



Lou Reed: A Life

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The essential biography of one of music's most influential icons: Lou Reed

As lead singer and songwriter for the Velvet Underground and a renowned solo artist, Lou Reed invented alternative rock. His music, at once a source of transcendent beauty and coruscating noise, violated all definitions of genre while speaking to millions of fans and inspiring generations of musicians.

But while his iconic status may be fixed, the man himself was anything but. Lou Reed's life was a transformer's odyssey. Eternally restless and endlessly hungry for new experiences, Reed reinvented his persona, his sound, even his sexuality time and again. A man of contradictions and extremes, he was fiercely independent yet afraid of being alone, artistically fearless yet deeply paranoid, eager for commercial success yet disdainful of his own triumphs. Channeling his jagged energy and literary sensibility into classic songs - like "Walk on the Wild Side" and "Sweet Jane" - and radically experimental albums alike, Reed remained desperately true to his artistic vision, wherever it led him.

Now, just a few years after Reed's death, *Rolling Stone* writer Anthony DeCurtis, who knew Reed and interviewed him extensively, tells the provocative story of his complex and chameleonic life. With unparalleled access to dozens of Reed's friends, family, and collaborators, DeCurtis tracks Reed's five-decade career through the accounts of those who knew him and through Reed's most revealing testimony, his music. We travel deep into his defiantly subterranean world, enter the studio as the Velvet Underground record their groundbreaking work, and revel in Reed's relationships with such legendary figures as Andy Warhol, David Bowie, and Laurie Anderson. Gritty, intimate, and unflinching, *Lou Reed* is an illuminating tribute to one of the most incendiary artists of our time.

Lou Reed: A Life Details

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From Reader Review Lou Reed: A Life for online ebook

Mark says

Lou Reed was as polarizing a figure as rock has seen, but he was not, at heart, the "Lee Rude" character often evoked in magazine profiles. Anthony DeCurtis hones in early on Reed's deep sensitivity -- his introversion, social awkwardness, and need to prove himself to his father, and his tendency to act out as a way of distinguishing himself from his peers. DeCurtis sticks to the chronological narrative, following Reed from his NYC upbringing to the Velvet Underground, Andy Warhol and the Factory, and a long string of solo albums that documented his personal life -- wittingly or not -- in greater detail than most studies of Reed have to date. The book is curiously short on information about the disintegration of Reed's marriage to Sylvia Morales -- she was his inspiration for 'The Blue Mask' and ultimately assumed control of his career -- which begs the question of whether DeCurtis held details close in order to protect certain people. But that is a quibble, and 'Lou Reed: A Life' is a brisk, engrossing read.

Joseph says

Workmanlike and comprehensive, but relies overmuch on deep readings of Reed's lyrics for long stretches.

Hannah MacDonald says

I'm surprised by how well-received this biography was. I enjoyed the beginning of the book, but past that it turned into a very dry breakdown of all of his albums. I don't think anyone willing to read an 800 page book about Lou Reed would need that boring of a background. Lou Reed is an extremely interesting figure, and this book didn't do him any justice. The author seemed to insert his own opinions throughout the book which made it hard to take seriously. It could've been done better. His biography shouldn't have been written by a journalist.

Wesley Britton says

Take a walk on the wild side.

Yes, the line above was the title of Lou Reed's 1972 hit single, certainly his most famous, most popular song. The sentence can also serve as a succinct summation of the life of the singer/songwriter/ guitarist who spent many years immersed in New York's wild side, especially during the 1970s. The line can also serve as a summary of rock critic and Reed confidante Anthony DeCurtis's 2017 biography of a figure DeCurtis knew well for many years.

Speaking of many years, I'm happy to admit Reed got on my radar screen all the way back in 1967 when The Velvet Underground and Nico was released. I was apparently one of the 30,000 listeners who had a copy of the LP with the original Andy Warhol peel-off banana skin cover. Through the '70s, I was aware of Reed's connections with the "glam rock" and punk-rock circles including David Bowie and Mick Ronson, of Reed's close association with hard drugs, and his very public intimacy with the gender-benders of New York's gay and trans-sexual populations. But I had only a surface awareness of these aspects of Reed's public and private life, nothing like the detailed depths revealed in DeCurtis's very surprising journalism.

