

IN MEMORIAM AND A FAREWELL TO

LOU REED (1942-2013)

The editorial collective of *Situations* deeply mourns the recent loss of Lou Reed. His heroic struggle with cancer was well known and even though he lost the fight earlier than we all wished, his capacity for change provides an inspiration for all of us. The political implications of his artistic production were vintage radical imagination; beyond the open sexuality and sexual politics on many of his songs, he also demonstrated great understanding of the ecological crisis and gun control in lesser known songs such as “The Last Great American Whale.” Reed’s corpus hopefully will be critically engaged by serious research in the generations to come.

It is in the spirit of serious research that the Situations collective is privileged to remember Lou Reed in a retroactive fashion by reprinting Ellen Willis’ seminal essay (1978) on the Velvet Underground written in the heat of a struggle against nihilism that is reminiscent of Dionysian and cheerful excess, perhaps the subversive import of ‘the body electric,’ and its resurrection and redemption. Although a period piece, Ellen’s essay may well serve us a very powerful antidote to today’s cyberspace culture.

The essay which follows here as a memorial to the spirit and struggle of Lou Reed and what his work meant to the generation of the Sixties and early Seventies will be found again in a forthcoming book, *The Essential Ellen Willis*, edited by Nona Willis Aronowitz (University of Minnesota Press, Spring 2014). The editorial collective wishes to thank Nona for permission to reprint this essay in this issue, Vol. V, no. 2 of *Situations: Project of the Radical Imagination*, and it is our hope that the essay will be read or read again by the fans and followers of Lou Reed and the Velvets.

Michael Pelias, for the editorial collective

THE VELVET UNDERGROUND

Ellen Willis

THE VELVET UNDERGROUND

I'LL LET YOU BE IN MY DREAM

A change of fantasy: I have just won the first annual Keith Moon Memorial Essay Contest. (This year's subject was "Is Ecstasy Dead?") The prize is a fallout shelter in the bowels of Manhattan, reachable only through a secret entrance in CBGB's basement. It is fully stocked: on entering the contest I was asked to specify my choice of drugs (LSD), junk food (Milky Way), T-shirt ("Eat the Rich"), book (*Parade's End*), movie (The *Wizard of Oz*)¹, rock-and-roll single ("Anarchy in the U.K."), and rock-and-roll album. The album is *Velvet Underground*, an anthology culled from the Velvet's first three L.P.s. (My specially ordered version of this collection is slightly different from the original; for "Afterhours," a song I've never liked much, it substitutes "Pale Blue Eyes," one of my favorites.) The songs on *Velvet Underground* are all about sin and salvation. As luck would have it, I am inspecting my winnings at the very moment that a massive earthquake destroys a secret biological warfare laboratory inside the Indian Point nuclear power plant, contaminating New York City with a virulent, radioactive form of legionnaire's disease. It seems that I will be contemplating sin and salvation for a long time to come.

I LOVE THE SOUND OF BREAKING GLASS

In New York City in the middle sixties the Velvet Underground's lead singer, guitarist, and *auteur*, Lou Reed, made a fateful connection between two seemingly disparate ideas — the rock-and-roller as self-conscious aesthete and the rock-and-roller as self-conscious punk. (Though the word "punk" was not used generically until the early seventies, when critics began applying it to unregenerate rock-and-rollers with an aggressively lower-class style, the concept goes all the way back to Elvis.) The Velvet's broke up in 1970, but the aesthete-punk connection was carried on, mainly in New York and England,

¹ On second thought, I'd rather have *Gone With the Wind*, or maybe *The Harder They Come*.

by Velvets-influenced performers like Mott the Hoople, David Bowie (in his All the Young Dudes rather than his Ziggy Stardust mode), Roxy Music and its offshoots, the New York Dolls and the lesser protopunk bands that played Manhattan's Mercer Arts Center before it (literally) collapsed, the antipunk Modern Lovers, the archpunk Iggy Stooze/ Pop. By 1977 the same duality had surfaced in new ways, with new force, under new conditions, to become the basis of rock-and-roll's new wave.

