

Lou Reed: The Man Who Rocked Till He Dropped

By: Paige Platter

Lou Reed was the lead singer of the Velvet Underground, a singer, songwriter, and poet. *Rolling Stone* called him the poet of destruction. Friends with David Bowie and Andy Warhol, Lou Reed was a bisexual man. Although the Velvet Underground wasn't considered a commercial success of its time, it's now regarded as one of the most influential bands of alternative and underground rock music.

Lou Reed was born, Lewis Allan Reed in Brooklyn, in 1942 to a Jewish family. Reed has said that even though he was Jewish his real god was rock n' roll. (The Gospel According to Lou: Interview with Lou Reed). He suffered from anxiety, panic attacks, and depression. During one of these times when things got very bad, he was sent to electroshock therapy with the consent of his parents. This experience left him traumatized, with memory loss, and a hatred for his father that he wrote about in the song *Kill Your Sons*. (Lou Reed Lived and Died with a Broken Heart). Reed believed that he was being treated with electroshock therapy for his homosexuality. However, after his death, his sister denied that by saying their parents weren't homophobic and were told that electroshock therapy was needed to help his mental disorders. (A Family in Peril: Lou Reed's Sister Sets the Record Straight About His Childhood).

Reed attended Syracuse University where he studied under Delmore Schwartz, a poet, who Reed called "the first great person I ever met" and eventually dedicated the Velvet Underground song *European Son* to. (Rock and Roll Heart). At Syracuse, Reed met Garland Jeffreys, who was also studying under Schwartz. The two became friends, a friendship that would last until Reed's death. While at Syracuse, Reed was introduced to intravenous drug use, and quickly contracted hepatitis. (Lou Reed & The Velvet Underground). In an interview with *Rolling Stone*, he said that his goals as a writer were "to bring the sensitivities of the novel to rock music" or to write the Great American Novel in a record album. He graduated from Syracuse University in 1964.

Reed started work at Pickwick Records as an in-house songwriter. This is where he met John Cale, who he would then go on to form the Velvet Underground with. Cale wasn't impressed with Reed's abilities however the way he tuned his guitar to the same note to create a dissonance effect kept him hooked and the partnership blossomed. The duo invited Reed's college friend, guitarist Sterling Morrison, along with Cale's neighbor and drummer, Angus MacLise, to join and thus the Velvet Underground was born. The band got their first paying gig at Summit High School in Summit, New Jersey. However, MacLise believed accepting money for art was selling out and wouldn't participate in the gig. He was replaced by Moe Tucker on drums. Tucker was supposed to only do the one gig, but her sound fit and she stayed. (The Velvet Underground Biography).

The band soon came to the attention of Andy Warhol who at the time was doing a multimedia event called Exploding Plastic Inevitable, where he asked the Velvet Underground to play.

Warhol went on to inspire many of Reed's songs as he fell into the artistic scene. (Between Thought and Expression: Selected Lyrics of Lou Reed). Reed would rarely give an interview where he didn't give Warhol credit for being his mentor. Warhol pushed the band to take on a female singer, the German model, and singer, Nico. Reed initially resisted but went on to write several songs for Nico. The two were briefly lovers. (Transformer: The Lou Reed Story).

By 1968, Nico had left the band and Warhol was fired as manager. Both at Reed's behest. Cale then left the band, again at Reed's behest. This was the beginning of the end for the Velvet Underground. Cale was replaced by Doug Yule and the band took a more pop-oriented sound and turned away from the music in order for Reed to work more on his songwriting. During all of this, Reed was in a relationship with one of Warhol's photographers, Billy Name. (Transformer: The Lou Reed Story). They released two albums with this new sound until Reed left the band in 1970. The band then disintegrated when both Morrison and Tucker left in 1971. (White Light/White Heat: The Velvet Underground Day-by-Day). This was the start of Reed's solo career.

During this time, Reed moved back in with his parents in Long Island and worked for his father as a typist. (White Light / White Heat). In 1971, he recorded his first solo album after signing with RCA Records. It was mainly unused songs from the Velvet Underground and ended up not selling well. (Rolling Stone). But he kept working and eventually hit a breakthrough in 1972 with his album *Transformer*, which included his hit song *Walk on the Wild Side* which saluted the 'misfits' that surrounded Andy Warhol. This album brought Reed to the attention of the UK. (Beatles Buy-Out). Bowie, who had been helping Reed with his *Transformer* album, had a falling out with Reed during a late-night meeting which led to Reed hitting Bowie. The falling out started because Bowie has told Reed he would have to "clean up his act" if they were going to continue working together. (Lou Reed: A Life). During this time, Reed was a heavy user of Methamphetamines and alcohol. (Who Was the Real Lou Reed?).

Reed hired a local band, The Tots, to tour in support of *Transformer* and spent much of 1972 and 1973 with him, but let them go in favor of recruiting a new band in preparation for his upcoming *Berlin* album. (Concert Summary: May 2, 1973). In 1973, he married Bettye Kronstad, his girlfriend of four years, who called him a violent drunk on tour. The two split ways not even a full year into the marriage. (Bettye Kronstad) *Berlin* was a concept album about two junkies falling in love in the city with severe songs about domestic abuse, such as *Caroline I* and *Caroline II*, drug addiction in *How Do You Think It Feels*, adultery and prostitution in *The Kids*, and suicide in *The Bed*. Rolling Stone called it a disaster and many gave it poor reviews. (Transformer: The Lou Reed Story).

Reed started a live band and in 1975 he dedicated the song *Coney Island Baby* to his then partner, Rachel, a transgender woman Reed dated and lived with for three years. Rachel appeared in several photos with Reed including the cover his 1977 best-of album. (Lou Reed: A Life. New York: Little Brown). *Street Hassle* was released by the record label Arista during the beginnings of punk scene Reed helped to inspire. Reed took a competitive and sometimes

dismissive attitude towards punk, but he knew he inspired them. Reed would attend performances of punk bands at the New York music club CBGB. (PUNK Magazine Began With Lou Reed Comic).

In 1987, Reed met Cale again at Warhol's funeral. The two went back to work creating songs, including the album *Songs for Drella*, and a series of songs about Warhol. In the songs, Reed criticizes the doctors who couldn't save Warhol and his would-be assassin, Valerie Solanas. (Lou Reed remembered by VU bandmate John Cale). During the same time, Reed made the comment, "I just wouldn't want listeners to be under a false impression. I want them to know that if they're liking a man, he's a gay one – from top to bottom. You want to know the real Lou Reed? Turn around. Now bend over," about his sexuality.

In June and July of 1993, the Velvet Underground reunited and toured Europe, even appearing in the Glastonbury Festival, a five-day music festival in Somerset, England. (Older but Still Hip, the Velvet Underground Rocks Again). In 1995, Reed appeared in the unreleased video game *Penn and Teller's Smoke and Mirrors* as a boss on impossible mode. Reed would kill the player with laser beam eyes then would say "This is the impossible level, boys. Impossible doesn't mean very difficult, very difficult is winning the Nobel Prize, impossible is eating the sun."

In 1996, The Velvet Underground was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. At the ceremony, Reed, Cale, and Tucker performed the song *Last Night I Said Goodbye to My Friend*, dedicated to Sterling Morrison who died the previous August. (7. The Velvet Underground 1996).

Reed was part of multiple bands and music groups until his death in 2013 from liver disease. (Lou Reed, Velvet Underground Leader and Rock Pioneer, Dead at 71). Multiple bands, including Pearl Jam, The Killers, My Morning Jacket, The Arctic Monkeys, and Phish, performed songs in tribute to Reed shortly following his death.