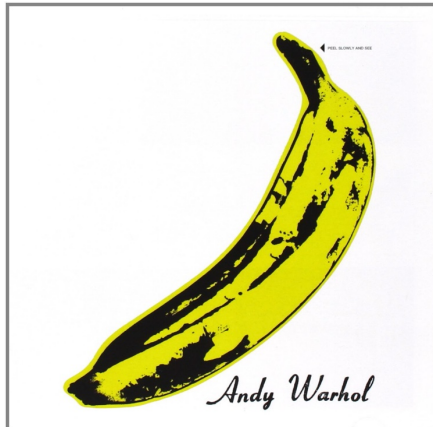


“The Velvet Underground & Nico”—The Velvet Underground (1967)

Added to the National Registry: 2006

Essay by Aidan Levy (guest post)*



Album cover



The Velvet Underground and Nico

“The Velvets straddled the categories.”

--Ellen Willis

Combining carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, and oxygen in the right proportion makes nitroglycerin, the key ingredient in dynamite. This is the Velvet Underground. They were a band of misfits, thrown together by the Brownian motion of New York’s downtown art world: Lou Reed, a middle-class Long Island Jew and self-taught guitarist who loved doo-wop, rockabilly, Ornette Coleman, the French Symbolist poets, the Beats, and Hubert Selby Jr.; John Cale, a Welsh coal miner’s son who fled the doldrums to become an avant-garde violist, was classically trained at Goldsmiths with Humphrey Searle, studied with Iannis Xenakis and Aaron Copland at Tanglewood, performed alongside John Cage and La Monte Young’s Theatre of Eternal Music, and became affiliated with the Fluxus movement, with no background in rock; Sterling Morrison, a self-described “very unsensitive young person” and “tear the house down” guitarist who loved John Lee Hooker, despised Frank Zappa, and eventually got a PhD in medieval literature; Maureen “Moe” Tucker, who played a stripped-down drum kit standing up, favored mallets over sticks, and loved Babatunde Olatunji and Bo Diddley. They were too much for their time, or any time. At Andy Warhol’s urging, they brought in Nico (born Christa Päffgen), the statuesque German model and chanteuse who had appeared in Fellini’s “La Dolce Vita,” her Teutonic accent and “Götterdämmerung voice,” as Sterling Morrison described it, always just flat enough to evoke an ill-fated sense of melancholy and unbelonging. The Velvets’ debut album title’s conjunction signified Nico’s steely detachment from the band, but they had their fair share of backstage conflict without her. It was that productive tension that made it all work.

Instead of having one clear leader, Cale and Reed were the fire-and-ice nucleus, sonically and lyrically, and it was their antagonistic cooperation that fueled the band and threatened to break it apart. Reed wanted to change what rock songs could be about; Cale wanted to change what a

rock song could sound like. Along with Sterling Morrison and Moe Tucker, they changed rock itself.

According to Reed biographer Lucy Sante, they “encompassed so many contradictions it initially weirded out nearly everybody.”

The Velvets’ 15 minutes of fame seemed to have come and gone after their incendiary appearance alongside Warhol at the New York Society for Clinical Psychiatry annual gala at Delmonico’s Hotel on January 13, 1966 got written up in “The New York Times” (Cale was identified as the leader, Reed not mentioned). They could never have imagined that more than half a century later, sidewalk record dealers in New York would still be selling fresh pressings of their debut album, released to so little fanfare in 1967.

Their origin story has become so steeped in myth that it can be hard to remember their humble beginnings as what Morrison once referred to as part “Long Island garage band,” part “Euro-band.” This fortuitous collision of cultures happened after Reed’s December 1964 recording of “The Ostrich” for Pickwick Records, the budget label he worked for as a songwriter, which released it under the fictitious band the Primitives. Producer Terry Philips spotted three guys at a party who looked like they might be members of such a band--John Cale, Tony Conrad, and Walter De Maria--and the fiction became a reality. “We recruited a group to accompany me on promotional trips,” Reed soon thereafter wrote his mentor, Delmore Schwartz. “One guy was from Wales. . . a starving viola player.” Reed and the Welshman would seem to have little in common, but this unlikely collaboration led to the Velvet Underground. Conrad called the band “an almost magical mistake.”

