



## Who the hell are the Velvet Underground?

Despite their obscurity when they existed, the Velvet Underground have come to be called "the most influential rock & roll band of the last twenty years." Indeed, they've been an immense influence on the likes of REM, Sonic Youth, the Smiths, the Pixies, and, indirectly or directly, every other alternative band under the sun.

The band's three modes were apparent on the first album, *The Velvet Underground and Nico* (5), with fairly straight, if threatening, r&b-derived rock on the likes of "I'm Waiting For My Man" and "There She Goes Again," gentle ballads with "Sunday Morning" and "Femme Fatale" and dissonant experiments like "Heroin" and "European Son." *White Light/White Heat* (3) took the experimentation to unlistenable extremes. Though there are definite structures to songs like "Sister Ray," "I Heard Her Call My Name" and the title track, the album is a nihilistic mess and strictly for masochists. John Cale left the band after that and VU became much less abrasive -- much less, as we hear on *The Velvet Underground* (4), which features one of Reed's most touching songs in "Pale Blue Eyes," full-fledged optimism in "Beginning to See the Light" and the truly inspiring "What Goes On." 1970's *Loaded* (5), their last album, took the Velvet Underground's newfound songcraft to new heights with wonderful rockers like "Sweet Jane" and "Head Held High" and moving ballads like "New Age" and "Oh! Sweet Nuthin'."

Each of the Velvet Underground's live albums has a distinct personality. *1969* (4) is the band at their most world-weary and is generally cited as their best. The album includes the slowed-down version of "Sweet Jane" that the Cowboy Junkies based their cover on. Despite the intense melancholy of it, I find *1969's* sloppy marathons numbing. I prefer the dreadfully recorded *Live at Max's Kansas City* (4.5), which captures the band at a highly accessible, truly life-affirming peak, not what most think of when they think of the Velvet Underground. Half fast and half slow, the band applies their *Loaded* songcraft and rock power to some of their classics and livens up the newer material; the version of "Sweet Jane" is a killer. The barrel-scraping albums, *V.U.* (4) and *Another View* (3.5), are goofy, relaxed and accessible, essential to fans. The first is preferable; the second digs deeper into the dumpster but still comes up with some gems.



### Live MCMXCIII The Velvet Underground (Warner)

Like *1969* and *Live at Max's Kansas City*, *Live MCMXCIII* (3.5) showcases the Velvet Underground in a distinct mood. The 1993 model VU is less experimental, still a little longwinded (a fifteen minute version of "Hey Mr. Rain"! ) and more jam-oriented. Reed, a massively improved musician since the days of VU, solos nonstop and Reed and Cale may be the most deadpan vocal duo you've ever heard. All the tracks are inventive and exude a very un-VU-like positivity. The more friendly takes of "The Gift" and "I Heard Her Call My Name" are revelations. VU sounds as vital as ever.

