

The Seminal Velvet Underground

By Jim DeRogatis

I. Introduction

“I have always believed that rock ’n’ roll comes down to myth. There are no ‘facts.’” — Lester Bangs, 1981

“I remember when the Velvet Underground came out, and very few people were interested in them at all. And for a certainty I knew that they were going to become one of the most interesting groups, and that there would be a time when it wouldn’t be the Beatles up there and then all these other groups down there, it would be a question of attempting to assess the relative values of the Beatles and the Velvet Underground as equals.” — Brian Eno, Punk magazine, 1976

“Where does this album fit in?... I think it’s great rock ’n’ roll. I think Alexander the Great, Lord Byron, Jack the Ripper, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Albert Einstein, James Dean, and other rock ’n’ roll stars would agree with me.” — Elliott Murphy, liner notes to 1969: The Velvet Underground Live with Lou Reed (1974)

Such is the enduring influence of Lou Reed, John Cale, Sterling Morrison, and Maureen Tucker that it essentially has become a part of their collective name—they are *the Seminal Velvet Underground*, thank you very much—though in addition to standing as one of rock’s hoariest clichés, that phrase also slights Tucker’s role as one of rock’s instrumental gender pioneers. Fine points like that hardly matter though in the mad competition to hyperbolize the band’s genius. Witness another, even more resonant quote from that erudite musical philosopher Eno, though this one could be apocryphal (I’ve seen variations of it repeated dozens of times, but I’ve never found the original in any of his voluminous writings or interviews): “Only five thousand people ever bought a Velvet Underground album, but every single one of them started a band.”

Mull that over for a second and you’ll realize that it’s pure hyperbole: All of those people can’t possibly have formed bands, because many of them clearly became *rock critics*! Not to mention the fact that by now, we’ve endured many more than five thousand shameless Velvets clones and unapologetic V.U. namedroppers. But again, such distinctions don’t seem to matter when so much praise has been heaped upon the band that new initiates and longtime fans alike both can be forgiven for thinking that the group descended from the heavens fully formed, instantly brilliant, and utterly without peers—or, more appropriately as the case may be, that it emerged on the IRT direct from that other afterworld down below, with the musicians’ foreboding black wardrobes and sheltering Ray-Bans still smoldering from the fire and brimstone they endured while forging their own Robert Johnson-style pact for musical immortality with the biggest, baddest Record Company Suit of all time (and I don’t mean Jimmy Iovine).

Yes, this is exactly the sort of thing that Lester Bangs was getting at when he noted the power of myths in rock ’n’ roll, and there is no bigger myth than that of *the Seminal Velvet Underground*—created in large part by Bangs himself, the band’s most eloquent and prolific champion in print, though the late great rock critic also spent a

considerable portion of his too-short career as the Boswell to Lou Reed's Samuel Johnson, trying to illuminate the facts that led to Reed's biggest artistic triumphs and most spectacular disasters as well as churning out thousands of words in the struggle to figure out what it all meant, only to conclude, not long before his death in 1982, that "Lou Reed is my own hero principally because he stands for all the most fucked-up things I could ever possibly conceive of—which probably only shows the limits of my imagination."

Poor Lester: He took it all so seriously—his was a life not only saved by rock 'n' roll, but quite possibly also claimed by it. "Sometimes when people get obsessed with your work it's really dangerous for both of you," Reed told me when I asked him about Bangs in 1991. "You can disappoint someone like that so easily when they find out just how human you are." True enough, but it also is true that an artist can inspire people even more when they realize that he or she fundamentally is just like them—not a god, not a genius, just another smart, talented, ambitious, but fucked-up kid from Long Island. That was a central theme for Andy Warhol throughout the 1960s: Anyone can be a Superstar, if only they have the desire (and if only for fifteen minutes). "The Pop idea was that anybody could do anything. So naturally, we're all trying to do it all," he said. It also is what punk rock began saying shortly after the Velvets, and what it has been saying ever since: Anybody can do it, if only they have the imagination.

In the end, knowing the facts doesn't cheapen the accomplishments of the Velvet Underground, it informs them, and knowing the context in which the group operated doesn't make it seem less unique, but more extraordinary, for being both a part of and a reaction against its times. Plus the facts make for a hell of a good story, and it begins, per the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, at Beth El Hospital in Brooklyn, New York, on March 2, 1942, with the birth of Lewis Alan Reed.

II. From Freeport to Pickwick via Syracuse

*"Then one fine mornin' she puts on a New York station
She couldn't believe what she heard at all
She started dancin' to that fine fine music
You know her life was saved by rock 'n' roll."*

—Lou Reed, "Rock 'n' Roll"

The man who would become simply Lou Reed was the first child born to Sidney George Rabinowitz, a New Yorker who anglicized his name and became a tax accountant, and the former Toby Futterman, a beauty queen turned housewife. The couple would have a second child, Elizabeth, better known as Bunny, when their son was five, and they would move their family from Brooklyn to the middle-class American-dream suburb of Freeport, Long Island, when Lewis was eleven. Like many Jewish mothers, Toby would dote on and sometimes smother her son, and like many Jewish fathers, Sid would goad and needle the boy with an acerbic sense of humor while fully expecting that he grow up to run the family business.

According to his biographers, the most prolific of whom has been the tireless Victor Bockris, Reed was subject to wild mood swings as a child, and these would continue throughout his life, to the point where those around him could never be sure

which Lou Reed they'd be dealing with on a spectrum from warm and encouraging friend to cruel and egotistical bully. He attended Freeport High School, where he had a busy inner life filling notebooks with poetry and short stories, but where he also participated in sports, including track and field (specializing in running and pole vaulting) and basketball. Honing a theatrical rebellious streak, he convinced his parents to buy him a motorcycle, the better to emulate Marlon Brando in *The Wild One*; became fascinated with Beat poetry and New York's underground gay culture ("I always thought that the one way kids had of getting back at their parents was to do this gender business: It was only kids trying to be outrageous," he said years later, when he seemed dedicated to erasing the history of his bisexuality), and developed a lifelong obsession with rock 'n' roll, first as a devoted fan of the sounds coming over his AM radio at age twelve, and later as a budding guitarist playing with various ad hoc groups that performed at high school variety shows and odd gigs around town.

At sixteen Reed recorded some of the first songs he'd written with a combo called the Jades, and the aptly named single "So Blue" backed with "Leave Her for Me" was released in 1958 on the small Time Records label. "Our big moment came when [renowned New York DJ] Murray the K played it, but he was sick and someone else stood in," Reed recalled years later. "He played it once. I got royalties of seventy-eight cents. We were still in school. We'd open supermarkets, shopping centers, things like that. We had glitter jackets. It was what was called style—later on, people would call it punk, but at that time what we meant by punk was a pusher: 'He's just a fucking punk!'"

Troubled by his behavior, in 1959 Sid and Toby Reed followed the advice of a doctor and submitted their seventeen-year-old son to eight weeks of electro-shock therapy at Creedmore State Psychiatric Hospital, after which he entered therapy. It backfired: Lewis emerged even more resentful of his parents and convinced that he had to get as far away as possible to follow his own path. After briefly attending the uptown campus of New York University in the Bronx, he transferred upstate to the more distant Syracuse University, where he connected with the first of several difficult but inspiring mentors and surrogate fathers, the poet Delmore Schwartz, best known for his 1937 short story, "In Dreams Begin Responsibilities." Slowly drinking himself to death at Syracuse, Schwartz led Reed to believe that he could become a great writer, even though the student never showed the teacher any of his work.