There are important differences, both temperamental and musical, that divide today's punks and punkoids from the Velvets and other precursors and from each other; American punk (still centered in New York) and its British counterpart are not only different but in a sense opposed. Yet all this music belongs to a coherent genre, implicitly defined by the tension between the term "punk" and the more inclusive "new wave," with its artsy connotations. If the Velvets invented this genre, it was clearly anticipated by the Who: Pete Townshend, after all, is something of an aesthete, and Roger Daltrey something of a punk. It was not surprising that the impulse to make music that united formal elegance and defiant crudity should arise among working-class Englishmen and take shape among New York bohemians; each environment was, in its own way, highly structured and ridden with conflict. And as a vehicle for that impulse, rock-and-roll had unique advantages: it was defiantly crude, yet for those who were tuned in to it, it was also a musical, verbal, and emotional language rich in formal possibilities.

The Who, the Velvets, and the new wave bands have all shared this conception of rock-and-roll; their basic aesthetic assumptions have little to do with what is popularly known as "art rock." The notion of rock-as-art inspired by Dylan's conversion to the electric guitar — the idea of making rock-and-roll more musically and lyrically complex, of combining elements of jazz, folk, classical, and avant-garde music with a rock beat, of creating "rock opera" and "rock poetry" — was from the rock-and-roll fan's perspective a dubious one. At best it stimulated a vital and imaginative eclecticism that spread the values of rock-and-roll even as it diffused and diluted them. At worst it rationalized a form of cultural upward mobility, concerned with achieving the appearance and pretensions of art rather than the reality — the point being to "improve" rock-and-roll by making it palatable to the upper middle class. Either way, it submerged rock-and-roll in something more amorphous and high-toned called rock. But from the early sixties (Phil Spector was the first major example) there was a countertradition in rock-and-roll that had much more in common with "high" art — in particular avant-garde art — than the ballyhooed art-rock syntheses: it involved more or less consciously

using the basic formal canons of rock-and-roll as material (much as the pop artists used mass art in general) and refining, elaborating, playing off that material to produce what might be called rock-and-roll art. While art rock was implicitly based on the claim that rock-and-roll was or could be as worthy as more established art forms, rock-and-roll art came out of an obsessive commitment to the language of rock-and-roll and an equally obsessive disdain for those who rejected that language or wanted it watered down, made easier. In the sixties the best rock often worked both ways: the special virtue of sixties culture was its capacity for blurring boundaries, transcending contradictions, pulling off everything at once. But in the seventies the two tendencies have increasingly polarized: while art rock has fulfilled its most philistine possibilities in kitsch like Yes (or, for that matter, Meat Loaf), the new wave has inherited the counter-tradition, which is both less popular and more conscious of itself *as* a tradition than it was a decade ago.

The Velvets straddled the categories. They were nothing if not eclectic: their music and sensibility suggested influences as diverse as Bob Dylan and Andy Warhol, Peter Townshend and John Cage; they experimented with demented feedback and isolated, pure notes and noise for noise's sake; they were partial to sweet, almost folk-like melodies; they played the electric viola on Desolation Row. But they were basically rock-and-roll artists, building their songs on a beat that was sometimes implied rather than heard, on simple, tough, pithy lyrics about their hard-edged urban demimonde, on rock-and-roll's oldest metaphor for modern city life — anarchic energy contained by a tight, repetitive structure. Some of the Velvets' best songs — "Heroin," especially — redefined how rock-and-roll was supposed to sound. Others — "I'm Waiting for the Man," "White Light/ White Heat," "Beginning to See the Light," "Rock & Roll" — used basic rock-and-roll patterns to redefine how the music was supposed to feel.

