

the conversation

‘That’s a rather pubescent question, don’t you think?’

Rude, paranoid, obtuse — Lou Reed is not a dream interviewee. But gradually the king of New York cool opens up to Will Hodgkinson about his ‘kindred spirit’ Andy Warhol, the power of rock and the beauty of the Kindle

Lou Reed is a famously difficult man to interview. As the rock critic Lester Bangs wrote about the guiding light of the Velvet Underground in 1973: “He fixes you with that rusty bug eye, he creaks and croaks and lies in your face, and you’re helpless.” In an interview for Swedish television in 2000 Reed summed up his feeling about journalists in general: “They’re disgusting. Mainly the English. They’re pigs.”

You always hope to be the one who breaks past the nasty old rock star and finds the sensitive little boy inside — and anyone who could write such beautiful songs as *I’ll Be Your Mirror*, *Jesus* and *Perfect Day* must have a soul in there, somewhere. So when news comes that the singer Antony Hegarty has asked Reed to appear at this year’s Meltdown Festival, which Hegarty is curating, I put in a request for an interview.

A handful of demands come back from Reed’s people. He wants a cover story; he wants to be photographed in black and white; he wants a make-up artist. The great man of New York art rock is apparently as vain as your average reality TV contestant.

Arrangements are made. Reed will meet me in Prague the day before he has a concert in the city. The Czech capital has had a special place in Reed’s heart ever since the Velvet Underground became the unlikely soundtrack to the Prague Spring in 1968, so it’s possible that he might be in a good mood. And there’s so much to talk about. Reed has recorded everything from pop perfection (*Transformer*, from 1972) to mechanical noise (*Metal Machine Music*, 1975). He has all kinds of extra-curricular activities, from photography to t’ai chi to his range of spectacles (Lou’s Views). Then there’s *Lulu*, the album he made last year with Metallica, a melange of macho posturing and poetic pretension that received a critical slamming. Besides, if Reed hates me, who cares? He hates all journalists.

The interview is at half-past five at Reed’s hotel, a former monastery around the corner from the Charles Bridge. At four-thirty, wearing a freshly pressed shirt, I take a coffee at a nearby café and think about questions; a figure of European composure, ready for anything. An e-mail arrives. Lou wants to move the interview to five o’clock. It’s five o’clock now. I run through the cobbled streets of Prague’s old town and arrive at the hotel, panting. My shirt is dripping with sweat. Reed is in the bar with his personal assistant,

the photographer and the make-up artist. He doesn’t get up. He doesn’t acknowledge me at all. In his three-quarter length trousers and leather jacket he looks like a biker hobbit. There is no chair free so I hover above him, wishing I could stop grinning inanely; it must be the nerves. They sit there for another ten minutes or so. Eventually, Reed slowly rises — to have his photograph taken. He heads off to one of the hotel’s long, stone corridors.

First it’s the Czech make-up artist who ignites his wrath. “You’ve made me look like a f***ing zombie!” he growls, messing up the hairstyle she has fashioned and wiping off the foundation she has applied. Then he poses for the camera, pressing his fist into his palm as if gearing up for a fight. Then he is ready for the interview.

I ask him how he met Antony Hegarty, whose remarkable falsetto first came to public attention in 2005 with the Mercury Music Prize-winning album *I Am a Bird Now*. Reed holds me with a resigned stare and says, in a calm, patient voice, as you would to a child: “I was doing a version of Edgar Allen Poe’s *The Raven*. We were looking for voices so you could identify the characters. Hal [Willner, Reed’s producer] found this CD by Antony and said: ‘Wow, who’s this?’ We went to look for him. He was about ten blocks away.”

Silence follows. Then Reed does something that he’ll do throughout the interview: he waits until I begin another question before he continues answering the one before. It might be a power play or it might be simple bad manners, but in either case it’s extremely annoying.

“There’s something astonishing in Antony’s voice that anyone can feel,” he says, just as I start on a question on what Reed will be playing at Meltdown. “Antony is the real deal. It takes not even a second to know it when you hear it.” There’s another long silence. I begin to talk, which means that he does too. “Same thing with Ornette,” he says, referring to the saxophonist Ornette Coleman. “I was 17, 18 and I heard him and Don Cherry doing *Lonely Woman*. I mean, the harmonics to that... Jesus.”

He begins to warm up. “You don’t have to know anything,” he says, talking about appreciation of great music. “You hear it, you feel it... if you have to think about it, maybe it’s not so good. I truly, truly believe this kind of music, this kind of rock, can change your entire feeling. Guys with classical music that you have to listen to for an hour, two hours... this stuff comes out and you hear it in ten seconds. It’s the vibe that’s astonishing, and that’s why it’s taken off. It’s not just a bunch of guys with loud guitars. It’s the same beat as the heart.”

