

Lou Reed

BY ANTHONY DECURTIS

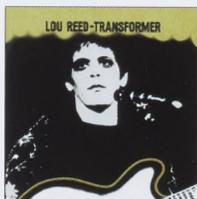
His formidable artistry has contributed timeless classics to the rock & roll canon, while influencing several generations of musicians.

LOU REED'S SONGS, BOTH WITH THE VELVET UNDERGROUND and as a solo artist, constitute a body of work that ranks with Dylan and Lennon-McCartney as among the most significant and influential songwriting catalogues of the twentieth century. Reed was both an artistic exhibitionist and an intensely private man; a restless experimental soul and an ardent fan dedicated to the most elemental, even conservative, principles of rock & roll; a writer with the highest literary aspirations and a guitarist with a boundless love of distortion and noise. He is best known for his most daring, provocative moments, but he has also written ballads that are heartbreakingly moving in their sensitivity, their lack of sentimentality, and their profound emotional insight. According to Doug Yule, a former member of the Velvet Underground, Reed's toughness "protected his core, the gentleness that comes out in a lot of his work." * Sustaining such dualities without reducing any aspect of them to a cliché is essential to understanding Lou Reed and his work. Like Keith Richards or Bob Dylan, Reed is as much a symbolic figure as an artist. Well beyond the incalculable impact of his music, he stands for an unwavering determination to follow his own creative path and repel compromise. He allows the characters in his songs to live and act on entirely amoral terms, but ultimately he views the world that they and we move through according to a strict moral code. It's a vision and approach reminiscent of Martin Scorsese, whom Reed specifically cites in his song "Doin' the Things That We Want To," which is something of his aesthetic manifesto. "It reminds me of the movies Marty made about New York," he sings. "Those frank and brutal movies that are so brilliant."



Fronting the Velvet Underground, 1966

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY



TRANSFORMER
RCA 1972



BERLIN
RCA 1973



CONEY ISLAND BABY
RCA 1975



STREET HASSLE
Arista 1976



THE BLUE MASK
RCA 1982



NEW YORK
RCA 1989



SONGS FOR DRELLA
with John Cale
Sire/Warner Bros. 1992



MAGIC AND LOSS
Sire/Warner Bros. 1992

FRANK, BRUTAL, BRILLIANT CAN BE APPLIED to Reed's songwriting as well. That work so demanding and individual could help shape the creativity of so many artists over the course of so many years – not to mention move so many listeners – is a tribute to its quality and power. Reed's gift was to discover the universal in the rigorously specific. A product of Brooklyn and Long Island (b. Lewis Allan Reed on March 2, 1942), he was a quintessential New York artist, but he was not a documentarian. His New York is as fully invented a world as James Joyce's Dublin, William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, or Bruce Springsteen's Jersey shore. Like Scorsese and Woody Allen, who have also embraced New York as their primary artistic inspiration, Reed grounded his portrayal of the city in reality, but his own sensibility shaped the characters and situations he chronicled. His New York is an imaginative environment, as visceral, internal, and subjective as it is three-dimensional and real. It exists most vividly not in reality but in his chilling depictions of it in song.

From his college days at Syracuse University studying with the poet and short-story writer Delmore Schwartz, Reed viewed himself in literary terms. He eventually became one of his own creations, a strategy of self-invention he learned from Andy Warhol, who discovered the Velvet Underground and produced their first two albums. Throughout his long solo career, Reed often spoke about the "Lou Reed" persona he occasionally inhabited, the fearsome image he crafted for himself as a means of keeping the world, or at least the parts of it that he desperately wanted to avoid, at bay. Journalists, in particular, felt the lash of Reed's tongue, the savage attack or sharp dismissal that signaled his disapproval; the irony, of course, is that throughout his career, journalists were his strongest advocates. It was a self-protective strategy he learned from Bob Dylan – like the infamous scene in *Don't Look Back*, especially, in which Dylan eviscerates a reporter from *Time*. As with Dylan, Reed's anger disguised a fear of being trapped within anyone else's expectations, however benign they might be. Control was all important.

