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# ARTIFACTS

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## Album Review of The Velvet Underground & Nico

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**Sam Jennings started attending the University of Missouri in 2012 and is currently pursuing a bachelor of music performance in guitar. He writes in his spare time and fronts a local Columbia rock band, “The Rollups”. He is thankful to Dr. Michael J. Budds for encouraging him and his submission to this journal. He wrote this paper as one part of a multi-paper project in Historical Studies in Jazz and Popular Music, taught by Dr. Michael J. Budds. They were expected to choose a musician (before 1970) and review a full-length LP by that artist; he felt particularly inclined to make the case for a set of truly bizarre, radical artists who have been historically misunderstood and misaligned.**

When *The Velvet Underground & Nico* was released in March of 1967, it was to a public that hardly cared and a critical establishment that could not make heads or tails of it. Its sales were dismal, due in part to legal troubles, and MGM’s bungled attempts at promoting the record. The Velvet Underground’s seedy, druggy music defiantly reflected an urban attitude even closer to the beatniks than Bob Dylan and even more devoted to rock n’ roll primitivism than The Rolling Stones or The Who. Nevertheless, the recording had no place in a landscape soon to be dominated by San Francisco psychedelics and high-concept British pop. The Velvets were a product of their time as sure as any other band; however, their influence on the rock and pop of subsequent generations has, over time, vaulted them to the near-monolithic status of even their most popular peers. Indeed, almost all alternative American and British music since 1967 has its roots—if not in execution, then at least in style—in *The Velvet Underground & Nico*, the first album of the band’s incredibly brief career.

First, a brief history. The Velvet Underground was four-part: Singer Lou Reed was both chief songwriter and lead guitarist, John Cale (a classically-trained violist) played bass, Sterling Morrison played rhythm guitar, and Maureen Tucker played an unlikely drum set with a conspicuous absence of cymbals. In 1965, pop-art impresario and New York darling Andy Warhol took interest in the band, securing a tremendous record contract, offering to manage them, and using them in his “Exploding Plastic Inevitable” roadshow. He insisted that several songs be sung by Nico, a German model and Factory Girl whom Warhol hoped to pass as icy-blond chanteuse. Warhol also insisted that The Velvets be given complete artistic control, giving them free reign over the studio.

The album that resulted was stunning—alternatingly beautiful and garish. It is a record that is sometimes quaint and sometimes blistering, sometimes both in the same song. It is a landmark of deconstructionist pop, of a far more self-conscious form of popular music that eschewed complexity of any kind, retreating into pretty pop confections, aggressive sonic assaults, and relentless, hypnotic drone. It is insular and dramatic, and its lyrics conjure up nothing less than the sordid underbelly of New York City itself. Lou Reed's characters seem eternally caught in a haze of heroin and sexual dalliance.

The album begins with "Sunday Morning," where twinkling xylophone gives way to a lush, narcotized haze, pierced only by Reed's flat, affectless voice as he coos, "Sunday morning/And I'm falling/It's just a restless feeling/By my side...." The washed-out reverb is a perfect parallel to the song's bleary-eyed protagonist and yet, instead of amplifying Reed's voice, the vastness of the sound threatens to overcome it. This mood shifts abruptly, segueing into "I'm Waiting for the Man," a barrage of reductionist white-boy blues. The plodding 4-4 beat pounds out every single quarter note, which has the odd effect of removing any accent or emphasis. There is an incredible feeling of energy bubbling just under the surface, just as Lou Reed's nervous patter tells a story of going uptown to buy heroin.

These two songs serve as an incredible introduction to The Velvet Underground. Although the rest of the record is equally diverse, "Sunday Morning" and "I'm Waiting for the Man" represent the twin poles of The Velvets' influence. From the former the twee pop of modern Indie and the decadent hyper-sexuality of New Wave. From the latter the gleeful nihilism of punk and the art-rock concepts of Brian Eno and Roxy Music. The counterculture of an entire generation can be argued to be the product of The Velvet Underground's influence. The Velvets' subject matter and insistence on blurring explicit realism with drug-fueled twists defined a new standard of urban cool, one of stark simplicity and art-school pretension. Not unlike Andy Warhol's pop art, this music sought to ask inflated questions about what art was and what it was not. That it did so by removing the artfulness from the process emphasized its *attitude* as much as its actual execution. That they were often deadly serious about that mission risked characterizing them as stiff and pretentious.

Like much great pop music, however, there is a complexity in the delivery that belies far more thought than could be clear at first listen. In "Venus in Furs" Lou Reed sings of sadomasochism while a viola creates an eerie, sexual drone behind it. Yet, there is irreverence in his voice, the faux-formality of the lyrics barely disguising self-conscious silliness. Elsewhere, he flips Marvin Gaye's "Hitch-Hike," turning it into spritely jangle-pop on "There She Goes Again," a result that is more pastiche than mere emulation. Indeed, Reed's voice always elevates his pop music. His singing, although often compared to Bob Dylan, is truly unique among popular musicians in the twentieth century. They shared the quality of *surrounding* a melody—suggesting the pitches rather than smoothly articulating them—but Reed's talk-singing, limited as it is, is a more bemused and impossibly cool deadpan. His voice lends urgency to the band's most potent moments and embodies the same concept as the band's simplicity: an argument that style is substance and that creativity ultimately trumps ability.

Nico's voice, unfortunately, does not fare as well as Reed's. On the songs "Femme Fatale" and "I'll Be Your Mirror," the icy veneer and emotional distance of her interpretation (or lack thereof) reduce the songs to their simplest elements. Her voice is, yes, exotic but verges on awkwardness. The exception is

“All Tomorrow’s Parties,” where her voice casts an alien texture across the piano-led drone, her strange butchering of English pronunciation only furthering the song’s haunting, stimulating act of hypnotism.

Even “All Tomorrow’s Parties,” however, pales against Reed’s “Heroin,” a seven-minute, two-chord workout that recreates the experience of the titular drug, the tempo rising and falling as various highs set in. It is, perhaps, the most profound experience to be found in a Velvet Underground song – as incredible a document of drug use as has ever been made and, even more importantly, *exciting*. It begins with the familiar drone and jangly guitar and slowly works its way towards a cataclysmic climax, where a squall of feedback careens like a train off its tracks, leaving Reed intoning, “When that heroin is in my blood/And the blood is in my head/Thank god/That I’m good as dead.” To hear the song is to be *inside* the song, and to be inside the song is to experience an assault so powerful it becomes catharsis.

Ultimately, *The Velvet Underground & Nico* represents many things. In it can be found the inception of a new standard of Western counterculture, vigorously rejecting both the needless complexities of academic music and the particularly mainstream desire to smooth out all edges. It embodied a return to authentic experience and perspective that has characterized musical genres as diverse as punk and hip-hop. And, more importantly, it has emboldened generations of young people to push artistic boundaries and abstract ideas usually reserved for exclusive professional institutions, , exploring artistic decisions and processes through pop–the people’s music.

#### Reference List

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