Their 1967 debut album, “The Velvet Underground & Nico,” commonly known as the “Banana Album,” was produced by Andy Warhol for only \$3,000 (the figure is debated), but it was not as lo-fi as its legend implies. They recorded at Scepter Studios in New York and T.T.G in Los Angeles over about five days between April and November 1966. With no technical experience in the music industry, Warhol enlisted producer and Columbia Records sales executive Norman Dolph. It was rejected by Columbia, but MGM’s Verve subsidiary signed the band. Verve turned it over to Tom Wilson, the visionary African-American producer whose career spanned Sun Ra, Cecil Taylor’s “Jazz Advance,” Bob Dylan’s “Like a Rolling Stone,” and Simon and Garfunkel’s “The Sounds of Silence.” Also involved were engineers John Licata and Ami Hadani, an Israeli engineer credited on the album as Omi Haden. (He was one of the “two terrible guys” behind T.T.G. Studios.) The album was edited and remixed under Wilson’s supervision by Gene Radice and David Greene.

The legend of the album’s release, however, has been hardly exaggerated. It was barely promoted by Verve, did not crack the Top 100, and produced no hits. A lawsuit filed by Factory regular Eric Emerson over failure to clear the rights to his image for the back cover resulted in a recall and nearly derailed the release altogether. Yet it would eventually be considered one of the most influential rock albums of all time, ranking 23rd on the 2020 “Rolling Stone” 500 Greatest Albums list, and added to the Library of Congress’s National Recording Registry in 2006. The band was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1996. More than 50 years

after their debut album's unheralded detonation, its aftershocks continue to be felt. No number of accolades can make it safe; no number of repeated listens make it stale.

It has endured not because of its commercial success, but because of its totemic influence on generations of rock musicians. In 2021, two documentaries on eminent sixties rock bands directed by major filmmakers were released: Peter Jackson's "The Beatles: Get Back" and Todd Haynes's "The Velvet Underground." In 1967, no one could have predicted that we would still be talking about the Velvet Underground, or that "The Velvet Underground & Nico" would have anywhere near the cultural impact of "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band," which topped the charts that year. Yet there is an argument to be made that the Velvet Underground is ultimately the most influential band in the rock canon. "'Sgt. Pepper' remains tied to its time, as quaint and dated as a pair of granny glasses; the era 'The Velvet Underground & Nico' calls up is our present one," wrote Robert Palmer. "Mostly it is a tribute to music so radical it scarcely seems to have aged at all."

Chuck Klosterman articulated the contradiction of the album's ongoing influence. "It makes no sense: Something that sounds this modern should also feel familiar; something that feels this strange should also sound like it belongs to a different age. But it doesn't sound rote and it doesn't sound anachronistic. It is, in all likelihood, the most irrefutably timeless rock music anyone has ever made--not necessarily the *best*, but the most aesthetically durable."

The album is culturally, historically, and aesthetically significant for the following reasons: 1) its frank and transgressive exploration of taboo themes with a poetic depth of expression unprecedented in rock; 2) its interdisciplinarity, reaching out across the arts (literature, visual art, film, dance) and styles of music, with one of the most iconic album covers of all time; 3) its sound: a polyphony blending avant-garde jazz and classical, minimalism, drone, blues, R&B, and doo-wop; and 4) being the most critically influential commercial flop in rock history, establishing a claim for rock as high art.

