

This is Your Body on the Velvet Underground

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Abstract

“Everyone who bought one of those 30,000 copies started a band.” Brian Eno’s remark about the Velvet Underground’s brilliant but commercially lackluster 1967 debut album was re-circulated widely last October, when fans and critics mourned the passing of Lou Reed, lead songwriter for the band, and a key cultural figure of the last fifty years, by any metric.

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“Everyone who bought one of those 30,000 copies started a band.” Brian Eno’s remark about the Velvet Underground’s brilliant but commercially lackluster 1967 debut album was re-circulated widely last October, when fans and critics mourned the passing of Lou Reed, lead songwriter for the band, and a key cultural figure of the last fifty years, by any metric.

The remark has become trite through overuse, but not the sentiment it captures. A band that has, since [even before](#) before Andy Warhol’s Factory, been linked to an aesthetic of menace, hysteria and psychosis didn’t just “inspire” or “provoke” much of the music, art and sensibilities of the post-1960’s. It *extruded* that era.

At ***Sounding Out!***, we decided that in order to come to grips with Reed’s work in general (and the Velvet Underground in particular) from a Sound Studies perspective we’d have to adopt that spirit of provocation. I asked two prominent writers in the field for articles about how this band changed — and continues to change — the experience and history of sound, in a short series **Start A Band: Lou Reed and Sound Studies**. I’m thrilled to present the first of our articles from returning author [Jacob Smith](#) from Northwestern University, a musician and accomplished author of several distinguished books on sound and media history. Stay tuned next week for a second installment from **Tim Anderson** from Old Dominion University, an award winning writer and co-chair of the Sound Studies SIG at the Society for Cinema and Media Studies.

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Lou Reed’s recent death has inspired many critics to return to his groundbreaking work with the Velvet Underground (VU). Albums such as “The Velvet Underground and Nico” (1967), “White Light/White Heat” (1968) and “The Velvet Underground” (1969) have the reputation of influencing everyone from David Bowie, Iggy Pop and Roxy Music to the Sex Pistols, Talking Heads, REM and Nirvana. Many recent obituaries describe VU in literary terms, citing Reed’s “[lyrical honesty](#),” “[rock and roll poetry](#),” and touting his songs as “[serious writing](#)” and even a kind of “[Great American Novel](#).” There is much to be missed by taking such a decidedly literary approach to sound recordings, and there is an alternative approach, thanks to the emergence of Sound Studies as a vibrant academic field. Can what Jonathan Sterne has called the “interdisciplinary ferment” of Sound Studies help us to re-think the work of this seminal rock band ([The Sound Studies Reader](#), 2)? I think it can.

For a start, Sound Studies emboldens us to base our analysis on VU's *records*, which have often been oddly upstaged by other aspects of their career: Reed's street-level lyrics to be sure; but also the group's role as background music to Andy Warhol's Factory; or their use of drones and feedback, which makes them a footnote in the history of avant-garde music; or their influence on the glam and punk explosions of the 1970s. Sound Studies encourages us to start with VU's records, but the next step is not necessarily a formal musicological analysis.



For some of its proponents, including Steven Connor, Sound Studies is best understood as part of a broader investigation of the “fertility of the relations” between the senses, and VU’s albums turn out to be an excellent place to begin an exploration of the multisensory experience of recorded sound (“Edison’s Teeth: Touching Hearing,” in *Hearing Cultures*, ed. Viet Erlmann, 54). This essay explores the tactile experience of VU’s records, inspired by work on the tactile dimension of the cinema. I borrow the organizational structure of Jennifer M. Barker’s book *The Tactile Eye*, which moves from a discussion of sensations at the surface of the body, to muscular responses, and lastly, to the “the murky recesses of the body, where heart, lungs, pulsing fluids, and firing synapses receive, respond to, and reenact the rhythms of cinema” (2-3). Think of this essay as a body-scan of the VU listening experience (“this is your body on VU”) that follows a similar path from the skin, to the musculature, and finally, to the viscera.

Downy Sins

Writing about the tactile experience of movies is concerned with modes of looking that resemble touching, a “haptic visuality” that attends to textures and surfaces, and moves over the image like a caress (See Laura U. Marks *The Skin of the Film*, 183 and *Touch*, 117). A form of “haptic listening” has also been commonplace in the culture of popular sound recordings. Much of the recorded popular music of the past century has invested meaning in what Theodore Gracyk calls “very specific sound qualities and their textural combination” (*Rhythm and Noise*, 61). From Bo Diddley to Aphex Twin, pop recordings have tended to stress evocative timbres, idiosyncratic voices, and signature sounds over structural or lyrical complexity.

