



Reed, Lou (1942-2013)

by Tina Gianoulis

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In the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, rock musician Lou Reed, pencil-thin, craggy, and dressed in tough leather or androgynous glitz, came to symbolize the rebellious outsider. Reed produced a gritty urban rock and roll that made even the protest and acid rock of the 1970s seem tame in comparison.

Beatniks listened to Pete Seeger and the Weavers. Hippies listened to the Doors and Jimi Hendrix. The real freaks listened to Reed's Velvet Underground.

A rebel from an early age, Reed horrified his parents on Long Island with his effeminacy and his violently loud rock music. Hoping to curb his homosexuality, they sent him to a mental hospital for electroshock treatments. Although the treatments were painful and damaging, Reed emerged with his antisocial impulses (and bisexuality) more or less intact.

He moved to New York City, where he met Andy Warhol, the experimental artist who made a cult of both the decadent and the mundane. In 1965, Reed--as part of Warhol's studio, The Factory--joined fellow musicians John Cale, Sterling Morrison, and Maureen Tucker to form the Velvet Underground. Andy Warhol managed the band, which supplied the music for his Exploding Plastic Inevitable art shows in 1966.

Although Velvet Underground sold few albums and disbanded after only five years, the group had an impact that lasted for decades. Taking rock back to its rawest form--a few simple chords played very loudly--Velvet Underground's urban decadence was the opposite of the visionary dreaminess of much of the music of the era.

Their songs were about drugs and junkies, hustlers and drag queens, all sung with a bare-bones intensity that made them appealingly taboo. The 1980s alternative rock scene would honor the music of Velvet Underground as an influential forerunner of punk.

After the breakup of Velvet Underground, Reed continued to violate taboos as a solo artist. Bisexual in his private life, Reed linked up with another allegedly bisexual rocker, David Bowie, who in 1972 produced Reed's first solo album, *Transformer*.

On *Transformer*, Reed changed his look from urban tough to glam-rock flash. He also introduced his most famous signature song, "Walk on the Wild Side," the story of a transgendered hooker's odyssey from Los Angeles to the hard streets of New York, told with an understated, ironic affection and a catchy backbeat.

During the 1970s Reed had a long and very public affair with a transgender woman known only as Rachel, who is thought to have inspired many of his songs, including "Walk on the Wild Side," Reed's only top-40 hit.



Lou Reed performing in Malaga, Spain in 2008.
Photo by Marcelo Costa.
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Reed continued his solo career, producing well-reviewed albums every few years and frequently touring Europe and the United States. His work retained an honesty and clarity of poetic lyric that made him seem a more mature performer than many other aging rock stars.

His 2000 album *Ecstasy* is a powerful work with an unusual theme for a rock album--the celebration of a long-term relationship. Inspired by his association with experimental rock musician Laurie Anderson, Reed explores the issues of partnership with a hard-edged depth and complexity.

Anderson and Reed married in 2008. Two earlier marriages ended in divorce.

Reed's brutally romantic lyrics can also stand on their own, as, for example, in his artistically designed books: *Between Thought & Expression* (1995) and *Pass Thru Fire* (1999).

Reed died on October 27, 2013 at his home in Amangasset, New York. The cause of death was complications from liver disease.

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About the Author

Tina Gianoulis is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.