

Someone else, someone good

By Manu Bazzano

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For Colin 'Stoner' Bentley (1949-2014)
Artist, friend, bass-player supreme.

*You made me forget myself.
I thought I was someone else, someone good.
Lou Reed, Perfect Day.*

Forbidding, forbidden

Sitting zazen in the early hours of Monday 28 October 2013 before work, S. comes in to tell me that Lou Reed has died. The news pierces my heart. I continue to sit, so as to feel my heart break in slow motion. A broken heart is an open heart, and the wind still howls. Roaring gusts all night and stormy weather off New York too. *The tornados come, up the coast they run/ hurricanes rip the sky forever* – the song *Cremation*, written for his friend and mentor Doc Pomus. *Though the weathers change, the sea remains the same. The coal black sea waits forever.* They'll play that song at your funeral, an interviewer once said. No, Lou replied, when I'm dead, they'll play *Walk on the Wild Side*, and he was right.

Everything kept changing in the wayward pilgrimage that is my life – friends, lovers, cities, beliefs, passions, the language I spoke, the clothes I wore – except my love for Uncle Lou and his work. Changes in his life weirdly shaped some of my own winding turns on this ailing planet. A love for the forbidden and the forbidding – be it sensual, chemical experimentation, or keen interest in the avant-garde and the fringes in art, music, and writing. Wanting to bridge the torn halves – the remote with the everyday, complexity to simplicity, maximum expression with minimum amount of chords. *You can't beat two guitars, drums, and bass.* The various bands I played in, best of all *Daedalo* with Colin Stoner and Tri Hadi, inspired by Uncle Lou and by the Velvets. We hit it off for a few years, Colin and I, and the starting point was our boundless love for Lou. Colin was the real thing, an exquisite musician who lifted my songs onto another realm. Colin who had his baby daughter asleep in his velvet guitar cases during his early concerts with the *Doctors of Madness*.

The love of drugs and the love of literature. The gender-bending days. The eyeliner and mascara I used to wear and that so annoyed my blokeish pals. Lou's love of trans –the celebration of Holly Woodlawn, Jackie Curtis, and Candy Darling in *Walk on the Wild Side*, a song originally meant for a musical based on the novel by Nelson Algren, Simone de Beauvoir's Chicago lover, of the same name. Uncle Lou's relationship of four years with the transsexual male Rachel in the seventies. *And you, you really are a queen, oh such a queen. You know, I'd give the whole thing up for you.* That woke me up as a young man to a sense of solidarity for an oppressed minority in the light of the rabid transphobia around us and within us – that very same transphobia given space to strut at last year's existential conference in London.

Second year at Uni feeling lonely, I found solace listening to Lou sadly serenading *She's my best friend /she understands me when I'm feeling down*, except that moving to university meant saying goodbye to both hometown & sweetheart. The campus loves were so transient we barely remembered each other's name after hazy squeezes between a philosophy lecture and a smoky barricade. Or that time in Spain, travelling alone after the breakup, humming for days that line from the *Berlin* song, *you're right and I'm wrong, you know I'm gonna miss you now that you've gone one sweet day.* Doesn't every breakup repeat and compounds the first?

Hallucinated mediocrity

For several reasons J. Edgar Hoover, long-dead law-enforcing administrator, founder and director of the FBI for 37 years, exerts a covert yet pervasive influence today. He was the Avatar of Conformity, eliciting that peculiar Ecstasy of Obedience, within his tightly run little regiment of bigots, which is nowadays all the rage, albeit in jeans-and-T-shirt casual attire. He came up with a card-index system tracking every political dissident in the US – pacifists, socialists, union leaders, anarchists, 'deviant' writers and artists – all diligently compiled by organization and location. J. Edgar Hoover adored his mum, was horrible to his dad because he suffered from depression and couldn't stand granddad because he was mentally unwell. He was intolerant of anyone who was imperfect, flawed, human. His innovative indexing system was a smart and feeble attempt to master life's complexities. Assembling and subduing data as he did so well may of course come in handy if one were to, for instance, pursue a doctorate in existential therapy. Shrinking the complexity of existence to a

desiccated collection of data; submitting oneself to the same arbitrary research criteria to which tutors, supervisors, essay-markers and Viva panellists also sheepishly succumb in exchange for a buck; conforming to a cluster of recycled platitudes congested inside an arbitrary existential 'canon' – all of this would be useful indeed. Forget 'existence before essence'. Electing J. Edgar Hoover as your inspiration will help your career, and match to a fault *the data before existence* formula now all the rage.