VU's records exemplify that tendency because their complexity can be found more on the level of timbre than in musical structure or instrumentation. Moreover, Reed's lyrics often encourage a blurring of listening and touching. On "Venus in Furs," listeners are prompted to hear John Cale's viola stabs as the licks and bites of a mistress's whip. "Sister Ray" cues haptic listening by chugging resolutely on a single chord for seventeen minutes, while a plasmatic organ performance mutates from elegant bass arpeggios to shimmering waves of icy noise. As with "Venus in Furs," Reed's lyrics tie the textural complexity of "Sister Ray" to the surface of the body, through his descriptions of searching the skin of his arm for a "mainline" vein, and a first-person account of receiving oral sex. These examples demonstrate that the poetry of Reed's lyrics is intimately bound up with the sonic texture of VU's recordings, and moreover, that he was adept at liberating the erotic potential of haptic listening.



<https://youtu.be/7d69mDT11yl>

Run Run Run

Films can produce an empathetic muscular response in the viewer's body, as when we flinch in response to a horror film, or clench our fists while watching a thrilling action movie (Barker, *The Tactile Eye* 94, 83, 72). Listeners can have similarly empathetic relationships with recorded sound when they move along with the rhythms of a dance record, synchronize their workout or commute to a carefully designed playlist, or embody a recorded performance by miming an air guitar or air drums.

The members of VU had distinctive styles of instrumental performance that made their records evoke powerful muscular responses in listeners. Consider the piano track on "Waiting For the Man," which loses any semblance of melodic content to become the sheer act of pounding on the keyboard by the end of the song. Reed is usually regarded as a lyricist, but he is just as influential as a muscular rhythm guitar player. "What Goes On" has a minimalist arrangement that eschews structural development to become a showcase for Reed's vigorous strumming. The second half of the track lacks vocals or a conventional solo instrument, and so feels like a diagram of the human body that reveals the pulsating musculature beneath the skin.



<https://youtu.be/k8RElw0amb8>

Reed's jangly rhythm guitar could dominate the mix of VU tracks like "What Goes On" because it occupies a sonic niche that, in a more typical rock arrangement, would be filled by the hi-hat or ride cymbal. In fact, it is Maureen Tucker's distinctive drumming that is the main source of muscle power on VU's records. Standing behind a spare kit consisting of little more than a snare and a bass drum turned on its side, Tucker attacked her instrument with relentless intensity, raising her mallet over her head with each bone-cracking snare hit. A review of a live appearance in 1968 observed that Tucker "beats the shit" out of her drums so that the sound "slams into your bowels and crawls out your asshole" (See Clinton Heylin, *All Yesterdays' Parties*, 64). Hear (and feel) for yourself, on the VU track "Foggy Notion," a seven-minute drum and guitar workout.



https://youtu.be/CiT_O90jkUI

Tucker was a pioneer female instrumentalist in the male-dominated world of rock. "I didn't want to be the one to blow it," she said in an interview. "I wasn't gonna say, 'Well, they'll say she's a girl, she can't do it.' So I was determined, I wasn't gonna stop" (Albin Zak III, *The Velvet Underground*

Companion, 1965). Ironically, her uncompromising and supremely physical performances were so minimal and precise that she was sometimes compared to a machine. A Verve Records press release from 1968 referred to the fact that Tucker had briefly held a job at IBM, and wrote that “her symphonic simplicity is like that of a human computer.” One trajectory of VU’s influence leads to the electronic austerity of bands like Kraftwerk, but an attention to the tactile dimension of the band’s records prevents Tucker, one of rock’s most muscular drummers, from disappearing into the circuitry.