At Syracuse Reed also briefly hosted his own college radio show, spinning a mix of free jazz (heavy on the Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor, and Don Cherry) and R&B (favorites included James Brown and Hank Ballard), and he played in a series of bar bands that sometimes found him more interested in confronting the audience than in making them dance. In the process he made some soon-to-be fortuitous connections, meeting a likeminded guitarist named Sterling Morrison through their mutual friend Jim Tucker. Morrison reportedly was impressed that Reed used his electric guitar to blast screeching noise at the ROTC cadets marching on the green outside his dorm window.

In between classes Reed began to write gritty songs about life in the seedy underworld of Manhattan. He envisioned early versions of "I'm Waiting for the Man" and "Heroin" as the musical equivalent of what some of his favorite writers, Hubert Selby, Jr., and Williams S. Burroughs, had done in *Last Exit to Brooklyn* and *Junkie*. He also wrote wickedly funny and twisted short stories, including one in which an obsessive love-sick "schmuck" mailed himself as a gift to his girlfriend studying in Wisconsin.

With a B.A. in hand Reed returned to his parents' house on Long Island in the summer of 1964, more determined than ever to devote his life to music. Instead of working for his father, he found a job as a house songwriter and staff musician with a cheap, exploitative record company called Pickwick International, a name chosen to enhance the mystique of its quickie British Invasion and Motown knock-offs. Among the songs Reed churned out in the label's no-frills recording studio were derivative tracks such as "Soul City," "Why Don't You Smile," "Tell Mama Not to Cry," and "Cycle Annie." Though he only held the job for five months, until February 1965, it looms large in his mythology: It brought a low-rent Brill Building discipline to his songwriting, and it provided the opportunity for him to meet John Cale.

Born in Garnant, South Wales, on March 9, 1942—a week after Reed was born in Brooklyn three thousand miles away—Cale's father was a coal miner and his mother was a teacher and a piano player. Though she failed to impress upon her son the importance of education—he hated school—his mother did instill a love of music, and this was further encouraged by his maternal uncles, one of whom hosted a radio show on the BBC and another of whom played violin. At thirteen Cale began a long association with the Welsh Youth Orchestra as a viola player, and some of those who heard him considered him a prodigy. Yet it was with the goal of fulfilling his mother's wishes that he enrolled in Goldsmiths' Teachers' College at the University of London in the fall of 1960.

In the end Cale's college years sealed his fate of becoming a musician, since, like Reed with Schwartz, the young Welshman found a mentor: the radical intellectual Cornelius Cardew, who introduced him to the anti-art/anti-commercialism Fluxus Movement. The young viola player was fascinated by the work of John Cage and La Monte Young, classical avant-garde composers who were experimenting with minimalist repetition and atonal drones, and the enthusiastic young Welshman began to correspond with them and with another American composer he admired, Aaron Copland.

Interviewed and endorsed by Copland upon his graduation in London, Cale won a Leonard Bernstein scholarship to the Berkshire Music Center in Tanglewood, Massachusetts, bringing him one step closer to permanently escaping from Wales and moving to Manhattan. He made the most of Tanglewood, networking with another avant-garde giant, Yannis Xenakis; having his picture published in *The New York Times* when he was one of several pianists who performed Cage's more than eighteen-hour epic "Vexations" in September 1963, and eventually linking up with Young's Theatre of Eternal Music, whose members included Terry Riley and Tony Conrad. (Cale and Conrad also formed an offshoot group called the Dream Syndicate.)

With Cage, Cale learned to embrace the unexpected. "He picked up the essential feeling I had that chaos isn't something to be afraid of... His view was that if chaos is the natural state of the universe, then we should accept that as it is, instead of trying to impose some sort of artificial regime on it," he wrote in his autobiography, *What's Welsh for Zen*. With Young and Conrad, he discovered that even the quest for the unexpected can be approached methodically. "The members of the Dream Syndicate, motivated by a scientific and mystical fascination with sound, spent long hours in rehearsals learning to provide sustained meditative drones and chants. Their rigorous style served to discipline me and developed my knowledge of the just intonation system. I also learned to use my viola in a new amplified way which would lead to the powerful droning effect that is so strong in the first two Velvet Underground records."

While working at Pickwick in early 1965, Reed stumbled across a fashion article about how ostrich feathers were all the rage. He quickly wrote a garage-rock stomper celebrating an invented dance craze called “The Ostrich” (“*You bend forward, put your head between your knees/Do the ostrich, do the ostrich*”) which he recorded with a fictitious group called the Primitives. One of Pickwick’s owners, Terry Phillips, thought it could be a hit, and he set out to find some musicians to join Reed in a group to promote the single. Cale, Conrad, and their friend Walter De Maria agreed to take the gig as a lark and were shocked to discover that a key ingredient of the song was what Reed called “Ostrich guitar,” which featured all six strings tuned to the same note—a primitive, rock ’n’ roll version of what they were doing with more structure and classical instrumentation in the Dream Syndicate and the Theatre of Eternal Music.

After a few weekend appearances, when “The Ostrich” failed to dent the pop charts, the Primitives’ gigs dried up and Pickwick moved on to the next piece of product in the pipeline, but a friendship endured between Reed and Cale, and they began to collaborate in the latter’s flat in a slum on Ludlow Street in the Lower East Side. Reed was struck by Cale’s musicianship and Cale admired Reed’s ability to improvise lyrics, but it’s an unfair if popular simplification to say that the Welsh prodigy brought virtuosity and sophisticated avant-garde ideas to the Long Islander’s raw rock ’n’ roll. Reed already was an accomplished musician in his own right and a voracious student of adventurous sounds ranging from free-form jazz to Karlheinz Stockhausen, and though Cale hadn’t played much rock ’n’ roll professionally, he had been gripped by its power since he first heard Elvis Presley as a teenager listening to the BBC. Now he began to help Reed rewrite Syracuse-era songs such as “Heroin” and “I’m Waiting for the Man,” alternating between amplified viola and electric bass as needed, as well as developing new material such as “The Black Angel’s Death Song.”

Cale soon left the classical world behind, and he never looked back. “It was the time of the Beatles,” he wrote. “I stopped working with La Monte and dove into working with Lou.”

To complete their nascent band, Reed recruited Sterling Morrison on second guitar after he’d happened upon his old acquaintance from Syracuse during a chance meeting in the New York subway, and Cale turned to his neighbor, drummer Angus MacLise, who sometimes played hand drums with the Theatre of Eternal Music. The quartet began to do odd gigs, including several at the Café Wha, first under the name the Falling Spikes, and then for a while as the Warlocks (coincidentally, the same name chosen by an early version of the Grateful Dead). When Conrad visited one day carrying a worn paperback about sado-masochistic sex called *The Velvet Underground*, that was the name that finally stuck. “It’s the funniest dirty book I’ve ever read,” Reed said a few years later, in a 1969 interview with *Open City*. “‘Into the murky depths of depravity and debauchery with the Velvet Underground....’ This is too good! I mean, just the name: I love the ring of it.”

