# Lou Reed in the City of Night

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## *Introduction*

In May of 2017, University of Guleph's Central Student Association (CSA) publicly apologized after one of their events featured Lou Reed's 1972 song "Walk on the Wild Side." Reportedly, students took offence to a verse about a transgender woman named Holly:

> Holly came from Miami F-L-A
> Plucked her eyebrows on the way
> Shaved her legs and then he was a she
> She said, 'Hey babe, take a walk on the wild side.'

The statement issued by the CSA acknowledged that the content of the record was cause for offense: "We now know the lyrics to this song are hurtful to our friends in the trans community and we'd like to unreservedly apologize for this error in judgment" (Goffin 2017).

Friends and fans of Reed quickly took to social media to challenge the idea that the singer was at fault. Unsurprisingly, many defenses were declarations about sensitivity and snowflakes. But others voiced well-intentioned statements in support of the record. According to the producer Hal Willner, the lyrics were in tribute to the singer's LGBTQ friends: "the song was a love song to all the people he knew and to New York City by a man who supported the community and the city his whole life" (Helmore 2017). Others quoted Holly Woodlawn—the same Holly named in the verse—who lauded the singer just before she passed away in 2015: "Lou Reed made me immortal" (Boult 2017).

In many ways, the question of Reed's intent can be a red herring. The fact that students took offense to hearing the song should establish unequivocally that its inclusion on a playlist for a public event was in poor taste. Indeed, the situation in question was the distribution of bus passes to students, featuring a cheesy playlist designed to capture the experience of a old-timey road trip. It was hardly a situation capable of bringing requisite nuance to a discussion of the lives and experiences of transgender people.

Even so, it is curious that "A Walk on the Wild Side" would appear in such a situation. Reed's song has enjoyed a striking half-life, earning a central place in the mainstream of popular music—a space that to this day inconsistently addresses gender and sexuality. Odd indeed that, in a society where LGBTQ people are still denied recognition, evening commuters sleepily drum on steering wheels as Reed's voice drones out of class rock radio.

While I can offer no answers about when or whether to broadcast this song in a moment such as ours (a question of politics too wide and complicated for a short book chapter), I would argue at the least that this complicated legacy is illustrative. In many ways, the record stands in for the pitfalls, possibilities, and impasses that have structured the LGBTQ community in the last fifty or so years. Varyingly a testimony to the complicated circumstances of a formative historical moment or a dusty relic lingering after a now-bygone age, "Walk on the Wild Side" is a song marked by conflicting associations.

This chapter argues that much of the ambiguity in "Walk on the Wild Side" stems from its relationship to New York's nocturnal queer world. At the beginning of the 1970s, the LGBTQ community was marked by a dual character: a

robust social infrastructure woven into the fabric of the city, and yet dependent on its relative invisibility. New York's queer world was rooted in the darkness, relying on the opacity of its codes—and the literal absence of light—for protection. In this sense, the queer world of the twentieth century was, as the novelist John Rechy characterized it in his 1963 novel, a *City of Night*. Lou Reed's song took this world as a paradigm, evoking it both at the level of form and content. Aiming to depict the queer world of the 1970s, Reed's song literally evokes the experiences of those dwelling in the City of Night. But Reed also adopted the shadowed character of that context, producing a veiled song for a world beneath the veil of night. In this sense, "Walk on the Wild Side" is, for better and for worse, a monument to a world of darkness.

I begin my chapter with a discussion of New York's City of Night. By the 1970s, New York's LGBTQ community depended on a complex balance between visibility, invisibility, and mediatization. Living in a society where queer people were rejected and exploited, there was a literal relationship between this world and the night. The LGBTQ community rooted its social formations in hidden cruise spots and late-night parties, seeking out the dark for shelter.

There was also an affective character to a life spent moving in and out of the light. I further stress the intimate links between LGBTQ art practices and darkness. Drawing on the work of the theorist Jack Halberstam, I suggest that queer art thematizes shadows, a "dark landscape of confusion, loneliness, alienation, impossibility, and awkwardness.... launched from places of darkness, experiences of hurt or exclusion" (Halberstam 2011, 97–98). Darkness saturated

depictions of a community denied recognition, as well as the promise of a brighter future for those trapped, for far too long, in endless night.

I extend this nocturnal queer discourse to Lou Reed. After leaving the Velvet Underground, Reed's solo career was interpreted by critics as the turning over of a new, queerer leaf. Reed was marked as the musical expression of New York's LGBTQ world, the chief musical denizen of the City of Night. I conclude that this framework shaped the character of "Walk on a Wild Side." The song—saturated with complex genre referentiality—rendered the nocturnal queer world in aesthetic form. Ultimately, "Walk on the Wild Side" presents a vision of a queer world shadowed in darkness, with all its possible futures: misrecognition, resignation, and the possibility of hope.

