All the Needles are on Red!


If you want to write the story of the Velvet Underground, you have to begin far beyond any of the physical things that actually happened. You first have to look at New York City, the mother which spawned them, which gave them its inner fire, creating an umbilical attachment of emotion to a monstrous hulk of urban sprawl. You have to walk its streets, ride its subways, see it bustling and alive in the day, cold and haunted at night. And you have to love it, embrace and recognize its strange power, for there, if anywhere, will you find the roots.

— Lenny Kaye

Some context is required. When the Velvet Underground began gigging on Manhattan’s Lower West Side in December 1965, Greenwich Village was once again a vibrant scene. The Velvets, though, were the very antithesis of the folk-rock lightweights habitually haunting the better-known clubs. Yet, thanks to journalist and early Velvet advocate Al Aronowitz, within a week of their first gig the Velvets were playing nightly in the Village.

Whatever the owner of the not-so-appositely-named Café Bizarre thought he was getting, the Velvets were not it — even if their sets at this point were not extended excursions into white noise, feedback and distortion. Even these determined radicals realized that an unknown band playing in the Village was required to play largely recognizable tunes.

Sterling Morrison: We got six nights a week at the Café Bizarre, some ungodly number of sets, 40 minutes on and 20 minutes off. We played some covers — ‘Little Queenie’, ‘Bright Lights Big City’ . . . the black r&b songs Lou and I liked — and as many of our own songs as we had. We needed a lot more of our own material, so we sat around and worked. That’s when we wrote ‘Run Run Run’, all those things.

After three weeks of ‘some ungodly number of sets’, the Velvets’ capacity for tolerance — never one of their strong points — had been stretched to the limit. When the owner attempted to censor one of their own songs they responded with a commendable display of defiance.

Sterling Morrison: One night we played ‘The Black Angel’s Death Song’ and the owner came up and said, ‘If you play that song one more time you’re fired!’ So we started the next set with it.

A potentially exciting opportunity had opened up just two days before this Christmas catharsis. Andy Warhol had been one of the club’s few customers to recognize the unique quality in the Velvets’ sound. As one of New York’s best-known and most successful visual artists — his famous Factory was already operating as an umbrella for diverse ‘art’/film projects — Warhol was in a position to pull the Velvets up from this mundane bottom rung on rock & roll’s slippery ladder.

Warhol had been looking to expand his operations to incorporate some undefined dimension of rock & roll. Right-hand man Paul Morrissey had convinced him that he could make money from putting his underground films ‘in a rock & roll context’. The Velvet Underground were as close to art-rock as New York could provide in 1965. When Warhol offered them the opportunity to revert to a Factory regime they were happy to sign up.

Lou Reed: We looked at each other and said, ‘This sounds like really great fun and a lot better than playing in this tourist trap in the Village.’

In popular perception, the Warhol association is the beginning of the Velvets’ story. Indeed the degree of influence he exacted on the Velvets has often been misrepresented. It is important to recall that by the time they met Warhol the Velvets had already worked up the bulk of the songs they recorded on their first album.

Sterling Morrison: Andy gave us his opinion and we listened . . . But if we asked him something directly, something like, ‘What do we do now?’, he would answer with one of his typical sarcastic answers, like, ‘Well, what would you like to do?’ Thus was his advice: ‘Think what you would like to
do and do it ... That helped us, because we didn’t waste any time thinking about how to get our songs on the radio.

Lou Reed’s former professor at Syracuse, poet Delmore Schwartz — to whom the Velvets would dedicate the final cut on their first album — had already drummed into Reed the importance of maintaining faith in one’s inherent worth in the face of ignorance and/or commercial constraints. Schwartz’s bitter, cynical air, brought on by years of lack of recognition, made Reed profoundly aware of the potential cost of such integrity. He was certainly conversant with Schwartz’s essay, ‘The Vocation of the Poet in the Modern World’, in which Schwartz had written, ‘In the unpredictable and fearful future that awaits civilization, the poet must be prepared to be alienated and indestructible.

Despite Warhol’s general policy of non-interference, he did make one suggestion — and immediately caused dissension in the ranks. He wanted the Velvets to be augmented by a Hungarian chanteuse called Nico, who had come to New York in the summer of 1964, after Dylan had stayed at her Paris apartment, donating her one of his finest songs, ‘I’ll Keep It with Mine’.

