

AVANT-GARDE GRIT: JOHN CALE AND
EXPERIMENTAL TECHNIQUES IN POPULAR MUSIC

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis examines the work of composer and musician John Cale, whose contributions have greatly influenced popular music of the twentieth century primarily through his involvement in rock group the Velvet Underground. This influence is a result of Cale's experimental approach to rock music in which he combined progressive techniques, like drone and noise, with forms and instrumentations more often found in popular music. His background in art music and early performance art processes was the primary motivator in the conception of this new style. Cale's combination of provocative sounds with rock's aggression is especially important to early punk rock and other experimental popular musicians. His unique music, which has never been comprehensively examined, commands another look at the place of the avant-garde musician in the Western music canon.

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Introduction

Avant-garde is a term often applied to artistic movements that push formal and conceptual boundaries while questioning social or political constructs. However, its application is often limited to Modern and Postmodern movements in art and music, including those within popular music. As Jim Samson explains in his article on avant-garde music, Theodore Adorno and Peter Burger have both commented on the art music avant-garde, arguing that early Modernism (Wagner to Schoenberg) and postmodernism were the most clear manifestations of an avant-garde approach. However, both Adorno and Burger agree that the “New Music” of the 1950s and 1960s (Stockhausen, Boulez, etc) used avant-garde techniques like total serialism and aleatoric practices, but lacked the social element more clearly seen in movements like Dadaism.¹ This two-part definition of the avant-garde, which includes formal and social elements, can be easily applied to popular music in much the same way. Certain artists and groups have integrated new techniques, many taken from avant-garde art music composers, while simultaneously commenting on society or music’s place in society.

An artistic approach that seems to accompany the avant-garde, especially in the postmodern era, is collaboration, an association that defies the sense of rugged individualism that often accompanies avant-garde artists. While artists and composers have always shared ideas or concepts, avant-garde collaborative practice first began with the Second Viennese School. The group, which revolved around Arnold Schoenberg, identified themselves as such, sharing ideas and theories beyond the typical cultural artistic exchange. Almost all their works used various forms of serialism, but experimented with the compositional technique in various ways. The

¹ Jim Samson, “Avant garde,” *Oxford Music Online*, Accessed April 2, 2012, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.proxy2.cl.msu.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/01573?q=avant-garde&search=quick&pos=1&_start=1#firsthit.

composers of the Darmstadt School worked similarly, as did many of the conceptual and performance artists of the late 1950s and 1960s. It becomes easier to identify musical and artistic groups or movements, like the Italian Futurists and the members of Fluxus, because their members work collaboratively. This approach is true of popular music in general, as each performing group can be seen as a collection of musicians working collaboratively toward a final musical product. It is also common to see multiple groups working together, like free jazz artists collectives in the 1960s or the no-wave movement in New York City. In the no-wave movement, for example, there were distinct performing groups, but members of those groups were free to perform with other groups as well, sharing their individual approaches.

The life and career of John Cale provides an excellent opportunity to examine these processes. At the time when Cale began his music career in 1963, the shift from institutionalized musical modernism to a more conceptual postmodernism was in full swing. Artists and musicians had begun a reaction against the artistic ideal now associated with modernism, one which emphasized progress within the established boundaries of a given medium. This was a push that, in music, resulted in the advanced serialism of composers like Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen. Instead, many composers shifted their focus to a critique of the concept of music itself and thus either altered the traditional boundaries of the form, as is seen in performance art, or favored concept over progress, as seen in 1960s minimalism. At this pivotal moment in cultural history, Cale joined this radical push even while being instructed in serialism by composers such as Yannis Xenakis. Cale became especially interested in music influenced by conceptual and performance art, specifically that of New York minimalist composer La Monte Young, whose work with drone has established Young as part of the twentieth-century

compositional canon. Cale's interest led to his involvement with the international art group Fluxus, an "intermedia" group that embraced concept over the physical art "object."

Working with Young and the Fluxus group helped establish Cale as an avant-garde artist, dealing in experimental techniques and attempting to break traditional boundaries or express new ideas or concepts. He learned these techniques partially from Young, who aimed to create music in a new conceptual way, while also inheriting ideas from others like Italian Futurist Luigi Russolo, who simply wanted to expand the aural musical vocabulary. Tony Conrad, who performed with Cale in both Young's group and the rock group the Velvet Underground, commented on the type of music they were performing with Young when he said, "...The music had become so advanced that we didn't need composers at all. We were dismantling, destroying the Western tradition of composers by sitting in the middle of the music and just playing it."² Cale, while establishing himself as an avant-garde musician through his work with these various groups, also became attached to the collaborative ideal, one that he would continue to implement for decades.

