

The Velvet Underground

Bob Stark

1968

Have you who are reading this article expecting to be told how good or how bad whatever record I have chosen to review really is, ever stopped to analyze what you personally think is good music? Have you ever tried to think of music (Rock music) outside of the context of an immediately occurring pleasure-displeasure-boredom reaction?

Have you ever really listened to Coltrane's "Meditations," or "Impressions," and had even a vague epiphany, of what that seeming chaos is all about? Have you, moreover, ever seriously considered what your role in society will be after the impending Cybernetic revolution? What will you (yes, YOU) do when machines do all the manual labor and computers run all the machines?

On a much larger scale, how will you as a part of society be able to maintain your ego role as The Superior Being on Earth when machines have replaced you in all your work functions and can do a better job? And who will program the computers? You, maybe? or maybe Your elected representatives? Or maybe the computers themselves? Then what will you do?

Maybe you (we?) can organize and demand that the government give you (us) jobs, maybe set up thousands of petty bureaus so you (we) can all be bureaucrats. Or everybody can have one computer or machine which he or she can sit and watch all day, or maybe, just Maybe, there is a better answer. Is what Coltrane was talking about, about a new order, a whole new kind of order, rising out of the chaos brought on by the downfall of the old? But what does this have to do with a Rock and Roll review? And what does anything have to do with Burroughs' Nova Police, Wiedick's mass hangings of young boys, and A.J. Annual's Party? And perhaps the most important question: Why has this article up to now consisted of nothing but questions?

Answer: Because I know a lot of questions but only a few answers. I can only suggest places to look which brings us to the subject of the article (finally: Hurray! Hurray!): The one group working in the context of Rock that presents a system which represents anything more than their own personal temporary answers to any of these questions is the Velvet Underground.

I am not a musician and therefore will not even attempt a technical musical type review of their first album (especially since it has been out over a year and most of the people reading this article will have already heard it and made some sort of judgment of their own on that level). I will instead suggest a context from which to view this album. And right there I mentioned what is one of the most important concepts to be discussed: contexts.

On the surface this album is a vivid, lucid, and, in its own way, highly poetic description of the junkie scene in New York. This is the scene that Burroughs scarcely describes in *Junkie*, and that Alexander Trocchi brilliantly depicts in *Cain's Book*, but it is also the scene that spawned *The Naked Lunch*, *Nova Express*, etc. and Conrad Rook's *Chappaqua*, the most notable examples of a whole new kind of art.

The album describes a scene rooted in heroin and sado-masochism, populated by people whose thoughts seldom wander beyond their next fix or the next time they can get laid. Viewed in this way the album emerges as a unified work of art. Slowly and subtly it turns your head around.

The power of the lyrics and the seemingly ordered structure of the music ("I'm Waiting for My Man") slowly changes into utter chaos ("Heroin," "European Son"). You become aware of these people and of their almost stereotyped value system.

This is where the question of contexts arises. These people exist in a context in which these values are the only ones which work. Why? and more importantly why have these chosen to exist in that context? For they have chosen their own life style and they are, as a rule, intelligent and in touch with the outside world to some extent. Are they, perhaps, more aware than most of us of the problems of the new order? Could they, perhaps, have begun to formulate the new order, even if only subconsciously?

With the exception of "Sunday Morning" the first cut on the album, all the songs take a decidedly extreme point of view of their particular subjects. The drug songs are about smack. The sex songs are about sado-masochism ("Venus in Furs" is a poetic and musical adaptation of the novel by Sacher-Masoch which gave masochism its name). And the love songs are about girls who will "break your heart," or will "be your mirror" but no more than your own reflection.

All the relationships between people, and between people and things, seem to fall into a strictly hedonistic pleasure-pain sensation level. They seem to, I said.

And that may be the key. They all seem to be on that level because within' the context that the VU has chosen to operate and create, these are the only levels on which people can relate to each other and to things outside of themselves; and they know it. And that, my friends, is as close to the answer as I can come today.

When society has eliminated what is now considered necessary time consumption (work), and electronic media has tribalized society (as per McLuhan), people will have to completely re-evaluate the contexts in which they choose to live. They will be almost forced to lessen or even eliminate the role of their intellectual processes in favor of the physical pain-pleasure sensation level. Thinking, in the sense of deep intellectual thought evaluation, will disappear to be replaced by a world of pure sensation.

This brings us to the final point. Unless those in power especially, and the general public become aware of this, the change or order will take everyone by surprise and the resultant "society will have all the worst attributes of current "hip" society: junkies, speed freaks, total disregard for self-preservation in favor of immediate sensation, etc.

The time to begin acting is now. The government (or all governments) should begin to sponsor research into drugs (mainly of the psychedelic types) that can be used regularly and safely. There should be a total re-evaluation of the educational system, placing greater emphasis on personal initiative over compulsory courses, and on the arts (especially multi-media and sensational art), or the other academic disciplines, and who knows what else.

If not, Lou Reed may some day be cracking a whip over your head while Nico sings her "Siren Song" softly into your ear.

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