Now it seems to be going well. Lou Reed is a fascinating man, even if his manners leave something to be desired. “When I’m playing a Velvet Underground song I feel

like I can get right back into it,” he continues. “I wanted to use the language of Tennessee Williams, William Burroughs, Hubert Selby and Allen Ginsberg and put it into a rock song. I thought that would be amazing, the greatest thing, if you put lyrics worthy of that with that.”

I say how important the third Velvet Underground album has been for me, in particular the gorgeously delicate ballad *Jesus*. “I’ve played *Jesus* with Jimmy Scott,” he says. Scott is the jazz vocalist born with a genetic condition that gave him a high contralto voice. “Can you imagine what I’m talking about? He’s kind of hard to make records with, though. I went to see him at a club once and just before the set starts I feel this arm around my throat. It’s Jimmy. I’m choking, and he says: ‘I just found out you didn’t write the song for me.’”

What was his frame of mind when he wrote *Jesus*? “I’m not so sure how it got written, put it that way,” he says, slowly. “That’s true of any of them. It’s like it passes right through you. It just shows up and you’re either in shape to take it and do something

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with it or you miss it and it will never, ever come back. That’s something I’ve learnt. If you really like something you’re hearing in your head you’d better put it down, because you’ve got maybe 30 seconds more and then it’s gone.”

This really is better than I could ever have hoped. Just then, Reed’s tour manager and his girlfriend walk past and stop for a chat. They seem like a friendly pair. “So have you been keeping the musicians out of trouble?” I ask, jocularly. The tour manager laughs — until he notices Reed glowering at me. “That’s a rather pubescent question, don’t you think?” Reed says.

There are only two words that I want to say to this and the second one is “off”, but since we’ve been getting on so well I return to the subject of the Velvet Underground. I point out that the band sounded like nothing else of its time. “I had a kindred spirit in Andy Warhol, whose message was: leave it alone,” he replies. “Don’t let them pretty it up. In the studio Andy was the great protector. They wouldn’t ask us our opinion. They would say: ‘Mr Warhol, what do think of the album?’ His part was to keep producers and record companies away from us. He believed in us.”

Suddenly, he appears to take offence at something I haven’t actually said or, as far as I’m aware, not even thought. “I mean, it’s really hilarious,” he says, sounding distinct-

ly unamused, “to put us in the same breath with all these other groups. It’s a joke.”

“But I didn’t mention any groups...”

“It’s hilarious to even think of being lumped in with that. Saying you’re a band from the Sixties, right there, and it’s starting the category bullshit. Jesus! Who do you think you’re talking to? Was Andy Warhol’s *Shadow Paintings* a ‘great song from the Sixties?’”

“I was saying the Velvet Underground didn’t sound like a band from the Sixties.”

“Well, that’s one way of looking at it,” he says, either deliberately misinterpreting everything I’m saying or failing to hear it in the first place. He sighs. “I suppose you could get more simplistic if you tried...”

When the interview was arranged I said that the half an hour offered wasn’t enough. Now I’m wishing it was only 15 minutes. His paranoia sucks the life out of you. Things improve a little when he talks about the influence of Delmore Schwartz, the writer who taught him at Syracuse University, New York, and from there we somehow get on to the subject of technology. Reed tells me how much he loves his Kindle.

“Screw Kindles,” I reply, too exhausted to placate him any more. “How can you compare a Kindle with a real book?”

“The book’s in the writing,” he says, tritely. “As soon as they find the artificial smell app it’ll be perfect.”

And from there something strange happens. Lou Reed, who has survived heroin and alcohol addictions, who was a poster boy for transgression, turns into a nice, normal, only slightly grumpy 70-year-old. He says that his wife, the performance artist Laurie Anderson, hates Kindles too, and likes to spend an afternoon in a second-hand bookstore. Reed’s assistant says it’s time to wrap up, but he keeps talking: having a Kindle means he no longer needs to lug bags of books around or search for his bifocals. Finally, something Lou Reed truly cares about: an electronic book.

When the interview comes to an end we head off in different directions. But downstairs we bump into each other again — and he hugs me. He asks if I’d like to join him and his assistant for a (non-alcoholic) drink. We shoot the breeze with more Kindle talk. He couldn’t be more charming.

The following night he performs a storming set with his young band, not only playing extended versions of his greatest songs but also showing generosity to his musicians: his delight at the double bassist’s solo during *Walk on the Wild Side* is palpable. The only conclusion I can come to is that Lou Reed hates being analysed, which is why he hates English journalists, or, as he calls us, pigs. Stop being a pig, and Big Bad Lou becomes a teddy bear.

Lou Reed: From VU to Lulu; Meltdown festival, Festival Hall, London SE1 (0844 8750073), August 10



TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER, DAVID BEBBER

YOU TALKING TO ME?
Lou Reed in Prague; below, with Andy Warhol and fellow Velvet Underground member Nico, circa 1965