### *New York as the City of Night*

It is often noted that "Walk on the Wild Side" mentions five real people by name: Holly Woodlawn and Candy Darling, both of whom were transgender performing artists; the actors Joe Campbell and Joe Dallesandro (the latter a former hustler); and Jackie Curtis—a drag queen well-known around the New York scene. Four of them were Andy Warhol "superstars," and all affiliated with Warhol's entourage of artists and provocateurs. Four further acted in one or more films in Paul Morrissey's cult "Morrissey Trilogy": *Flesh* (1968), *Trash* (1970), and *Heat* (1972). (Joe Campbell does not appear in those films, but does appear in Andy Warhol's 1965 film *My Hustler*.) References to these individuals obviously situate Reed in a cinematic milieu of the late sixties and seventies (Suárez 2014; Yacowar 1993).

They also link him to a period of intense social upheaval. New York's 1969 Stonewall Riots—in which the clientele of a mafia-owned Village gay bar (many of whom were transgender) began hurling bricks in response to a police vice raid—were only the most famous of dozens of similar actions happening around the United States (Meyerowitz 2002, 235–237; Stryker 2008, 60–85; Silverman and Stryker, n.d.). Because of such events (and relentless media coverage of them), New York gained a reputation as beacon of queer life and culture.

In reality, the City has a robust LGBTQ community that dates back at least to the nineteenth century. This fact has prompted the historian George Chauncey to call the gay community a "world": a secretive but dynamic community rooted in a complicated network of social and sexual practices that existed just outside of the eye of the larger public (Chauncey 1995). Bowdlerizing Chauncey's argument slightly—his focus is specifically on gay male subcultures—I would argue that New York has long hosted a dynamic population, infrastructure, and set of socio-cultural practices rooted in the broader LGBTQ community; a *queer world*. This urban subculture witnessed myriad changes in its history, not the least in its slow crawl into the world of mass media during the 1950s and 1960s. Features about gay people appeared in magazines and newspapers including the *New York Times* and *Playboy*, alongside a proliferation of artistic representations such as James Herlihy's 1965 novel *Midnight Cowboy* and the 1968 off-Broadway play *Boys in the Band* (both of which were turned into films by 1970). In the end, Lou Reed came of age in the early years of what Rosemary Hennessy terms "queer visibility": the emergence of LGBTQ people in mainstream culture via activism, political gains, and mediatization (Hennessy 2000, 111–113). It was in this era—

and because of newfound mediatization—that the very word "gay" became a standard designator of male homosexuality (Chauncey 1995, 20).

I won't discuss this history at any length, since it has been well-documented (Cleto 1999; Delany 2001; D'Emilio 1998, 2002; D'Emilio and Freedman 2012; Gilfoyle 1994; McNamara 1994; Meyerowitz 2002; Stryker 2008). For my purposes, two aspects of New York's queer world are worth reiterating. First, it is necessary to stress the nocturnal character of the queer world during the 1960s and 1970s, a fact that is only implicit in many LGBTQ-centered histories. The night was part of New York's queer infrastructure. From clandestine cruise spots to all-night, invite-only parties and Mafia-owned bars where the presence of large numbers of gay, lesbian, and transgender clientele constituted an open secret; New York's queer culture was shrouded from prying eyes not only by the "closet" and subcultural codes, but also on the literal cover of darkness.

New York City in general has a long and intimate relationship with the night, its social life unfolding as much in sunbaked Midtown office buildings as 24-hour eateries and after-hours social events. Darkness played a more specific role in the lives of LGBTQ people. As Mark Caldwell notes in an essay discussing the topic, the night offered shelter:

> In New York, discos were also safety zones—havens where those normally excluded from the city's visible life could meet and mix.... The hideaway that allows something forgotten or forbidden to remember itself and come to life had always been a specialty of nightlife. The disco dance floors, loud, dark, and crowded, veiled as much as revealed by the mirrored balls and rapidfire lights, were a reassuring place to dance with other men.... Both the gay or the straight "club kids," as they were beginning to be known,

> could both be themselves and not themselves (Caldwell 2005, 316–17).

Nocturnal spaces therefore offered a doubled sense of freedom and restriction; not only possibility, but also protection, however fleeting in a world ruled by homophobia and organized crime. Ultimately, Caldwell concludes, nocturnal spaces were for "living as you would not be permitted to in cold daylight, making a nightly foray into the strange, unknown, and forbidden" (326).

