superstar, Andy Warhol. Malanga flipped to the band, and as Warhol was running a week of films at the Film-makers' Cinematheque, Malanga decided it would be a good idea to have these weird wonders playing behind the films. He convinced Andy, and the Velvet Underground was launched.

The group soon went on to become part of Andy Warhol's *Plastic Exploding Inevitable*, a complete art form which struck at all the senses. That this sort of thing could probably never occur again can in no way detract from what was in the mid-'60s an extraordinary event – mobiles floating everywhere, and members of the Warhol troupe moving round the audience, infiltrating as many minds as possible. Reed and the band played their brash, electric music dressed in black leather and wearing shades to avoid damaging their eyes on the light-show which played all over their bodies.

The impact of the event made it a success. The '70s would no doubt label the Velvet Underground and the whole *Plastic Inevitable* scene as mere high-energy rock & roll – and that's what it was – but then even the most freaked of New York crowds viewed it as a unique occurrence – a *happening*.

Incredible Material

For a time, it was interesting enough for Lou. Then it started to become just another job. Nico split, and Reed and Cale decided it was time that they and Warhol parted company. By now they had a recording contract, and the Velvet Underground were becoming a name in their own right. Both Lou and John were writing some incredible material – 'Heroin' (which earned Reed the title 'Drug Writer of the Year'), 'I'm Waiting For The Man', 'Black Angel's Death Song', 'White Light/White Heat' and the ultimate deviant-electronic extravaganza, 'Sister Ray'.

Maybe with that song the Underground reached their first peak. Cale thought so. It wasn't long after that he split along with Morrison, to be replaced by Doug Yule on the Velvets' third album.

Reed's songwriting by now was finding new levels. The power strumming of the early days gave way to a more gentle, sympathetic style typified by 'Pale Blue Eyes' and 'Candy'. Lou Reed had come of age. By the time the fourth Velvets' album, 'Loaded' hit the stands, a whole new audience was prepared to accept that the Warhol factory had spawned something concrete.

Reed himself never liked 'Loaded'. He thought the production of the album had ruined some of his finest songs, but despite his disapproval the album sold widely – and with songs like 'Sweet Jane',

Lou Reed sings on stage. Below: The Velvet Underground, with Lou Reed (far right), drummer Maureen Tucker, Sterling Morrison and Doug Yule.

'New Age', 'Sweet Nuthin'', 'Train Goin' Round The Bend' and 'Lonesome Cowboy Bill' has since become a collector's classic.

About the same time as the release of 'Loaded', Lou Reed decided that he had taken the Underground to the end of the line, and in the middle of a short residency at Max's Kansas City he picked up his guitar and walked out. Just like that.

Underground Collapse

It took several months for him to extricate himself from the legal and contractual mess, but August 23rd 1970 was the last Underground gig. The band carried on but it wasn't the same. Lou Reed was the Underground and New York knew it, nicknaming the remnants the Velvetens.

For Lou it was a time for wandering, resting, and finally working out his future. Warhol, Cale, Morrison and now the Underground itself had all passed on, leaving Reed finally to become himself. He never stopped writing, and by the time the business complications of his exit had died down he had enough material for his first solo album. So he signed with RCA, and used Richard Robinson as producer on the originally titled 'Lou Reed' album. Strangely, New York's number one son came to London to record it, using musicians like Steve Howe, Rick Wakeman, Caleb Quaye and Clem Cattini.

The album eventually appeared early in 1972 – when Bowie was beginning to steal the headlines with his own particular brand of decadence – and though it never became a top-seller, in many ways it was Reed's finest album.

To successfully write a song geared totally around the phrase 'I Love You' is a minor miracle. Reed did it as a throwaway. The album included the masterpiece 'Berlin', which Reed himself liked so much that he re-worked it as the title track for his third solo album which appeared in September 1973. As sophisticated a piece as any rock & roller could have attempted, it's a concise statement of Reed's relationship with the world:

*'In Berlin by the Wall
You were five feet ten inches tall
It was very nice
Candlelight and Dubonnet on ice'*

© Sunbury Music

The simple chord structures, the uncluttered, direct arrangements, and those lyrics. Words that retained simplicity but still operated on several levels. As Lou himself said, he thought of his albums as a series of chapters in a novel which when heard all together would 'make huge sense'.

With the solo album, he had moved away from his 'underground novel' and started on a new, improved version. 'Lou Reed' starts out with a hard rocker, 'I Can't Stand It', which those who read between the lines saw as a comment on the end of the Underground. The new improved, sophisticated Reed had also turned for the first time to production numbers like

'Ocean' and 'Berlin', while still finding room for 'Love Makes You Feel', harking back to the early days of punk rock. It's a classic album, but one that didn't satisfy Lou. The electricity was missing and he was soon back in the studio – again in London, but this time without Richard Robinson.

The superstar trip still held its attractions for Lou. He had met David Bowie during his first trip to the States, had listened to his music and decided that the young Englishman was doing a lot . . . and doing it right. For Bowie it was an experience too, for despite his occasional protestations, Reed appeared like the model on whom David had based Bowie. With this sort of connection the two of them *had* to work together, and the product of their combined labours, 'Transformer', proved how closely-knit the two were. Bowie and his guitarist Mick Ronson produced the set, which included 'Walk On The Wild Side' – a track which RCA decided to release as a single. It *had* to be a hit, and after six months as a 'sleeper' it finally made it to the British Top 10. The legend was finally out in the open.

Meanwhile, Lou had been busy on the stage with a tour of Britain, which brought constant rave reviews. Backing him were four young New Yorkers: Vinny Laporta and Eddie Reynolds (guitars), Bobby Resigno (bass) and Scottie Clark (drums), and together with Reed's superb rhythm guitar structures they produced some great live music.

New Sound

Typically, Reed, the perfectionist, wasn't satisfied, and during a later tour of Europe in summer 1973 he took with him an entirely different bunch of musicians and aimed for an organ-dominated sound. As always, Lou Reed moves on. Still slightly podgy, still wearing leathers and ghostly white make-up, and still looking for the next opening. In 1974 he released a live album, 'Rock & Roll Animal' and another solo album, 'Sally Can't Dance'; 1975 has brought the 'Lou Reed Live' album and another, 'Coney Island Babies', is scheduled for spring/summer 1975.

One thing's for sure. Long after the rock & roll culture is dead and gone, the words of Lou Reed will still have a relevance and a beauty of their own. That Lou Reed is a unique talent, few can disagree – the Velvet Underground has spawned a whole new culture. Bowie, in many ways close to Lou, is the one who managed to corner the commercial market, and has consequently taken most of the glory. The '70s have seen Bowie/Reed-style clothing, hair, attitudes and, if you like, plain bold, gay campy. Hence if Bowie and Reed have done one thing it is to show that there is a place for those who cannot be slotted. They have gone one better. Not only are their sounds powerful, but they have influenced as much as they have entertained. More important – their talent is undoubtedly enormous.