It may be disturbing, however, to learn that cataloguing, statistics and collection of data are at their origins intertwined with racial classification and eugenics. Nineteenth-century pioneers of statistic and social science Ronald Fisher and Francis Galton were eugenicists and 'racial optimizers'. Besides, what is produced by the statistical, 'objective' rendering of 'types' is a merging of the abstracted average – what Hyto Steyerl strikingly calls *hallucinated mediocrity*. A good term, I believe, for what is being currently casseroled in the lucrative, exploitative trade of many psychotherapy training & research combos.

There is another reason why J. Edgar Hoover is oddly the unsung hero of our violent and tangled times, namely his stance in life, summarized by biographer Curt Gentry in the formula *avoiding the appearance of misconduct is more important than avoiding misconduct*.

Uncle Lou epitomised the opposite stance, one that I've naively fostered (until recently), namely: *cultivating the appearance of misconduct is more important than avoiding misconduct*. To appear as a wild card has its appeal. It's kind of groovy, but you'd be surprised at the amount of bile it will bring upon you if you were to try it on. All sort of nasty nonsense will be hurled at your frail human frame by those who project their longing for freedom and 'wildness'. The constipated beigeness of their existence will have found a hook, a voodoo doll, an effigy to burn. Beware. It will make you sick, literally.

In Uncle Lou's case, 'wildness' took, among other shapes, the Baudelairean, *maudit* glorification of heroin and speed. I was lucky; only had a touch-and-run approach to the stuff, but have known some who died of it and others who got cured but couldn't bear to listen to his songs. Riffing on the brilliant, edgy secretions of Poe, Burroughs, Van Gogh, Sacher-Masoch, Hunter S. Thompson. *I wish that I was born a thousand years ago ... that I'd sail the darkened seas on a great big clipper ship going from this land here to that on a sailor's suit and cap*. Playing with fire. Coming close to the flame, getting smudged, retaining the whiff of hellish sulphur all your life. My modest tap-dance between good & evil, aged 21, playing truant during a *Lam Rim* course at a Tibetan monastery in Tuscany and fleeing to a Lou Reed's

concert in a stadium in Florence, next day hitchhiking to Naples to watch Lou again go through the old tunes next to his soul-searching *Growing up in Public* set, and then inject speed on stage. Gave his partner Betty a black eye and got a black eye in return. Dumped friends at the drop of a hat, interrupted a gig to shout at his manager 'Where is my fucking money?'. In years to come, bad appearance became more and more trendy as well as bankable – pricey torn jeans, hair expensively dishevelled, the cultivated doom of crooner Nick Cave, dispenser of new-agey homilies, court poet to King Charles' Coronation; or the punk haute couture of hyped-up celebrities Vivienne Westwood and Malcolm McLaren.

To find your soul, you've got to lose it first, and slowly walk your way up to a temporary salvation. Then yes, *the road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom*, but take good care, excess could make you stupid and the palace in question may turn out to be a ruin after all. For some this means embracing ancient models and symbols. *A diamond crucifix in his ear is used to ward off the fear that he has left his soul in someone's rented car.*

There is a difference between good and goody-two-shoes. A good person is able to do wrong but chooses to do right instead. Or, having recognized their wrongs, they're then able to rectify them. Not easy. It takes courage to do wrong, and even more courage to recognize it and rectify it. In contrast, a goody-two-shoes doesn't have the courage to do wrong, indulging instead on a 'virtue' whose root is fear, whose identity is victimhood and its payout social respectability.

Mentoring the impossible

Uncle Lou had formidable mentors. Delmore Schwartz, his creative writing teacher at Syracuse University, author of the masterpiece *In Dreams Begin Responsibilities*. Delmore was Leopold Bloom to Lou's Stephen Dedalus, in a playful reenactment of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, themselves reenactment of Odysseus and Telemachus, themselves reenactments of ancient multiple characters back in the mist of time.

The dream of intelligence, wanting to infuse a 3mins pop song with the same brainpower and impact of a Shakespearean play or a Joycean novel.

Another mentor was Andy Warhol, their difficult friendship and appreciation of Warhol's art documented in *Songs for Drella*, a tribute of Reed and John Cale to Warhol, whose nickname

Drella was a compound of Dracula and Cinderella, a description not entirely out of place perhaps with aspects of Reed's personality.