Cale's most famous collaboration was with the New York rock band The Velvet Underground, a group he co-founded with songwriter Lou Reed in 1965. This venture was Cale's first experience writing and performing in a group whose instrumentation was traditionally associated with popular music. However, Cale's avant-garde sensibilities continued to exert themselves even in this setting, and his musical contributions to the group aided in a dismantling of the traditional boundaries of the rock group, boundaries that were themselves only recently created. According to Cale, the group was "trying to figure out ways to integrate some of La Monte Young's ... concepts into rock 'n roll," a goal he accomplished by implementing

² Roni Sarig, *The Secret History of Rock: The Most Influential Bands You've Never Heard* (New York: Billboard Books, 1998), 17.

improvisation, drone, and noise.³ Beyond the music, Cale's connections with the avant-garde scene in New York City allowed the early form of the Velvet Underground to hold some of its first performances at experimental film showings, playing music quite different from the rock music typical of the mid-1960s. This connection also allowed the band to connect with its first major benefactor and manager, avant-garde Pop artist Andy Warhol. During the band's two-year relationship with Warhol, they performed regularly as a part of his multimedia show, the Exploding Plastic Inevitable, and recorded their first studio album, *The Velvet Underground and Nico*.⁴ After the Velvets severed ties with Warhol, Cale recorded one more album with the group, *White Light/White Heat*, before quitting due to artistic differences with Reed.

In 1968, Cale began a solo career that continues to the present. In the last forty-four years, he released fifteen solo studio albums, a number of live albums and EPs, collaborated with artists like Brian Eno and Terry Riley, produced a number of significant rock albums, and toured extensively. His music has ranged in style from tonal orchestral pieces to typical pop songs and everything in between. Despite the general critical reception of his music, it has never garnered popular success, much like the avant-garde art music he created during the 1960s. Cale retained many of his avant-garde ideals throughout his career, especially his views on collaboration and belief that music should be provocative. These two ideals were present especially in the production and live performance aspects of his career. Cale produced albums for former Velvet Underground member Nico and singer/poet Patti Smith, among others. The albums he helped craft for Nico are now seen as early standards of gothic rock while *Horses*, his production for the Smith, is a critically acclaimed and integral part of the early punk rock canon.

³ Legs McNeil and Gillian McCain, *Please Kill Me: The Uncensored Oral History of Punk* (New York: Grove Press, 1996), 24.

⁴ A complete discography can be found at the end of this document.

Cale's work is present and influential during the early formation of punk rock. Most popular music historians point to artists like the Velvet Underground and Patti Smith as seminal "proto-punk" groups, experimenting with the rebellious attitude that the same historians see most clearly in fully fledged punk groups like the Ramones. The era from 1973, when the Ramones first performed in New York City, to the late 1970s is often acknowledged as the height of the original punk rock movement. After about 1980, two distinct trends emerged from the punk scene: New Wave, a genre whose artists often made it onto Top 40 charts, and No Wave, an underground experimental scene that clung more closely to punk rock's original attitude of negation. Cale was directly involved with both the "proto-punk" groups and New York's later punk rock scene that revolved around the venue CGBG, thus remaining a constant presence through the evolution of the genre.

Unfortunately, there is very little written on John Cale specifically, besides his autobiography co-written with Victor Bockris, *What's Welsh for Zen*, and Tim Mitchell's biography, *Sedition and Alchemy*.⁵ Neither of these works, however, are academic in nature, instead focusing on a narrative re-telling of Cale's life in the style most typical of biographies intended for mass distribution. Because of this, *Zen* in particular contains probable embellishments of Cale's life, especially regarding his level of involvement with composer John Cage.⁶ However, the book is excellent in revealing Cale's personal thoughts and motivations regarding his music. It also reveals, in its content, which events Cale felt were most important in his life. *Sedition*, on the other hand, is far more balanced in content, including events and works,

⁵ Victor Bockris and John Cale, *What's Welsh for Zen: The Autobiography of John Cale*, (New York and London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1999); Tim Mitchell, *Sedition and Alchemy: A Biography of John Cale*, (London: Peter Owen Publishers, 2003).

⁶ Richard Witts, *The Velvet Underground*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006), 28.

especially those he created for Fluxus, that Cale did not mention in *Zen*. Generally, Mitchell wrote a detailed chronology of Cale's career, excluding most of the personal elements present in *Zen*.