The Lyrics

In late 1965, Reed wrote a letter to Delmore Schwartz, the professor at Syracuse he considered his "spiritual godfather" to whom he later dedicated "European Son" to: "Maybe i will go to school again. maybe I'll teach, maybe euope [*sic*], who knows. But mainly it must be writing and I think I'm good enough to give it a run for its money. Hope my latest records [*sic*] a smash because I'll be needing the money to be sure." In class, Schwartz had imparted a love of "Finnegans Wake," but mainly, he "showed me the beauty of the simple phrase," Reed wrote. Schwartz saw in his protégé the potential to join the ranks of the New York School poets, but Reed had other plans.

Before the Velvet Underground coalesced, Reed was at a crossroads: Would he pursue a writing life or a life of rock and roll? The literary establishment--including Schwartz--suggested it was impossible to do both. Reed decided to shelve his graduate school application to Harvard and with nothing but a Gretsch Country Gentleman, set out to see if he could prove them wrong. He did. (Underscoring the point, after leaving the Velvet Underground in 1971, Reed published

eight poems in the “Harvard Advocate,” two of which were the lyrics to “Sweet Jane” and “Candy Says.”)

“I was interested in writing the Great American Novel, and I wanted to use the rock and roll song as a vehicle for it,” Reed told David Fricke.

It was a lofty ambition. To Reed, it seemed that no one had thought of this before, or taken the idea seriously. “What if Raymond Chandler wrote a rock and roll song?” he said. “What would happen if Delmore Schwartz wrote a rock and roll song? . . . It may run counter to why someone listens to a pop song or rock and roll in the first place, which is not to think.” The writers he idolized confronted subject matter that no one in mainstream rock would dare touch. “It was only taboo on records. . . . Movies, plays, books, it’s all in there. You read Ginsberg, you read Burroughs, you read Hubert Selby, Jr. If you want to have this stuff taken on a level that’s worth considering, you can’t compare yourself to the other stuff that’s on record. You start looking at Brecht and Weill.”

Like Chandler or Burroughs, Reed was “interested in communicating to people who were on the outside,” he said, and like a novelist, he put these outsiders in his songs. His music was aggressively anti-pop, anti-flower power, anti-everything, it seemed, but as irrepressibly alive as Rimbaud, and anyone struggling with a dark night of the soul as dark as Lou Reed’s could drop the needle (on the record) and know they were not alone. As Greil Marcus wrote, Reed’s rock poetry signified “the embrace of self-destruction as a means of salvation--as deliverance from the inevitable destruction of the soul by a world of--as New Order, one of thousands of bands unthinkable without the Velvet Underground, titled an album in 1983—‘Power, Corruption, and Lies.’” The Velvet Underground represented—still represents—an act of sonic resistance.

Reed chose taboo subjects, drawn from personal experience: hard drugs, non-heteronormative sexuality, the eccentric characters he encountered at Warhol’s Factory. The rock status quo rarely ventured past heartbreak, but he dealt with ugly feelings: alienation, self-loathing, cynicism, existential despair. Sometimes, he would just “string words together for the sheer fun of their sound, not any particular meaning.” Reed was a reporter the way Jack Kerouac was a reporter, and his dispatches hit like social realism without the moral stance. And behind the mike or in an interview, he was notoriously prickly, more sarcastic and irreverent than anyone in rock.

He created slice-of-life scenes from the bohemian underground: “Femme Fatale” Edie Sedgwick, the “poor girl” at Warhol’s Factory in “All Tomorrow’s Parties,” or a “white boy” copping dope on 125th Street in Harlem. Other songs are less reportorial than expressionistic: “Sunday Morning,” a more “restless” than lazy Sunday written after an all-nighter, and “I’ll Be Your Mirror,” a paranoid love song fraught with tension between the doubt-ridden lyric and the soothing melody, sweetness with a bit of bile. “Venus in Furs,” an adaptation of Leopold von Sacher-Masoch’s novella, opened the door to the LGBT themes and nonbinary characters Reed would soon memorialize in song.