Gerard Malanga: Andy decided to throw Nico into the act because the Velvets themselves were not very charismatic onstage, and Andy wanted a spotlight on someone. So Andy threw her in on the act against the wishes of the Velvets.

There was very little suitable material for Nico in the Velvets’ current repertoire, and Reed was required to write new songs specifically for her. ‘I’ll Be Your Mirror’ and ‘Sunday Morning’ showed that he was as capable of writing wistful ballads as the ‘Götterdämmerung’ of ‘Black Angel’s Death Song’. Nico, though, was never fully accepted as an integrated member of the Velvets.

Sterling Morrison: There were problems from the very beginning because there were only so many songs that were appropriate for Nico and she wanted to sing them all — ‘Waiting for the Man’, ‘Heroin’, all of them. And she would try and do little sexual politics things in the band. Whoever seemed to be having undue influence on the course of events, you’d find Nico close by. So she went from Lou to Cale, but neither of those affairs lasted very long.

Yet Nico’s importance in the early Velvets’ set-up should not be underestimated. Her winter-day voice and icy beauty did add an extra dimension. Cale was certainly impressed by her singing, going on to produce her first four solo albums. The first Nico solo album, Chelsea Girl, recorded between the first two Velvets albums, could easily have been an alternative Velvet Underground and Nico. With Cale producing, Reed, Cale and Morrison providing musical accompaniment, and five songs written by Cale and/or Reed, Chelsea Girl is Nico and The Velvet Underground. It represents threads of the Velvets’ sound largely discarded when they left the Warhol cocoon. ‘Wrap Your Troubles in Dreams’ and ‘Little Sister’ had both been recorded for the first Velvets album, while ‘It Was a Pleasure Then’ developed out of ‘Melody Laughter’, an early Velvets instrumental. The album would have been even more obviously in Velvets territory if producer Tom Wilson had not overdubbed string arrangements on most of the songs.

Lou Reed: [I wish] they’d just have allowed Cale to arrange it and let me do some more stuff on it. Everything on it — those strings, that flute — should have defeated it. But with the lyrics, Nico’s voice, it somehow managed to survive. We still got ‘It Was a Pleasure Then’ on, they couldn’t stop us. We’d been doing a song like that in our beloved show; it didn’t really have a title. Just all of us following the drone. And there it sits in the middle of that album.

‘Our beloved show’ was a multi-media presentation, Andy Warhol — Uptight, which opened at the Cinematheque in February 1966. The Velvets accompanied a 70-minute silent black and white film entitled The Velvet Underground and Nico: A Symphony of Sound. The idea quickly evolved into something more ambitious, utilizing dancers, lights, strobes and slides, as well as film, presenting a truly multi-media performance. It became known as the Exploding Plastic Inevitable. By the time the Velvets & Co. had returned from a brief out-of-town excursion, Warhol had arranged a residency on Manhattan’s Lower East Side.

Sterling Morrison: When we opened the Dom, a nice setting in a spacious hall in St Marks Place, people didn’t talk yet about the East Village ... When we started moving around, things changed. Never again did we have a place like that. We needed a base of operations, and the Dom was an ideal place.
The Velvets had always delighted in improvisation, but the Exploding Plastic Inevitable gave them an unprecedented opportunity to experiment while kaleidoscopic images projected around them, dancers acted out conceptions, and people were encouraged to participate actively in the whole sensory experience. The downside: the EPI was restricting opportunities for the Velvets to work on new songs.

Sterling Morrison: We just played and everything raged around us without any control on our part.

The only extant recording of the Velvets with the EPI comes from a show in Columbus, Ohio, in November 1966, by which time the EPI had been up and running for nine months. On this evidence, the Velvets' EPI performances very much continued ideas originally explored by the Theatre of Eternal Music. What the Velvets' early experiments lacked was a sense of structure like that achieved with the Theatre. The Velvets needed to leave the confines of Warhol's grand experiment and rely entirely on their own presence, instead of subsuming their music to a series of sensory distractions. In describing one of their numbers, 'Melody Laughter' (which would form the basis for Nico's 'It Was a Pleasure Then'), Tucker hints at a tendency for indulgence which the EPI only encouraged.

