

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

Added to the National Registry: 2006

Essay by Cary O'Dell



Original album cover



Original label



The Velvet Underground and Nico

“...it’s so cool to be young, pale, deathly thin and wearing sunglasses!”

It took just four days and \$3,000 for the Velvet Underground and Nico to record their self-named, iconic and highly influential debut album.

The Underground (Lou Reed, John Cale, Sterling Morrison, Mo Tucker and Nico) were the protégés of the then reigning king of the American art scene--and society curio--Andy Warhol. Warhol, who had already elevated soup cans to high art, was always interested in expanding his oeuvre, influence, fame,...and profit margin. After moving into films (including 1964’s epic and banal “Empire”), music—or, at least, the packaging of music—seemed like the next, natural progression.

In late 1965, at New York’s Café Bizarre, located on the city’s MacDougal Street, Warhol’s filmmaking associate Paul Morrissey stumbled upon the perfect group of musicians for Warhol’s new endeavor.

Having first formed in 1964 and gigged with various members under various names in the NJ/NY area, at the time, the Velvet Underground consisted of Reed, Cale, Morrison and Tucker. The foursome were dark, edgy, androgynous and sang songs about street life and drugs. To the ears and eyes of Morrison, and later Warhol and Warhol’s eclectic entourage, they seemed like the perfect fit for Warhol’s strange fiefdom, The Factory, his studio/enclave devoted to art, debutantes, drag queens, junkies, and societal cast-offs.

Quickly, Warhol hired (or purchased) the group, becoming their Svengali, manager or master depending who one believes. Warhol provided the band with rehearsal space, money for equipment and the élan that went along with being part of the Warhol circle. In exchange, the Warhol organization was to reap 25% of all the band’s earnings. One of Warhol’s first edicts was to impose on the Underground a new lead singer, another recent discovery by the artist.

Nico was a stunningly beautiful, German-born sometime actress, model and singer who had found her way to the Factory. Her Dietrich-esque vocals were, at first, not welcomed by the band. But, by this time, the Velvets were firmly under contract to Warhol, so Nico was in.

In 1966, under the auspices of Warhol, the newly reconfigured Velvet Underground and Nico made their debut at the opening of Warhol's nightclub experiment, Up, as part of something Warhol named The Exploding Plastic Inevitable. The group's performance was more than music. While the band played and Reed and Nico exchanged lead vocals, a series of avant-garde, Warhol-produced films played on the bare wall behind them. Simultaneously, on stage, "dancers" (mainly Factory regulars) gyrated and, in the audience, other Factory folk ran up and down the aisles purposefully creating havoc among the spectators.

To some, the evening was pure rock and roll, to others it was sensory overload. To new wave art enthusiasts, it was a "happening" and, arguably, one of the first grand examples of "performance art."

After its debut, the band and its spectacle of a stage show went on a limited cross-country tour.

In 1966, the Underground also made their first trip into the recording studio to record their first album. Nico sang lead on the three of the album's songs ("I'll Be Your Mirror"; "Femme Fatale" and "All Tomorrow's Parties"); Lou Reed assumed lead on all the album's remaining cuts.

Though Warhol had little to do with the album's actual production, upon its release it did bear, almost literally, the artist's stamp of approval: his realistic yet phallic print of a single yellow banana on a solid white background became the album's iconic front image. (The banana could actually be "peeled" away from the front cover revealing a pinkish, fleshy fruit beneath the sticker.)

All tracks on the album were either written or co-written by Reed who brought to rock a blunt street poetry previously unheard of. As noted, Reed also handled the majority of the album's vocals; his deep voice and monotone tied with (oddly enough) Nico's for rock music's most deeply disenfranchised.

The classically-trained Cale was responsible for the majority of the album's musical arrangements. Cale, heavily influenced by classical and avant-garde composers, focused much of the production on the band's preference for experimentation. New techniques—like the "Ostrich guitar," which tuned all guitar strings to the same note—were utilized throughout the song cycle.

Despite a few upbeat moments—notably the Reed-penned "I'll Be Your Mirror"—the mood and tone of the Velvet's album was a dark one. In a significant counter-balance to the "free love" and sunshiny happiness then being promoted by the youth and hippie culture, the Velvets sang of dark alleys, drug addiction and other despairing topics. "Venus in Furs" takes its title and subject matter from a work by the Marquis De Sade. "Run Run Run" is about cocaine. The selections titled "Heroin" and "Black Angel's Death Song," meanwhile, speak for themselves.

And, yet, all these tracks have emerged as classics of the rock aesthetic. Allmusic.com summarizes the Velvet's album succinctly when they state that "glam, punk, new wave, goth, noise, and nearly every other left-of-center rock movement owes an audible debt to this set." "Rolling Stone" has repeatedly celebrated the album as one of the greatest rock and roll works in history. And "The Rough Guide to Rock" calls the album "The most essential purchase of them all."

When listened to today, every track from the album sounds distinctly modern and fresh to the ear.

Though not commercially successful at the time of its release, "The Velvet Underground and Nico" is, today, recognized as one of the most enduring albums in the history of rock 'n' roll.

Today, over 40 years after its release, it is still cited by musicians as a seminal work. The imprint and influence of the Underground can be heard in the work of David Bowie, Patti Smith, the Sex Pistols, REM, Sonic Youth, U2, the Cars and innumerable others.

After their debut disc, the Velvets returned to the studio for their follow-up, “White Light/White Heat,” which came out in December 1967. By this time, Nico--always adjacent anyway--had left the group for an on-and-off solo career often undermined by a legendary, lingering drug habit.

“White Light” would also be the final album for John Cale. He departed the group after ongoing creative conflicts with Lou Reed. Other personnel changes would occur through the band’s next three albums until the original Underground was fully disbanded around 1970. (A final LP, “Squeeze,” with none of the band’s original personnel, was released under the Velvet’s name in 1973.)

Lou Reed and John Cale would each go onto noteworthy solo careers, each emerging as undisputed princes of alt-rock each with legions of their own followers. Sterling Morrison would leave the music industry in order to teach at the college level. Later, he became a tugboat captain; he died in 1995. Maureen Tucker has recorded and performed on and off, married, raised five children, worked at a Wal-Mart and been a political activist. Nico toured extensively throughout the world and finally conquered her addictions. She was living in Europe when she died in 1988 at age 50.

For their bravery in taking on dark and controversial topics and placing them in such sonically progressive landscapes, the original Velvet Underground and Nico was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1996.

Their remarkable debut album was named to the National Registry in 2006.

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