While I owned some of Reed's 20 solo albums released between 1972 and 2009, Rock and Roll Animal being my absolute favorite, I never had the depth of knowledge or insight into Reed's music DeCurtis demonstrates on nearly every page of his biography. That's because DeCurtis's focus is on Reed's musical legacy and much of his book is critical analysis of all those albums with a special emphasis on the more important songs, Reed's musical development over the years, and the unique up and down pattern of Reed sometimes fighting commercial success, sometimes courting it.

I wasn't really aware of Reed's rejection of all the drug and sexual trappings in his life inspired by his second wife, Sylvia Morales, in the 1980s. That relationship is but one of many DeCurtis analyzes to show how both musical collaborators and personal friends and lovers could be close to Reed one minute and then exiled from his confidence the next whenever the thorny musician felt he had been slighted or misused. In some cases, it was simple pride or paranoia or insecurity that precluded Reed from accomplishing some goals, such as his insistence he be seen as the main motor of the Velvet Underground during the failed reunion attempts in the 1990s.

Gratefully, Anthony DeCurtis gives us a multi-dimensional portrait of Lou Reed, warts and all, as the expression goes. Wild warts, in this case. If you're like me, after reading this book, you might be inspired to track down some of Reed's work you didn't explore before. Most music fans likely know about the mostly unsuccessful collaboration between Reed and Metallica and/or the romance between Reed and performance artist Laurie Anderson. I didn't know about Reed's staging of some of his earlier albums in the 21st century, his latter-day interest in martial arts and meditation, or his interest in sonic technology and photography. I didn't know about the soft-skinned Reed many people saw when they met Reed during his final days with Anderson until his death in 2013.

Clearly, any reader picking up this title will be a fan wanting to learn more about Reed, the Velvet Underground, or the sub-genres of rock Reed contributed to or influenced. All such readers will be handsomely rewarded. Drawing from his own past experiences with Reed, interviews with Reed intimates, and more basic research, Anthony DeCurtis has given us what will certainly be the definitive retrospective of a significant figure in rock history.

This review first appeared at BookPleasures.com on March 7, 2018:
<http://1clickurls.com/ihc8kYx>

Mr. Gottshalk says

This was one of those books that I did not hesitate to pick up when I saw it in my local library, displayed in the New Releases section. For all his complexities, Lou Reed has always been an intriguing character. While there was no reason for me to understand the backstory of every song on every album, I get it that a biographer has to do his due diligence, and Anthony DeCurtis sure did just that. I like that Reed was thorny, unpredictable, and flat out different from other rock and roll artists, from his break in with the Velvet Underground all the way through his work with Metallica on the 2011 album *Lulu*. I saw Lou Reed at the Tower Theater in Philadelphia in 2003 - stumbled upon a front-row ticket, actually, and the experience was unforgettable. (I think I was seated next to an old girlfriend, or something, and he kept staring over in my direction). RIP to a rock legend who I deeply admire.

Tosh says

Overall Lou Reed had a sad life. One of the great American songwriters, he is also a guy that was angry. First of all, there's nothing better than The Velvet Underground. He may not have wanted to hear that, but having such perfection at a young age is a hard thing to jump over. On the other hand, there were brilliant solo Lou albums as well. His anger toward his father is puzzling, even though the family ok a series of shock treatments to solve Lou's depression or some say his gay tendency, but that's not really clear if that was the reason or not. Many said his father was a loving figure than someone who was evil, and Lou treated him as an evil presence throughout his life. There are a few ugly scenes that came up through Lou's behavior, but on the other hand, I know people who loved him. And, Anthony DeCurtis interviewed many that did love him for his gentleness and his ability to show affection when needed. DeCurtis who knew Lou and go along with him was very even-handed and more important appreciated his entire output as a recording artist. While reading this book I had the urge to listen to the Lou albums I passed up, but also revisited the classic Velvets and Lou solo albums. A remarkable song man, and a great lyricist. Now, I really want to hear the "*Lulu*" album.

Rick says

This was a strange book for me in that I found the subject fascinating yet despicable. I discovered the Velvet Underground in college and was familiar with some of his early work but really didn't know much else about him or the rest of his oeuvre. I think the biographer had a very difficult job in being both fair and honest to the subject as a person as well as an artist. I suspect it would be quite easy to paint him as a total asshole which he definitely was at times and yet he was much more complex than that. I would not recommend this book but it was an interesting read.