At a memorial service after Reed's death, his wife, Laurie Anderson, addressed that element of his life quite beautifully. "People who knew him also sometimes experienced his anger and his fury," she said. "But in the last few years, each time he was angry it was followed by an apology, until the anger and the apology got closer and closer, until they were almost on top of each other. Lou knew what he was doing and what he was going for, and his incredible complexity and his anger was one of the biggest parts of his beauty."

Reed, characteristically, spoke about it far more bluntly. "God forbid I should ever be nice to people, it would ruin everything," Reed once said, only half-jokingly. "The fact is, it works well, being thought to be difficult, because then people just won't ask you to do things you don't want to do. Being a nice guy? That's a disaster. You're just asking for trouble. People think, 'Oh, he's a nice guy, let's work him over.' As opposed to 'Him? Forget it. He'll rip your throat out.'"

Reed's don't-mess-with-me reputation extends back to the 1967 debut of his original band, the Velvet Underground, which more or less invented the idea of alternative rock. While the rest of the music world was basking in the bright pastel colors of the Summer of Love, Reed was writing songs like "I'm Waiting for the Man," "Venus in Furs," and "All Tomorrow's Parties," tales from the darkest corners of New York's



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT
Making the scene with Andy Warhol, 1970; hanging 'round New York City, 1980; live with his Dan Armstrong Lucite guitar, Agoura Ballroom, Cleveland, 1980; with Laurie Anderson at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Induction dinner, 1996; and with Patti Smith at the Ocean Club, 1976.



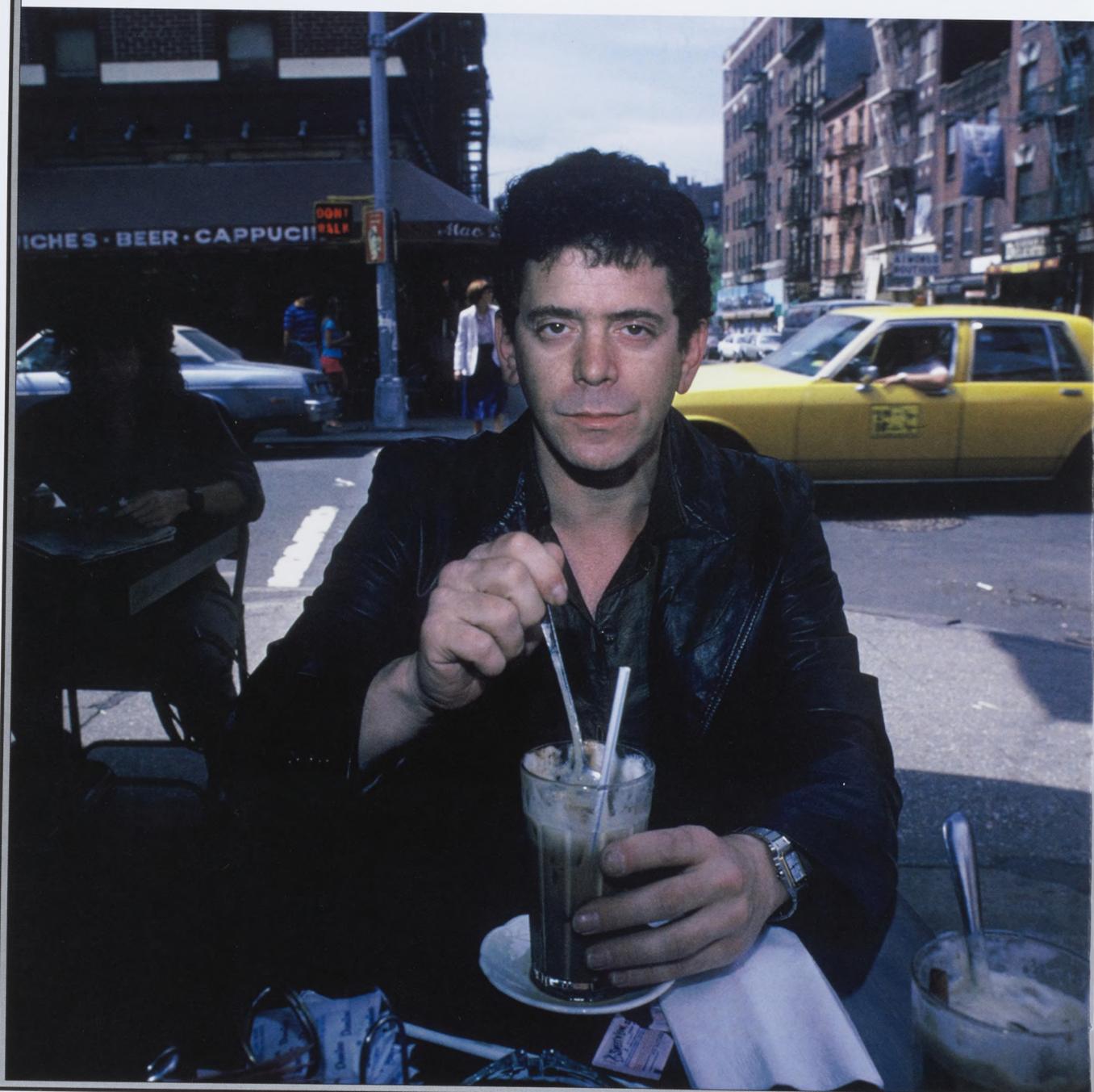
netherworld. He depicted a realm separate from the hippie paradise of San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury district by much more than a mere three thousand miles.