Beyond these two major works are numerous interviews and album and concert reviews published in popular music periodicals like *Rolling Stone* and *Creem*, as well as the occasional mention of Cale in books about Fluxus or LaMonte Young. While informative, these periodical articles do little to contextualize Cale's work within the broader musical narrative of the twentieth century, instead focusing on the currency of his work. In the case of the latter, specific mentions to Cale are few and far between, though Brandon W. Joseph's book, *Beyond the Dream Syndicate*, does a fair job of portraying Cale as a connecting figure between the art music avant-garde of the Dream Syndicate and the popular music avant-garde of the Velvet Underground. However, he dedicates very few pages to this as the work is primarily about concept artist Tony Conrad.⁷ Another important reference to Cale is in Roni Sarig's *The Secret History of Rock*, a book that claims to expound on "the most influential bands you've never heard."⁸ Interestingly, Sarig writes about Cale primarily in the context of the Dream Syndicate, couching his descriptions of Cale's later work and other artists inspired by Young or Cale in that art music context.

Overall, the vast majority of writing on Cale is the context of his work with the Velvet Underground, a popular topic that has inspired many books and articles. The angle of these writings vary from edited collections of articles (Clinton Heylin's *All Yesterday's Parties* and Albin Zak's *The Velvet Underground Companion*) to retrospectives featuring numerous

⁷ Brandon W. Joseph, *Beyond the Dream Syndicate: Tony Conrad and the Arts after Cage*, (New York: Zone Books, 2008).

⁸ Sarig, *Secret History of Rock*, iii.

interviews (Victor Bockris's *Up-Tight: The Velvet Underground Story*) to Richard Witts's notable academic dissection of the band's members and music (*The Velvet Underground*).⁹ Witts is by far the most musicologically thorough of these sources, as the author carefully conceptualizes and analyzes Cale's music, placing it in both a personal and historical context. Albin Zak is the only other musicologist who has written on the Velvets, though his book is simply an edited collection of articles. The other writers come from various professional backgrounds. For example, Heylin was educated as an historian, though the majority of his published works are on rock music, Bockris is a biographer who was associated with Warhol during the 1960s, and Richie Unterberger, who published a quasi-encyclopedia of the Velvets' history, is a music writer.¹⁰

Music textbooks on rock or popular music history also mention the Velvet Underground. Reebee Garofalo, in *Rockin' Out: Popular Music in the USA*, dedicates about three paragraphs to the Velvets, primarily citing their "inspiration to a generation of punks," but also mentioning their involvement with Andy Warhol and the Exploding Plastic Inevitable.¹¹ Larry Starr also writes about the Velvets in the context of punk rock in his textbook *American Popular Music: From Minstrelsy to Mp3*. However, he dedicates less than a paragraph to the group and claims

⁹ *All Yesterday's Parties*, ed. Clinton Heylin, (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2005); *The Velvet Underground Companion*, ed. Albin Zak III, (New York: Schirmer Books, 1997); Victor Bockris and Gerard Malanga, *Up-tight: The Velvet Underground Story*, (New York: Omnibus Press, 1983); Witts, *The Velvet Underground*.

¹⁰ Richard Middleton, in the introduction to his book *Reading Pop*, comments on the seeming discrepancies in popular music scholarship, namely who is writing on the topic. As evidenced by the array of authors who have written on the Velvet Underground, the majority of these authors are not musicologists. This fact is also illustrated by the conspicuously named *The Popular Music Studies Reader*, edited by Andy Bennett, Barry Shank, and Jason Toynbee, a professor of communications, popular culture and film; professor of comparative studies; and lecturer in media studies, respectively.

¹¹ Reebee Garofalo, *Rockin' Out: Popular Music in the USA* (Upper Saddle River: Pearson Education, Inc, 2011), 257.

they have a yet closer connection to punk rock's "more commercial cousin, new wave."¹² He then quickly moves on past the Stooges and New York Dolls to the Ramones, the "first bonafide punk rock band," an assertion for which he provides no evidence.¹³ However, his assertion seems to reflect canon, as most popular music historians place the beginning of punk rock with the appearance of the Ramones in 1973.

The amount of writing on John Cale within the context of popular music scholarship is comparable to the amount of writing on the postmodern musical avant-garde within the context of art music scholarship. This is likely due to the difficulty inherent in contextualizing the work of both Cale and composers like Phillip Glass or LaMonte Young. Because they all seemed to work in multiple circles, it is perhaps facetious to claim any kind of genre distinctions for their music. For example, Young is often lauded as one of the founders of musical minimalism, yet he came to the idea through concept art, a separate movement often associated more with art than music.¹⁴ There are similar problems involved with writing on Cale; he began as an art music composer, combined art music and popular music in the Velvet Underground, and later went on to release many strictly "pop" albums. He, as an artist, cannot be put into any one category because of the sheer diversity of his musical accomplishments.