Maureen Tucker: 'Melody Laughter' was another one. We used to play it when Nico was with us. I think there weren't any actual lyrics, just warble ... That would go anywhere from two minutes to forty-two ... It used to drive me crazy, because it started off with a certain beat, and Lou would just do what he wanted, and the next thing you knew, John would be doing what he wanted, and I had to stay at the same beat, and you're hearing this definite other beat ... Cale would play the viola, put it down and pick up the bass, put it down, and if we had an organ or something he'd play that it just went on and on.

Their time in the EPI illustrated an important aspect of Velvet psycheology. They had so many strings to their electric bow that they could manifest themselves in myriad, almost mutually exclusive ways. They could be a straight R&B band; an avant-garde ensemble on the outer edges of music; a light, melodic pop combo; a haunting wave of noise designed to complement Nico's occasionally over-strident vocals; or indeed any combination of the above. The EPI allowed them to push one aspect of their complex makeup to an extreme, but it was never a direction that could be fully satisfying. After all, they had all these songs they wanted to record.

The Velvet Underground and Nico is an album even the band members never thought they would be allowed to cut. It seems to have been Warhol who made the decision to record the album and then try to sell it to a record label, rather than the more conventional route of securing a contract first. The advantage was obvious — no interference. As was the disadvantage — no funds. The results reflect both the sense of freedom and the economic limitations. Prior to the sessions the Velvets rehearsed constantly, working on new arrangements, determined to transfer as much of their unique sound to vinyl as possible.

The lack of funds meant that the number of studios available to them was seriously curtailed.

John Cale: This shoe salesman, Norman Dolph, put up the money, and he got a deal at Cameo-Parkway Studios, on Broadway. We went in there, and the floorboards were torn up, the walls were out, there were four men working. We set up the drums where there was enough floor, turned it all up and went from there.

If conditions were anything but ideal, the quality of the results says a lot for the Velvets' determination to compensate for primitive facilities, and for the engineer's ability to get the best from very basic equipment. There has been a lot of speculation in the intervening years as to Warhol's role in the making of this historic album (as there has been about his role in the Velvets' entire development). The album credits him as producer. In a conventional sense there was no producer. What Warhol did qualify more as executive input. Nevertheless, his role was central to the completion of the album, and its eventual sale to Verve.

Tom Reed: Andy was the producer and Andy was in fact sitting behind the grand piano gazing with rapt fascination ... at all the blinking lights. He just wanted it possible for us to be ourselves and go right ahead with it because he was Andy Warhol. In a sense he really did produce it, because he was the umbrella that absorbed all the attacks when we weren't large enough
to be attacked ... As a consequence of him being the producer, we'd just walk in and set up and do what we always did and no one would stop it because Andy was the producer. Of course he didn't know anything about record production ... He just sat there and said, 'Oooh, that's fantastic,' and the engineer would say, 'Oh yeah! Right! It is fantastic, isn't it?'

The Velvets' determination to avoid compromises is reflected best by the two cuts which conclude the album. After the sensuous guile of 'I'll Be Your Mirror' comes the determinedly opaque 'Black Angel's Death Song' and the cacophonous 'European Son', which Reed dedicated to Delmore Schwartz because of his hatred for pop forms, 'European Son' being a long way from any rock music being made in 1966. They did not confine the song's sounds to musical instruments.

Maureen Tucker: [There's] a chair being scraped across the room by Cale, at which point he stops in front of Lou, who drops a glass ... The engineer, he's saying, 'My God, What are you doing?' ... It was tremendous, because it is in time, and the music starts right up. I don't know how we timed it like that ... [but 'European Son'] was just different every time. There was no structure, we just did it.

With the album largely complete when the Velvets went looking for a record deal, there could be no misunderstanding as to what any potential label might be getting. Not surprisingly, this was a major problem. Atlantic were interested in signing the band — minus 'Heroin' and 'Venus in Furs'! In their search for a label not afraid to handle a band who were a little out of the ordinary, the Velvets had one useful ally. CBS producer Tom Wilson had seen the band playing in the Village, wanted to work with them, and already had a label in mind.