In July 1965 the Velvet Underground recorded a demo that included “Heroin,” “Venus in Furs,” “The Black Angel’s Death Song,” and “Wrap Your Troubles in Dreams.” Inspired by some of the adventurous recordings that Cale had recently brought back from a visit to the U.K., including records by the Who and the Kinks, the group thought it might be able to find a home with a label in the U.S. It was all getting to be a bit too crass and commercial for the mystical purist MacLise, who disliked the ideas of

being paid to play music or of having to show up, start, and stop at preordained times. He quit the group, but the problem of his departure quickly was solved when Morrison and Reed turned to the younger sister of their old Syracuse buddy Jim Tucker.

Reed, Cale, Morrison and Maureen Tucker played their first gig together at Summit High School, twenty-five miles from Manhattan in Summit, New Jersey, on December 11, 1965, sandwiched between two long-forgotten groups called 40 Fingers and the Myddle Class, and earning seventy-five dollars for their troubles. As chance would have it the audience included a student who, several years later, would perform in the Doug Yule-led version of the band during its last European tour in 1972, as well as going on to more recognition with the power-pop band the Bongos, though at the time Rob Norris was just another suburban kid who had his mind blown.

“Nothing could have prepared the kids and parents assembled in the auditorium for what they were about to experience that night,” Norris recalled. “Everyone was hit by the screeching urge of sound, with a pounding beat louder than anything we’d ever heard.” Shortly into “Heroin,” the second song, “most of the audience retreated in horror for the safety of their homes, thoroughly convinced of the dangers of rock ’n’ roll music.”

III. Andy and the Banana Album

*“This is a rock group called the Velvet Underground
I show movies on them
Do you like their sound?”*

’Cause they have a style that grates and I have art to make.”

—Lou Reed and John Cale, “The Style It Takes” from Songs for Drella (1990)

Given how familiar rock fans have become with the larger-than-life personas they’ve created over the last five decades, it’s not hard to imagine how Lou Reed and John Cale could easily have slid into the legendarily vibrant, colorful, perverse, and intensely competitive scene that surrounded Andy Warhol at the Factory in 1966. In their mid-twenties both musicians possessed boundless talent, prodigious intellects, intense sexual magnetism, and the skills for living on the edge and pushing other people’s buttons, even if they still were privately wracked with insecurities. It’s more difficult to envision the other two members of the Velvet Underground as Warhol superstars, though that’s really more of a compliment than a put-down.

Reed’s new band mates both were born less than ten miles from his family’s house in Freeport: Holmes Sterling Morrison, Jr., on August 28, 1942, in East Meadow, and Maureen Ann Tucker on August 26, 1944, in Levittown. Morrison’s parents divorced when he was young, and he became a bright, talented, and sarcastic teen obsessed with music, mastering first the trumpet and then electric guitar. “I graduated high school with very high numbers and matching low esteem, for just about everything but music,” he said. With the Velvet Underground he and Reed often alternated on lead and rhythm guitar, and though he disliked it, Morrison also played bass when Cale moved to organ or viola. Precise and powerful, Morrison’s rhythm guitar provided the solid foundation for Reed’s noisier free-form excursions, while his leads added the gorgeous melodic filigree that Reed never seemed to have the patience to craft himself.

“When he had played his passionate solos, I had always seen him as a mythic Irish hero, flames shooting from his nostrils,” Reed said of Morrison in *The New York Times Magazine*. “[He was] the warrior heart of the Velvet Underground.”

For her part Tucker’s interest in the drums began in 1962, when she was seventeen. “I was in the high school library when an announcement came over: ‘Anyone who would like to sell candy to help pay for an African drummer named [Babatunde] Olatunji to come to assembly to play, please go to the office,’” she recalled in an interview with Jason Gross of the Webzine Perfect Sound Forever. “I *ran* to the office for that! So, in our silly little Levittown school, we got Olatunji and his full troop with ten or twelve musicians and ten or twelve dancers, and it was just stunning.”

Tucker began playing the drums herself at age nineteen, strictly for her own amusement while studying at Ithaca College, and she was practicing in her bedroom at night after working for IBM as a keypunch operator during the day when she first heard from Reed asking her to temporarily fill in for a gig in New Jersey. She took the job and stayed, and as she stood wielding her tympani mallets on a snare drum and a bass drum set on its side, largely eschewing cymbals, she brought both an enigmatic presence to the group—many concertgoers couldn’t figure out if she was a boy or a girl—and a primal and relentless backbeat that came straight from Africa via two of her rock ’n’ roll idols, Bo Diddley and Charlie Watts.

On December 15, 1965, four days after their less than illustrious gig at Summit High School, Reed, Cale, Morrison, and Tucker began a two-week residency at a Greenwich Village tourist trap called the Café Bizarre. They needed the experience onstage, not to mention the money, but the former was tainted by the fact that Tucker had to play tambourine because the club owner said her drums were too loud, and the latter was meager indeed. The sets included all of the originals they’d written to date, as well as time-killing covers by Jimmy Reed and Chuck Berry.

Early in the run the Velvetes played a show for an audience that included Paul Morrissey and Gerard Malanga, Andy Warhol’s left- and right-hand men at the Factory, who were charged at the time with finding a band to perform at a discotheque that the Pop Artist was considering endorsing and using as a showcase for his movies, his art, and the fascinating people that he enjoyed collecting, manipulating, and using as a source of energy and inspiration. (Not for nothing was his nickname a contraction of Dracula and Cinderella.) As coincidence would have it Warhol had dabbled with sponsoring a rock band once before, in 1963, but the project—which featured La Monte Young and Walter De Maria, Cale’s old cohorts in the Theatre of Eternal Music—never amounted to much.

Now Malanga liked the Velvetes so much that he twirled around the dance floor cracking the bull whip he’d carried to accessorize his black leather ensemble, and he and Morrissey soon returned with Warhol and his then-reigning Superstar, Edie Sedgwick. The legend holds that they caught the band’s last show at the venue: The club owner warned the group not to perform its dissonant version of “The Black Angel’s Death Song” again, whereupon the musicians promptly played it once more and were fired. True or not, it was exactly the sort of spirit Warhol admired.

Since his first solo Pop-Art exhibit in Manhattan, in November 1962, Warhol had become the single most discussed name in the New York art world, polarizing people with his repetitive images of Marilyn Monroe, Campbell’s Soup cans, and Coca-Cola bottles, as well as his “sculptures” of Brillo boxes. Working out of the aluminum foil-

lined loft in a building on East 47th Street that would become known as the Silver Factory, he began making films in 1963 with the somnambulistic *Sleep*; two years later he'd become so enamored of moviemaking that he'd announced he was retiring from painting. That didn't last long, but at age thirty-six, Warhol clearly was growing restless and looking for new ways to express himself—he also made the tape recordings that would become the basis for *a: a novel* at this time—and the Velvet Underground entered his orbit at exactly the right moment.

“It was like bang! They were with Andy and Andy was with them and they backed him absolutely. They would have walked to the end of the earth for him. And that happened in one day!” actress, dancer, and Factory regular Mary Woronov recalled.

