



The Velvet Underground (Icons of Pop Music)

Richard Witts

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Though The Velvet Underground existed for no more than three years with its original members, it is considered to be not just the 'ultimate New York band' but also the most influential group ever. Artists who have acknowledged such influence include David Bowie, The Sex Pistols, Patti Smith, Joy Division, and Nirvana. Witts places the band and its genesis in the cultural context of Manhattan's beatnik bohemianism, its radical artistic environment, and the city's negative reaction to California's 'Hippie' counterculture. Lou Reed's Brill Building background is also considered, while his "Primitives" (1964-5) and "Velvet Underground Songs" (1965-70) are examined within the stylistic context of rock music. The band's sound world is likewise considered in this light. John Cale's experimental contribution is assessed, especially his work for LaMonte Young (The Theatre of Eternal Music) and what he carried from that experience into the Velvet's sound. The visual artist Andy Warhol, known to the Velvets as Drella, became the band's manager and produce in 1965. He placed his 'superstar' Nico in the line-up (which already included a female drummer). The radical nature of the group's Warhol period performances are examined, together with those aspects related to issues of gender, sexuality and drugs culture by which the Warhol Factory scene was identified, and contemplated in Reed's songs. Witts examines the musical influences of the Velvets on punk, post-punk and subsequent rock movements, culminating in the group's reunion of 1993. He also indexes the variety of media constructions that the group endured through the years and how these affected Cale, Nico and Reed and their attempts to establish solo careers.

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