At that moment, Reed opened rock & roll to the forbidden themes addressed in the most provocative fiction of that era, like William Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* and Hubert Selby's *Last Exit to Brooklyn*. He unflinchingly tackled such subjects as heroin addiction, sadomasochism, homosexuality, and violence. Commercially, the album was a disaster. Brian Eno famously remarked that, while the first Velvet Underground album sold only thirty thousand copies, everybody who bought it formed a band. That's scarcely an exaggeration. Every alternative movement for the next half century and counting – from punk to new wave to grunge and beyond – can be traced back to that album. David Bowie, R.E.M., U2, Peter

Gabriel, Pearl Jam, and Radiohead, along with dozens of other artists and bands, all claim the group as an indelible influence. If Reed and the Velvets had never made another album, *The Velvet Underground & Nico* alone would have justified their election to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1996.

The Velvets broke up in 1970, and after that Reed embarked on a solo career of nearly equal significance. Younger musicians embraced his music and looked up to him as an artist who insisted on remaining vital and not conforming to whatever trends defined whatever moment. Albums such as *Transformer* (1972), *Street Hassle* (1978), *The Blue Mask* (1982), *New York* (1989), *Magic and Loss* (1992), and *Ecstasy* (2000) stand as eloquent – and potent – extensions of his work with the Velvet Underground. *Songs for Drella*, his 1990 collaboration with John Cale, a cofounding

Relaxing at a Greenwich Village cafe, 1982



member of the Underground, is a stark, moving tribute to Andy Warhol. Even albums like *Berlin* (1973) and *Metal Machine Music* (1975), which were reviled upon release and came close to ending Reed's career, have since been fully recognized for their boldness, impact, and importance.

AS REED GREW OLDER, HIS ARTISTIC RESTLESSNESS never abated. Increasingly, he identified with artists outside the realm of rock & roll. He collaborated on theater pieces with Robert Wilson, published books of photography, and composed instrumental music designed to accompany his practice of tai chi. His marriage to Laurie Anderson only further encouraged his artistic adventurousness. She is a central figure in the intellectual avant-garde whose seriousness and ambition Reed strongly identified with.

Indeed, throughout his life, Reed maintained a great love of popular music in its most commercial forms, but he hated to be perceived in those terms himself. At many points in his solo career, he actively resisted the safe move that would have brought him greater sales and a larger audience. He frequently pointed out that if he were writing novels or plays or making films, none of the themes he explored would have generated much controversy at all – controversy that, he believed, often drowned out meaningful discussion of his songs.