The album’s masterpiece, “Heroin,” uses the lived experience of the drug itself--the rush and the nod--as a metaphor for the emotional highs and lows of a character caught between the nihilism

of wanting to “nullify my life” and the youthful idealism of that “great big clipper ship.” Contrary to the critical backlash it engendered, the song does not valorize opiate use. Patti Smith called it “one of our more perfect American songs, because it addresses a very conflicting subject. . . that has so many stigmas attached to it. It addresses all of the deeply painful and destructive elements of it. And also whatever is precious about it in. . . a non-judgmental piece, in a non-preaching piece. . .with. . . such beautiful, simple, direct language.” Ellen Willis called it “seven minutes of excruciating spiritual extremity.”

It became, according to Joe Harvard, “the first ram that the Velvet Underground used to batter down the walls hemming in rock lyricists--and it did so using just two chords: D and G.” When Reed composed it, around the time he was a staff songwriter at Pickwick, he was as bewildered as the song’s protagonist, poised to join the folk revival movement, go to graduate school, or take a job at the New York City Department of Welfare, he wrote Schwartz: “One song of mine is in hollywood, another is in england where a longhaired group is mulling it over, and my manager has dug up some smaller but more liberal (?) folk record companies.”

Enter Andy Warhol.

The Exploding Plastic Inevitable

In December 1965, Warhol, Paul Morrissey, Gerard Malanga, Barbara Rubin, Edie Sedgwick, and “Village Voice” co-founder John Wilcock came into the Café Bizarre in Greenwich Village, where the Velvets had a residency playing on a stage so small Moe Tucker could only fit a tambourine. Most of the clientele hated them, but for Warhol and his retinue, it was a match made in heaven. The club soon fired them when they refused to stop playing “The Black Angel’s Death Song,” but Warhol hired them as the Factory house band. There, the band became a fixture of Warhol’s pop art demimonde, a 24-hour filmed extravaganza starring the Superstars, the silk-screens, the aluminum foil wallpaper. Warhol set the scene for the Velvet Underground’s experiment in mixing rock with the avant-garde. “He was this catalyst, always putting jarring elements together,” Reed said. “Which was something I wasn’t always happy about.” For one, Warhol brought Nico, another clashing voice that defined the album’s otherworldly sound.

Rehearsals happened at the Factory or Jonas Mekas’s Film-Makers’ Cinematheque, where artists from across the disciplines intermingled. In November 1965, filmmaker Piero Heliczer cast the band in “Venus in Furs,” an eight-millimeter short film named for the song. “The idea seemed to be to redefine ‘spontaneous,’” recalled John Cale. “Films were projected on gauze which doubled as sets for dancing with music--as likely to be interrupted by poetry reading as dancing was by film. The noise of drone was heard in the streets. ‘Found art’ was as likely to turn into a poem as a sculpture.” The band could stand on its own, but these interdisciplinary connections became part of their musical DNA.

Warhol realized his vision of a full spectrum artistic experience at the Polski Dom Narodny or Polish National Home (the Dom for short) with the Exploding Plastic Inevitable. “We’re sponsoring a new band. It’s called the Velvet Underground,” Warhol said in an interview. “We have this chance to combine music and art and films all together. . . if it works out, it might be

very glamorous...it would be kind of the biggest discotheque in the world.” The Velvet Underground played; Jonas Mekas projected films onto any and every surface, including onto the band themselves; Mary Woronov and Gerard Malanga improvised a leather-clad whip dance; lighting engineer Danny Williams made it a technicolor dreamscape. It was a happening to end all happenings, a kinetic collage creating an effect Branden Joseph describes as “disruptive multiplicity and layering.” Wayne McGuire referred to the band at the time as “prophets of a new age, of breakthrough on an electronic intermedia: total scale.”

The EPI was an attack on the senses, meant to rupture the porous boundary between the arts, and the Velvet Underground was the most explosive part. “They always sounded so raw and crude,” Warhol said of the band. “Raw and crude was the way I liked our movies to look, and there’s a similarity between sound in that album and the texture of ‘Chelsea Girls,’ which came out at the same time.” On “The Velvet Underground & Nico,” they sought to replicate what they did at the Dom. “It’s so much nicer to play into one very cheap mike,” Reed said. “That’s the way it sounds when you hear it live and that’s the way it should sound on the record.”