The Velvets were the first important rock-and-roll artists who had no real chance of attracting a mass audience. This was paradoxical. Rock-and-roll was a mass art, whose direct, immediate appeal to basic emotions subverted class and educational distinctions and whose formal canons all embodied the perception that mass art was not only possible but satisfying in new and liberating ways. Insofar as it incorporates the elite, formalist values of the avant-garde, the very idea of rock-and-roll art rests on a contradiction. Its greatest exponents — the Beatles, the Stones, and (especially) the Who — undercut the contradiction by making the surface of their music deceptively casual, then demolished it by reaching millions of kids. But the Velvets' music was too overtly intellectual, stylized, and distanced to be commercial.

Like pop art, which was very much a part of the Velvets' world, it was antiart art made by antielite elitists. Lou Reed's aesthete-punk persona, which had its obvious precedent in the avant-garde tradition of artist-as-criminal-as-outlaw, was also paradoxical in the context of rock-and-roll. The prototypical rock-and-roll punk was the (usually white) working-class kid hanging out on the corner with his (it was usually his) pals; by middle-class and/or adult standards he might be a fuck-off, a hell-raiser, even a delinquent, but he was not really sinister or criminal. Reed's punk was closer to that bohemian (and usually black) hero, the hipster: he wore shades, took hard drugs, engaged in various forms of polymorphous perversity; he didn't just hang out on the corner, he lived out on the street, and he was a loner.

As white exploitation of black music, rock-and-roll has always had its built-in ironies, and as the music went further from its origins, the ironies got more acute. Where, say, Mick Jagger's irony was about a white middle-class English bohemian's (and later a rich rock star's) identification with and distance from his music's black American roots, his working-class image, and his teen-age audience, Lou Reed's irony made a further leap. It was not only about a white middle-class Jewish bohemian's identification with and distance from black hipsters (an ambiguity neatly defined when Reed-as-junkie, waiting for his man on a Harlem street corner, is challenged, "Hey white boy! Whatchou doin' uptown?") but about his use of a mass art form to express his aesthetic and social alienation from just about everyone. And one of the forms that alienation took pointed to yet another irony. While the original, primal impulse of rock-and-roll was to celebrate the body, which meant affirming sexual and material pleasure, Reed's temperament was not only cerebral but ascetic. There was nothing resembling lustiness in the Velvets' music, let alone any hippie notions about the joys of sexual liberation. Reed did not celebrate the sadomasochism of "Venus in Furs" any more than he celebrated heroin; he only acknowledged the attraction of what he saw as flowers of evil. Nor did he share his generation's enthusiasm for hedonistic consumption — to Reed the flash of the affluent sixties was fool's gold. Like Andy Warhol and the other pop artists he responded to the aesthetic potency of mass cultural styles; like Warhol he was fascinated by decadence — that is, style without meaning or moral content; but he was unmoved by that aspect of the pop mentality, and of rock-and-roll, that got off on the American dream. In a sense, the self-conscious formalism of his music — the quality that made the Velvets uncommercial — was an attempt to purify rock-and-roll, to purge it of all those associations with material goodies and erotic good times.

Though it's probable that only the anything-goes atmosphere of the sixties could have inspired a group like the Velvets, their music was prophetic of a leaner, meaner time. They were from — and of — *hard-headed*, suspicious New York, not utopian, good-vibes California. For all Lou Reed's admiration of Bob Dylan, he had none of Dylan's faith in the liberating possibilities of the edge — what he had taken from *Highway 61 Revisited* and *Blonde on Blonde* was the sound of the edge fraying. Like his punk inheritors, he saw the world as a hostile place and did not expect it to change. In rejecting the optimistic consensus of the sixties, he pre-figured the punks' attack on the smug consensus of the seventies; his thoroughgoing iconoclasm anticipated the punks' contempt for all authority — including the aesthetic and moral authority of rock-and-roll itself.