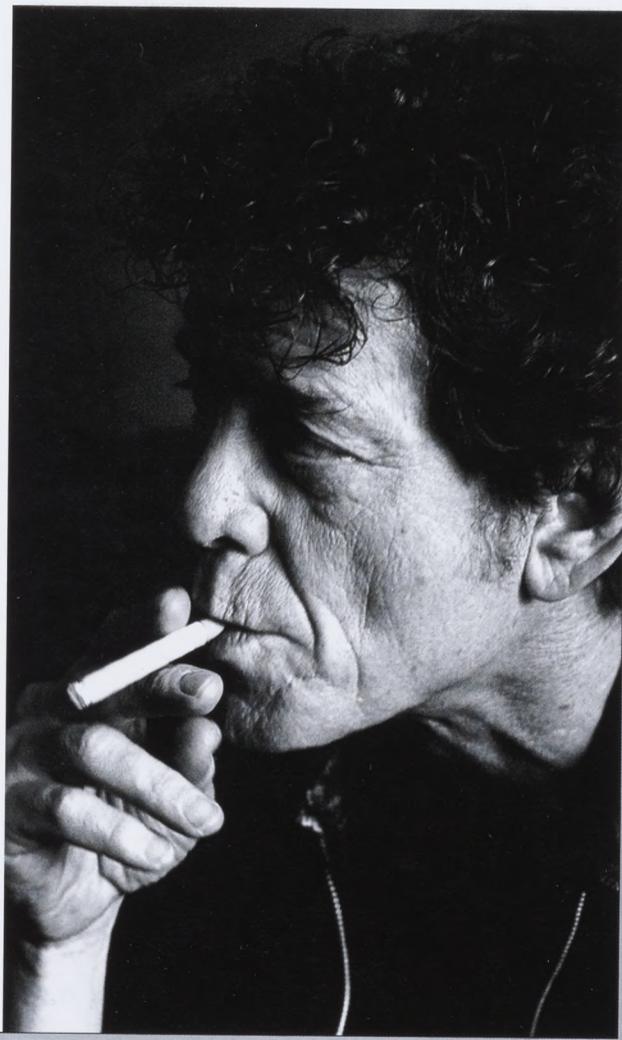
If Reed was guarded and self-protective in his life, he was fearless in his work.

Talking about his lifetime of recorded music, Reed once said, "If you thought of it as a book, then you have the Great American Novel, every record as a chapter. It tells you all about me . . . what it was like for one person, trying to do the best he could, with all the problems that go along with [that]. Except mine took place in public. And I wrote about that too."

If Reed was guarded and self-protective in his life, he was fearless in his work. His successes speak for themselves, but even his failures inspired younger artists, who saw them as expressions of his unwillingness to work on anyone's terms but his own. After his death from liver disease on October 27, 2013, it became clear – even to anyone who may have doubted it – how deeply people felt about his work. Lou Reed's importance rested on his music, but extended far beyond that. Finally, it was about conviction. Reed's certainty that his need to follow his own artistic journey overrode any other consideration proved an inspiration for millions of people. He provided the best lesson they could learn, one that was both uplifting and liberating. In his life and his work, they discovered the freedom to be themselves. He sang about doing the things that we want to do, and we all heard him and took it to heart. 🍷



Still living dangerously in Holland, 2003



Glam Bam Thank You Ma'am

BY ROBERT BURKE WARREN

In the early 1970s, T. Rex and David Bowie inspired U.K. rock & rollers to embrace androgyny and glitter, with inductees Lou Reed and Joan Jett among those heeding the call in the States.

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ROM ITS INCEPTION IN THE FIFTIES, rock & roll embraced elements of glam: Elvis sported eyeliner, Little Richard loved his pancake makeup, and Jerry Lee Lewis' girlish hair drove audiences wild. But "glam rock," with its wholehearted embrace of theatrical cosmetics, outlandish costumes, glitter smudges, towering heels on men, and blatant, cross-dressing androgyny, did not fully flower until the early seventies. Earthy hippie fashion was out, and Western pop culture was embracing science fiction, post-modern decadence, and, in the face of the first televised war, escapism. Originally U.K.-based, glam radiated to the U.S., influencing a variety of rockers both musically and visually. In its heyday, radios and hi-fi stereos from London to L.A. pumped out dozens of catchy, bubble-gummy melodies with chanting choruses, chunky power chords,

David Bowie, 1974





and primitive rhythms. As bands graduated to theaters and arenas – or dreamed of doing so – musicians upped the ante on their looks, so even the folks in the nosebleed seats could see them.

