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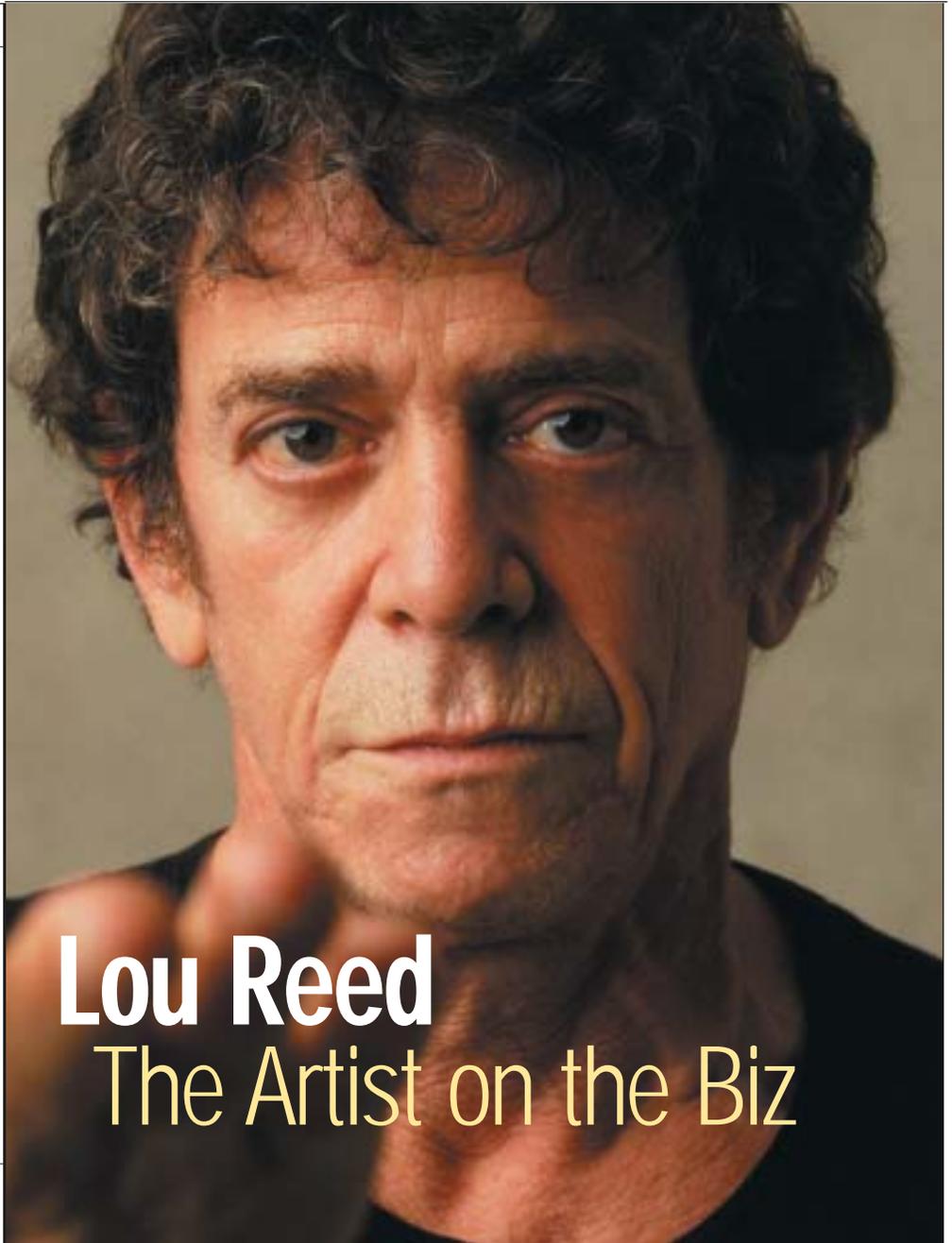
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# Lou Reed

## The Artist on the Biz

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# Lou Reed: the Artist on the Biz

by Larry Jaffee

At the 45th annual Grammy Awards ceremony last month, Lou Reed was introduced by his co-presenter of the Best Pop Song category as a “true rock legend.” That he is, albeit one who never won a Grammy for his music, although a documentary about him won a Grammy for Best Long-Form Video in 1998 and he was inducted into the Rock ‘n’ Roll Hall of Fame in 1996 with his group the Velvet Underground.

Thirty-six years this month since the release of the first Velvet Underground album, the 61-year-old Reed is still making challenging music that unfortunately doesn’t fit neatly into Grammy categories.

Reed is what the record industry calls a “prestige artist,” who doesn’t move tons of units, but has a diehard audience and is a favorite among rock critics and musicians. He’s best known for a 1973 hit single “Walk on the Wild Side” (it made it to No. 16 on the pop charts) that still gets played on the radio. Reed probably is more appreciated across the Atlantic, as evidenced by the numerous gold records from various European countries that decorate the walls of his downtown office where this exclusive *Medialine* interview took place.