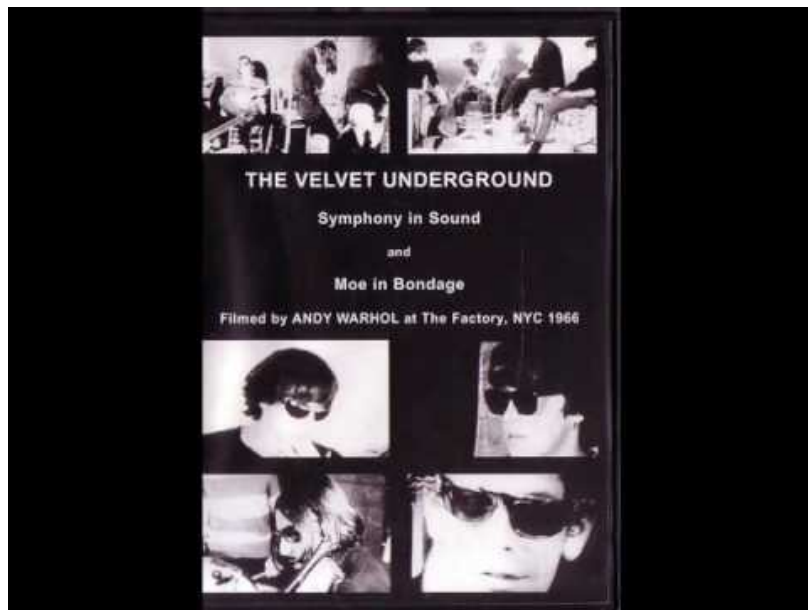
The Body Lies Bare

A tactile analysis of VU records can go deeper still, to document their relation to the body’s viscera. The experience of the inner body is usually hidden from us, and gains our attention only when organ systems produce an overall effect like nausea (Barker, *The Tactile Eye*, 125). We lack direct conscious control over most of our visceral responses, but we can stimulate them through the ingestion of drugs, which of course, is the topic of many of VU’s most famous tracks. But where other rock bands of the 1960s associated the drug experience with whimsical flights of the imagination, VU’s drug references are bluntly visceral.



A still from a 1966 film of the Velvet Underground rehearsing by Rosalind Stevenson

“Heroin” is a sonic re-enactment of the physical effects of the eponymous drug, conveyed not only via Reed’s lyrics, but in the backing track’s fluctuations between dreamy bliss and frantic rush. “White Light/White Heat” fuses two sensory metaphors, one visual and one tactile, in order to point to an embodied experience beyond them both. Listen to how the track ends, with surging cymbals and a distorted bass figure whose spasmodic rhythm suggests the dilation of blood vessels, the firing of synapses, and the tightening and release of internal organs that have been kicked into amphetamine overdrive.



<https://youtu.be/62ckXALWn1M>

The mysterious visceral body can also emerge into our consciousness in moments when the internal rhythms of the heart or lungs are destabilized, as in a sudden heart palpitation or violent case of the hiccups (Barker, *The Tactile Eye*, 128-29). “Lady Godiva’s Operation” provides a vivid demonstration. The first half of the track is run-of-the-mill hippy exotica, with John Cale’s lead vocal given the conventional placement in the center of the stereo picture. This calm sonic surface is unsettled when Cale’s voice is decentered, shifting first to the left and then the right speaker. The lead vocal fractures even further when Reed begins to finish each of Cale’s lines:

Cale: ‘Doctor is coming,’ the nurse thinks...

Reed: ... sweetly.

Cale: Turning on the machines that...

Reed: ... neatly pump air.

Cale: The body lies bare.

By integrating these fragmented lines, we learn that a body is lying on an operating table. Listeners are encouraged to inhabit this body through the placement of voices around and above us, as well as the sounds of heartbeats and breathing that enter the mix but are jarringly out of rhythm with the existing backing track. Reed sings that the doctor is making his first incision into the body, and the backing track vanishes, leaving only the heartbeat, breathing, and an eerie whirring vocalization that sonifies some nameless physical process. The scene ends with a dark twist, suitable as a shock tactic from an exploitation film: the anesthetic has malfunctioned, and the patient has regained consciousness in the midst of the procedure.



<https://youtu.be/AxgvkzFVnNQ>

The track's arrhythmic sound effects overwhelm the coherent flow of the standard musical mix, working in tandem with the lyric's account of the body made manifest in a moment of dysfunction. The fact that VU's "White Light/White Heat" LP contains "Lady Godiva's Operation," as well as the title track and "Sister Ray," makes it a tour de force of tactile phonography. Reed may have been a rock poet, but he and his collaborators were also acoustic engineers who were adept at sonifying tactile experience, producing music worth feeling with our whole bodies.

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Featured Image- "A Drop of Warhol" by Flickr User Celeste RC

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Jacob Smith is Associate Professor in the Radio-Television-Film Department at Northwestern University. He has written several books on sound (*Vocal Tracks: Performance and Sound Media* [2008], and *Spoken Word: Postwar American Phonograph Cultures* [2011], both from the University of California Press), and published articles on media history, sound, and performance.

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