Pedro Torres-Paraizo

Dr. Steven Hamelman

ENGL_332

6 December 2022

Searching for a Mainline with *White Light/White Heat*

As 1960s America found widespread anti-establishment sentiment amongst its post World War II youth, a great secular antinomian spirit formed around the many blossoming artists and musical groups of the era. One such group, the now iconic Velvet Underground, played a pivotal role in the evolution of rock music as art. Abhorrent by design, provocative in its symbolism, and downright unappetizing to many, the VU's 1968 sophomore effort *White Light/White Heat* stands as one of rock and roll's most notorious albums. As the album was a confluence of modern art sensibilities, avant-garde experimentation, and boundary-pushing literature–taking cues from the improvisational jazz sound of saxophonist Ornette Coleman to the hedonistic, deranged novels of William S. Burroughs; not to mention the group's prior involvement with Warhol–it's no surprise that the end result *White Light* was a startlingly antinomian work of art. The VU's efforts on the album have also proven to be the template for several generations of punk, noise, no-wave, and avant-garde acts to follow, expanding the breadth and complexity of the genre. The sound itself was defiant of popular music of the time, relying on piercing, dissonant and distortion-filled noise. Pairing perfectly with such an unapologetic sound are lyrics and themes that are incredibly daring and darkly humorous, giving both a brutally honest and ultimately transgressive peek into the underbelly of late 60s America.

After the Velvet Underground's eponymous debut, German singer Nico left the group to pursue her own solo work, and creative collaborator Andy Warhol was fired by singer and

guitarist Lou Reed (Warhol's only contribution to *White Light* would be the album's cover art.) Along with Reed, multi-instrumentalist John Cale, percussionist Maureen "Moe" Tucker, and guitarist Sterling Morrison rounded out the quartet that was set to destroy conventions and create a soundscape totally new to rock and roll. *White Light,* well before the age of noise rock, could be seen as a prototype for that future subgenre, a blueprint of sorts for what others would build off of in the last quarter of the 20th century. Even at a "relatively short" six tracks (barring the last tracks shocking length), the moment anyone set the needle down on the first side of the LP, they would be met with an onslaught of aggression and intensity that only grew more ferocious the further one delved in. What makes the album so brilliantly antinomian is just how overt it is in its imagery and sound. The tracks all delve headfirst into topics ranging from extravagant drug use, wild orgies with drag queens shut down by cops, failed gender-change operations, orgasms and fellatio, amongst other such debauchery (as far as to who is pleasuring who is left ambiguous). Lyrically it almost takes on a quality of Beat-generation poetry, giving insight into a world many wouldn't dare approach.

The title track "White Light/White Heat," is the first on the album, sounds a bit like a traditional rock and roll or doo-wop song with the distortion turned all the way up. "White Light" describes the sensations of shooting up methamphetamine, giving almost a spiritual and blissful interpretation of the act. None of the aforementioned taboo acts are judged harshly whatsoever, they merely present them as they are, deranged or disgusting as it might be. In "The Gift," fictional character Waldo Jeffers decides to mail himself in a giant cardboard box to his disinterested college love Marsha, only to end up with his head sliced open (accentuated by the sound of a splitting watermelon) by Marsha's hand when she plunges a knife through the package in a frustrated attempt in getting the box open. What makes the track even more

intriguing than its narrative is the use of stereo sound. A spoken-word performance of the lyrics read by John Cale plays in the left channel, while a steady, surreal instrumental plays in the right channel, keeping up with the story as it unfolds over eight minutes. VU's insistence on keeping the listener on their toes and taking sharp turns with each track adds to the general aura of unease and uncertainty in the album. Upon first listen, one wouldn't be able to guess just where the band would go next.

Across the album, people are murdered, drugs are ingested as often as one breathes air, and authorities are called upon left and right. David Fricke, writing for the introduction to the 45th anniversary version of *White Light*, notes how the group got a lot of inspiration from what they saw in their everyday lives: "[They] scrabbled to survive in the drug-soaked art-scene demi-monde of Manhattan's Lower East Side." A lot of their personal experiences in that bubble would play right into the lyrics on the album. Morrison, speaking in an interview with Fricke, would recall that time in the band's life: "Our lives were chaos. Things were insane, day in and day out: the people we knew, the excesses of all sorts . . . [that album] was definitely the raucous end of what we did," (this would be the last studio album Cale would work on with the VU).