His latest album, *The Raven* (released Jan. 29 on Warner Music Group’s Sire/Reprise label), is a sprawling aural experience spanning over 125 minutes and two CDs that finds Reed rewriting Edgar Allan Poe’s poetry and short stories—sometimes with music, sometimes with soliloquies and exchanges recited by stellar actors the likes of Willem Dafoe, Elizabeth Ashley, Amanda Plummer and Steve Buscemi,



Lou Reed recently assisted in remastering 31 tracks from throughout his career that he personally selected for a forthcoming compilation *NYC Man* at The Lodge Audio Mastering Facility. Pictured here with Emily Lazar (The Lodge), Rob Santos (BMG/Heritage) and Lolabelle (the dog).

PHOTO: TIMOTHY GREENFIELD-SANDERS

cover  
story

amid sound effects. In other words, *The Raven* is closer in style to a radio drama of yesteryear such as Orson Welles’ *War of the Worlds* than a conventional rock album.

During the interview, Reed covered a wide range of topics including his record company experiences, his views on file-sharing and declining industry sales, as well as the importance of his involvement in reissue remastering and packaging.

*The Raven*, he notes, “is not getting released in the greatest [industry] climate, to say the least. So I am very pleased that the powers that be at the record company let this even come out.”

“Some of my things get popular very much later,” comments Reed. In 2000, his 1972 song “Perfect Day” sold more than 1 million copies in the U.K. as a single that was sung by an all-star lineup for the BBC’s charity, Children In Need.

At Warner’s insistence, *The Raven* epic was pared down to a single disc, still clocking at over 75 minutes. If he had his druthers and could pick only one version, Reed says he’d go with the double-disc, packaged in a Digipak. But he understands why the company thought it could

maximize sales with one mostly music CD.

According to Warner Bros., 10,000 units of the limited edition were manufactured and 40,000 on the single disc for the first run.

Asked if the record company handled the editing for the single disc, he replied, “No, no, no, don’t be crazy. We (he and producer Hal Wilner) did. Up to the last day we were diddling around with it!”

Reed spent five months of concerted effort to make the album—four years if you take into account conceptualization, writing and development.

“It was very hard to do this—very complicated, complex, so many different levels. You couldn’t have done it without the use of computers. The music is analog, but the acting, the effects, the placement of the effect, you had to put it in a computer to move it around, hear if it works. The stuff really worked, trying to move things spatially. It was all about space, depth. I brought in every [music effects] toy I own.”

Most of Reed’s huge catalog has stayed in print during the CD age and regularly gets reissued with new deluxe releases and compilations.

“We’re just wrapping up the mastering of this

rock legend strives for sound perfection

compilation for BMG (*NYC Man: The Ultimate Lou Reed Collection*, due out May 6) that I did locally at [New York-based] The Lodge with Emily Lazar. It's a two-CD set where I picked [and sequenced] everything. Mastering is such an astonishing experience. The technology has improved in a staggering way. [BMG] gave me a shot at it. I was able to go back to all the old Velvet Underground records on up and really make them sound the way they're supposed to sound."

"I don't like to listen to my old stuff. But when I do hear [older CDs], it's only upsetting because you say, 'If only I could do this, listen to that—Why didn't they clean the vocal track? There should be more bass on this.' If you made a [vinyl] record that's 20 minutes long, you lost bottom, you lost volume. Then they made a CD of it and kept it that way. So you have these CDs floating around that have no known bottom. There's no reason for it—they're just mimicking the vinyl. If **you** can go back and remaster it, as opposed to **them**—all they're going to do is the

Some artists will end up selling their music directly from their websites, but not Reed. "I don't want to get involved in the business side of things. That's not my interest. But I won't have a choice if this thing (*The Raven*) doesn't do anything." Asked if he's been told that by Warner, "No, I'm making a supposition. I've been saying that for a long time now over the years."

Reed believes one way the industry could help drive CD sales is by putting more attention into packaging. He asks rhetorically, "Why couldn't you have a CD in a beautiful, normal-sized album cover like you had for records? I think people would buy more CDs if they did that."

He often uses friends like graphic designer Stefan Sagmeister and artist Julian Schnabel to do his CD covers. "It's my choice and I do recommend them, but they don't have to listen."