Throughout this decade rock-and-roll has been struggling to reclaim its identity as a music of cultural opposition, not only distinct from but antagonistic to its own cultural conglomerate, rock. The chief accomplishment of the punks has been to make that antagonism explicit and public in a way that is clearly contemporary — that is, has nothing to do with “reviving” anything except the spirit of opposition itself. What is new in rock-and-roll — what is uncomfortable and abrasive and demanding — is the extent to which it insists on a defensive stance; the authentic late seventies note is nothing so much as cranky. Though the British punk movement was in some respects a classic revolt of youth — a class-conscious revolt, at that — its self-mocking nihilism is a classic crank attitude, while the American new wave makes up in alienated smart-assism for what it lacks in shit-smearing belligerence. The power and vitality of the crank posture are attested to by the way it makes less discordant sensibilities sound corny, even to those of us who might prefer to feel otherwise. Bruce Springsteen may still pull off a credible *mélange* of fifties teen-age-street-kid insurgency, sixties apocalyptic romance, and early/mid-seventies angst, but he is an anomaly; so is Graham Parker, whose stubborn and convincing faith in traditional rock-and-roll values recalls John Fogerty's. Patti Smith, on the other hand, is a transitional figure, half cranky messiah, half messianic crank. The rock-and-rollers who exemplify the current aesthetic do so with wide variations in intensity, from Johnny Rotten (maniacal crank) to Elvis Costello (passionate crank) to Nick Lowe or Talking Heads (cerebral cranks) to the Ramones (cranks of convenience). (The Clash, one convolution ahead, is boldly anti- or post-crank — the first eighties band?) The obvious core of their crankiness is their consciousness of themselves as a dissident minority, but it's more complicated than that. Real, undiluted rock-and-roll is almost by definition the province of a dissident minority (larger at some times than at others); it achieved its cultural

hegemony in the sixties only by becoming rock — by absorbing competing cultural values and in turn being absorbed, making a new rebellion necessary. What is different now is that for the first time in the music's twenty-five-year history, rock-and-rollers seem to accept their minority status as given and even to revel in it. Which poses an enormous contradiction, for real rock-and-roll almost by definition aspires to convert the world.

In some ways the crankiness of current rock-and-rollers resembles the disaffection of an earlier era of bohemians and avant-gardists convinced they had a vision the public was too intractably stupid and complacent to comprehend. But because the vision of rock-and-roll is inherently populist, the punks can't take themselves seriously as alienated artists; their crankiness is leavened with irony. At the same time, having given up on the world, they can't really take themselves seriously as rock-and-rollers, either. They are not only antiart artists but antipeople populists — the English punks, especially, seem to abhor not only the queen, America, rich rock stars, and the uncomprehending public but humanity itself. The punks' working-class-cum-lumpen style is implicitly political; it suggests collective opposition and therefore communal affirmation. But it is affirmation of a peculiarly limited and joyless sort. For the new wave's minimalist conception of rock-and-roll tends to exclude not only sensual pleasure but the entire range of positive human emotions, leaving only what is hard and violent, or hard and distanced, or both: if the punks make sex an obscenity, they make love an embarrassment.

In reducing rock-and-roll to its harshest essentials, the new wave took Lou Reed's aesthete-punk conceit to a place he never intended. For the Velvets the aesthete-punk stance was a way of surviving in a world that was out to kill you; the point was not to glorify the punk, or even to say fuck you to the world, but to be honest about the strategies people adopt in a desperate situation. The Velvets were not nihilists but moralists. In their universe nihilism regularly appears as a vivid but unholy temptation, love and its attendant vulnerability as scary and poignant imperatives. Though Lou Reed rejected optimism, he was enough of his time to crave transcendence. And finally — as "Rock & Roll" makes explicit — the Velvets' use of a mass art form was a metaphor for transcendence, for connection, for resistance to solipsism and despair. Which is also what it is for the punks; whether they admit it or not, that is what *their* irony is about. It may be sheer coincidence, but it was in the wake of the new wave that Reed recorded "Street Hassle," a three-part, eleven-minute antinihilist anthem that is by far the most compelling piece of work he has done in his post-Velvets solo career. In it he represents nihilism as double damnation: loss of faith that love is possible, compounded by

denial that it matters. "That's just a lie," he mutters at the beginning of part three. "That's why she tells her friends. 'Cause the real song — the real song she won't even admit to herself."