In the studio, as always, Warhol gave them permission to be utterly, unapologetically themselves. As a music producer, he was a novice, but Warhol’s imprimatur made all the difference. “In a sense he really did produce it, because he was this umbrella that absorbed all the attacks when we weren’t large enough to be attacked,” Reed said. What came out was not sanitized or overproduced; the Velvet Underground built a wall of sound only to promptly tear it down.

“The Velvet Underground & Nico” is a mass-produced extension of the multimedia world they inhabited at the time. It is itself a piece of Warholian pop art--the vinyl record as fetish object; icon; mass culture as high art. That peelable banana, dripping with innuendo: “Peel slowly and see.”

Warhol primarily spoke through his art, but what he did say was memorable. His advice to the band? “Always leave them wanting less.”

The Sound

No one sounded like the Velvet Underground, not just because their eclectic sensibility subverted genre conventions. The “Banana Album” was not five disparate voices randomly mashed together, noise for noise’s sake; it was all in service of the music. It was a true synthesis, the rock equivalent of what Bakhtin called heteroglossia, in which multiple linguistic codes can coexist in fruitful tension within a unified whole. The Velvets created a layered canopy the way few other groups of their size have. The ambition was, according to Cale, to do “a Phil Spector thing with as few instruments as possible.”

Reed is generally credited as the band’s frontman, but during the Cale years, that was not the case. They were a full-fledged band, and Morrison and Tucker were more than accompanists. It did not come together spontaneously; it took time to develop that sound. We have the evidence of the radical transformation from conventional folk-rock arrangements to the singular sound of the Velvet Underground on the 1995 “Peel Slowly and See” box set’s “Ludlow Street” demos,

recorded by Reed, Cale, and Morrison in July 1965 at the gritty Lower East Side loft at 56 Ludlow Street that Cale briefly shared with Reed. A bluesy “I’m Waiting for the Man” has an unmistakable twang. “Heroin” has no bass drum pulse, the song’s heartbeat. A folksy “All Tomorrow’s Parties” is taken up-tempo, with doo-wop vocal harmonies, nothing like Nico’s haunting delivery. Cale’s madrigal “Venus in Furs,” sans electric viola hits, sounds like a lost verse from Simon and Garfunkel’s “Scarborough Fair.” Throughout, Reed does his best Bob Dylan impression; he hasn’t found his voice yet.

In Reed’s melodies and lyrics, Cale heard something that was entirely absent from those tame early demos, and transformed the arrangements so that form mirrored content. Cale had the revelation that the fire and fury of his composition for axe and piano which reduced philanthropist Olga Koussevitzky to tears at Tanglewood, the power of the drone he had developed with La Monte Young’s Dream Syndicate, the 19-hour performance of Erik Satie’s proto-minimalist “Vexations” he performed alongside John Cage, all ran parallel to the anarchic thrust of rock. “We had this opportunity to do something revolutionary--to combine avant-garde and rock and roll, to do something symphonic,” he told Victor Bockris.

According to Morrison, this revolution was possible because Cale did not yet know what was not possible. “See, the beauty of Cale in the beginning was that he really didn’t know very much about rock,” Morrison recalled. “In fact, he knew next to nothing. So, if you turned him loose on an instrument, he wasn’t able to play any kind of clichéd anything because he didn’t know any of the clichés. It was all original.”

Even if Cale didn’t know the conventions, it was all deliberate; improvisation did not mean loss of control. “People would say we were just improvising and making noise on stage, but actually what we did was disciplined and intentioned,” Cale said. “Everything was deeper, too. A song written in E would be played in D. Maureen didn’t use cymbals. I had a viola (not the higher violin), and Lou had this big drone guitar we called an ‘ostrich’ guitar. It made a horrendous noise, and that’s the sound on ‘All Tomorrow’s Parties,’ for instance. All this made our sound entirely unique.”