Popular Music and Society writer Matthew Bannister finds a parallel between the VU's lyrics and the writings of French philosopher Michel Foucault. In relation to Foucoult's theory of the Prison Panopticon in *Discipline & Punish:* "There is certainly something of the panopticon in the way that their songs deal with a procession of alienated and deviant subjects, each locked in his or her own little subjective cell, confessing his or her "truth" to an invisible narrator," (Bannister 169). Such a brave and uncensored look at the lives of the addicts and hustlers surrounding them, presented in explicit detail, lends nearly a voyeuristic quality to the album. Quite intentionally, *White Light* presents the stark contrast and inequity of life between the haves

and the have nots in Manhattan in that time. Those portrayed in the album are ne'er-do-wells, junkies, perverts, and nymphos. It's so startlingly real that it comes across as surrealist.

In the chaotic, depraved world that singer Lou Reed weaves through the album, a sound equally as disturbing seems appropriate. The LP leans mostly on improvisation and live takes, and neither Reed or Morrison take lead guitar duties; they instead prefer to share the role and hop back and forth, seemingly at a whim. The guitars squeal and growl thanks to them, sounding like addicts trapped in hell. Tucker's drums feel eternally steady, never faltering or missing a beat, and the bevy of strange sounds, from medical equipment in "Lady Godiva's Operation," to the electric viola on "Here She Comes Now," (a not so subtle double-entendre) are generously provided by Cale. The highlight of the work lies in the album's closer: "Sister Ray," a 17-minute single-take live improvised recording of the VU trying to out-sound each other over lyrics of drag queens and sailors shooting up smack and having an orgy. With just two chords, and a highly distorted, crunchy swirling repetitive beat, one almost feels lost in the music as if they were on drugs, which is fitting. Nothing at the time sounded this violent, this mesmerizing. Writing on the album's 45th anniversary reissue, Pitchfork contributor Douglas Wolk asks of the final track, "Why is ["Sister Ray"] way, way more potent than any other extended jam on a simple riff by an American band of the 60s?" Not only did the VU take listeners on a journey, they violated their ears and made sure they would never forget it. Cale would later recall how "Sister Ray" came to be: "The sound we could get on stage – we wanted to get that on the record. . . [The] idea of us coming out one after the other, doing whatever we wanted, that individualism – it's there on Sister Ray, in spades," (Fricke). The energy the band had in their live shows was perfectly replicated on *White Light*, further proven by the reissues' bonus live tracks from around the album's release. Live and "studio" versions of the songs share the same

power, the same gritty attitude. There is no intention of a clean, crisp, sound at all. *White Light* is loud, it is indelible, and it is certainly uninterested in what the listener thinks about it.

Upon its release, *White Light* was both critically and commercially a failure. It launched right at the bottom of the Billboard 200, falling off completely after just a couple weeks. A contemporary review of *White Light* by Sandy Pearlman for Crawdaddy Magazine (republished in *All Yesterdays' Parties: The Velvet Underground in Print, 1966-1971*) finds similarities in the album with William S. Burroughs's famous 1959 novel: "In mood this LP's most reminiscent of that last ("shoot 'em up") section of Naked Lunch wherein Bill Burroughs actually portrays himself (the arch-doper) shooting some narco cop. That's how pretentiously humorous it is." While mostly negative, Pearlman does applaud VU for their dedication to such a dark, difficult sound across the entire record, ultimately finding the work interesting but also monotonous and repetitive (Heylin 62).

Time has been kind to *White Light*, however, and in the years following the demise of the Velvet Underground–along with several re-issues over the years of their entire back catalogue on LP, CD, and digital–the album has seen far more praise, with many praising the originality and audacity of the work. With *White Light* being as much of a pioneer as was in terms of heavy music, releasing close to six decades ago–predating metal and punk and the like–it getting its due seems like a righting of a major wrong. The genius of the work is undeniable at this point, and its influence is undisputed. It will never be a major commercial success, existing comfortably in the reach of die-hard music aficionados and open-minded listeners. In truth, its limited appeal only adds to the mystique of the record. Just before his death in 2013, Lou Reed would look back on *White Light*: "No one listened to it. But there it is, forever – the quintessence of articulated punk. And no one goes near it," (Fricke).

Works Cited

Bannister, Matthew. "'I'm Set Free…': The Velvet Underground, 1960s Counterculture, and Michel Foucault." *Popular Music and Society*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2010, pp. 163–178., https://doi.org/10.1080/03007760903142889.

Fricke, David. "Overloaded: The Story of White Light/White Heat." *MOJO*, 2013, https://bit.ly/3iHhiUC.

Heylin, Clinton, editor. "1968." *All Yesterdays' Parties: The Velvet Underground in Print, 1966-1971*, Da Capo Press, Cambridge, MA, 2006, pp. 55–82.

Velvet Underground, *White Light/White Heat.* Verve, 1968.

Wolk, Douglas. "The Velvet Underground: White Light/White Heat." *Pitchfork*, 16 Jan. 2014, pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/18770-the-velvet-underground-white-lightwhite-heat/.