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Why Lou Reed Can't Die

By Landon Jones



Lou Reed in Amsterdam in 2003. — Redferns via Getty

Why can't we let go of **Lou Reed**? The quintessentially urban singer and songwriter died one month ago, in the suburbs, of all places. He was a New Yorker who had only one real hit, "Walk on the Wild Side." Yet the obituaries and tributes have kept pouring out, as if some vast dam in the collective consciousness has been breached. In the weeks after his death, Lou Reed has finally achieved the cultural moment he never quite had in life.

It has taken until now to begin to get our arms around his legacy. There was a poem in *The New Yorker* by Nick Flynn ("since the news I can't stop listening to him"), then an appreciation by **Patti Smith**. ("He was our generation's New York Poet, championing its misfits as Whitman had championed its workingman and Lorca its persecuted.") The bloggers talked about his irreplaceability, his influence, his coolness.

Why is this happening? Why do we struggle to understand him? The answer, I think, lies in a style that was consistently disruptive, amazingly, over five decades. Reed refused to be pigeonholed. From his earliest days with the **Velvet Underground** in the late 1960s to his long solo career — boosted by **David Bowie** — he kept evolving and pushing beyond his own limitations. In this way, he resembles his onetime mentor, **Andy Warhol**, who stood in the middle of pop culture but also outside of it — mocking it, commenting on it.

Consider the contradictions. Reed was a singer who could not carry a tune. He aspired to bring all the narrative techniques of the novel to his lyrics — populating his songs with society's outcasts — but his greater influence may have been in his sound itself, with its groaning guitars and unmelodic melodies.

Lou Reed was a protean figure of rock who comprised many of the sub-elements of the form — punk, glam, indie, new wave, and noise rock.

Robert Ray, a film studies professor in Florida who for years played the Velvets' music with a rock band called The Vulgar Boatmen, sees in Reed a strong attempt to bring the goals of high art to a popular form. In that way, Reed resembled the be-bop movement in jazz, which rejected the conventions of swing, or the New Wave in cinema, which rejected the Hollywood models. If Reed's leathery style pleased the critics, it did not always please the public. "The boppers did not make music for dancing," Ray points out. "You had to sit and listen. Hence the emergence of R&B, always designed for dancing. The Velvets' music, with its slower tempos and drones, also discourages dancing."

Another academic who plays in a rock band, Nigel Smith of Princeton, says that what makes Reed most elusive is not his subject matter — the darkest angels of our nature — but rather the texture of his effort to describe it. It was not just what he said but how he said it — defiant, different, disturbing.

Today, if someone wants to praise a new band, they will call them "the New Velvet Underground." Reed is still a link to the original counter-culture. Our culture needed him in the way we need all transgressive figures in order to move ahead. We finally do move ahead. And yet that is what makes it so hard for us to let go.

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