Cale could sculpt with sound. A gifted multi-instrumentalist, he worked in mixed media: celeste, piano, bass, grabbing whatever was available and made sense; on “Sunday Morning,” for example, a xylophone. On “European Son,” he found a metal chair, dragged it across the floor, and hurled it into a pile of aluminum dishes. He expanded the possibilities of amplification: “I filed the bridge of the viola down and played on three strings. . . it made a great noise; it sounded pretty much like there was an aircraft in the room with you.”

Cale found the perfect sound for Reed’s lyrics--maybe not always the one Reed wanted, but the sound he needed. Jonathan Richman told Joe Harvard that “folks like to imbibe simulated darkness and decadence, when a guy like John Cale can give them the *real* thing--using only chords, tones, and textures.” It would one day make him one of the most brilliant producers, behind the debut albums of the Stooges and Patti Smith.

Reed, for his part, was not averse to avant-garde experimentation. “There were two sides of the coin for me,” he said. “R&B, doo-wop, rockabilly, and then Ornette Coleman and Don Cherry,

Archie Shepp, stuff like that. When I was in college, I had a jazz radio show. I called it 'Excursion on a Wobbly Rail,' after a Cecil Taylor song. I used to run around the Village following Ornette Coleman wherever he played." That R&B influence would manifest in songs like "There She Goes Again," with the intro sampling Marvin Gaye's "Hitch Hike." "European Son," Reed said, channeled "Ornette Coleman on the guitar."

Reed discovered that "Ostrich guitar" Cale loved when Pickwick songwriter and producer Jerry Vance tuned every guitar string to A sharp. "He was just screwing around," Reed said, "and he didn't realize what he had. But I did. And I took that and made it into 'The Ostrich.'" Part of Reed's modus operandi, which dovetailed with Cale's background in minimalism, was to keep it simple. "The Velvet Underground could do a lot of things a lot of ways. They could be very dissonant, very pretty," he said. "And they were all two-, three-chord songs."

The key for Reed was to take the repetitive structure of rock and make it new--never to recycle, but to repurpose. "We actually had a rule in the band for a while. If anybody played a blues lick, they would be fined," Reed said. "Of course, we didn't have any money to fine anybody with. But that was because there were so many of these blues bands around, all copping on that. And while I really liked the stuff for singing, I can't sing that. I had to find my own way." This did not mean no blues; what it did mean was that everybody had to come up with their own licks. In fact, Reed, Tucker, and Morrison had a common interest in the blues: Bo Diddley, Booker T. & the M.G.'s guitarist Steve Cropper, Chuck Berry, Mickey Baker, Jimmy Reed. The challenge was to make it their own without appropriation.

To give Cale and Reed all the credit for defining the sound of the Velvet Underground and redefining the rock aesthetic elides the indispensable roles played by Morrison and Tucker. Reed thought of Morrison as the "Warrior Heart of the Velvet Underground" and Tucker as a "genius drummer." Together, they transformed the band's raw material through hundreds of hours of work in rehearsal and on the road--at the Factory, the Dom, and during a disastrous California tour that found them comically out of place. "Our music evolved collectively," Morrison insisted.

Morrison bucked the trends. He "liked the really raw blues," he said. "Folk music caused me more grief than commercial rejection. That was an attack on rock and roll. . . If you were a college student you weren't supposed to like what we liked, let alone play it. You were supposed to be a folk person dealing with the serious issues of the day, such as the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression, the WPA, the IWW . . . but to me that was all anthropology and a waste of time." When the music called for loudness, Morrison unleashed hell: "I presume that nobody can hear the lyrics--I did my best to drown them out!"