Phil Overeem says

I went into this hesitantly, after having read two other Reed bios and never having been knocked out by DeCurtis' work. But clearly it was a labor of love: while never flinching in looking at the subject with cold,

clear eyes, the author makes a surprisingly fresh case for the humanity inherent in Reed's life and work. It takes DeCurtis a bit to get rolling; the early life / Velvets section is mostly what we already knew. But beginning with Reed's departure from VU, and especially extending into his last quarter-century, he writes absorbingly, and even re-evaluates relationships and work that seemed settled for posterity. Recommended.

Laura says

From BBC Radio 4 - Book of the week:

Born in Brooklyn in 1942, Lou Reed moved with his middle-class Jewish family to Long Island when he was a young boy. A rebellious teenager, he discovered R&B and rock and roll and began playing in bands early on. He also began experimenting with drugs and sex, leading his parents to take a drastic decision that Lou never forgave them for. At Syracuse University, he came under the influence of the poet Delmore Schwartz, who encouraged him to take writing seriously and served as a role model for Lou's bohemian ambitions. When he moved to New York City, Lou took a song-writing job with the budget label Pickwick Records, and met avant-garde musician John Cale. With guitarist Sterling Morrison and drummer Maureen Tucker they formed the Velvet Underground, whose first paid gig was a now legendary appearance at a high school dance where they played three songs and by all accounts caused half the audience to flee for the exit.

1/5 The Velvet Underground is formed.

Read by Read by Demetri Goritsas

Abridged and produced by Sara Davies.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b09gfbc4>

Matt says

In finalized, linky version: <http://artsfuse.org/167342/book-review/>

In some ways, everything you need to know about Lou Reed is in the name- a sleek, slick, terse pair of punchy syllables that fits the image he projected to the public like a leather glove- a scowling, streetwise New Yorker who wore all black and wrote songs about illicit drugs, kinky sex, and the underworld that followed. What many people don't know is that if it weren't for his upwardly mobile, status-conscious Jewish family's desire to blend in to 50's suburban America, we'd know the songwriter who wrote "Heroin" as Lewis Allan Rudnitsky, the accountant's son from Long Island.

Anthony DeCurtis's extensive new biography shows how the fertile schizophrenia of Lou's personality fueled his restless creative energy. Reed was able to intermingle the contradictory aspects of his personality- equal parts edgy, downtown provocateur and bookish, middle class intellectual- into the complex, compelling, and controversial figure that influenced the shape of rock to come.

The welter of contradictions started early- Reed was ambivalent about his middle-class upbringing seemingly from the cradle. While his friends were sneaking beers and peeking at Playboys, Reed was smoking pot and

reading the Marquis De Sade. Taking a progressively matter-of-fact approach to the illicit subject matter, he explained that “this is just what some people enjoy”- not necessarily admitting that he happened to be one of them. A track star who loved avant-garde jazz, Reed also maintained a lifelong love for the swooning romanticism of doo-wop, which infused his most vulnerable songs. The picture of the teenage Reed that emerges is of a teenage loner who enjoyed reminding people that he never actually enjoyed any of the parties he kept getting invited to.

Beginning in his teens, Reed’s androgynous sexuality would now be neatly categorized as “non-binary” but at the time his effeminate mannerisms scandalized his anxious parents. He was given electroshock treatments (a not uncommon practice at the time), a harrowing experience revisited many years later in the bitter “Kill Your Sons.” DeCurtis takes us through the debate about how much blame Reed’s parents truly deserve. His sister insists that they were skittish but genuinely thought it was for the best, given the crude understanding of mental health of the time and place. Reed remained unforgiving his whole life, and DeCurtis points out that Oedipal themes recur in many of his songs.

DeCurtis suggests, slightly too formulaically, that this Freudian psychology explains Reed’s tumultuous romantic life. In a frustratingly pat judgment, DeCurtis suggests that Lou’s interest in men seemed more erotic in nature, and his interest in women more domestic. He argues that Reed’s ultimate motivation was to find a nurturing, nonjudgmental mommy figure- a slapdash Freudian judgment if ever there was. To be fair, he married three different women in his life, but the argument is essentially reductive. Reed went through plenty of willed transformations, but just because he tended to settle down longest with women doesn’t necessarily mean his queerness was just an affectation or a passing fancy.