THE REAL SONG, OR I'LL NEVER BE YOUR MIRROR

If the Velvets suggested continuity between art and violence, order and chaos, they posed a radical split between body and spirit. In this way too they were closer to the Who than to any other contemporaries. Like the Velvets the Who were fundamentally ascetic; they too saw the world as hostile — particularly the world as organized by the British class system. Their defiance was cruder than the Velvets', their early music as hard and violent as any to come out of the new wave. But they were not cranks; they were determined to convert the world, and Townshend's guitar-smashing expressed his need to break through to his audience as well as his contempt for authority, including the authority of rock-and-roll itself. That need to connect also took another form: even before Townshend discovered Meher Baba, the Who's music had a side that could only be called religious. If it seemed, at first, surprising that the same band could produce music as uncompromising in its bitterness as "Substitute" and as miraculously transcendent as the "You are forgiven!" chorus of "A Quick One," it was no contradiction; on the contrary, it was precisely Townshend's sense of the harshness of life, the implacability of the world, that generated his spiritual hunger.

The same can be said of Lou Reed, except that "spiritual hunger" seems too self-important a phrase to apply to him; the Velvets' brand of spirituality has little in common with the Who's grand bursts of mystical ecstasy or Townshend's self-conscious preoccupation with the quest for enlightenment. It's impossible to imagine Lou Reed taking up with a guru, though he might well write a savagely funny (and maybe chillingly serious) song about one. The aesthete-punk and his fellow demimondaines are not seeking enlightenment, though they stumble on it from time to time; like most of us they are pilgrims in spite of themselves. For Townshend moral sensitivity is a path to spiritual awareness; for Reed awareness and the lack — or refusal — of it have an intrinsically moral dimension. While he is not averse to using the metaphors of illusion and enlightenment — sometimes to brilliant effect, as in "Beginning to See the Light" and "I'll Be Your Mirror" — they are less central to his theology than the concepts of sin and grace, damnation and salvation. Some of his songs ("Heroin," "Jesus," "Pale Blue Eyes") explicitly invoke that Judeo-Christian language; many more imply it.

But “theology” too is an unfairly pretentious word. The Velvets do not deal in abstractions but in states of mind. Their songs are about the feelings the vocabulary of religion was invented to describe — profound and unspeakable feelings of despair, disgust, isolation, confusion, guilt, longing, relief, peace, clarity, freedom, love — and about the ways we (and they) habitually bury those feelings, deny them, sentimentalize them, mock them, inspect them from a safe, sophisticated distance in order to get along in the hostile, corrupt world. For the Velvets the roots of sin are in this ingrained resistance to facing our deepest, most painful, and most sacred emotions; the essence of grace is the comprehension that our sophistication is a sham, that our deepest, most painful, most sacred desire is to recover a childlike innocence we have never, in our heart of hearts, really lost. And the essence of love is sharing that redemptive truth: on the Velvets’ first album, which is dominated by images of decadence and death, suddenly, out of nowhere, comes Nico’s artless voice singing, “I’ll be your mirror/ ... The light on your door to show that you’re home./ When you think the night has seen your mind/ That inside you’re twisted and unkind/ ... Please put down your hands, cause I see you.”

For a sophisticated rock-and-roll band with a sophisticated audience this vision is, to say the least, risky. The idea of childlike innocence is such an invitation to bathos that making it credible seems scarcely less difficult than getting the camel of the gospels through the needle’s eye. And the Velvets’ alienation is also problematic: it’s one thing for working-class English kids to decide life is shit, but how bad can things be for Lou Reed? Yet the Velvets bring it off — make us believe/admit that the psychic wounds we inflict on each other are real and terrible, that to scoff at innocence is to indulge in a desperate lie — because they never succumb to self-pity. Life may be a brutal struggle, sin inevitable, innocence elusive and transient, grace a gift, not a reward (“Some people work very hard/ But still they never get it right,” Lou Reed observes in “Beginning to See the Light”); nevertheless we are responsible for who and what we become. Reed does not attempt to resolve this familiar spiritual paradox, nor does he regard it as unfair. His basic religious assumption (like Baudelaire’s) is that like it or not we inhabit a moral universe, that we have free will, that we must choose between good and evil, and that our choices matter absolutely. If we are rarely strong enough to make the right choices, if we can never count on the moments of illumination that make them possible, still it is spiritual death to give up the effort.