On New Year's Eve, 1965 to 1966, the Velvets could be heard performing “Heroin” on a CBS-TV news reported called “The Making of an Underground Film” spotlighting director Piero Heliczer and narrated by Walter Cronkite; meanwhile Warhol, Sedgwick, Malanga, and several members of the band headed to the Apollo Theater in Harlem to see James Brown. Less than two weeks later, on January 13, 1966, Warhol brought the Velvets along to a speaking engagement before the New York Society for Clinical Psychiatry at Delmonico's Hotel. *The New York Times* reported on the gathering the next day under the headline “Syndromes Pop at Demonico's.”

“There was John Cale, leader of the Velvet Underground, in a black suit with rhinestones on the collar. There was Nico, identified by Warhol as ‘a famous fashion model and now a singer,’ in a white slack suit with long blond hair. And there were all those psychiatrists,” reporter Grace Glueck wrote. “The act really came into its own about midway through the dinner (roast beef with string beans and small potatoes) when the Velvet Underground swung into action. The high-decibel sound, aptly described by Dr. Campbell as ‘a short-lived torture of cacophony,’ was a combination of rock 'n' roll and Egyptian belly-dance music.” (No doubt any joy that Reed got from torturing the psychiatrists—payback for what they'd put him through as a teen—was mitigated when he read the review and learned that Cale was the leader of *his* band, to say nothing of the odd nod to belly-dancing.)

The Velvets' association with Warhol would prove to be both a blessing—as the *New York Times*' coverage of a group barely two months old illustrates, it brought instant notoriety—and a curse, since it also subjected the band to instant stereotyping as “just another Warhol gimmick.” In the beginning though it was all good, and it all happened very, very quickly—not surprising, considering that the scene largely was fueled by the prodigious consumption of speed. By February Warhol had shot the band rehearsing at the Factory for a film called *Symphony of Sound*; the group had provided the soundtrack for two more of his movies, *Hedy* and *More Milk Yvette*, and it had begun performing in front of Warhol's movies and behind some of the flamboyant dancers from the Factory in a multimedia show called *Andy Warhol Uptight*, staged nightly at the underground film center Cinématheque. But as the *Times* review indicated, Warhol's biggest contribution to the band came via the addition of a chanteuse.

Most likely born in Cologne, Germany, in 1938, Christa Päffgen left school at thirteen and began selling lingerie, which led to some modeling jobs in Berlin. From there she moved to Paris and fashion spreads in *Vogue*, *Tempo*, and *Elle* through the late 1950s; she also did a number of small film roles, most notably Federico Fellini's *La*

Dolce Vita, released in 1959. By that time she'd adopted the name Nico, inspired by photographer Herbert Tobias while on a modeling assignment in Ibiza.

Jetting between Paris, New York, and London through the early 1960s, Nico made her first foray into rock 'n' roll in 1965 when she met Brian Jones of the Rolling Stones and recorded a single, "I'm Not Sayin'," for Andrew Loog Oldham's Immediate Records label. A few months later she met Bob Dylan, who reportedly wrote "I'll Keep It with Mine" for her. In January 1966 she moved to New York, and she quickly became a Factory regular and a member of the Velvet Underground.

The Velvets had been wary of the idea of having "a chick in the band": At first Cale even balked at the asexual Tucker, mindful perhaps of the two abortive attempts that he and Reed had made to work with female singers in their earliest days as the Warlocks and the Falling Spikes. The group compromised to a point—Nico was given a few lead vocals but spent much of her time on stage banging a tambourine—because, well, Warhol wanted it that way, and because Reed and Cale soon fell under her spell. (During her brief time with the group she had brief romantic entanglements with both of them.) But there is no denying that she was a fascinating presence visually and musically. "Half goddess, half icicle," pioneering rock critic Richard Goldstein wrote in *The Village Voice*. "She sings in perfect mellow ovals. It sounds something like a cello getting up in the morning."

Shortly after they met Reed wrote two of the Velvet Underground's most beautiful songs with Nico's voice in mind: "Femme Fatale," based on a suggestion by Warhol that he pen a tune about Sedgwick, and "I'll Be Your Mirror." These provided the moments of unsettling calm in the otherwise tumultuous assault of the band's live shows, which Warhol took on the road in March to a number of college art departments, including Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey, and the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. "If they can take it for ten minutes, then we play it for fifteen," Warhol wrote. "That's our policy: Always leave them wanting less."

The following month the focus was back on New York as Warhol rented a Polish dance hall on St. Marks Place—*Polsky Dom Narodny*, or "the Dom" for short—to host the multi-media assault of film, dance, lights, and music that he now called the Exploding Plastic Inevitable. This run coincided with a show at Leo Castelli's gallery featuring his cow wallpaper and floating silver "cloud" pillows. It seemed as if the Pop Artist could do no wrong, and with a cover charge of six dollars, the Dom engagement netted eighteen thousand in its first week, though Factory overseer Morrissey only paid each of the Velvets five bucks a day.

While the Dom run was still going on Warhol used some of the money, augmented by an investment from former Columbia Records sales executive Norman Dolph, to put the Velvet Underground into the run-down Scepter Recording Studio on West 54th Street. Dolph and John Licata engineered the sessions, which were contentious and nerve-wrangling, since nobody really knew what they were doing. Nevertheless four days of recording and mixing yielded the versions of "Femme Fatale," "Run Run Run," "All Tomorrow's Parties," "There She Goes Again," "I'll Be Your Mirror," "The Black Angel's Death Song," and "European Son" that eventually appeared on the band's debut album. Then it was back on the road again as Warhol took the Exploding Plastic Inevitable to California in May 1966.

At the time the West Coast scene epitomized everything the Velvets disliked in popular music and culture. Morrison put it most succinctly: “We all hated hippies,” he said, and they sneered at the music they’d heard by the Jefferson Airplane, Frank Zappa, and the Grateful Dead. At least one of the key voices behind the flower-power hype returned that animosity: “Warhol’s Exploding Plastic Inevitable was nothing more than a condensation of all the bum trips of the Trips Festival,” wrote Ralph J. Gleason, music critic for *The San Francisco Chronicle* and an early mentor to Jann Wenner as he started *Rolling Stone*. “It was all very campy and very Greenwich Village sick. If this is what America’s waiting for, we are going to die of boredom because this is a celebration of the silliness of café society, way out in left field instead of far out, and joyless.”

While they were in Los Angeles the Velvets did some more sessions at T.T.G. Studios in Hollywood, recording “I’m Waiting for the Man,” “Venus in Furs,” and “Heroin” with engineer Omi Haden. They also linked up with Tom Wilson, a gregarious African-American from Waco, Texas, who’d become a staff producer at Columbia Records, overseeing the recording of several groundbreaking albums by Bob Dylan (*The Times They Are a-Changin’*, *Another Side of Bob Dylan*, and *Bringing It All Back Home*) as well as the 1964 debut by Simon and Garfunkel. Wilson was in the process of moving from Columbia to head up the Verve Records division at MGM, and he promised the band a deal—if the musicians would be patient.