The dark was central to John Rechy's novel *City of Night* (1963), which intimately chronicles the experiences of a queer male hustler as he travels across America. Rechy dedicates a significant portion of his book to New York. From Central Park to Third Avenue (later the subject of the Ramones's 1976 song "53rd and 3rd"), and above all, Times Square, the protagonist of the book weaves through libraries repurposed as after-dark cruise spots, meeting spots hidden behind darkened shrubbery in Central Park, and shadowed blocks stalked by police. This world was not only nocturnal, but also a refuge for those suffering from "insomnia." In his words, New York was,

> an unfloating island with that life that never sleeps—in this city that seems to generate its energy from all the small, sleepy towns of America, sapped by this huge lodestone: the fugitives lured here by an emotional insomnia: gathered into like or complementary groups: in this dazzling disdainfully heaven-piercing city (Rechy 1994, 56).

This description speaks to a second aspect of New York's queer world. A City of Night in a doubled sense, New York was often experienced as a site of unsleeping isolation. It was a twilight world, perpetually clouded by dusk. In this sense, *City of Night* captured not only the dynamism of the hidden queer world, but also, as

David Williams Foster notes, its dual identity as both "mecca and dystopia" (Foster 2014).

The appeal to dystopia is not to suggest that queer life was unilaterally negative. Rather, as Jack Halberstam notes, darkness has long played a forceful role in queer life. In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam argues that darkness—an "ethos of resignation to failure"—also constitutes a source of power (Halberstam 2011, 96). Darkness forms a central thematic in LGBTQ art. This was true at the level of literal content, with descriptions of nocturnal encounters or films and photographs depicting shadowed city streets in New York and Paris. But it further characterized queer affect, so often shaped by a "landscape of confusion, loneliness, alienation, impossibility, and awkwardness" (97). In this sense, queerness was a way of being in the world, but also a way of seeing (and hearing) the world; a sense for that which lurked in darkened alleys and broken hearts.

Morrissey's films are saturated by darkness, documenting topics often hidden from the light: drug addiction and sex work, but also depression, boredom, anxiety, and despair. Even the very possibility of queer sociality was questioned by queer art forms. By the 1984 edition of his book, Rechy himself was doubting the City of Night; as he lamented, "The Times Square of the narrator's youth is now long gone" (Foster 2014, 106).

**Lou Reed & the Queer World**

In spite of this alarmism, the period beginning in the 1970s witnessed not only the expansion of New York's LGBTQ community, but also the proliferation

of film, literature, and theater focused on queer topics. Even rock music began to camp it up, despite its tendency toward overblown, straight male performativity (Waksman 2001). From traditionalists such as Elton John to glam artists like David Bowie and punkers such as Jayne County, the Magic Tramps, and Klaus Nomi, rock in the 1970s celebrated a brighter, queerer future (Auslander 2006; Ervin 2017; Jarman-Ivens 2007; O'Meara 2003; Wadkins 2012).

Lou Reed in particular emerged as one of the core musical representatives of the City of Night. After leaving the Velvet Underground in 1970, Reed released a string of solo albums including *Transformer* (1972), *Berlin* (1973), and the live album *Rock and Roll Animal* (1974). Along with a series of early seventies Velvet Underground reissues, these albums helped to establish Reed as one of the premier figures of New York rock music and "godfather" to the emerging punk scene surrounding the Ramones, Patti Smith Group, and Blondie.

These records were also pivotal in linking the singer to queerness. While Reed's songs from this period were not miles away from those on Velvet Underground's sixties work (and often times, were written while he was still in the group), the extent to which they focus on gender and sexuality grabbed the attention of critics. *Transformer* in particular has emerged as a queer classic, a reputation established instantly with the New York cognoscenti.

Of course, "Walk on the Wild Side" quickly comes to mind. But many others evoke queer culture, full of allusions to Andy Warhol, Times Square cruising, and the newly minted term "gay." "Make Up," for example, evokes a then-particularly timely notion of queer liberation on the bridge of the song:

> Now we're coming out

Out of our closets
Out on the streets
Yeah, we're coming out

(Recall that this is just a few years after Stonewall.) Other songs on the album more subtly evoke queer thematics. "Hanging Round" tells of the brutal dismissal of a rival who keeps "hanging round" on the scene, abounds with biting queer wit. It throws shade in a form instantly recognizable to scene queens and insiders on the drag circuit. "New York Telephone Conversation" similarly camps it up, conjuring the image of gay men chattering on the phone, gossiping snarkily about friends, enemies, and frenemies. LGBTQ music history also haunts *Transformer*. The cabaret choruses of "Wagon Wheel" and the glam grandiosity of "Satellite of Love" subtly queer New York underground rock. "Goodnight Ladies" offers a kind of campy, disingenuous version of an old minstrel tune best known for its barbershop rendition in the Meredith Wilson's 1957 *The Music Man*. The song positions Reed's work partially between rock and theater—perhaps *the* paradigmatic queer art, especially in the close wake of shows like *Boys in the Band*. Ultimately, *Transformer* is an album saturated with queerness, not only in its explicit descriptions of sexuality *à la* Rechy's *City of Night*, but also through allusion, double entendre, and subcultural in-speech.

Lou Reed was actually quite evasive when asked by the press directly about his own sexuality, despite the fact that insiders on the New York scene loved to speculate and share rumors about his personal life. It is telling that, in one of the few times Reed spoke candidly about his musical relationship to queer culture, he remarked, "what I've always thought is that I'm doing rock and roll in drag" (Rock 1972, 14).

His reluctance did little to stall critics. In fact, because they lacked explicit evidence about Reed's intent, critics made recourse to queerness as an interpretive heuristic. Whether referencing his appearance and personal life or elements of his music, many critics interpreted records such as *Transformer* as the surface expression of the subterranean character of queer New York. Critics frequently wrote in euphemistic terms about the (perceived) gender or sexuality of many artists in the rock/punk orbit such as Jayne County and the New York Dolls (Ervin Forthcoming). Representative is Tom McCarthy's 1974 *Village Voice* column about Lou Reed's influence on punk, "Looking Back at the Prophets." Hinting at but never directly addressing LGBTQ culture, McCarthy suggests that the Velvet Underground were "more in touch with Times Square than Berkeley, more at home in a gay bar than a commune" (McCarthy 1974, 73).

The nocturnal was explicitly evoked by some critics, as in Mick Rock's 1972 essay suggesting that "Lou Reed Sees the Future, Darkly" (Rock 1972). Other critics emphasized the grim tone of Reed's music; James Wolcott, for example, in one of the 1970s first major features on punk rock, wrote about how artists such as Patti Smith and Television poached from the "loneliness, melancholy,… [and] chiaroscuro shadings" of Reed's music (Wolcott 1976, 87). Richard Nusser wrote the most emphatic account of Reed's relationship to darkness, arguing that the singer's music was saturated by "Dark Rays":

> Lou Reed chose to concentrate on the dark side of our character when he began writing songs years ago…. [The Velvet Underground] captured the demonic sound and fury, the din and dissonance of the dark side of urban life…. [Reed's newer work has a] preoccupation with drugs, death, depravity, and the quiet desperation of ordinary life, not to mention the trauma of being a man according to the

> dictates of contemporary society…. His melodies and lyrics strung together shards of life, glittering dark and sharp (Nusser 1973, 58).

While, like many critics of the period, Nusser explicitly avoids discussion of LGBTQ issues, he does stress the interlinked relationship between thematics and affect. Reed's music rendered the dark side through sound.

Richard Robinson, the founder of *Rock Scene* magazine, went even further into New York's nocturnal life in his 1974 article "The Dolls: Hot New York." Ostensibly a feature on New York Dolls (though also dedicating considerable attention to Reed), Robinson's article is really a lengthy meditation on the aesthetic character of New York. Seeking to understand the darkness of New York rock groups like Velvet Underground, Robinson developed an elaborate social theory of rock. He argued that New York was "two cities," not just the "one you see during the day" (the office buildings populating Wall Street and Madison Avenue), but also a second, hidden world:

> [It is] one that slinks around at night. There are people in New York who live at night. They can't tolerate the sunshine, the people scurrying off their commuter trains and being jovial in their office. So they've crossed over into the night time for one reason or another, maybe to escape, maybe because they were just born that way. The night energy of New York also differs from the day energy. It's more bizarre, more unreal, more the product of a fanciful brain than anything else (Robinson 1974, 14).

Aside from mentions of "bizarreness" and "fancy," Robinson mostly avoids gender and sexuality—curious, since these topics formed standard talking points about the New York Dolls in this period (Ervin 2017). Even so, Robinson centrally aligns underground music with the night. In particular, he argues that Lou Reed

was a kind of priest, overseeing “murky rites” taking place “when the moon is full” (Robinson 1974, 14).