That the Velvets are hardly innocents, that they maintain their aesthetic and emotional distance even when describing — and evoking — utter spiritual nakedness, does not undercut what they are saying; if anything, it does

the opposite. The Velvets compel belief in part because, given its context, what they are saying is so bold: not only do they implicitly criticize their own aesthetic stance — they risk undermining it altogether, ending up with sincere but embarrassingly banal home truths. The risk is real because the Velvets do not use irony as a net, a way of evading responsibility by keeping everyone guessing about what they really mean. On the contrary, their irony functions as a metaphor for the spiritual paradox, affirming that the need to face one's nakedness and the impulse to cover it up are equally real, equally human. If the Velvets' distancing is self-protective (hence in their terms damning), it is also revelatory (hence redeeming); it makes clear that the feelings being protected are so unbearably intense that if not controlled and contained they would overwhelm both the Velvets and their audience. The Velvets' real song is how hard it is to admit, even to themselves.

That song in its many variations is the substance of *Velvet Underground*. This album can be conceived of — nonlinearly; the cuts are not at all in the right order — as the aesthete-punk's *Pilgrim's Progress*, in four movements. ("Sha la la, man, whyn't you just slip away?" I can hear Lou Reed say to that.)

ONE: WORLDLY SEDUCTION AND BETRAYAL

"Sunday Morning," a song about vague and ominous anxiety, sums up the emotional tone of this movement: "Watch out, the world's behind you." "Here She Comes Now" and "Femme Fatale," two songs about beautiful but unfeeling women (in the unlovable tradition of pop — not to mention religious — misogyny, Lou Reed's women are usually demonic or angelic icons, not people), sum up its philosophy: "Aah, it looks so good/ Aah, but she's made out of wood." These songs underscore the point by juxtaposing simple, sweet, catchy melodies with bitter lyrics sung in flat, almost affectless voices (in "Sunday Morning," Reed's voice takes on a breathiness that suggests suppressed panic). "White Light/ White Heat," a song about shooting speed, starts out by coming as close as any Velvets song does to expressing the euphoria of sheer physical energy; by the end of the trip the music has turned into bludgeoning, deadening noise, the words into a semiarticulate mumble.

TWO: THE SIN OF DESPAIR

"Heroin" is the Velvets' masterpiece — seven minutes of excruciating spiritual extremity. No other work of art I know about has made the junkie's

experience so powerful, so horrible, so appealing; listening to "Heroin" I feel simultaneously impelled to somehow save this man and to reach for the needle. The song is built around the tension between the rush and the nod — expressed musically by an accelerating beat giving way to slow, solemn chords that sound like a bell tolling; metaphorically by the addict's vision of smack as a path to transcendence and freedom, alternating with his stark recognition that what it really offers is the numbness of death, that his embrace of the drug ("It's my wife and it's my life") is a total, willful rejection of the corrupt world, other people, feeling. In the beginning he likens shooting up to a spiritual journey: he's gonna try for the Kingdom; when he's rushing on his run he feels like Jesus' son. At the end, with a blasphemous defiance that belies his words, he avows, "Thank your God that I'm not aware/ And thank God that I just don't care!" The whole song seems to rush outward and then close in on itself, on the moment of truth when the junkie knowingly and deliberately chooses death over life — chooses damnation. It is the clarity of his consciousness that gives the sin its enormity. Yet the clarity also offers a glimmer of redemption. In the very act of choosing numbness the singer admits the depths of his pain and bitterness, his longing for something better; he is aware of every nuance of his rejection of awareness; he sings a magnificently heartfelt song about how he doesn't care. (A decade later, Johnny Rotten will do the same thing in an entirely different way.) A clear, sustained note runs through the song like a bright thread; it fades out or is drowned out by chaotic, painful distortion and feedback, then comes through again, like the still small voice of the soul. Reed ends each verse with the refrain, "And I guess that I just don't know." His fate is not settled yet.

