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'Lou Reed' by Anthony DeCurtis: Vivid, claims too much

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Anthony DeCurtis, author of "Lou Reed."

Lou Reed: A Life

By Anthony DeCurtis
Little, Brown & Co.

528 pp. $32.

Reviewed by Glenn C. Altschuler

Lou Reed (1942-2013), lead singer and songwriter for the Velvet Underground and a solo artist for more than four decades, is generally regarded as the principal creator of alternative rock.

In his book *Lou Reed*, Anthony DeCurtis, a lecturer in creative writing at the University of Pennsylvania, a contributing editor at *Rolling Stone* magazine, the author of *Rocking My Life Away*, and the co-author of an autobiography of music impresario Clive Davis, draws on extensive research, dozens of interviews, and his own relationship with Reed to provide a vivid and compelling account of the life and work of this complex and controversial popular music figure.

DeCurtis reveals the cruel, volatile, and violent side of Reed’s personality. Reed’s black-clad bad-boy behavior, he suggests, can be explained in part by the electroshock therapy his parents ordered when he was a teenager (to “reverse” his homosexuality), his drinking and addiction to speed, and the “competing drives” - to attain, yet also spurn, success - “that raged within him.”

At its core, however, the biography celebrates Reed the artist. His
themes (obsessions, paranoia, and self-destructive behavior),
DeCurtis suggests, reflect his fascination (akin to that of Edgar Allan Poe) with abomination, cultural “decay,” and a secular version of original sin. DeCurtis endorses as “cogent” Reed’s claim that singing about a man beating up his girlfriend is no more objectionable than Shakespeare depicting Othello’s murder of Desdemona. “Maybe they should sticker my albums,” Reed declared, “and say, ‘Stay away if you have no moral compass.’”

DeCurtis also lauds Reed as an “avatar” of artistic and personal freedom. The violence of Reed’s anger, he concludes, “can be seen as an expression of frustration with limited options,” as “cathartic, a necessary purging of the inessential, rather than offensive.” If Reed went too far, personally and professionally, “that was just the price that had to be paid for everyone else not going far enough.”

These claims, and DeCurtis’ assertion that Reed’s “failures” (his albums did not sell all that well) are “marks of his integrity,” should, in my judgment, be met with skepticism.

DeCurtis is almost surely right, however, that Reed’s drug addiction, his bisexuality, fascination with transsexuals, rejection of gender orthodoxy, and contempt for the obsession with success were part of the “cultural moment” of the 1960s and ‘70s.

That cultural moment has had a significant impact, for better and worse, on our contemporary culture. Nonetheless, some of Reed’s principal preoccupations, his sound, and his signature single, “Walk on the Wild Side,” may already seem dated.

That is why it may be too early to say, with DeCurtis, that “as judged by the greatness of his best work . . . there is little chance that he will ever be forgotten.”
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