Sterling Morrison: Tom Wilson ... was still at Columbia. He told us to wait and come and sign with him when he moved to Verve because he swore that at Verve we could do anything we wanted. And he was right. We gave something up of course, because there was no effective marketing on Verve ... The album was ready by April 1966, but I don't think it ever made a '66 release.

Eventually released in March 1967, The Velvet Underground and Nico is an extraordinarily assured debut album. Within its grooves lay not only the seeds of subsequent Velvet albums — White Light/White Heat ('Black Angel's Death Song', 'European Son'), The Velvet Underground (I'll Be Your Mirror', 'There She Goes Again') and Loaded ('I'm Waiting for the Man', 'Run Run Run') — but a thousand innovations drawn upon by later bands. The Velvets never again allowed the hypnotic drone of Cale's viola its full impact. 'Venus in Furs' and 'Heroin', in particular, defined the Velvets sound for some time to come. Yet the album went largely ignored by contemporaries.

If the Velvets were operating outside conventional parameters, they did not see themselves as working entirely in a vacuum. Within the East Village itself were a couple of other bands striving to widen the limits of popular music.

Sterling Morrison: The Fugs, the Holy Modal Rounders and the Velvet Underground were ... [all] authentic Lower East Side bands. We were real bands playing for real people in a real scene.

In fact the Holy Modal Rounders, whose fusion of bluegrass, country and folk into something truly original was equally at odds with the times, had been the original back-up group for the Fugs, at a time when Sanders and Kupferberg lacked even the basic musical knowledge required to realize the willful parodies of rock forms that they had in mind.

Pete Stampfel: When they started they sat down and decided to form a dirty rock & roll band. Knowing nothing about rock & roll whatsoever they proceeded to write sixty songs, like 'Bolt On Clip' and 'Coca Cola Douche', exactly like punk ten years later. Just taken with an abrasive vision which, despite the fact they had no technical knowledge or chops or expertise or ... to do it in the standard way, did it anyway on pure balls ... Sanders had this toy organ, and Ken Weaver had various hand drums which kept ... getting stolen from him, and Kupferberg didn't play anything, so I volunteered the Rounders to be their backing band.

If the Holy Modal Rounders could be considered a folk version of the Velvets, there was one more band that the Velvets took seriously among the jumble of folk-rock exponents and West Coast rockers, the only outfit to have had a commensurate influence on modern rock & roll — the Byrds. Though the Byrds achieved considerable chart success, like the Velvets their innovations were largely ignored in their day.
Sterling Morrison: I always liked ... the Byrds ... Roger McGuinn was always at an incredible level. If I had to admit that something called folk-rock existed ... then the Byrds were it.

Bob Quine: When I met Lou Reed in 1966, the only guitarist he would say anything positive about was McGuinn. When 'Eight Miles High' had just come out he saw them in a club in the Village. He was thinking along the same lines too. He was listening to Ornette Coleman.

If the Velvets were painting themselves in black and white, and the Fugs and the Byrds in sepia tones, the remainder of the American music scene they perceived in garish technicolour. Rather than indulging in the contemporary fascination with hallucinogenics, the Velvets were an amphetamine band — in every sense — loud, cynical, brutal and frenetic. They were not interested in mellowing out an audience.

Sterling Morrison: Drugs didn't inspire us for songs or anything like that. We took them for old-fashioned reasons — it made you feel good, braced you for hostile audiences and criticism.

Of course the Velvets' association with amphetamines and — it was assumed — heroin, only confirmed their Satanic mission in the eyes of their most vehement critics.

Pete Stampfel: Amphetamine was considered the Bad drug. It was what evil people took to make 'em more evil, or nice people took it and became evil.

If the Velvets seemed confrontational, this was absolutely deliberate. The band was formed to shake people up. Confrontation (in all its forms) was a major part of both Cale's and Reed's psyches at the time.

John Cale: I had no intention of letting the music be anything other than troublesome to people. It was a revolutionary, radical situation. We really wanted to go out there and annoy people.

If their music sounded extreme within the jaundiced confines of Manhattan, then a trip to the West Coast in the summer of 1966 offered the Velvets a rare opportunity to take their sound to the heart of the hip(py) underground and confront the gurus of Soporifica. The Velvets' main concern on arriving in Los Angeles was to complete some 'retouching' on their debut album with Tom Wilson.