Another mentor was the great songwriter Doc Pomus (*Save the last dance for me*) who died of cancer and to whom the album *Magic and Loss* is partly dedicated. *Radiation kills both good and bad, it cannot differentiate. To heal you they must kill you, the sword of Damocles hangs above your head.*

Mentorship is a funny thing. Reed generously mentored others, including Anthony, now Anhoni (of *Anhoni and the Johnsons*) a *nom de plume* whose Hindi etymology hints at the impossible, the unlikely event. In Anhoni's performances with Lou, the current of deep affection between them moves me deeply: Socratic mentorship of love; cellular transmission of craft, knowledge and crazy wisdom, unthinkable today to contemporary sensibilities oversensitized by the ideological manoeuvrings of a trauma industry which has quickly morphed from valid response to trauma to traumatization of the entire psychic landscape.

Despite his sophism and sophistication, Socrates was ignorant of the transference. He fatally discounted the hate hiding in its folds. He would fare no better today in an atmosphere of persecutory victimhood – seemingly, the only permissible form of agency, in the same way as the only permitted politics are the politics of injury, categorizing individuals and communities solely on their suffering rather than their aspirations and humanity. In the cultural climate we inhabit, what may be transmitted through mentorship, teaching, and therapy are merely a bunch of withered data paired to a handful of platitudes. This is why I found it helpful (even though it's not everyone's cup of tea), to summon at times Uncle Lou's spirit of defiance and artistry. 'Be yourself' is a cliché; practicing it requires courage. It takes courage to make (personal, professional, artistic) choices which are neither popular nor profitable. Uncle Lou did it three times. After the relative success of *Transformer*, he came out with *Berlin*, the chronicle of a couple's descent into addiction and abuse.

That time in Oregon doing a 'past lives' session and in the induced reverie becoming an Eastern European single mother taking her own life and after that experience vowing to never again listen to Uncle Lou's album *Berlin*, a masterpiece of melancholia, despair, and existential angst. Needless to say, I returned time and time again to that magnificent album.

Lou's second bold, deeply unpopular decision was *Metal Machine Music*, a double album of avant-garde noise and guitars feedback. Then his final release, *Lulu*, recorded with the band Metallica, an album even Yours Truly finds hard to listen to, with lyrics based on Frank

Wedekind's late-19th-century play 'Earth Spirit' and its sequel 'Pandora's Box'. A parting shot, a 'rage against the dying of the light' thing which I know will one day find its way to my heart. All three were commercial disasters – now gradually hailed as milestones.

Passing through fire

The arc of Reed's life is that of a man transformed by love. A tender core had always been there of course, concealed behind those rough edges. I've often noticed, in individual and group work with men, the presence of this tender heart under the tough exterior. And by the way, does anyone know of a more affecting song than *Pale Blue Eyes*?

His existential trajectory reached the peak of human and artistic flourishing. He passed through fire, as the last song in *Magic and Loss* says. *Surviving your own war. Passing through fire, through 'I'm better than you all'. Finding that the fire is passion and that there is a light ahead, not a wall.* In her song *Sliver of Ice*, Anthoni describes her last conversation with Reed: 'a carer had placed a shard of ice on his tongue one day and it was such a sweet and unbelievable feeling that it caused him to weep with gratitude'.

In her tribute to her companion of twenty-one years, the artist Laurie Anderson spoke of the wonder and joy of their relationship: singing, fighting, making unlikely friends, loving and protecting each other. She mentioned Lou's illness, which had become terminal, and how he fought to stay alive until the last hour when he suddenly accepted it. She got him out of the hospital and even though he felt very weak, insisted on going out into the morning light. She describes his last moment:

I have never seen an expression as full of wonder as Lou's as he died. His hands were doing the water-flowing 21-form of tai chi. His eyes were wide open. I was holding in my arms the person I loved the most in the world, and talking to him as he died. His heart stopped. He wasn't afraid. I had gotten to walk with him to the end of the world. Life – so beautiful, painful and dazzling – does not get better than that. And death? I believe that the purpose of death is the release of love. At the moment, I have only the greatest happiness and I am so proud of the way he lived and died, of his incredible power and grace.

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For details of Manu's upcoming seminars and events, please visit www.manubazzano.com

