

American musician, performer Lou Reed dead at 71

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29 October 2013

Lou Reed, leader of the influential rock band The Velvet Underground, died Sunday at the age of 71. Reed had been battling liver disease for some time, undergoing a liver transplant in April of this year. He is survived by his wife, musician and performance artist Laurie Anderson.

An iconoclastic and often combative artist, Reed's music exerted a considerable influence over the development of rock music after the 1960s. The influence his music has had on alternative or "indie" rock in particular has been enormous.

The future songwriter and guitarist was born March 2, 1942 in Brooklyn, New York. He grew up in a middle class Jewish family in suburban Long Island. His father was a tax accountant and his mother a former beauty queen.

As a boy, Reed fell in love with the R&B and early rock n roll songs he heard on the radio and taught himself to play guitar by listening to those recordings. He played in rock bands during his high school years and adopted the customary anti-establishment dress and behavior.

Unhappy with their teenaged son's burgeoning countercultural activities, Reed's conservative parents sent him for electroshock treatments, partly as an effort to cure the young rebel of supposed homosexual tendencies.

Following these disturbing events, Reed went on to study at Syracuse University in the early 1960s, where he was mentored by poet and short story writer Delmore Schwartz (1913-1966), who had been on the periphery of the Trotskyist movement in the late 1930s. Combining a passion for literature with music, Reed said that he wanted to create a kind of "Great American Novel" with music, with each of his records serving as another chapter in the book.

After college, Reed worked briefly as an in-house songwriter for Pickwick records and had a minor hit with his own dance record parody "The Ostrich" in 1964. It was at Pickwick that he met Welsh musician John Cale. The two founded The Velvet Underground in 1964-65 and the band's line-up was soon filled out by guitarist Sterling Morrison and drummer Maureen Tucker. Their debut album, *The Velvet Underground & Nico* (1967), is considered a landmark in the history of rock music.

The Velvet Underground's music was abrasive and noisy. Their songs addressed a number of taboo themes: drug addiction, sado-masochism and prostitution, among others. Alongside these songs were more sensitive—and often more substantial—works like the anxious and beautiful "Sunday Morning" or "Pale Blue Eyes." There was also the catchy "Sweet Jane" and the emphatic "I'm Beginning to See the Light." Many of the group's more interesting songs, in fact, were to be found on what are perhaps the least experimental or "avant-garde" of their albums: *The Velvet Underground* (1969) and *Loaded* (1970).

Reed was not a great singer, at least not in the conventional sense, but there was something about the timbre of his voice and the casual delivery of his vocals that was appealing, even seductive. In addition to this, the sounds he was able to pull from his electric guitar were unheard of at the time. The blistering solo he plays on "I Heard Her Call My Name," from the band's second album *White Light/White Heat* (1968) is surely among the more ferocious ever committed to tape.

In surveying the work Reed did with the Velvets and in his solo career beginning in the 1970s, one is struck, however, by how very narrow in scope and ultimately how unsatisfying the bulk of it is. A great deal of

sifting has to take place before one lands on something significant or moving. There are interesting and meaningful moments on albums like *Transformer* (1972) or *The Blue Mask* (1982), but even these relatively strong albums are not fully realized or fully satisfying works.

Beginning in the late 1960s, Reed and his bandmates fell under the baleful spell of pop artist Andy Warhol and became regular fixtures in his insular and self-involved Factory crowd. Warhol designed the famous Banana image featured on the *Velvet Underground & Nico* album cover. In “Walk on the Wild Side,” the most famous song of his solo career, Reed detailed the lives of various characters in and around the Warhol group. The song is a memorable and enduring number, despite its self-conscious “decadence.”

The receding of the radical wave of the late 1960s and early 1970s was a major turning point for many artists and performers, including Reed. Much of his work was done in a period of intense political reaction and stagnation. A strong working class movement was no longer a part of the political landscape and what passed for “left” politics shifted away from big social questions and toward “cultural” and “lifestyle” issues. To a certain extent, one is obliged to judge many popular artists by the degree to which they gave way or withstood that reaction, or, to speak more frankly, by the manner in which they gave way.

Reed’s somewhat bitter tendency was to wallow in the darker side of life represented by various bohemian subcultures. One gets the sense that Reed found such characters, or at least his fantasies about them, more honest and genuine. They cared nothing, or apparently cared nothing about social conventions. Their vices were on full display, all the taboos were out in the open. Such characters may have confirmed for Reed something he believed about humanity in general.

In those all too rare moments when Reed approached his favored subject matter with a more critical eye, he was able to offer something moving and insightful, but there is too little of this ultimately.

At his worst, Reed was needlessly obscure and self-indulgent. His 1975 album *Metal Machine Music* featured nothing more than an hour’s worth of guitar feedback. This was the worst kind of artistic “self-expression.”

In the end, one suspects the *idea* of Reed, as much as

his music, tends to hold sway over audiences. He was the cool, rock rebel in dark sunglasses and a black leather jacket. The ultimate anti-establishment figure, the archetypal artist. It’s a romantic portrait, but the real Reed was more complex and contradictory than all that and his development, or lack of development, was bound up with some of the problems of our time.



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