Maureen Tucker: When MGM bought [the album], and agreed to put it out, they gave us three hours in California in the studio to fix ten songs.

The Velvets ended up re-recording four songs — 'Waiting for the Man', 'All Tomorrow's Parties', 'Heroin' and 'Venus in Furs' — though at least one band member was unhappy with the released version of 'Heroin'.

Maureen Tucker: 'Heroin' drives me nuts ... it's a pile of garbage on the record ... The guys plugged straight into the board. They didn't have their tape up loud in the studio, of course I couldn't hear anything ... And then we got to the part where you speed up ... it just became this mountain of drum noise in front of me. I couldn't hear shit ... So I stopped, and being a little wacky, they just kept going, and that's the one we took.

The Velvets and the EPI slotted in some shows in Los Angeles. They quickly found that they had already been tried, judged and sentenced by the West Coast media.

Sterling Morrison: The West Coast music scene was then a very strong force trying to predominate within the music industry. I remember that we rented a car at the airport, and the first thing we heard was 'Monday, Monday'. We knew that it was going to be hard to please these people on their own turf.

John Cale: Our attitude to the West Coast was one of hate and derision.

In San Francisco, where they played two shows at the legendary Fillmore West, the Velvets were equally at odds with the prevailing scene. The world media would soon designate San Francisco as the visible pulse of what was happening in contemporary music, thanks to local outfits like the Grateful Dead, Jefferson Airplane, Great Society and Big Brother & the Holding Company.

Sterling Morrison: When we finally made it to San Francisco we were asked directly. They convinced themselves that we were there to destroy the innocence and purity of their music. Ralph Gleason said that we were the urban evil of New York, and we were there to corrupt the simple purity of the California music.
Though the Velvets would return to San Francisco on an annual basis until the fall of 1969 (when they played a long residency at the Matrix, from which much of the 1969 album comes), very little would change in the intervening three years. The wind would continue to be filled with a pungent smoke.

By the spring of 1967 - their debut album finally in the shops - the Velvets were outgrowing their association with Warhol. The EPI had become a means to avoid working on new songs and, despite the Warhol connection, the debut album was selling poorly. The art connection also meant that the Velvets were failing to reach a rock & roll audience.

Maureen Tucker: We played one place in Philadelphia ... at some art show, and I'm telling you ... I'd be beating the shit out of those drums, and I'd look up and see - Urgh! - it was 50-year-olds, people who came to see a soup-can, and this is what they got. And Gerard swooping around in his bikini with the American flag.

The band had tired of working with Nico on stage and Reed felt that Warhol had now made his grand rock & roll gesture.

Lou Reed: Andy came up to me and said we should have a talk. He said, 'You have to decide what you want to do, Lou. Do you want to start expanding into the outside world, or do you want to keep doing museums and art shows? And I decided - Well, we're leaving you.' He was furious.

Between May and December 1967 the Velvets, unimpeded by the EPI, worked on a live sound that meshed the abstract noise of 'European Son' with modern pop-rock structures. They often opened shows with a powerful instrumental christened 'Booker T' (which was so far removed from 'Green Onions' that 'Purple Hearts' might have been a more apposite title). They also worked up a monumental tale called 'Sister Ray' around a riff they had first devised in Chicago, in June 1966, during an EPI residency, when the Velvets were playing without Reed, who was sick. Cale had assumed vocal duties. Tucker had become bassist, while Angus MacLise had temporarily returned to play tabla drums sitting on the floor.

'Sister Ray' could run anywhere from fifteen to forty minutes, depending on which version of the saga Reed wanted to relate that night.

John Cale: In the Velvet Underground the idea was to go out there and improvise songs on stage. I talked to Andy Warhol about it and he said we should actually go out there and rehearse. Like, stop and go back and teach each other and the audience the songs.

There are no circulating recordings of any Velvets show from 1967 (though a 58-minute tape of an April show at the Gymnasium in New York remains in the hands of John Cale). Two songs from the Gymnasium - one broadcast by Cale on a New York radio station some years later, 'Guess I'm Falling in Love', the other, 'Booker T', included on Cale's 1992 soundtrack album Paris S'Traville - indicate the Velvets' renewed delight in distortion and feedback as the two principal pillars of their temple of sound. The problem that they now faced was how to get this 'off-the-dial' sound on to vinyl.

