

SEVEN-DAY TELEVISION AND ENTERTAINMENT

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spend a night with
The Velvet Underground

SATURDAY DECEMBER 11-FRIDAY DECEMBER 17



Some Velvet evening

MICHAEL BRACEWELL previews a night with The Velvet Underground

It is widely considered that since their formation in the mid 1960s, the Velvet Underground has remained the most notorious, most copied, and most influential rock group, ever. What is even more remarkable about the group's legendary status is that they only survived intact until 1970, they only released four LPs and played only a minuscule number of concerts — most notably in hippy-ridden Los Angeles, where they got right up the noses of the resident flower children.

The Velvet Underground were smart and bloody-minded. They wore drab, black clothes and wrap-around shades; Andy Warhol projected porn films and screen tests onto them while they were playing. Their music veered from bitter-sweet lullabies to 20-minute slabs of minimalist sensory assault.

When, after 23 years, they reformed for last summer's European tour, there were those who thought the risks too great. Reunion concerts are usually sad, flimsy affairs — self-parodic at best and often little more than a death knell. As tension began to mount, rumours of the worst kind proliferated; there was going to be a live LP, there was going to be a video, there was going to be a souvenir box set — there was going to be a TV special.

And now, in the bleak mid-winter, that TV special has turned up. It is a suitably nocturnal event, comprising of a documentary about the VU (with new inter-

views from Cale, Reed, Tucker and Morrison), recent concert footage, and a promo for the first new VU song since God knows when, Coyote.

The concert material from this year's tour, entitled Velvet Redux MCMXCIII, is a lucid account of the VU's enduring strength, and their ability to create a unique wall of sound out of — as Lou Reed once put it — “four chords and an attitude”.

For many people, it was little Mo Tucker who was the heroine of these concerts. Now in youthful middle-age and having worked in an office for nearly 20 years, Maureen Tucker keeps up a constant, near tribal, drum-beat which has no equal. Her performance on *Femme Fatale* can still scare the living daylights out of anyone unwise enough to think that rock can't be frightening and sexy at the same time. Lou Reed called her drumming “the landing strip”, and if that beat is where the VU land, it's also where they take off.

Shortly after midnight, this feast of feedback and leather begins to get really interesting — or really boring, if you're a Warhol purist and subscribe to his belief that boring things are really great. The worldwide TV premiere of *The Chelsea Girls* (1966), directed by Warhol and remastered for this event by Paul Morrissey, takes us through to 4.20 in the morning.

The *Chelsea Girls* is one of Warhol's most accessible movies, possessing the added glamour of the Velvet's erstwhile chanteuse, Nico in a starring role. Despite the claims of cynics, Nico was a truly remarkable personality who seemed to bridge the cultural divide between traditional sil-

ver screen sophistication and the blurred, confrontational world of underground art and music. The soundtrack to *The Chelsea Girls*, recorded by Nico and John Cale, remains one of the most hauntingly lonely records ever made.

For those of us who are still awake, there is a second chance to see the film of Lou Reed and John Cale's Warhol tribute, *Songs For Drella*, at 4.20am. By this time, the audience will have divided into those who will stay tuned-in to the bitter end, and those who are dying to play a Slade LP and watch repeats of *On The Buses*.

Songs For Drella is stark and moving, recounting the biography of Warhol through a sequence of narratively chronological songs. This was the project that brought Cale and Reed back together again, proving above all else the power and sensitivity of John Cale as a vocalist.

The night concludes with what promises to be the most interesting film, a short documentary of the Velvet Underground recording their classic paean to paranoia, *Sunday Morning*. This is the VU at their best, filmed in black and white and still far cooler than any of their subsequent and myriad imitators.

All in all, *Peel Slowly And See* is a marvellous idea, bravely executed. It's a shame that valuable space is wasted by the likes of U2 droning on about influence, but you can't have everything. Even if you remain unconvinced, I heartily recommend you either watch or tape this selection of films. One day you will get the point.

● *Peel Slowly And See*
Saturday 11 December, 10pm, C4