**A Walk on the Wild Side**

If Reed presided over nocturnal rituals, this linked him to a world of shadows. Entangled in processes of anxious disavowal, remembrance, and despair, Reed took on the burdens of remembering and forgetting queer culture. Constituting a form of nostalgia for the promises of queerness at the point of rupture, Reed lamented the possibilities of a world fading into the past, obscured from view by encroaching dark. In this spirit, I might argue that Lou Reed’s music was not rock and roll in drag, but rock and roll clad in a veil of night.

This provides a suggestive framework for hearing “Walk on the Wild Side.” Though not explicitly about the night *per se*, Reed’s song surveys lifestyles at home in the nocturnal world of Times Square and the Village, from gender transgression and queer sex to sex work and drug usage. Moreover, the intertextual link between the song, Paul Morrissey’s films, and the broader Warhol scene provide a depth of specificity. More than most songs from the period—including the Magic Tramp’s “S&M-Leather Queen” or even Jayne County’s proudly explicit and trans-centric lyrics—Reed reconstructs the City of Night in musical miniature.

Despite the specificity of Reed’s lyrics, they are peculiar. Descriptions feel voyeuristic. We are invited to watch and learn; to hear about adventure, lust, and danger. But the narrator speaks in the third person, as if he is watching and savoring, not participating. Moreover, the accounts are piecemeal, as if witnessed

across darkened bars and backrooms. They are clouded by darkness. The musical accompaniment to “Walk on the Wild Side” matches this estranged standpoint. Through genre references, the song is linked to the doo-wop/vocal harmony tradition. Reed deploys a number of signature elements: a percussive shuffle rhythm hammered out on an acoustic guitar, a walking bass line, a sax solo, and doo-wop style vocals sung by Reed and choir. Structurally, the song also plays on the affective power of earlier pop. “Walk on the Wild Side” gradually accrues layers that propel the song forward: plucked bass and gently strummed guitar are followed by the entrance of drums, Reed’s vocals and the backing doo-wop choir, and by the time of the third and fourth verses, a legato string cantus firmus.

On closer examination, though, “Walk on the Wild Side” is no model reconstruction of any genre. The vaguely accented guitar and plodding bass part only loosely gesture at the robust swing grounding R&B. Meanwhile, as Jacqueline Warwick notes, Reed’s “doo wop” vocals—basically just the syllable “doo” sung on repeat—acknowledging the paradigmatic status of this style of vocal delivery only through resort to cliché (Warwick 2008, 63). This is, of course, to say nothing of Reed’s highly offensive line “and the colored girls sing…” A cavalier acknowledgement of links between his song and African American vernacular music, Reed only dismissively indexes social context. Across the board, it feels as if Reed haphazardly points a light toward a range of musical, cultural, and historic associations, never quite seeming to care about whether or not he illuminates his targets.

This opacity shapes overall musical affect. Despite the gradual layering effect performed in the song, its development feels curiously deflationary. The

song loses force, such that the arrival of the sax solo appears excessive and meandering against a plodding backdrop. Rather than an ecstatic high point, it signals failure. These musical transgressions are minor compared to Reed's singing. He mutters in a deflated monotone, distantly. Evoking a musical world ruled by voice—by star singers, vocal bravado, by *presence*—Reed is absent. Not just his usual coy irony, here, Reed seems on the verge of giving up.

Frankly, "Walk on the Wild Side" is dull. For a song that alludes to musical desire and lyrically promises the listener the delights of the "wild side," it can't deliver. Both lyrically and formally, the song evokes virtuosity, energy, and eroticism, but performs their abdication. It renders its subject matter historical, bygone. That is to say, "Walk on the Wild Side" holds its sources at a distance, demonstrating their remoteness. It is as if Holly's excitements are not ours to enjoy, the queer world fading into darkness once and for all.

### *Conclusion*

This estranged standpoint is the source of the song's potential to do harm. Reed's irony suggests that queer radiance is not merely unimportant, but impossible. The record thus hints that reconciliation with the ghosts of the past—of LGBTQ people, people of color, and women, denied the right to thrive—stands just out of reach. This vision fits all-too-well into a world where LGBTQ people are still invisible, a world where the drudgery of university bureaucracy and rush hour commutes leave little space to inquire after queer lives. Thus, Reed potentially suggests that there can be no recognition for the denizens of the City of Night, no recognition in a world of eternal darkness.

But in his longing look at the City of Night, Reed acknowledges the vitality of this alternative world. In this sense, the song bears within it a glimmer of promise, a reminder that queer people stand in the shadows. Reed presents a vision shaped by Jack Halberstam's darkness: a world thriving in the night, providing refuge to those denied a place in the light. Reed depicts a world of possibilities, in spaces not yet illuminated.

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