Moe Tucker aligned herself unabashedly as an anti-Ginger Baker, laying down a more elemental beat than Ringo Starr. The quintessential showman, Baker played an ever-expanding drum kit: two bass drums, surrounded by cymbals, arms flying. On the other hand, Tucker "couldn't play a perfect roll for a million dollars," she said. "I didn't know how, and I didn't want to know how." On "Heroin," all she needed was a bass drum and a mallet. "When I first joined, they already had that song but were actually playing it like a folk song," Tucker recalled. "Angus MacLise was their percussionist at that time, and he played bongos and stuff, which fit in with

that style. I honestly don't remember what caused the shift. Maybe me pounding on the drums the way I did." Tucker solidified another tenet of the band's cohesive sound: no matter how loud they played, they always listened to each other. "We all really watched each other on stage," Tucker said. "And it was fun, because we communicated--'Oh, he wants to go double time,' or 'He wants to emphasize this, so I won't emphasize it.' And we did a lot of improvisation. It was fun playing like that, not knowing what was going to happen."

This improvisatory spirit meant that songs were over when they were over, and not a moment sooner. If the lyrical content or the screeching viola did not deter deejays from playing "The Velvet Underground & Nico," the track length was another deterrent. "We figured that on our first album it was a novel idea just to have long tracks," Morrison said. "People just weren't doing that--regardless of what the content of the track was--everyone's album cuts had to be 2:30 or 2:45 minutes."

This uncompromising commitment to excess and experimentation led the Velvet Underground to become, as Richard Hell claimed, "the first completely hitless rock and roll band to end up in everyone's short-list pantheon of all-time-best groups."

Influence

Recordings entered into the Library of Congress's National Recording Registry "inform or reflect life in the United States." They do not all do both. Music, claims Jacques Attali, has the power to hold a mirror up to the culture and be prophetic--an apparent paradox. "Change is inscribed in noise faster than it transforms society," he wrote. Such was the case with "The Velvet Underground & Nico." Released on the heels of the Summer of Love, the album was defiantly not of its time, but it turned out to be timeless. "The first Velvet Underground record sold 30,000 copies in the first five years," Brian Eno famously said in 1982. "The sales have picked up in the past few years, but I mean, that record was such an important record for so many people. I think everyone who bought one of those 30,000 copies started a band!" (The album actually sold nearly double that: 58,476 copies in its first two years.) It peaked at 171 on the "Billboard" 200 chart, but its sales have continued steadily since. It has now sold more than 560,000 copies, though it has not, as of this writing, been certified gold by the RIAA.

The Velvets became the quintessential rock band's rock band, the undisputed godparents of punk. The band, according to Alex Ross, "closed the gap between rock and the avant-garde." In bridging distant worlds, they opened the floodgates to a sea of multi-hyphenate subgenres: art-, avant-, noise-rock. "You can find the basis of so many bands' and stars' whole sounds and styles in specific Velvets songs," wrote Richard Hell.

A partial list of listeners who started a band would include: David Bowie, Jonathan Richman, Michael Stipe, Patti Smith, Iggy Pop, Debbie Harry, David Byrne, Henry Rollins, Kurt Cobain, Jack White, Vernon Reid, Kim Gordon, Thurston Moore, Melvin Gibbs. Not everyone started a band, though. Playwright Václav Havel and a group of non-violent political dissidents started Czechoslovakia's Velvet Revolution, which the Velvets indirectly inspired. Literary figures Neil Gaiman, William Gibson, and Denis Johnson translated the Velvets' music back into the kind of

boundary-breaking literature from which it sprang. The Velvet Underground gave them all the chutzpah not to ask permission or forgiveness.

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The band on “The Velvet Underground & Nico” only lasted one album. Soon, they lost Nico. Then Reed fired Warhol, and following their second release, “White Light/White Heat,” he pushed Cale out as well. Without that charged polarity, the band lost some of the improvisatory plasticity that made it so inevitably explosive. Some have used the metaphor of alchemy to describe that early incarnation of the band--four common elements that, in the right proportion, turn lead into gold. But the Velvets weren’t common, and they didn’t make gold; they made dynamite, and the problem with dynamite, of course, is that it explodes.

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* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.