The wait dragged on through the rest of 1966 and into 1967: Adorned with the famous peelable banana cover art by Warhol, *The Velvet Underground & Nico* would only finally be released on March 12, 1967, a few months before *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* signaled the start of the much-ballyhooed Summer of Love. In addition to the songs recorded at Scepter and T.T.G., the final album included one more tune, “Sunday Morning,” recorded in November 1966 with Wilson in New York because he wanted the band to have “a commercial single.” The original plan was to let Nico sing the track—she thought of the uncharacteristically upbeat tune as “Sun-day mourning”—but Reed insisted that he do it himself. Relations between the musicians and their chanteuse were already souring, and by the time the album arrived in record stores, the band and Warhol were going their separate ways as well.

Warhol’s short attention span was infamous; the group wasn’t returning much on his investment of time or money, and he seemed to be siding with Nico as her star rose after her role in the film *Chelsea Girls* (which featured contributions from Reed and Cale on the soundtrack). “The final nail in the coffin of Lou Reed’s collaborative relationship with Andy Warhol came at the end of May 1967, when Warhol took an entourage to the Cannes Film Festival in France to show *Chelsea Girls*—excluding the Velvets,” Bockris wrote in *Transformer: The Lou Reed Story*. But Warhol already had performed his biggest service for the band.

“He just made it possible for us to be ourselves and go right ahead with it because he was Andy Warhol,” Reed told *Musician* magazine in 1989. “In a sense, he really did produce [the first album], because he was this umbrella that absorbed all the attacks when we weren’t large enough to be attacked... and as a consequence of him being the producer, we’d just walk in and set up and do what we always did and no one would stop it because Andy was the producer. Of course he didn’t know anything about record production—but he didn’t have to. He just sat there and said, ‘Oooh, that’s fantastic,’ and the engineer would say, ‘Oh, yeah! Right! It is fantastic, isn’t it?’”

Reaction from reviewers was less enthusiastic, though by no means was it universally negative, as is sometimes contended today. “All in all, for what it is trying to express, this is a good album—not for those who desire to hear the usual popular music, but for those who desire to hear a very unusual, perhaps even experimental type of music,” Timothy Jacobs wrote in the underground journal *Vibrations*. The record’s commercial performance was underwhelming—it debuted on the *Billboard* Top 200 Albums Chart at 199, peaked at 171 on December 16, 1967, and dropped off at 193 on January 6, 1968—but it was victim as much of the delay in its release and a series of marketing problems (including a lawsuit filed by Factory dancer Eric Emerson for unauthorized use of his photo on the back cover) as it was the lack of popular acceptance.

The ideas that the Velvets were alone in spreading bad vibes during the sunny heyday of hippy and that they had nothing in common with psychedelia also are untrue. The Thirteenth Floor Elevators, the Byrds of “Eight Miles High,” and many of the psychedelic garage bands that Lenny Kaye compiled on the *Nuggets* album all conjured similar free-form bum-trip excursions in rock during the same period, and while the Velvets undeniably preferred methedrine to lysergic acid diethylamide, the rumor nevertheless persisted that Warhol’s banana was laced with LSD. In many ways the Exploding Plastic Inevitable was similar to the sensory assaults Pink Floyd was delivering in London and which Ken Kesey’s acid tests were providing in San Francisco. In New York, grungy folkies the Fugs and the Holy Modal Rounders were addressing similar taboo lyrical concerns, while the Beatles also dabbled in the power of drone with “Tomorrow Never Knows” on *Revolver* in 1966. The Velvets were not totally unique in anything they did; they simply were more extreme and uncompromising.

Listening to *The Velvet Underground & Nico* today, when the shock of the new has long since faded, the most striking things about the album are the enduring artistry of the songwriting and the musicianship and the fact that it contains the seeds of everything the group would explore for the rest of its career. The Velvets would extend the chaotic experimentation of “The Black Angel’s Death Song” and “European Son” even further with *White Light/White Heat*; they would go beyond “I’ll Be Your Mirror” and “Femme Fatale” to dig even deeper into their quiet, introspective soul with the self-titled third album, and they would up the ante on pop songs such as “Sunday Morning” (which recalled the Beach Boys circa *Pet Sounds*) and the gleefully misogynistic “There She Goes Again” (a blatant rewrite of Marvin Gaye’s “Hitchhike”) with the more straightforward rock ’n’ roll of *Loaded*. But all in good time...

IV. Whip It On Me, Jim: From “Sister Ray” to “Jesus”

“How do you define a group who moved from ‘Heroin’ to ‘Jesus’ in two short years? It is not enough to say that they have one of the broadest ranges of any group extant; this should be apparent to anyone who has listened closely to their three albums. The real question is what this music is about—smack, meth, deviate sex, and drugdreams, or something deeper?”

—Lester Bangs on The Velvet Underground in Rolling Stone, May 17, 1969

John Cale contends that Lou Reed had been shopping around for a new manager for a year before the Velvets formally broke from Andy Warhol and signed with Boston-

based hustler Steve Sesnick, none too fondly recalled by the Welshman as “a real snake” and “a miserable piece of trash.” The group toured through much of the second half of 1967, pausing in September to enter New York’s Mayfair Sound Studios with producer Tom Wilson and engineer Gary Kellgren to lay down a new set of material, some of which had been coming together since the summer a year earlier. This time the musicians were determined to record as quickly as possible with a minimum of studio polish, the better to capture the power of their live performances.

“There’s a lot of improvisation on *White Light/White Heat*,” Cale writes in *What’s Welsh for Zen*. “Most of the recording was done straight through; ‘Sister Ray’ was one piece. ‘I Heard Her Call My Name’ and ‘Here She Comes Now’ evolved in the studio. ‘The Gift’ was a story Lou had written when he was at Syracuse University. It was my idea to do it as a spoken-word thing. We had this piece called ‘Booker T’ that was an instrumental, so instead of wasting it we decided to combine them... We were intent on recording this album live in the studio because we were so good live at this point. We played and played and played, and to keep that animalism there, we insisted on playing at the volume that we played onstage.”

Released on January 30, 1968, *White Light/White Heat* is in many ways Cale’s album—or at least the ultimate realization, recording flaws aside, of his ideas from the classical avant garde colliding with Reed’s extraordinary abilities for lyrical improvisation. Lester Bangs called it “rock ’n’ roll’s ultimate expression of nihilism and destruction,” and he often said his litmus test for whether or not someone was a real punk or a phony was that he’d pull *White Light/White Heat* out of their record collection and see whether the needle had ever really spent much time in its uncompromising grooves.

The album opens with an ode to the chemical rush of speed via the title track; moves into a bit of twisted humor neatly separated with the music in one channel and Cale’s rich baritone reading in the other (“The Gift”); proceeds through a harrowing tale of a transsexual operation gone wrong (“Lady Godiva’s Operation”) and a deceptively sweet ode to a woman who seems unable to orgasm (“Here She Comes Now”); begins to build to its own climax with a rush of insanity and the band’s ultimate use of that old “Ostrich guitar” (“I Heard Her Call My Name”), and then obliterates everything else with “Sister Ray,” an extraordinary seventeen-minute, twenty-seven-second sonic assault coupled with a Reed lyric telling a story that could have come from *Last Exit to Brooklyn*.

