

DOC NYC Film Festival 2021: Part 3

***The Velvet Underground*: Self-imposed constraints weaken filmmaker Todd Haynes's documentary**

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This is the last in a series of articles devoted to the 2021 DOC NYC Film Festival (November 10–28). Part 1 was posted November 30, and Part 2 December 7.

Veteran director Todd Haynes (*Safe*, *Mildred Pierce* , *Dark Waters*) has ventured into new territory in *The Velvet Underground* (2021). Although he has focused on musicians in several of his previous films, including *Velvet Goldmine* (1998) and *I'm Not There* (2007), *The Velvet Underground* is his first documentary. Like his previous efforts, Haynes's new film displays his considerable talent as a visual artist. But those who seek out the film to gain greater insight into the group it examines—and its times—will walk away with unanswered questions. Even fans of the band, too, may feel only half-satisfied.

The Velvet Underground formed in New York in the mid-1960s. Its early line-up included the talented vocalist and guitarist Lou Reed, multi-instrumentalist John Cale, guitarist Sterling Morrison and drummer Moe Tucker. Reed's love of early rock and roll, Cale's interest in the musical avant-garde and the bohemianism of both contributed to a sound that distinguished the group from its peers.

Pop artist Andy Warhol became the band's manager in 1966 and brought German model and singer Nico into the line-up. This configuration recorded what became the group's most acclaimed album, *The Velvet Underground & Nico*. Several of its songs dealt with taboo topics such as drug addiction and sadomasochism.

Shedding first Nico, then Cale (who was replaced by bassist Doug Yule), the band recorded several more

albums, each with a distinct sound. Although the group's music became more conventional, it also gained subtlety and emotional range. Never popular or successful while it was active, the Velvet Underground has since gained a large critical and popular following. The band's enduring popularity and continuing influence on rock musicians certainly provide grounds for a critical examination of its history and music.

Unfortunately, Haynes's self-imposed constraints limit the movie's perspective. Haynes told *Portland Monthly* that he wanted to de-emphasize oral narrative and instead recreate the historical period through images and sound. At times, the screen is split into two, or as many as 12, images that range from newsreels to avant-garde films. Although this technique is striking and evocative, it eschews any explanation. "I wanted the audience to fill in the holes themselves and make their own discoveries," said Haynes. But viewers who did not live through the 1960s may well have trouble filling in the "holes" and making sense of what they are seeing.

Haynes also did not want the film to examine the band's importance, thinking that it needed no explanation. This approach, of course, does not help the viewer who is unfamiliar with the band, or critical of it. It misses an opportunity for a fresh analysis of its music. The result of these decisions is a film for the initiated that does less than it could have to enlighten the newcomer.

Interviews with Cale and Reed's sister Merrill shed light on the background of the band's two principal figures. Cale articulately describes his musical

development and his desire to reflect “the 60-cycle hum of modern life” (that is, the sound associated with alternating current power lines). He speaks mainly about his intentions, though, and little about his larger motives.

Through archival footage, the film evokes the mid-1960s without adequately conveying the period’s significance. The band got underway during the height of the civil rights movement and the inner city rebellions, the emergence of the anti-Vietnam War protests and amid signs the postwar economic boom in the US was unraveling. Various social moods were developing, some of them very confused, not all of them healthy. Bohemianism called for the throwing off of conservatism, but in favor of what precisely? In general, the distance of the artists from—or even their hostility toward—the working class remained a central issue. This complex environment was crucial to the group’s development, but *The Velvet Underground* scarcely acknowledges its influence.

Nor does the film probe Warhol’s influence on the band—or Warhol in general. Avant-garde filmmaker Jonas Mekas likens Warhol to “a father who always said yes,” which hints at Warhol’s passive, uncritical approach to the world. Little mention is made of the Factory, Warhol’s workshop where, in addition to the band, various hangers-on and aspiring stars gathered, often for drug- and sex-related escapism.

Like the Factory, the film feels somewhat insular, which no doubt results from Haynes’s decision to interview, in his words, only “the people that were there.” These people naturally share valuable information about the band. But excluding “people that were not there” limits the broader historical context and objective commentary that the movie can offer.

A recounting of the band’s trip to the West Coast prompts an oblique discussion of politics. Tucker notes that the band rejected “flower power” and hippie culture generally, finding it hopelessly unrealistic. Indeed, developments soon exposed the limitations of the counterculture’s idealism. But what did the Velvet Underground propose as an alternative? “We had no axe to grind or anything to tell anybody,” says Tucker. For a group of self-styled bohemians, this apparent acceptance of the status quo might seem surprising.

Several of the band’s songs, particularly on its first two albums, appear to romanticize decadence for its

own sake. Reed sang about drug use not as a pathway to enlightenment, but as a dangerous and seductive end in itself. At bottom, the band did not point a more productive way forward than the hippies did. One interviewee notes that some fans were as devoted to the Grateful Dead, the quintessential hippie band, as they were to the Velvet Underground, which indicates the limits of the latter’s perspective.

Jonathan Richman, a fan-turned-friend of the band, provides the film’s few remarks about what made the Velvet Underground’s music interesting. It spoke to artists and outsiders, he says, and showed them that they were not alone. He also describes the band’s ability to “hypnotize” an audience, who would remain in stunned silence for several seconds after a song ended. Richman founded proto-punk group the Modern Lovers, which was strongly influenced by the Velvet Underground. Again, more exploration of the magnitude and character of the latter’s influence would have been illuminating.

Much of the movie focuses on the period around the band’s belatedly acclaimed debut album. The raucous follow-up *White Light/White Heat* receives scant attention, and the subsequent albums even less. This unbalanced view prevents a fuller examination of the band’s development. And though we hear the band’s songs, we are not able to listen to them; the film does not often step aside to let the music speak.

Ultimately, Haynes’s artistic and ideological impulses seem to have prevented him from making what could have been an excellent documentary. He gained interviews with the surviving band members, spoke to several of their peers and had access to a mass of intriguing footage. Yet large parts of the picture have been left out, and an opportunity for a reappraisal of the band has been missed. *The Velvet Underground* takes too narrow and uncritical an approach to genuinely illuminate its subject.

Concluded.



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