John Cale: When it came to White Light/White Heat, it was like a road band, improvising songs on stage ... We decided to make that album as live as possible, we told Tom Wilson we were gonna do it as we do it on stage.

The resultant album may well be the most extreme committed to vinyl in the name of rock & roll. The title itself, White Light/White Heat, sums up the sound they were trying for. But Tom Wilson, sitting in as producer, lacked the technological expertise to capture the Velvets' live sound and was 'more interested in the cowbell running through the studio', while the engineer merely grew increasingly exasperated at the Velvets for attempting to record such unconventional sounds.

Sterling Morrison: There was fantastic leakage because everyone was playing so loud and we had so much electronic junk in the studio - all these fuzzers and compressors. Gary Kelgrun the engineer, who is ultra-competent, told us repeatedly: 'You can't do it - all the needles are on red.' And we reacted as we always reacted: 'Look, we don't know what goes on in there and we don't want to hear about it. Just do the best you can.' And so the album is all fuzzy, there's all that white noise ... We wanted to do something electronic and energetic. We had the energy and the electronics, but we didn't know that it couldn't be recorded ... What we were trying to do was to really try the tracks.
There was at least one song whose impaired state on the album was not a result of Wilson’s inability or the studio’s capabilities, but rather Reed’s attempt to remake the Velvets entirely in his own image. The seeds of division were sown.

Maureen Tucker: ‘I Heard Her Call My Name’ was ruined in the mix – the energy, you can’t hear anything but Lou. He was the mixer in there, so he having a little ego-trip at the time, turned himself so far up that there’s no rhythm, there’s no nothing.

All the members of the Velvets now admit that perhaps they overdid it on White Light/White Heat. On one song though – ‘Sister Ray’ – the Velvets captured the sound that proved elusive on the remainder of the record, a morass of noise from which each instrument is required to assert its own identity by cranking up and blasting out. The story of ‘Sister Ray’ is largely lost in the ongoing battle but even the least attentive listener could not ignore the repeated refrain about ‘sucking on my ding-dong’. The Velvets had succeeded in pushing rock & roll off the dial.

Listening again to White Light/White Heat, it is astonishing that Verve ever announced its official release, particularly when the Velvets provided as front-cover artwork a photo of a black skull printed on a pitch black sleeve. Still, it was released, and fared even worse than the debut album.

In fairness to Verve, there was no way to market White Light/White Heat in 1968. It made Jefferson Airplane’s After Bathing at Baxter’s sound like the Everly Brothers on Mogador. Indeed the album was so far off the path of contemporary rock & roll that the Velvets themselves were constrained to retrace some of their own steps in order to produce something that their contemporaries could deal with. The remaining history of the Velvets is essentially one of attempting to commercialize innovations that date from the first two years of their existence.

If the Velvets’ was the sound of New York City, then clearly they were giving the rotten apple a bad name. After a second album where references to drugs and deviant sex remained as overt as album number one (witness ‘Lady Godiva’s Operation’ and ‘Sister Ray’), the Velvets found it almost impossible to get radio play in New York. They also found it increasingly difficult to locate suitable venues prepared to book them. The Velvets decided that, if New York didn’t want their brand of musical mayhem, they would not force their form of indigenous music upon it. As Sterling Morrison concisely put it, ‘Our reaction was: fuck ‘em. And we stopped playing in New York, despite the fact it was the prime market in the country, and our home.’

The Velvets did not play New York between the Gymnasium shows in the spring of 1967, and a residency at Max’s in the summer of 1970. With the Velvets went the underground. The simultaneous abandonment of New York by its folk-rockers, heading for the mountains or the (other) coast, meant that the city became merely a stopover for bands seeking industry backing and publicity. It would be another five years before New York once again heard the beat of its own sound.

Having acquired a new manager, the unprepossessing Steve Sesnick, the Velvets’ most regular hunting ground became the Boston Tea Party, a 1,200 capacity ballroom in which Sesnick had a controlling interest. From May 1967, when they played their first post-EPI shows there, the Velvets were rarely absent from the Tea Party for more than a couple of months.