“It has eight characters in it and this guy gets killed and nobody does anything,” Reed said of the lyrics to “Sister Ray” in a 2002 interview with *The Stranger*. “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.” Years earlier he described the music to Bangs as a “jam [that] came about right there in the studio—we didn’t use any splices or anything. I had been listening to a lot of Cecil Taylor and Ornette Coleman and wanted to get something like that with a rock ’n’ roll feeling. And I think we were successful, but I also think that we carried that about as far as we could for our abilities as a band that was basically rock ’n’ roll. Later, we continued to play that kind of music and I was really experimenting a lot with guitar, but most of the audiences in the clubs just weren’t receptive to it at all.”

Indeed, the commercial reception for the band's second album was even bleaker than it had been for its predecessor: *White Light/White Heat* spent exactly two weeks on the Billboard chart at 199, and then it vanished for good.

Undaunted, the band forged ahead, performing on the road whenever it could through 1968; the group had decided to boycott New York because of the lack of radio support, and because it had lost its ideal venue when Bob Dylan's manager Albert Grossman had swooped in, stolen the Dom, and rechristened it the Balloon Farm while the Exploding Plastic Inevitable made its first trip to California. Reed, Cale, and Morrison had stopped living together in their communal band crash pad in late 1967, and now, the more time they spent touring, the more their personalities clashed. Cale hated Sesnick, and in their version of the classic Paul McCartney/John Lennon/Yoko Ono band melodrama, Reed resented Cale's girlfriend, designer Betsey Johnson, whom he married in April 1968.

Reed, Cale, Morrison, and Tucker entered the studio twice in 1968 in an attempt to cut a single, but the results illustrated the growing chasm in the band between the direction Reed wanted to take and the one Cale that wanted to pursue. In February, at A&R Studios in New York, the group recorded Reed's light-hearted and upbeat rocker "Temptation Inside Your Heart" and the lovely "Stephanie Says," while in May, at T.T.G. Studio in Los Angeles, it laid down the droning "Hey Mr. Rain." The latter, officially unreleased until decades later, would be Cale's last studio contribution: In September, on the eve of a trip to Cleveland, Reed met with Tucker and Morrison to tell them that Cale was out. The onerous task of informing Cale fell to Morrison.

"Lou always got other people to do his dirty work for him," Cale said. In the many years since their split, neither man has earned a reputation for playing nicely with others—quite the opposite—and in retrospect their break perhaps was inevitable, though it cannot be denied that each brought something uniquely powerful out of the other, and neither has quite matched it since. "It was never the same for me after John left," Morrison said. "He was not easy to replace... We moved more towards unanimity of opinion [and] I don't think that's a good thing. I always thought that what made us good were the tensions and oppositions. Bands that fight together make better music."

To replace Cale, Reed turned to another Long Island native five years his junior, Doug Yule, who'd migrated to Boston to play in a band called the Grass Menagerie; that group's managers were friendly with Sesnick, who made the connection to the Velvets. Though he lacked Cale's vision, Yule was a natural musician: "My reason for being in music was a hunger—I couldn't have *not* been in music," he said. Of equal importance to Reed, he wouldn't compete in an attempt to try to lead the band: He simply was a useful tool, the first of many that Reed would utilize in the years to come.

"We would spend time together, where he would take out these songs that he was fooling around with and ask for help: 'I'm thinking about this melody, what's a chord that goes with that?'" Yule told Pat Thomas in a 1995 interview for *Perfect Sound Forever*. "He'd ask for help building things, then he would return six months later with the song put together and announce it: 'Here's my new tune.'"

With Yule on bass and organ, the band moved from the chaos and noise of the Cale years to an emphasis on relentless rhythm in Reed's more driving songs ("What Goes On," "Beginning to See the Light") and a quiet, beautiful fragility in his slower ballads ("Candy Says," inspired by Factory Superstar and pre-op transsexual Candy

Darling, and “Pale Blue Eyes,” written in the midst of a rekindled romance with a Syracuse-era girlfriend). The only evidence of the wild experimentation of the first two albums would come in “The Murder Mystery,” a stream-of-consciousness assault of words and music that featured all four band members on vocals. It was only partly successful: “Good try, but it didn’t work,” Reed concluded.

The band recorded its self-titled third album at T.T.G. in November and December, 1968. By all accounts these sessions were much easier and more pleasant, though Morrison and Tucker were angry when Reed remixed some of the songs shortly before the final release in March 1969; they contended that the original mixes were better, and Morrison called Reed’s claustrophobic version “the closet mix.”

The group also seemed concerned if not apologetic to be releasing a relatively mellow album that stood in such stark contrast to its predecessor, and Reed and Morrison invented the tale that its quiet sound was the result of their effects pedals having been stolen at the airport. “I don’t where [that story] came from, unless it was started to make the group more interesting somehow,” Yule told Perfect Sound Forever. “That’s just what we were playing then—we were playing much more melodic stuff.”

Slowly but surely the nascent rock press was growing more enthusiastic about the band—in addition to Bangs and Goldstein, its core of champions now included Ellen Willis, Richard Meltzer, Richard Cromelin, and *Crawdaddy* founder Paul Williams—and the band was starting to move in a direction more in step with the times. Even critics who didn’t completely get it were beginning to appreciate what the band was doing; in his list of the best albums of 1969 for *The Chicago Tribune*, Robb Baker gave *The Velvet Underground* an honorable mention, placing it behind a number of admittedly worthy contenders (*Let It Bleed* by the Rolling Stones, *Tommy* by the Who, *Abbey Road* by the Beatles, and *River Deep, Mountain High* by Ike and Tina Turner) as well as some that were not nearly so deserving (*Hand Sown, Home Grown* by Linda Ronstadt, *Stay with Me* by Lorraine Ellison, and *Illuminations* by Buffy Sainte-Marie).

The album was greeted nonetheless with the usual commercial indifference and, more troubling, the band was starting to endure an increasing indifference bordering on animosity from its own record company, now led by Mike Curb, a conservative Republican businessman and ally of President Richard M. Nixon in his war on drugs. As he began to remake the label in his own square image, Curb issued a corporate manifesto: “Groups that are associated with hard drugs... are very undependable. They’re difficult to work with, and they’re hard on your sales and marketing people.” The Velvets’ days as an MGM act clearly were numbered.

Whether they were continuing to push on with blind optimism, trying to fulfill the terms of their contract in order to escape, or some combination of the two, the musicians entered to the studio again several times between May and October, 1969, working with Kellgren at the Record Plant in New York to record songs such as “Foggy Notion,” “Andy’s Chest” (written after Valerie Solanas shot Warhol in June 1968), the playful “Ferryboat Bill,” and the anthemic “I Can’t Stand It.” Though the proposed follow-up to the third album got as far as being assigned a catalog number, MGM SE-4641, it would never be released, remaining in the realm of legend as “the great lost Velvets album” until the PolyGram corporation finally resurrected the material for two posthumous releases, *VU*, issued in February 1985, and *Another View*, released in September 1986.

The Velvet Underground story was winding down, but the group still had one more significant statement to make.