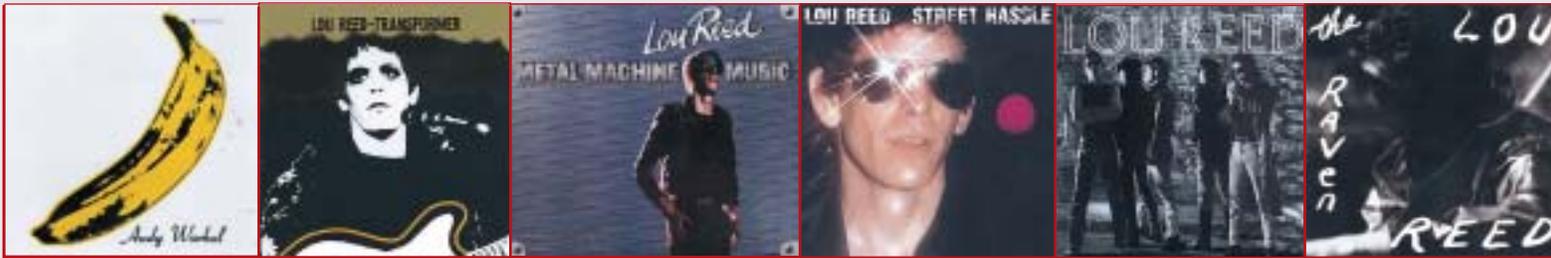
At the height of his popularity after the 1974 live album *Rock 'n' Roll Animal*, Reed pushed the envelope by delivering a two-record electronic music set, *Metal Machine Music*,

NY. Reed says *The Raven* was initially "instigated" by the Warner Music classical subsidiary in Germany. As *The Raven* "grew, it was adopted by U.S. Warners, amazingly enough."

The U.S. company ended up footing the bill, which was "the same budget I always have"—a sum Reed declined to divulge. "I couldn't afford to pay what [the actors, Dafoe, et al.] would normally get," he observes. "They were a very noble bunch; they did art for the art's sake, a great bunch of people."

Asked whether *The Raven*, which is full of sound effects and spatial relationships that play with the listener's imagination, would have been better suited for a surround mix, Reed responds, "Yes, I would [still] like to do a 5.1." But he's more inclined now to mix in the Stereo Binaural System, a recording process developed by German recording engineer Manfred Schunke that Reed used on three albums in the late 1970s mixed at the Delta Studio in Wilster, Germany.

"Play the whole thing for a head. I've been



minimum—you can address these problems, which is what I did."

Reed clarifies that when he says "them" he means the record company. "Yeah, they're just going to throw it in and reproduce it—badly. I've listened to some of those reproductions that they've done. It's unbelievable how chintzy they are. That's because no artist or A&R person who's really passionate about it was involved. There's now [at BMG] a guy named Rob Santos [who cares]." Santos has produced a half dozen deluxe reissues with insightful essays; two more will be released in September.

Reed is not surprised by the record industry's current woes. "There's nothing I can do about the record companies causing some of the problem by overcharging for those ugly, miserable, plastic jewel cases that break as soon as you open them. It makes you furious, myself included. You buy a CD, you open up the thing and it cracks in your hand. And you feel like you've been ripped off. I think that encourages people to download."

From the artist's perspective, completing an album only to find that people are downloading it for free can "put you out of business. But as far as the record company, most people would say 'good.'"

comprising four sides of feedback with each side at 16 minutes and 1 second, much to the dismay of RCA. To anyone uninitiated with avant-garde music, the release would appear to be nothing more than an exercise in cacophonous squelch at randomly selected frequencies. But Reed was very serious about it then, and continues to be so.

In fact, he feels vindicated as a result of a serious German orchestra, Ensemble Zeitkratzer, last March performing the seemingly unperformable *Metal Machine Music* with concerts in Berlin and Venice, at which he played along for the final movement. "It was a staggering thing to see that live."

BMG's Buddah imprint last year released domestically on CD for the first time *Metal Machine Music*, remastered by renowned engineer Bob Ludwig, who originally mastered the vinyl album for quad. Reed adds, "And yeah, after 25 years, to have that rereleased, mastered properly, that was wonderful vindication. I'm tired reading that I did that to get out of a contract."

Reed conceived *The Raven* following his collaboration with theater director Robert Wilson on *POEtry*, a "rock-theater" production also based on Edgar Allan Poe's writings, staged in Hamburg, Amsterdam, Paris and in Brooklyn,

obsessed with that for a long time," explains Reed. "Now it works. We figured out what was wrong. It was a phasing problem. On the way to vinyl, something happened with phasing and the effect went away. But it's back and is pretty astonishing. If you sit in the sweet spot, it's amazing. That was 1978. I've waited 24 years to get a shot at this again."

He "begged and pleaded" with the Warner top brass to give *The Raven* a binaural treatment, but to no avail. Still Reed is pretty happy with the sonic qualities of what has been released. [*The Raven's*] stereo imaging is pretty large. You've got things coming at you from the back, diagonally. You don't have anything coming directly in back of you, true."

Among *The Raven's* 36 tracks is the single, "Who Am I?"—a song so well written to my ears that it has the potential of becoming a standard across different genres, sung by everyone from Tony Bennett to Johnny Cash to some cabaret diva.

Reed, who once duetted with Pavarotti on "Perfect Day," loves to hear "people other than me" sing his songs, and agrees: "'Who Am I?' is another 'Perfect Day,' another '[Walk on the] Wild Side' for sure, no question."