Sterling Morrison: Boston was our second home. We had a large audience there. On one occasion we played in Boston against the Doors. They had to come to our party, and they didn’t like it.

The second most important venue for the Velvets was also within striking distance of New York; Cleveland’s La Cave played host to the Velvets throughout 1968 and into 1969. At La Cave, like the Tea Party, the Velvets felt comfortable enough with their audiences to play whatever they considered appropriate. On one occasion their entire set consisted of a version of ‘Sister Ray’ prefaced by a 40-minute instrumental (christened ‘Sweet Sister Ray’).

Although the Velvets toured sporadically throughout 1968, ostensibly promoting their second album, they rarely performed much from White Light/White Heat save for ‘Sister Ray’ – which rarely bore much resemblance to the released version – and the title-track. They seemed genuinely unsure of what direction to pursue, given the resounding failure of the second album.

Reed had always retained a keen pop sensibility, dating back to his days at Pickwick, and in February 1968 the Velvets went into a New
York studio to record their first non-album single, two unashamedly pop-oriented songs, ‘Stephanie Says’ (later reworked as ‘Caroline Says’ on Reed’s 1973 album Berlin) and ‘Temptation Inside Your Heart’. The songs ended up unused. In May they recorded a further new song, ‘Hey Mr Rain’ seemed more like a return to forsaken territory, at least in its use of Cale’s viola as the fulcrum of the band’s sound.

No further studio recordings are known from the first nine months of 1968, as the two ostensible leaders of the Velvets vied for the future direction of the band. Inevitably, the songwriter won out and Cale was ousted from his own band.

**John Cale:** There were a lot of soft songs and I didn’t want that. Many soft songs were into trying to develop these really grand orchestral parts. I was trying to get something big and grand and Lou was fighting against that, he wanted pretty songs.

**Sterling Morrison:** [Cale] was going in a more experimental direction, while Lou wanted something within a more ‘pop’ context... John and I were very happy with Sister Ray-type music... Lou placed heavy emphasis on lyrics. Cale and I were more interested in blasting the house down.

It may well be that Cale’s ‘more experimental direction’ was simply an attempt to return the Velvets to their original aesthetic, which he felt they had strayed from.

**John Cale:** In the beginning, Lou and I had an almost religious fervour about what we were doing – like trying to figure ways to integrate some of La Mont Young’s or Andy Warhol’s concepts into rock & roll. But after the first record we lost our patience and diligence. We couldn’t even remember what our precepts were.

The Velvets had always been the product of unresolved tensions, Cale and Reed always representing two contrary figures. But Cale’s virtuoso grasp of instrumentation was largely irreplaceable. The Velvets would never recapture the unique, modal sound that Cale had brought to the band.

Sterling Morrison: John was playing great at the time. He was always exciting to work with. If you listen to his bass part on ‘Waiting for the Man’, it’s illogical – inverted almost. He had really good ideas on bass. Or take a song like ‘What Goes On’: if you’d heard us play that in the summer of ’68 with Cale on organ you would have known what it was all about... He was not easy to replace. Doug Yule was a good bass player, but we moved more towards unanimity of opinion, and I don’t think that’s a good thing.

It was as a recording band that their identity most dramatically changed. The third Velvets album seemed to continue the direction Reed had sought to steer the band in with the aborted February 1968 single, save for the surrealism of ‘Mudder Mystery’. According to Morrison, The Velvet Underground was not originally devised to sound the way that it came out.

**Sterling Morrison:** All our effects boxes were locked in a munitions box that was stolen at the airport when we were leaving for the West Coast to record. We saw that all our tricks had vanished, and instead of trying to replace them, we just thought that we could do without them.

It is difficult to give credence to Morrison’s explanation, that the ‘closet sound’ of the third album was simply down to circumstance. Even the previously manic ‘What Goes On’ is a muted performance on record. Studio recordings that the Velvets made within six months of finishing their self-titled third album only affirmed the new direction. (These tracks make up the bulk of the two official collections of Velvet Underground out-takes, PU and Another FU.)