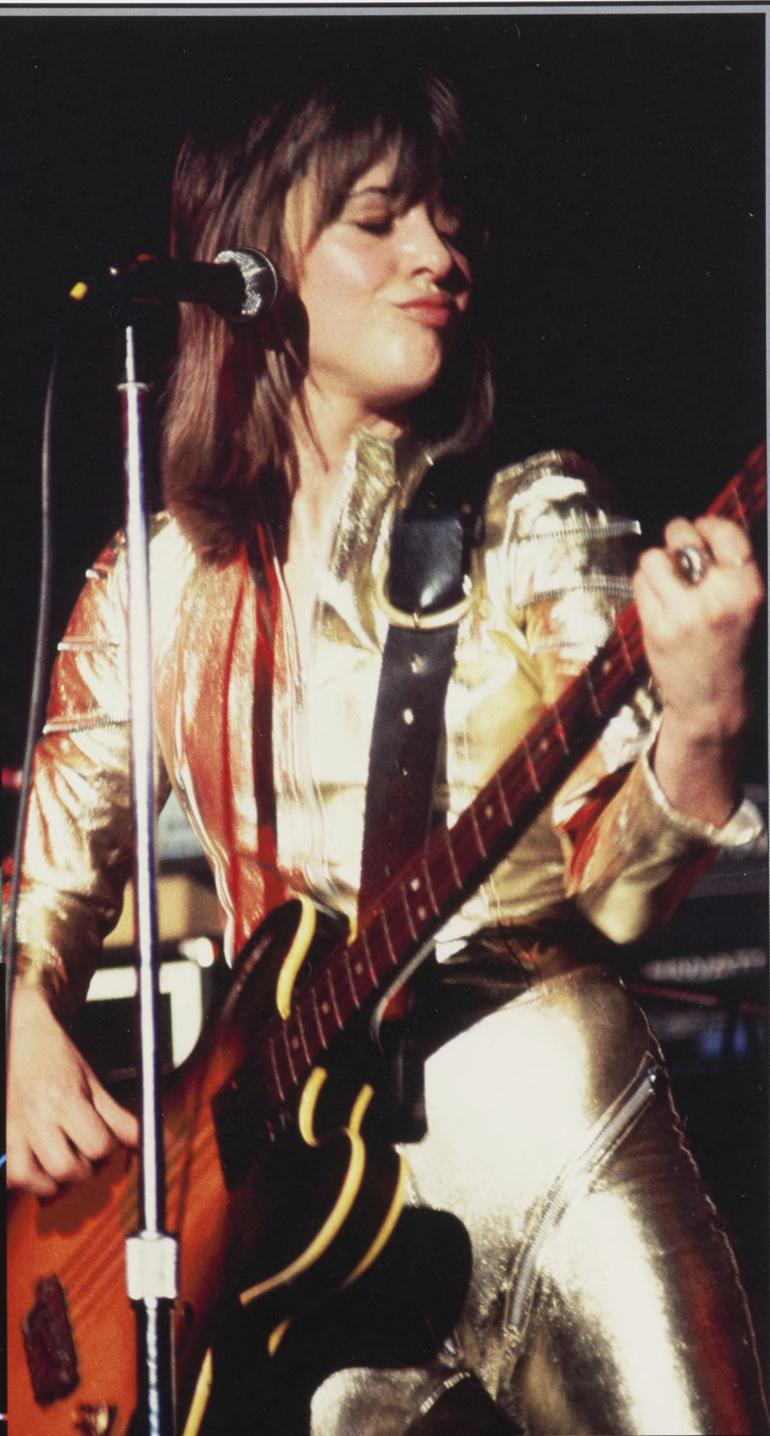
Glam had been swishing toward the spotlight for a few years. Mick Jagger had appeared in a dress onstage in Hyde Park, London, in 1969, and David Bowie wore a fetching gown on the cover of his 1970 LP, *The Man Who Sold the World*. But the official beginning of glam-as-we-know-it was T. Rex's career-defining 1971 performance of Number One hit "Get It On (Bang a Gong)" on *Top of the Pops*. In the dressing room prior to the show, guitarist and leader Marc Bolan enhanced his shiny outfit by applying glitter to his cheekbones. He hit the stage shimmering with a fey glow while simultaneously channeling the alpha-male sex strut of Chuck Berry. This set off a trend among U.K. bands, who not only wore glitter – thus glam's interchangeable moniker *glitter rock* – they started proclaiming they were "glam," appearing in ever-higher-stacked heels, feather boas, furs, silks, and other traditionally female accoutrements, while still singing about all things hetero. The juxtaposition made for the most brazenly sexual rock to date. Prime glam movers like Slade, Mott the Hoople, Bowie, the Sweet, and America's own Jobriath left dressing rooms smelling like Aqua Net, their makeup cases, mascara, fake eyelashes, eyeliners, and lipsticks scattered among the drug paraphernalia and liquor.