One of the largely forgotten players in Reed’s tumultuous love life was the elusive figure known as Rachel, the trans woman with whom he was very vocally in love, proclaiming that “Rachel knows how to love me better than anyone” and to whom his heartfelt “Coney Island Baby” is dedicated. Little is known about her other than her relationship with Reed, and DeCurtis uses most of her section of the book deservedly criticizing Lester Bangs’ belittling of her during one of his infamous interviews.

It’s amusing to learn that the college girlfriend who was the inspiration for “Pale Blue Eyes” (arguably his greatest ballad) didn’t actually have blue eyes. I loved finding out that “Perfect Day” was written about a blissful New York afternoon spent with *her*, *who spent the afternoon hiding the callouses from him from a new pair of shoes.* Evidently the best way to Lou’s heart was through connecting with his inner techno geek- he met his soul mate Laurie Anderson at a convention for *ampifiers* and immediately bonded with the independent and accomplished fellow musician over what models she preferred.

In a slightly less Freudian way, Reed had a lifelong knack for finding mentors. At Syracuse it was Delmore Schwartz, former golden boy of the Partisan Review gone haywire from booze but still able to command rapt attention. Schwartz once demanded that Lou promise to write honestly and never sell out or risk being haunted by his ghost. Reed took his mentor at his word, honored his memory for the rest of his career, never breaking his promise. Schwartz’s literary obsessions reinforced Reed’s sense of himself as a writer, something he wished to be his legacy.

Schwartz was the smartest man Reed had ever met, until he met Andy Warhol. As the patron for the Velvet Underground (named after a cheap shocker book about S & M practices in suburbia), Warhol provided a performance space for the group and was able to provide all the multimedia at his disposal- whip dancers, film projection, and a Factory throbbing with all the glamorous freaks Reed could ever want.

Even as he learned from these figures, Reed’s stubborn independence and solitary nature meant that he couldn’t stand to share the spotlight with a collaborator or be under the thumb of any authority figure for

long. It took a while, but Reed and his VU bandmate John Cale eventually reconciled their differences and reunited for the underrated record Songs for Drella which explored his relationship to his former mentor and patron with time-earned wisdom.

After the VU disbanded, Reed's solo career had its peaks and valleys. Transformer is probably the most well-known of his solo records, but Berlin and Rock and Roll Animal were initial flops that have gained in reputation over time. DeCurtis offers close readings of his best work. When his scholarly attention (DeCurtis has a PhD in Literature) is applied to Reed's best material, such as his magnum opus "Street Hassle", the analysis enhances the songs. When it isn't, the scholarly focus seems too formal. I happen to think more of the later work, such as the somber Magic and Loss, than DeCurtis does, but generally his taste is on point.

For long time fans, the biggest concern with the book is its briskness. DeCurtis wants to do justice to his subjects' extensive catalogue, which is well-intentioned, but as he ticks off the summaries for one record after another, the book begins to feel less like a career evaluation and more like Lou Reed 101. Aside from the occasional insightful anecdote, DeCurtis' life doesn't offer the in-depth reckoning that appeals to lifelong fans. Maybe his goal is to turn on the next generation, which is understandable and even necessary, particularly in our ephemeral, consumerist culture. Reed himself once mordantly remarked that they would be playing "Walk on the Wild Side" (his only real hit song) at his funeral, and he wasn't wrong. Hopefully, DeCurtis' encyclopedic approach will inspire younger readers to dig a little deeper.

Peyton Van amburgh says

had a lot of fun reading this and revisiting and discovering Lou Reed and the Velvets music I've always loved and some I never heard. The book perfectly connects his life with the type of music he made and why, which was almost always about painfully real things going through his head. The first half of the book paints a frighteningly disturbing portrait of a person in a ridiculous amount of despair and self-loathing and how his music reflected that, while still making you enjoy and want to listen to it with a whole new appreciation. Sure, once it gets into the 90s stuff it gets a little dull, but the laughably rude behavior Reed exuded to fans and journalists makes it a very entertaining read that culminates in the revelation that Reed was ultimately actually a sweet, happy person that only those close to him realized him to be.

Amy Leigh says

A must read for Lou Reed & Velvet Underground fans. The author knew Lou Reed well on a personal level and gave him unprecedeted access to windows of his soul and parts of his life you will probably only read on this book. Definitely not a boring biography but an adventure that happened in real life!

Matthew says

4.5 stars.