The Velvets were finally dumped by MGM in the fall of 1969 – without even releasing the tapes provided for a fourth Velvet Underground album – and had to record their final album for Atlantic. Loaded ‘with hits!’ – ensured that the movement towards a more ‘pop’ orientation was evident to all. Reed seemed happy as a writer of orthodox rock songs rather than an exponent of the more free-form experiments that the Velvets had originally pioneered. Of course Loaded was in part an attempt to salvage for the Velvets a marginal commercial credibility. If so, their image was still far too daunting for Loaded to reverse their fortunes.

In concert the Velvets were not so conciliatory, continuing to indulge in exuberant self-expression. Though Cale’s sawing viola was now absent from the mix, Reed and Morrison’s twin-guitar attack was if
anything turned up in intensity. Songs like 'Run Run Run', 'Waiting for the Man' and 'I Can't Stand It' became extended guitar duels, only tenuously connected to their studio prototypes. 'What Goes On' once again became an astonishing tour de force, as organ and guitar vied for attention. Their twelve-minute performance of the song at a hillside festival in New Hampshire in August 1969 (featured on the Italian *Wild Side of the Street* CD) remains one of the Velvets' most dramatic live recordings, illustrating perfectly the Velvets' notion of pushing rock music to the cliff-edge of a droning monotony before turning intensity up to white light/white heat proportions.

The live versions of 'What Goes On', 'Ocean', 'I Can't Stand It' and 'Waiting for the Man' on 1969 also hint at the Velvets' ability to transport their songs to another plane when extending them in performance. Despite the esteem that this belated collection of live Velvets cuts has enjoyed since its 1974 release, the bulk of 1969 is drawn from a sedate October 1969 performance at Dallas's End of Cole Avenue club.

**Sterling Morrison:** The [1969] tapes were recorded by the owners at the Matrix and End of Cole Ave. I don't like it, because it was taped in small locations... Generally our sound was bigger. On this record everything is subdued, there are no really loud songs... At the Boston Tea Party, a bigger location, the ideal size for us, about 1,200 people, we could really play.

If 1969 was recorded as the Velvets were descending from peak performing powers, the Dallas version of 'Sister Ray', omitted from 1969 but available on the Italian *End of Cole Avenue* CD, is an impressive example of how the Velvets could still build a song up in performance. It begins as if the Velvets were simply tuning up for an EPI-style symphony of sound, but then the bizarre tale begins to audibly unfold as the music teeters on the brink of a storm. First it spits, then it pours down like silver.

By the time of the November Matrix shows – from which the remainder of 1969 would later be drawn – the Velvets were fast disintegrating. They had lost the one label that had given them carte blanche in the studio, and though audience recordings from the beginning of 1970 show them extending 'Train Round the Bend/Oh Sweet Nuthin' into a seventeen-minute opus, and attempting ambitious new material like 'Sad Song', 'Men of Good Fortune' and a prototypical 'Oh Jim', the outfit that began recording *Loaded* – all the while performing their first New York residency in over three years at Max's Kansas City - had largely abandoned major extemporizations.

'Sister Ray' was now rarely performed. On Live at Max's no song clocks in at longer than five minutes, as if Morrison and Reed were too weary to blast away. The Velvets were certainly burnt out. By the end of the Max's residency, Reed was heartily sick of what his band had become. After a five-year tightrope walk between avant-garde ideals and commercial constraints, Reed realized that he had become nothing more than a circus performer.

**Lou Reed:** hated playing Max's. Because I couldn't do the songs I wanted to do and I was under a lot of pressure to do things I didn't want to do... I was giving out interviews at the time saying yes, I wanted the group to be a dance band. I wanted to do that, but there was a large part of me that wanted to do something else. I was talking as if I were programmed... I didn't belong there. I didn't want to be a mass-pop national hit group with followers.

If the Max's concerts were viewed by New York fans as something of a homecoming, the spirit of America's rock & roll underground was passing beyond the five boroughs. The torch was being carried not by fellow New Yorkers, but by bands who had been exposed to the Velvets during their regular sorties to second homes like Boston and Cleveland; and, most importantly, by two bands at the heart of an effervescent Detroit scene, the Stooges and the MC5, who fused their garageband aesthetic not to an avant-garde classical but to a free-jazz sensibility, searching for free-form with substance.