V. Riding the Express to *Loaded*

“Lou Reed has always steadfastly maintained that the Velvet Underground were just another Long Island rock ’n’ roll band, but in the past, he really couldn’t be blamed much if people didn’t care to take him seriously... Well, it now turns out that Reed was right all along, and the most surprising thing about the change in the group is that there has been no real change at all. ”

—Lenny Kaye on *Loaded* in Rolling Stone, December 24, 1970

After nearly five years of constant growth, evolution, and struggle, the Velvet Underground entered 1970 with its best prospects since the early days at the Factory in 1966. Dropped by MGM the band went on to receive one of the ultimate votes of confidence at the time in the form of a new recording contract from Ahmet Ertegun, the revered head of Atlantic Records. But Lou Reed had begun to fight with manager Steve Sesnick, and relations had started to sour between him and Sterling Morrison, who’d resumed his studies at the City College of New York in between commitments to the band. Tucker grew distracted when she became pregnant with her first daughter, born in June, and everyone was exhausted. The band was falling apart even as it began to record some of what would become its best known songs that April.

The sessions at Atlantic’s house studios in New York were the longest and most difficult in the band’s history, stretching on for five months under three producers and engineers: Geoffrey Haslam, Shel Kagan, and Adrian Barber. Though she recorded the vocals for “I’m Sticking with You” and added some incidental percussion, Tucker did not play drums on the sessions, and at various times she was replaced by Barber, Doug Yule’s brother, Billy, and Long Island session drummer Tommy Castanaro. Backed by Sesnick, who thought he could easily replace the band’s founder with its newest member, Doug Yule wound up singing some of the lead vocals, including “New Age,” and Reed would grouse about the final mixes and the radio edits made to some of the songs, though his band mates contend he had much more control over the results than he later claimed.

“I gave them an album loaded with hits, and it was loaded with hits to the point where the rest of the people showed their true colors,” Reed has said. Indeed, the best songs on *Loaded*—“Sweet Jane,” “Rock & Roll,” “New Age,” and “Head Held High”—have an instant and undeniable appeal, despite all the amputations during the mixing and the behind-the-scenes computations on the business side of things. Yet while it was the friendliest sound the band had crafted, the group retained just enough of the old outlaw edginess to seem outré: The Velvet Underground forever would be the group that sang “Heroin,” and on seeing the album cover, heads at the time naturally assumed that that was a cloud of dope smoke wafting up from the subway station.

Through the tail end of the *Loaded* sessions, from June through August, 1970, the Velvets were booked for a nine-week engagement at Max’s Kansas City. This was their triumphant return to live performance in New York, and they played two sets a night while finishing the album during the day. On August 23, Factory regular Brigid Polk, sitting at a table with Gerard Malanga and the young poet Jim Carroll, recorded the

performance in the old-school Andy Warhol audio-verité style: The future author of *The Basketball Diaries* can be heard ordering a Pernod and talking about Tuinals in between songs. It turned out to be a memorable night, since at the end of the second set, Reed left the stage, told Sesnick he was quitting the band, and went outside to wait for his parents, who were driving in from Long Island even as their son played his last notes with the Velvets onstage.

Reed still was living at home a few months later when he talked to the band's biggest critical booster on the phone from his father's accounting office. The quotes appeared in a loving eulogy that Lester Bangs entitled "Dead Lie the Velvets Underground, R.I.P., Long Live Lou Reed" and published in *Creem* magazine in May 1971. "I'm not going to make any accusations or blame anybody for what's happened to the Velvets because it's nobody's fault, it's just the way the business is," Reed said. "I just walked out, because we didn't have any money, I didn't want to tour again—I can't get any writing done on tour, and the grind is terrible—and like some other members of the band, I've wondered for a long time if we were *ever* going to be accepted on a scale large enough to make us a 'success.'"

Of course Reed's career did not end with the Velvets—nor, strangely enough, did the Velvets' career end after Reed.

VI. What Becomes a Legend Most? (Well Baby Tonight it's You)

"What it comes down to for me—as a Velvets fan, a lover of rock-and-roll, a New Yorker, an aesthete, a punk, a sinner, a sometime seeker of enlightenment (and love) (and sex)—is this: I believe that we are all, openly or secretly, struggling against one or another kind of nihilism. I believe that body and spirit are not really separate, though it often seems that way. I believe that redemption is never impossible and always equivocal. But I guess that I just don't know."

—Ellen Willis

Though the remaining members of the Velvet Underground no doubt were stunned by Lou Reed's departure, the band's momentum carried them several years into the next decade. "[Manager Steve] Sesnick was the one who said 'Lou won't be here,'" Doug Yule recalled in his interview with *Perfect Sound Forever*. "We just kept going; what else could you do really?"

Yule, Maureen Tucker, Sterling Morrison, and a new recruit, Yule's friend Walter Powers, continued to tour as the Velvets, capitalizing on the generally positive reception that greeted *Loaded* after its release in September 1970. Morrison left the next year and was replaced by another of Yule's old Boston band mates, Willie "Loco" Alexander; after that, Tucker began to drift in and out of the picture. In time Sesnick arranged a deal for another studio album with Polydor in the U.K., and Yule recorded it on his own in London in the fall of 1972, playing many of the instruments himself, with the exception of drums by Deep Purple's Ian Paice—always the jazziest of heavy-metal drummers, and the stylistic opposite of Tucker—and some unnamed studio musicians on sax and female backing vocals.

By the time the aptly named *Squeeze* was released in February 1973, Yule had given up on the final version of the band, which contained none of the original members,

after Sesnick slithered away and left the group stranded in the midst of a botched European tour. Never issued in the United States, the final Velvet Underground studio album remains a curious footnote. Musically, Yule followed the pop-rock direction of some of the lesser songs on *Loaded*—“Lonesome Cowboy Bill” and “Train Round the Bend”—while lyrically, he adapted one of Reed’s favorite motifs, the character portrait à la “Candy Says,” though with much less distinguished results on generic tunes such as “Little Jack,” “Dopey Joe,” “Jack & Jane,” and “Louise.”

“Someone said to me, ‘You can go into a studio and you can record your songs.’ And I thought, ‘Great, every songwriter’s dream,’” Yule said. “It’s kind of a nice memory for me and kind of an embarrassment at the same time.... A lot of that stuff is about Lou; some of it about Maureen.” Though he has been vilified in some quarters as a mercenary who wrung the last dime out of the Velvet Underground name, it’s interesting to note that Reed did not seem to hold any animosity toward him at first, and Yule contributed to a track on Reed’s 1974 solo album *Sally Can’t Dance*, as well as touring with the band that supported that release.

On the other hand, during their reunion in the early ’90s, Reed and John Cale both vetoed the idea of Yule participating when Morrison suggested it—he had always disliked playing bass when Cale moved to organ or viola—and Yule was excluded when the band was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1996.

Of course the two driving forces of the early Velvet Underground both have had long solo careers, though in almost all of their guises, they’ve usually included Velvets song in concert, and the shadow of the band looms large over everything else they’ve accomplished.

Throughout the 1970s Reed shifted from style to style, adopting one strange persona after another. His self-titled 1972 debut had some of the trappings of progressive rock, though several of the songs dated back to the Velvets, and *Transformer* (1972) yielded a hit with “Walk on the Wild Side,” a simplified version of the character studies he’d done of people at the Factory. *Sally Can’t Dance* (1974) and *Coney Island Baby* (1976) flirted with mainstream pop, but in between came the nearly unlistenable white-noise assault of the infamous *Metal Machine Music* (1975)—“Sister Ray” taken to the extreme with all semblance of melody removed. Meanwhile the title track of *Street Hassle* (1978) told a similar story to the one in that Velvets epic, attempting a punk operetta complete with strings.