Like so many others, my introduction to Lou Reed came at an early, impressionable age. I was barely a teenager, obsessed with the classic rock stalwarts that dominated my father's own music collection - The Doors, Hendrix, Dylan, to name a few. It was also around this time Oliver Stone directed a horribly bloated

biopic about Jim Morrison and the Doors, yielding in nothing more than a wasted (literally) performance from Val Kilmer and, well, an inclusion of the Velvet Underground's seminal drug anthem "Heroin" on its soundtrack. I, of course, bought the soundtrack, despite it being a reissue of many tracks I'd already owned; yet it was the peculiar droning noise of "Heroin" that continued to bring me back to it. What in the hell was this? To say it was like nothing I'd ever heard before was not only an understatement, but likely the reaction of so many others upon being introduced to Lou Reed's brilliance.

But enough about my experience with Lou Reed. I imagine readers of Anthony DeCurtis's comprehensive and compulsively readable biography, *Lou Reed: A Life*, have similar stories. Reed was an icon not just for his contributions towards music, art, literature, etc, but for the profound effect he had on those who cherished his work. DeCurtis, a friend of Reed's but also a dynamic music journalist, poignantly depicts the artist's life through the lens that's both celebratory and unapologetic. For someone as complex as Lou Reed, I'm almost certain he'd have expected nothing less.

Or perhaps he would've given DeCurtis shit for it. Reed was famously difficult, a fact the writer hasn't any problem describing in and throughout *A Life*. The prologue even mentions Reed's own presumed apprehensions about the bio's subject matter had he still been alive. But he was also fiercely loyal, oftentimes to a fault. It made for many a broken relationship throughout his life. It also made for many monumental achievements.

These achievements are spelled out in full in DeCurtis's bio, from Reed's early "success" as a Pickwick Records songwriter, to his forming of the Velvets, to his collaboration with Warhol and beyond. I knew a bit of the Underground's background, but it was the stories surrounding Reed's solo work I found the most telling and compelling. Here was this mythical creature, this villainous character, shattering taboos and irking the masses seemingly for his own pleasure. What was behind all of this? What motivated the man to morph into such a figure? *A Life* dives deep into this dark, weird world, walking on the wild side Reed so ingeniously speaks of in his biggest hit. I found it difficult not to get roped into this strange, different alternate universe.

My one quibble with *Lou Reed: A Life* is one I'm not surprised by. DeCurtis by nature is a music journalist, and many of his track-by-track interpretations of Reed's work, while appreciated, felt a bit exhaustive. Then again, so too was Reed himself, a tireless pioneer who bled for his work, and was not against letting others bleed for it too. The man was far from perfect and *A Life* lets this be known. Yet what it also tells is a tale of a one-of-a-kind, once-in-a-generation talent whose influence was and is unquestionable, unrivaled and, frankly, unbelievable. Lou Reed was a visionary who paved the way for so many other artists with a similar vision, one that's far from myopic, one that tests boundaries, one that pushes past comfort zones.

What a life. And what a book.

Ashley Adams says

Amazingly, Lou Reed's biography really hit its stride after the disbanding of the Velvet Underground. Sure, you'll read about the violent, drug-induced sexual scandals of the leather-clad asshole we all love, but I was really struck by Reed's evolving, passionate optimism for life. Whatta guy!

Dan says

This is an outstanding look at the life of a rock icon. DeCurtis writes with love, admiration, warmth, and above all honesty about Lou Reed's life, which was both tortured (at one point, literally) and glorious. This is far from a rock hagiography. The book pulls no punches when it comes to Reed's difficult personality, troubled relationships, and propensity for egotistic self-deception. But this uncompromising (though sympathetic) look at Reed's foibles makes his triumphs and personal growth all the more believable.

Much of the book consists of chapters essentially dedicated to individual albums - the circumstances and events in Reed's life that surrounded the production of each one. Knowing what was happening in Reed's life and what was going on around him adds a new layer of understanding and appreciation as one traces the evolution of Reed's music.

It is a bit of a shame that books like this are not written until it is too late to provide their insights during the subject's life. I wish I had known even half of this while Reed was still making music. The book ends, as biographies are wont to do, with the death of its subject. DeCurtis renders his final days and the memorials that followed with such compassion that I find myself mourning his loss far more intensely and personally than I ever did at the time.

Highly recommended.