Bassist-vocalist and American expat Suzi Quatro, under the watchful eye of her producer Mickie Most, went in the opposite direction of her male peers, downplaying traditionally feminine looks by zipping herself into a tight leather jumpsuit. Yet

Quatro, ironically, was the first to bring real female energy to glam's center stage, performing the hell out of tunes like "Can the Can" and "48 Crash," songs hewing to the big-chorus/big-beat template of the time. On the other side of the world, in California, young Joan Marie Larkin, a.k.a. Joan Jett, a frequent underage partyer at L.A.'s premier glam club, Rodney Bingenheimer's English Disco, was paying close attention to those Quatro singles. As a teen, she would form all-girl proto-punk glam-rock band the Runaways, brazenly borrowing Quatro's style, favoring tight jumpsuits and a shag 'do, while the Runaways' lead singer, Cherie Currie, aped her glitter idol, David Bowie.

IN 1972, DAVID BOWIE'S *THE RISE AND FALL OF Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders From Mars* became glam's beachhead. The cover featured a tinted photo of Bowie as Ziggy, clad in a snug green jumpsuit, sporting bright blond hair and big space-alien boots. When he and the Spiders From Mars took the show on the road, he switched to a crimson mullet, heavily lined eyes and kabuki-inspired costumes, offset by lead guitarist Mick Ronson's blond shag, tight, glittery suits, and platforms.

The Spiders From Mars, however, like many rockers, were leery of glam, at least at the start. As David Bowie told *Rolling Stone*: "What was quite hard was dragging the rest of the band into wanting to [dress glam]. That was the major problem. It was like: 'Jesus, you lot – let's not be [just] another rock band, for chrissakes.' But they caught on to it as soon as they found that they could pull more girls." With help from his now fully on-board band, Bowie



**CLOCKWISE
FROM FAR LEFT**
T. Rex maestro
Marc Bolan;
British rockers
the Sweet;
Jobriath, the
no-hit wonder,
in his signature
bodysuit;
America's first
glam sweetheart
Suzi Quatro;
top-charting
band Slade; and
2015 inductee
Joan Jett, with
Cherie Currie, at
the height of the
Runaways.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

Lou Reed, 1973; ground zero for the glam explosion in the U.S.: Rodney Bingenheimer's English Disco on Sunset Boulevard, Los Angeles, 1974; New York Dolls, 1973; and Iggy Pop, 1973.



would at last achieve superstar status.

As the Ziggy persona spun further outward, Bowie and Ronson brought glam stardust to their friend and long-standing influence, Lou Reed, whose "I'm Waiting for the Man" they'd covered on the *Ziggy* tour. Reed had recently departed his seminal band, the Velvet Underground, and owed his record company a second solo album. Bowie and Ronson flew Reed to London's Trident Studios and coproduced *Transformer*, now known as Reed's "glam" album, and his commercial high water mark.

Bowie and Ronson encouraged Reed to write about his pansexual days in Warhol's factory, and the duo provided very Ziggy-esque rock (much of it played by Ronson) as accompaniment. Reed grabbed the glam torch and ran with it, even writing a song entitled "Make Up," which goes into deep detail about cosmetics and dresses, then proclaims, "We're coming out of our closets!"

The trio branched out on *Transformer*'s centerpiece, "Walk on the Wild Side." Bowie and Ronson deviated from glam trappings and swathed Lou's literate, sung-spoken, Warhol Factory-inspired lyrics in laid-back, jazzy atmospherics like stand-up bass, brushed drums, and R&B backup singers. Despite bald references to oral sex, drag queens, drugs, and prostitution, "Walk on the Wild Side" became perhaps the unluckiest hit single ever.