With tracks such as “Disco Mystic,” “I Want to Boogie with You,” and “The Power of Positive Drinking,” most of *The Bells* (1979) and *Growing Up in Public* (1980) are best forgotten, but with *The Blue Mask* (1982) and *Legendary Hearts* (1983), Reed once again found a measure of the ideal creative collaboration he’d had with the Velvets. Guitarist Robert Quine was a veteran of Richard Hell and the Voidoids and a V.U. superfan who later lovingly compiled *The Velvet Underground Bootleg Series Volume 1: The Quine Tapes*, a three-disc box set released by Polydor in 2001. He complemented Reed by combining a measure of some of the best aspects of Cale and Morrison, searing noise and solid rhythm, but the pairing did not last.

On *New York* (1989), a loving homage to the city that has always been such a large part of his work, Reed seemed to arrive at his final incarnation as a distinguished elder statesman and literary professor of rock. This is the persona that dominates *Magic and Loss*, his 1992 contemplation of death and dying; *Ecstasy*, his 2000 homage to love

and marriage; *The Raven*, his 2003 musical reworking of Edgar Allan Poe, and *Berlin: Live at St. Ann's Warehouse*, his 2008 resurrection of his dense, depressing, but brilliant 1974 album *Berlin*. Yet fans still can never be certain of when Reed will throw an unexpected curve ball, and it boggles the mind to think that the same artist who gave us *Metal Machine Music* also produced *Hudson River Wind Meditations*, a 2007 set of ambient music written to accompany his Tai Chi work-outs.

Every bit as rewarding and slightly more consistent in its stylistic detours, Cale's solo canon ranges from early art-rock albums such as *The Academy in Peril* (1972) and *Paris 1919* (1973), to the furious punk explosion of *Fear* (1974), and from his own version of Reed's "collaboration" with Poe—*Words for the Dying*, a 1989 album largely built upon the poems of Dylan Thomas—to recent electronic forays such as *HoboSapiens* (2003) and *blackAcetate* (2005). While Reed is considered the songwriting genius of the Velvets and Cale is the master musician, the best cases for the depth and rewarding complexity of the latter's song craft are the 1992 live album *Fragments of a Rainy Season* and the 1994 compilation *Seducing Down the Door*—"two sides of one coin," as Cale wrote. "They're good companion pieces because you see both sides of how the songs are performed, how they've stood up over time and how they were originally."

Cale also played a big role in the best solo albums by Nico, *The Marble Index* (1969) and *Desertshore* (1970), both gorgeous if at times relentlessly dark and depressing epics. A sad soul who battled heroin addiction for much of her life, Nico spent many of her years after the Velvets eking out a meager living as a cult heroine, a tale traced with humor and warmth in *Songs They Never Play on the Radio*, a 1999 book written by one of her touring musicians, James Young. As a formative influence on the Gothic sound, style, and ambience, Nico tops even Siouxsie Sioux as the witchiest woman in rock history. Ironically she died on a sunny day in Ibiza in July 1988 after suffering a minor heart attack while bicycling, hitting her head, and incurring a severe cerebral hemorrhage.

Much less dark and destructive, Tucker also has enjoyed a Velvets afterlife as a cult heroine, periodically taking a break from raising her four children to record simple, charming, and not surprisingly drum-heavy indie-rock excursions such as *Playin' Possum* (1981), *Life in Exile After Abdication* (1989), *Dogs Under Stress* (1994), and *Moe Rocks Terrastock* (2002), which features contributions from Yule.

As for Morrison, the third original band member referred to in the group's initial publishing company Three Prong Music, not long after leaving the Velvets he moved to Texas to pursue a life in academia. He eventually earned a doctorate in medieval studies, in between time spent piloting tugboats in the Houston Ship Channel. (The song "Tugboat" by Velvets acolytes Galaxie 500 is thought to be a tribute to him.) Sometimes reticent to revisit his rock 'n' roll past, he did pick up his guitar from time to time to play in Austin's vibrant music scene, tour with Tucker's band, or make the odd guest appearance on a recording such as the 1994 Luna album *Bewitched*.

Morrison's most significant return to the spotlight came during the brief Velvets reunion tour in the summer of 1993. Two years later, on August 30, 1995, he died of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma at his home in Poughkeepsie, New York. He was fifty-three.

Appropriately enough, the roots of the Velvets' reunion can be traced back to their original sponsor, Andy Warhol, who died on February 22, 1987, from a cardiac arrhythmia while recuperating from gall bladder surgery. In early 1989 Reed and Cale came together to pay tribute to Warhol with a set of new songs that they co-wrote and

performed at St. Anne's Church in Brooklyn; several months later they played the set again at the Brooklyn Academy of Music and recorded those shows for a live album. Though Cale was angry that Reed took control of the mix, the music was poignant and powerful, and *Songs for Drella* was released in April 1990. In June Reed and Cale were invited by the Cartier Foundation to perform the album for the opening of a Warhol tribute in Paris. To the surprise of everyone, Morrison and Tucker joined them on the stage to play "Heroin" once more, spurring hopes for a formal reunion by Velvet fans around the world.

Considerable negotiating led to the 1993 tour documented on *Live MCMXCIII*. Most of the band's live sets were comprised of highlights from the 1960s, and the album only includes two new songs, neither of which are extraordinary. "Velvet Nursery Rhyme" attempts to make a self-deprecating comment on the reunion, but winds up being campy and mawkish. (*"We're the Velvet Underground and we have come to play/It's been twenty-eight years since we've been here to the day... Now you got here John and me, we want no part of this/That's because we think it is real pretentious shit."*) Holding out the promise of an eventual lift-off, "Coyote" is all build-up with no delivery, and though the lyrics don't reference it, it's hard not to think of the parable of the coyote chewing off its own leg to escape the trap.

By the time *Live MCMXCIII* was released in October 1993 the reunion was over. All of the old tensions between the musicians quickly returned—first and foremost Reed's desire for control clashing with Cale's urge toward chaos—and the Velvet broke up again and—given Morrison's death—most likely for good.

For a band that always had been about living in the moment while forging a sound that bravely pointed toward the future, the idea of revisiting the past seemed incongruous anyway, and there can be no better celebration of the Velvet Underground's legacy than losing oneself in the glorious noise of its first four studio albums and the best of the many live recordings from the periods in between. The music remains as vital, timeless, and infinitely rich as the day it was made, offering listeners bottomless depths to plumb, and in the end, this may be the Velvet's biggest contribution: proving that rock 'n' roll can be as substantive and important as any great art, and that smart, passionate people can devote their lives to exploring and reveling in its many contradictions—between beauty and ugliness, contemplation and aggression, control and chaos, the Dionysian and the Apollonian, love and hate, and life and death.

As with so many aspects of this band, Lester Bangs phrased it best: "Everybody assumes that mind and body are opposed. Why? (Leaving aside six thousand years of history.) The trog vs. the cerebrite. How boring. But we still buy it, all of us. The Velvet Underground were the greatest band that ever existed because they began to suggest that such was not so."