



Issue #01 - June 2006

DVD

THE VELVET UNDERGROUND UNDER REVIEW:

AN INDEPENDENT CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Review by Jason Quinn

Doing a review of the Velvet Underground is difficult these days since we're taking a look at some of the best music ever made. Aside from jumping up and down saying "this stuff is great!" and pointing out how the Velvets influenced the sounds, styles and attitudes of other bands and/or artists, there's not really a lot one can say anymore. The career and legacy of the Velvets has been covered in the work of Lester Bangs, Clinton Heylin's *FROM THE VELVETS TO THE VOIDOIDS* and *ALL YESTERDAYS' PARTIES: THE VELVET UNDERGROUND IN PRINT 1966-1971*, Legs McNeil & Gillian McCain's *PLEASE KILL ME: THE UNCENSORED ORAL HISTORY OF PUNK*, so to dwell on that here would be a tad redundant, no?

Instead, let's ask about what this release gives us that could be considered worthy of a band like The Velvet Underground. What does it do "right" in the (re)telling of what many already know? Is it the type of document that will win the band new listeners or does it fall in the "preaching to the converted" category?

One of the things that Velvets fans will be looking for in any new documentary is live footage. Some of the band's live performances have registered quite strongly— especially the 2001 release of *THE QUINE TAPES* which included enough head-ripping guitar work to show exactly what they were capable of—and being able to actually see the band during its prime, being able to witness band members in action as they created the sounds which still hold such noisy influence, would be something for which many could lay down their hard-earned without a second thought.

Most of the live footage used in *UNDER REVIEW* comes from the 1966 EPI/Warhol period, and it basically sets the scene as opposed to showing the band causing the psychotic blasting of which every fan

knows they were capable. There must be a distinct lack of any video footage from this era since the same images, from the same EPI shows, are used over and over again.

The producers make the most of photographs from the various periods and there's a surprise near the beginning. During one of the montages, you can hear "Venus In Furs," but the vocals are being sung by John Cale. Even though it's never mentioned, there was a performance done by the band when Reed was in the hospital for shooting up some bad meth. The show was at Poor Richards in Chicago, and John took over the vocals while Moe moved to bass and their original drummer, Angus MacLise, filled in on drums. If this version is indeed the one from that rare show, why didn't the producers let us know about it?

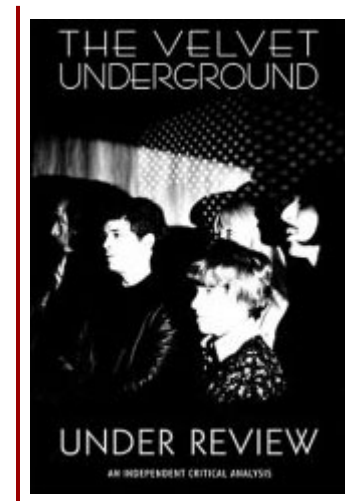
As far as I can tell from the interviewed participants, the producers of the series seem to be looking for a balance between those who were working with the band and those who are willing to offer some critical perspective on the band's legacy.

On one hand, interviews with Moe Tucker (all important drummer), Billy Name (artist & photographer who designed the first two album covers), Doug Yule (Cale's replacement whose presence helped take the Velvets in a different direction) and Norman Dolph (line producer of the first album) describe being there at the time, creating the whole Velvets image and sound. There are no comments from either Reed or Cale, but perhaps this is because they've said all they wish to say about the band. Cale's autobiography *What's Welsh for Zen?* has some very cutting comments on his time with Reed, particularly the 1993 reunion tour in Europe, and it ain't a pretty sight at all. Enough to make the Pope weep.

The personal memories are balanced by historical assessments by Clinton Heylin (who points out that the band's influence on the whole "Punk" movement probably comes more from "White Light White Heat" than anything found on the first album but also goes so far as to claim that "Venus In Furs" was the most important Velvets song since Elvis doing "Heartbreak Hotel"), Robert Christgau and Malcolm Dome.


Joe Harvard does some helpful guitar demonstrations explaining how the sound of Reed's "ostrich tuning" could carry songs like "Heroin" and "All Tomorrow's Parties" into unheard realms of train-wreck abandon. Steve Nelson's comments on how the Velvets took up residency at The Boston Tea Party while he was manager in 1967 is worth a listen to give an idea of how the Velvets began playing at their favorite hall. Sal Mercuri's comments are like some kind of uber-fan testimony, but since he did such a good job with his V.U. 'zine, he can be forgiven.

The comments of the non-band members help to shed light on the whole Velvets phenomena, and they succeed in making the viewer actually want to listen to all of those albums again as soon as the credits begin to rol. The footage of Sterling's guitar solo on "Rock'n'Roll" from the '93 reunion is fantastic and even had me, against my better judgment, putting on that album to hear the song in context. The same



goes for the double guitar solo on “What Goes On” from the band’s third album, so the documentary does a good job of getting one in the right frame of mind for hearing these songs with new ears.

The DVD includes what the producers claim to be “the Hardest Velvets Interactive Quiz In the World Ever” (I got 19/25 which doesn’t speak well for their claim), cast biographies and a special “Velvet Reflections” featurette which seems to be reflections that didn’t quite make it into the documentary proper.

When the Velvets swing, they hang past right and wrong. There have been other documentaries made about the band (notably by the BBC), but the definitive version has yet to be assembled. Until someone finally gets it together enough to take on the task of creating something worthy of the Velvets’ legacy, the UNDER REVIEW documentary will give new listeners and fans something to chew on. 

A Sexy Intellectual Production. Distributed by MVD Release Date: April 15th, 2006 Directed and Produced by Tom Barbor-Might. Picture Research by Angela Turner Featuring: Moe Tucker, Doug Yule and Billy Name. With appearances by Clinton Heylin, Robert Christgau and Dean Wertham of Luna. 85 mins. Full frame. Audio 5.1 Surround Sound (stereo)

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