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Lou Reed's New Agony and Ecstasy

Lou Reed on new album, new book and New York

New York City filth, soured relationships, animal logic, paranoia, yearning, and of course, ecstasy. Despite featuring a number of Lou Reed touchstones, it would be a mistake to call *Ecstasy*, Reed's first studio effort in four years, the culmination of a rock & roll career. It is however a momentous release, marking the continued progress of a man who makes rock & roll high art. And Lou Reed believes his latest album is as good as anything he's ever done.



Minuet man

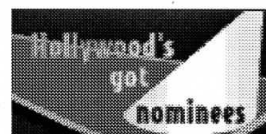
The brutally beautiful twelve-song set showcases Reed's trademark-style rock & roll. Like Reed's epic works -- *Berlin*, *Street Hassle* and *Blue Mask* -- the album is emotional and violent, both musically and in its imagery. It's a storyteller's album, soul-searching and self-mutilating.

While a new Lou Reed album is a porterhouse of a main course, Reed is also busying his plate with a multitude of sides. In February *Pass Thru Fire: The Collected Lyrics*, a four-decade lyrical retrospective was published, and he's just returned from Europe where *Poe-try*, his second collaboration with theater director Robert Wilson, just premiered. This summer, thirty Reed photographs will be featured in an exhibit at the Printemps de Cahors in France. Between albums, performances, theater, writing and other pursuits, Reed took some time to chat about his varied works.

The album's title led me to believe that you were making a "ecstatic" album. But the term "ecstasy" is much more elusive here. What is ecstasy to you?

Let's not talk what it is for me; it's what it is on the album. I was just told that the Greek root for ecstasy means "standing outside yourself." Everything's a story. I mean, I'm a writer. It's part of the fun of writing. Real life isn't that compressed -- people don't say things that well. But in writing you can put in a character and make it come out anyway you want. In the album it's a situation of people experiencing ecstasy, or they want to have ecstasy, or they have tasted it but they can't hang onto it. Or they're thinking about how to get it, where is it, what is it, what does it mean?

Sometimes it comes out violently?



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Well, people have different ways of expressing themselves. It's a spectrum. It just comes out the way it comes out.

What's it like looking at an album once you finished it?

It was sad when it was over. It was just this wonderful family of friends at home and in the studio making this music everyday. It was fabulous. I wish it had gone on forever. It's really a shame to only make one album a year, or every two years.

Laurie Anderson plays violin on two songs ["Rouge" and "Rock Minuet"]. Was it a privilege to be able to collaborate with her?

Absolutely. We needed a really special player to come in because that part [in "Rouge"] could destroy that song. Here's the person who could do it. It's working with a genius.

You've been pretty busy these days, photography exhibitions, theater projects...

It seems that way. I've always thought I'm lazy.

Have you been writing anything other than lyrical work?

I've been trying to write a New York detective novel for so long. I'm on chapter three.

How long have you been writing it?

Five years.

In the *Rock & Roll Heart* documentary you site Raymond Chandler as a literary influence.

Love Raymond Chandler. "That blonde was as pleasant as a split lip." It's those kind of quick images -- simple, simple language, quick image, Bam! There you go. It's incredible. I really work on that.

Why is the novel taking you so long?

Because it requires a very long attention span, which I don't have. I do a lot of things and when I come back to it I've forgotten what the hell the thing was about. And I have to re-read the thing just to get back in. It's really hard.

Within the last year you released *The Definitive Collection* and a book of collected lyrics. Are you in a place where it's comfortable to look back?

I don't like looking back. I really don't look back. I did a concert with Ornette Coleman once and he said, "One word of advice: Don't look back."

Can you tell me about *Poe-try*?

Robert Wilson had an idea to do a play based on the writings of Edgar Allen Poe. He said I should write it, the whole thing, so I did. It's playing, probably right this very minute at the Thalia Theater in Hamburg. I wrote the text, the lyrics, the music. If it's written out, that's me. [It] will come to the United States in November of 2001.

Did you catch much flak after choosing not to play in Austria [in protest of the rise of the nation's right-wing Freedom Party]?

I wouldn't call it flak. It was just that I was the only one out there.

You didn't feel any support coming from anywhere?

There was none. Oh, you know, some people said that it was great that you did what you did. Da da da da da da. But it's like no one else had done it.

And you were in Europe at the time?

I was in Germany. I think they have to be careful what they say. Much more than other countries. Let me put it this way, I said my action was my statement so I don't want to go into it in any further depth than that.

Like all your albums, *Ecstasy* is possessed by New York. With New York changing so much, do you feel your reaction to it changing?

Well, I love New York. You know, I detest [Mayor Rudolph] Giuliani. It's a shame Times Square had to change like that. Giuliani ought to try to go to some European cities so he can get a bit more sophisticated and broader in his outlook.

Do you ever feel the need to escape New York?

Constantly.

ADAM FALIK
(April 1, 2000)

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