

Pieces of Lou, part 1

by John Leland

EXTRACTS

(Supplied by a Sub-Sub-Lou-brarian)

“Lou Reed, if I may digress, isn't known for being a friend of journalists, a group he apparently once referred to as ‘foul vermin.’”

William I. Lengeman III, Crawdaddy!, 2008

“For one thing, he has a professed loathing for journalists. ‘Show me a critic and I'll show you an asshole. They are the vermin of the century,’ he says.”

Peter Culshaw, The Age, 2003

“Critics. What does Robert Christgau do in bed? You know, is he a toe-fucker?”

Lou Reed, monologue, Bottom Line, 1978

“Are you interested in hearing an interviewer drown? The sound of a once-promising writer going down the toilet? Just listen to my tape. It's all here. Dylan made a career out of destroying journalists. Reed had refined the process to an art. As I listen to it now, in pain, my face fixed in a wince, each minute hangs like a guillotine. The interviewer's throat begins to get raw, his voice cracks. Soon he develops a cough, one which gets worse as the hour progresses. You can hear the terror in his tone.”

Bruce Pollock, Modern Hi-Fi and Music, 1975

“Setting up the tape, I comment on the unnaturalness of interviews, the gap between interviewer and interviewee... ‘But you're getting paid to have this conversation, what kind of conversation is that? ... I'm not getting paid,’ Lou gripes. ‘If I was

getting paid, too, then the playing field would be a lot more level.”

Patrick Humphries, The Independent, 2000

“It's been a long time since I spoke to any journalists. They are a species of foul vermin. I wouldn't hire people like you to guard my sewer. Journalists are morons. Idiots. I don't perform to idiots. Journalists are ignorant and stupid.”

Lou Reed, Melody Maker, April 1977

“Reed makes me feel like an amoeba. I want to cry. Look, I was a huge fan of yours, I say.

“‘Was?’ he sneers.”

Simon Hattenstone, The Guardian, 2003

“See, this to me is what rock journalists do, they rip off, make fun of musicians... y'know, and sell it to morons. Written by morons for morons.”

Lou Reed

“There was the occasion some years ago when he greeted a reporter from a British music paper with the friendly rejoinder that ‘Your head's too big for your f--ing body. What locker room did Melody Maker find you in, faggot?’”

Mick Brown, The Telegraph, 2007

“So I went up to Lou and I said, ‘Hey, we're gonna interview you for our magazine!’ You know, like, ‘Aren't you thrilled?’ I had no idea of what we were doing. Then Holmstrom said to Lou, ‘Yeah, we'll even put you on the cover!’ Lou just turned around, real deadpan, and said, ‘Oh, your circulation must be fabulous.’”

Legs McNeil, Please Kill Me

“So I'm thinking, Hey, I know about this, and I'm sitting with my hero, Lou Reed, and we're going to have an intellectual conversation about Raymond Chandler. Alright! ...

"And he said, 'Well, look, why don't you come back to my hotel with me?' I said, 'And?' He said, 'And you can shit in my mouth. How'd you like that?' I said, 'I don't think I would like that.'

"I was really ashen. And Lou started whispering, like it was supposed to make me hot, and said, 'Does that, does that repulse you?' I said, 'Yeah.' And he said, 'Well, I'll put a — I'll put a plate over my face, then you can shit on the plate. How'd you like that?'

"I said, 'No, I don't think I'd like that, either.'"

Duncan Hannah, Please Kill Me

"I mean, it wasn't as if we thought Lou Reed would be nice and chatty but he was cold and scary and he hurt our feelings. How could Laurie Anderson put up with that?"

Gawker.com, 2007

"You want to know the real Lou Reed? Turn around. Now bend over."

Lou Reed to Camper Stacks, Suborbital Transmissions, October 1986

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PRELUDE: THE WHITE WHALE

Camper Stacks arrived at the offices of BURN magazine on January 14, 1989 in a state of unaccustomed joy: Lou Reed was going down.

For two years the sting of his interview had remained with him. It hovered when he couldn't fall asleep at night, or when he tried to talk to women in clubs. He'd learned to spot the symptoms in colleagues, the sullen silences or the embarrassed flush when a formerly favorite Lou song came on. Some told stories in bars at night; others, like Camper, didn't like to talk about it.

Most simply moved on, consoling themselves that Michael Stipe had invited them out for barbeque, or that Sylvia (Honey) Potts, publicist from Rat Boy Records, had called to say she liked their

Human League review. Bad interviews happen. “Unpleasant little man, but so Basil Fawlty-esque in his snobbishness, hair-trigger temper and venomous outbursts that I actually have fond memories of that interview,” said the English writer _____ when contacted for this project.

Camper sometimes thought he could move on as well. But he wasn't the *move on* type, as former love interests could attest. He'd be fine for a couple months, until he'd see Lou in an ad for Honda scooters, or he'd happen upon a group of critics dropping Velvet Underground references, a sport that used to give him pleasure. Then he'd relive not the interview, but the experience of listening to it on tape, which was always worse. When he ran out of options he plotted his revenge. The big payback.

Now the wheels were in motion. Release schedules had been finalized, vinyl melted and pressed, publicists hired, press releases written and faxed, tapes messengered, interviews scheduled. Lou was coming into his sights. He glanced at his clock, a promo likeness of the Beastie Boys shouting “No Sleep Till Brooklyn.” On his desk was the two-sentence letter that brought him to BURN, now creased and coffee-stained:

Ms. Zine,

I will have my vengeance on Lou Reed. I'd like to do it in your magazine.

He was calm. The Fruit of the Loom tag was sticking out the back of his Sonic Youth t-shirt. Soon everything would change. He was a critic. He would have his justice.

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What is the force that drives some men to build homes, families, companies, monuments — and others to curdle around plots of revenge? Perhaps it is this: the salt in the water, the water in our blood, the blood in our head, the Sea itself: wild, mineral, brackish with microorganisms, agent of the moon's infernal pull. It sustains life but is poisonous to crops and human beings. The same water

rips children from their parents' arms and casts sailors to shore in splintered wrecks. Men swim it in icy December and taste it on their lovers' necks in hot July. It is yin and yang, the fruit of the Fall, the gospel and the blues, the whiteness of the whale.

In Camper Stacks that force had a name: Lou.

The sea was strong in Camper that season, a damp, drizzly November in his soul, when he found himself pausing outside crack houses and missing deadlines by ever more precarious margins. Even free records gave him no joy. He was 27 years old, associate editor of BURN magazine (circulation withheld by publisher), leading exponent in the backlash against U2. He had an excellent record collection, stooped posture, good teeth, no girlfriend, no cable, no college degree, no prior work history, no savings. He had everything to lose.

"You don't have to do this," said Arthur NoiZe, the magazine's features editor. "It's just blind instinct with Lou, like any brute beast. How many extra drink tickets or plus-ones will your vengeance get you, even if you succeed?" But Arthur was wrong. Camper did have to do it.

He called his roommate, Gavin, to confirm the timetable. "Albino Vinyl," the voice answered. Then: "It's on."

He nodded to Little Thing. The Kids were ready.

There would be no halfway measures, no skullduggery, no flim-flam, no sell-out. Camper would have his vengeance. Today was the day.

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