THREE: PARADISE SOUGHT, GLIMPSED, RECOLLECTED

This movement consists of four songs about world-weary sophistication and the yearning for innocence. "Candy Says" defines the problem: "I've come to hate my body and all that it requires in this world/ ... I'd like to know completely what others so discreetly talk about." "Jesus" is a prayer: "Help me in my weakness, for I've fallen out of grace." In "I'm Set Free" the singer has his illumination, but even as he tries to tell about it, to pin it down, it slips away: "I saw my head laughing, rolling on the ground/ And now I'm set free to find a new illusion." In "Pale Blue Eyes" the world has gotten in the way of the singer's transcendent love: "If I could make the world as pure and strange as what I see/ I'd put you in the mirror I put in front of me."

Musically these songs are of a piece. They are all gentle, reflective. They all make use of the tension between flat, detached voices and sweet melodies. They all have limpid guitar lines that carry the basic emotion, which is bittersweet: it is consoling to know that innocence is possible, inexpressibly painful that it always seems just out of reach. In "Pale Blue Eyes" a tambourine keeps the beat, or rather is slightly off where the beat ought to be, while a spectacular guitar takes over completely, rolling in on wave after wave of pure feeling.

FOUR: SALVATION AND ITS PITFALLS

"Beginning to See the Light" is the mirror held up to "Heroin." I've always been convinced that it's about an acid trip, perhaps because I first really heard it during one and found it utterly appropriate. Perhaps also because both the song and the acid made me think of a description of a peyote high by a beat writer named Jack Green: "a group of us, on peyote, had little to share with a group on marijuana; the marijuana smokers were discussing questions of the utmost profundity and we were sticking our fingers in our navels & giggling." In "Beginning to See the Light" enlightenment (or salvation) is getting out from under the burden of self-seriousness, of egotism, of imagining that one's sufferings fill the universe; childlike innocence means being able to play. There is no lovelier moment in rock-and-roll than when Lou Reed laughs and sings, with amazement, joy, gratitude, "I just *wanta* tell you, *everything* is all right!"

But "Beginning to See the Light" is also wickedly ironic. Toward the end, carried away by euphoria, Reed cries, "There are problems in these times/ But ooh, none of them are mine!" Suddenly we are through the mirror, back to the manifesto of "Heroin": "I just don't care!" Enlightenment has begotten spiritual pride, a sin that like its inverted form, nihilism, cuts the sinner off from the rest of the human race. Especially from those people who, you know, work very hard but never get it right. Finally we are left with yet another version of the spiritual paradox: to experience grace is to be conscious of it; to be conscious of it is to lose it.

CODA: I'D LOVE TO TURN YOU ON

Like all geniuses, Lou Reed is unpredictable. In "Street Hassle" he does as good a job as anyone of showing what was always missing in his and the Velvet's vision. As the song begins, a woman (or transvestite?) in a bar is

buying a night with a sexy young boy. This sort of encounter is supposed to be squalid; it turns out to be transcendent. Reed's account of the odd couple's lovemaking is as tender as it is erotic: "And then sha la la la he entered her slowly and showed her where he was coming from/ And then sha la la la he made love to her gently, it was like she'd never ever come." Of course, in part two he almost takes it all back by linking sex with death. Still.

What it comes down to for me — as a Velvets fan, a lover of rock-and-roll, a New Yorker, an aesthete, a punk, a sinner, a sometime seeker of enlightenment (and love) (and sex) — is this: I believe that we are all, openly or secretly, struggling against one or another kind of nihilism. I believe that body and spirit are not really separate, though it often seems that way. I believe that redemption is never impossible and always equivocal. But I guess that I just don't know.

(From Greil Marcus's Stranded, 1979)