For the *Transformer* LP cover and subsequent live performances, Reed fashioned his own nocturnal New York version of glam: black fingernails, leather with bondage overtones, and thick eyeliner. Despite eminent rock scribe of the day Nick Tosches deriding the album's "homo stuff," *Transformer* made Reed an international star.

Fellow Bowie friend and influence Iggy Pop, a keen student of rock & roll outrage, grabbed some glam in the early seventies, too. Although this was a musically fallow period for the Ig, photos of him from the glam days are unforgettable: hair bleached bright surfer blond, godlike physique poured into a pair of skintight silver hip-huggers, Maybelline accentuating his haunted eyes and his rapacious mouth. Thus outfitted, Iggy became a drug-addled fixture at Rodney Bingenheimer's, where, legend has it, he stared stupefied at his reflection and bedded many, many young women.

MEANWHILE, ON THE EAST COAST, THE New York Dolls' trashy hooker version of glam would prove quite influential. Despite selling few records in their 1971-77 lifespan, the campy, big-haired quintet, clad in women's underwear, thigh-high boots, and sloppily applied makeup, inspired two very influential forces: costumed rockers Kiss and London impresario Malcolm McLaren.

In the early seventies, fellow New Yorkers Kiss shared stages with the Dolls, copying their cross-dressing style, but, according to drummer Peter Criss: "We were just too husky to wear women's clothes and makeup . . . we looked more like drag queens." In one of the more genius moves in rock history, Kiss invested in professional theatrical grease-

paint, and, a la Ziggy, each became a sharply defined, comic-book-esque character, ascending to stadiums while the New York Dolls imploded in the gutter, as glam seemed to, for a few years. But glam never fully went away.

Malcolm McLaren, who began as a clothing store entrepreneur, briefly managed the Dolls before they finally broke up in 1977, and took note of the band's visual shock effect. Back in London, he applied what he'd learned to his next clients, the Sex Pistols. While not glam per se, under McLaren's tutelage the Pistols contrived a similarly theatrical and confrontational style, initially sporting loud, artfully distressed duds designed by Vivienne Westwood and sold in Westwood and McLaren's King's Road shop, SEX.

INSPIRED BY THE SENSATIONAL VISUAL ASPECTS of punk, but also in thrall to Bowie, who was at his artistic peak for the entire decade, glam reemerged in binary form in early-eighties England: the New Romantic and goth movements - again, largely U.K. phenomena. Bands like Duran Duran, Spandau Ballet, and Adam and the Ants were the former, employing lipstick, mascara, blush, and loud, wide-shouldered suits; meanwhile, Siouxsie and the Banshees, Bauhaus, the Cure, Sisters of Mercy, and their ilk

went the route of the latter, with whiteface, raccoon eyes, and vampiric attire. Though their fans would have been appalled, these goths and New Romantics could easily have swapped tips at the Boots cosmetic counter (and probably did so) all while discussing their spiritual father, Bowie. Yet, heading into the nineties, these styles would make only a few inroads into the U.S., sonically through bands like the Dandy Warhols and Brian Jonestown Massacre, and visually through the occasional thick eye makeup and frequent Day-Glo hair color of Berkeley, California punk upstarts Green Day.

The years from the mid-eighties to early nineties saw the reign of so-called hair metal - largely a U.S. West Coast thing. Bands like Mötley Crüe, Poison, and Warrant slathered themselves with makeup both tribal and glamorous, teased their hair ever higher, paraded stages in scarves, fringed crop-tops, and headbands, played ear-splitting, chart-topping rock & roll, and worried parents sick.

Nirvana, of course, brought that final glam era to a shuddering halt, but Kurt Cobain himself, once he could afford it, undertook some glam affectations, *vis a vis* a boa, eyeliner, and occasional full drag. Although he became the reluctant standard-bearer for grunge, Cobain was the most glammy of the great unwashed rock stars of the nineties, twisting gender norms in look and song with perverse glee.

Post-Internet cultural fragmentation shows us that no one genre will dominate again, and with the increasing mainstream acceptance of cross-dressing and LGBT lifestyles, glam may have, at long last, lost much of its power to shock. Depending on your perspective, this development could be either good or bad. Or, in the glam tradition, it could be both. 

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Lou Reed fashioned his own nocturnal New York version of glam.
