

Infamy To Inspiration



The Life and Times of Lou Reed

By Kevin Klenkel

The Velvet Underground's first album sold 30,000 copies in five years of its release. The album has gone on to become one of the staples of rock music and a critical classic on all accounts. Lou Reed was the mastermind that birthed punk rock, glam rock, industrial music and feedback as an instrument. Though his albums sales were meager, his fingers reached far beyond the airwaves and his hand expanded the parameters of rock 'n' roll from a young man's rebellion to an art form.

Reed picked up the guitar at a very young age, before that he dabbled in piano. He was always an outcast. He remembered his brain being filled up with "lyrics from old rock and roll records where the stuff I learned in school should have been." Reed always wanted to perform music, but it was not until a misguided attempt to help their son that the parents of Lou Reed pushed him to reevaluate his life for all of the wrong reasons. This reevaluation led to several actions and consequences:

some of them were terrible, but they eventually led to his notoriety and critical acclaim.

Reed was attending Syracuse University as a freshman when he returned home complaining of feelings of depression, anxiety and social unresponsiveness. His parents were overwhelmed. The early 60s are now a distant time. They are remembered by some as a time when everything was great, everyone had a job, no one had even heard of Vietnam. But for anyone who wasn't a straight white man, times were tough. No respect—no effort of understanding. As a young Jewish man, Reed's parents agreed that the only logical course of action to help their son was electroconvulsive therapy.

Reed recalled the incident in the 1996 book "Please Kill Me," a history of punk rock. "They put the thing down your throat so you don't swallow your tongue, and they put electrodes on your head. That's what was recommended in Rockland State Hospital to discourage homosexual feelings. The effect is that you lose your memory and become a vegetable." Common risks for ECT include a partic-

ular memory loss known as retrograde amnesia, which is forgetting things that happened before treatment and during treatment as well.

Reed largely blamed his father; he composed a song titled, "Kill Your Sons," where he complains of the effects of the treatment and explains that while he took drugs later for fun he could only remember the chlorpromazine used in treatment and the terrible effects that this had on his immediate health.

Though Reed did go back to Syracuse and finish school he knew that as soon as he finished he would move to New York City and become a musician. His parents' inability to simply talk to him about his feelings and instead hiding behind convention and conservative values, no doubt had a hand in Reed's subject matter in songwriting.

Nineteen sixty-seven was a monumental year in music, it was a year where the "freaks" were gaining popularity as well as the long-hairs and the hippies. Others stuck to conventional pop ballads like Lulu and her hit, "To Sir with Love." A year when all music seemed to portray love, sunshine, and lollipops, "The Velvet Underground & Nico" was a vehicle for Reed's simple and straightforward lyricism to explore themes of the underground. The seedy underbelly of society: drug abuse, prostitution, sadomasochism and sexual deviancy. This was very far from what anyone else was singing about.

Reed chose to address real topics that were not pleasant to bring up in conversation. There was nothing like that before. Perhaps Reed did this as a way to connect with others who had been closeted because of their lifestyle, these songs were reminders—though I may be different from everything and everyone I know; there are others like me. Something that many people would love to receive while going through personal turmoil.

Between the releases of "The Velvet Underground & Nico" through "Transformer," Lou Reed displayed his mastery of music. He penned both the heaviest and most controversial tracks rock music had ever seen as well as the packed dark room ballads that music hadn't seen before or since. While The Beatles were preaching second-hand spirituality with orchestral arrangements, Reed and The Velvets were documenting the underbelly of glamor and true nature of cultural outliers.

Lou was a poet whose lyrics paired perfectly with vocal moans and musical minimalism. There is no doubt that his music will last for eons, his lyricism has the ability to transcend any boundaries. His exploration of heavy themes are more relatable than any pop

song's call for peace, love or unity. The man had the ability to capture pain, self-doubt and self-loathing in a way that was honest and beautiful. His music acts as a guide through the mind of any person who is or has battled with any adversary.

He enjoyed success lightly with the release of his solo album "Transformer," but he made a conscious decision to move away from massive audiences so that he would be able to make music with a shelf life that will stay fresh long after he has passed. "Walk on the Wild Side," his hit with more airplay than anything else in his catalogue had massive appeal while still diving into depths of debauchery that went highly unnoticed. Everyone remembers the melody and the bass line that would later be picked up by A Tribe Called Quest for "Can I Kick It." What they forget is that Reed's simple and straightforward lyrics continually explored the dark side of urban America that would not be touched again until the punk movement and hip-hop, respectively.

For many, Reed has been placed on a pedestal, or more commonly upon Mount Olympus watching his creations for which he bore no claim. He is often credited

with birthing the Punk Rock movement of the U.S. and the U.K. In the most "punk rock" way he responded by saying that he refused to take credit for what was mostly junk. That attitude is more indicative of punk rock than can be found in any of the artists today whom carry the banner "punk."

Unlike his contemporaries who were more concerned with making commercial albums, he wrote songs as poems and albums as novels. He included a musical accompaniment that would either heighten or conflict the poetry that he sang out like a moan. His ballads stack up next to anyone. "Pale Blue Eyes" is possibly the saddest and most genuine love song ever recorded.

Reed's contribution to music has reached far beyond anything he could have ever expected. All four of his albums with The Velvet Underground are on Rolling Stone's list of 500 greatest albums of all time, along with two of his solo efforts. That means for rock music as a whole, his albums comprise more than 1 percent of all-time albums ever recorded. It is well-deserved: the way that Reed made music has been and will continue to be copied as long as guitars, ears, vocal cords and pain exist.

Reed eventually found peace in his music and life. His music from 40 years ago is still fresh today. This man is a beacon of hope for anyone who has ever been an outcast, but simply wanted to be honest.

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