In this thesis, I will both contextualize Cale's work and argue for its significance in twentieth-century music, specifically within the context of the avant-garde and punk rock. The first chapter will present information on Cale's early life and the beginnings of his musical career from childhood to 1965, explaining his initial motivations to pursue music and the way in which he initially implemented these motivations. The second chapter will focus almost entirely on

¹² Larry Starr, *American Popular Music: From Minstrelsy to Mp3* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 363.

¹³ Ibid, 364.

¹⁴ Joseph, *Beyond the Dream Syndicate*, 85.

Cale's work with the Velvet Underground. It will contain a brief overview of their history, but will focus primarily on Cale's musical and artistic contributions to the group. The third and final chapter will explore Cale's work after the Velvets, including solo and collaborative albums as well as his production work. A brief conclusion will explain Cale's significance to twentieth-century popular music as evidenced by his long and prolific career.

Chapter 1

To understand John Cale's music, we must first understand the man, beginning with his childhood in Wales. He was born in 1942 in Garnant, South Wales, to parents better educated than most. His father was a miner and his mother a former schoolteacher determined to make sure her only child had the best education possible. One unfortunate repercussion of her educational enthusiasm was that it drove a wedge between Cale and his father. His father was not as well-educated as his mother and spoke only English as he was from an English-speaking area of Wales. Cale, as a result of his mother's tutelage, grew up learning only Welsh and was unable to even communicate with his father until he was seven years old and began learning English in school. This estrangement from his father continued throughout his childhood and adolescence and, coupled with other negative relationships with male authority figures, had a negative lasting effect on his psyche.

Cale's first official forays into music began when he was seven and began taking piano lessons from his mother. According to Cale, she played piano "for pure enjoyment," and thus imbued him with an appreciation for music that encompassed both purpose and pleasure.¹⁵ It was during these early years that he formed musical associations and traits that would continue on for the rest of his life, including an early association between music, sex, and drugs, most notably narcotics; a strong drive to learn more about music, especially American avant-garde and popular music; and a desire to create music of his own.¹⁶

The first of these associations formed when the young Cale was prescribed opium-laced medicine to treat a psychologically induced respiratory ailment at about the same time he began taking piano lessons. Cale distinctly remembers lying on his bed and hallucinating as an effect of

¹⁵ Bockris, *What's Welsh for Zen*, 12.

¹⁶ Ibid, 16.

the treatment.¹⁷ The age of seven is an incredibly formative time in a child's life, and to have these two new and intense experiences, music and drugs, coincide would have solidified their mutual association in his mind. Later, music became the center around which his life revolved, and it is perhaps easier to explain, in the context of his early experiences, how drugs remained such a large part of his life for decades after. Another volatile musical association was created in Cale's mind a few years later, when Cale was twelve. At that time, he took organ lessons with the organist of a local church who turned out to be a child molester. Cale's weekly lessons haunted him for years, turning him away from religion and igniting an unpredictable, violent side of his personality, one that would also have been associated with music.¹⁸

These experiences did not lessen his musical drive, however, and Cale identifies the turning point in his desire to learn more about music as the year he turned eleven. The year any British student turned eleven was a momentous time in their academic career as it was during that year all students took an exam that would place them either in trade school or grammar school depending on how well they scored. His mother, acting upon her academic instincts, discouraged Cale's piano practice in favor of his studies. Cale, reacting like many young adolescents who look with doubtful disbelief on their parents' advice, was only inspired to practice more. His growing interest in music was fed by radio programs, especially the BBC program *New Music*, which featured works by composers like Schoenberg and Stockhausen. He was fascinated by these avant-garde and experimental new works, which led him to create music in this vein later, at university. The young Cale was also entranced by *Rite of Spring*, a work he considered "the original piece of rock and roll."¹⁹ Later in his teens, music programs featuring

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid, 20.

¹⁹ Ibid, 22.

not only avant-garde music, but also American rock and roll were something of a solace to Cale. It was during those years, while listening to *Voice of America*, that he first heard Alan Freed, Elvis Presley, and Bill Haley. He lay in his room and imagined these artists and composers performing their works at that very moment, half way across the globe, alive and very real, aching to join them.²⁰

It was through listening to rock and roll on the radio, a topic that will be discussed in more depth in the next chapter, that Cale became aware of the music's underlying rebellious nature, one he adopted wholeheartedly. The teenage Cale dressed and acted the "teddy boy," a stylish subculture that began associating itself with rock and roll music in 1955. He slicked his hair and altered his clothes, presenting a façade of the foppish fool. These rebellious attitudes, ingrained in his outward persona, were certainly stoked by his disintegrating family life. His relationship with his father remained rocky and an aunt and uncle, who lost their jobs with the BBC, came to live with the Cale family, spending most of their time drinking. Cale's mother, who had always been a strong presence in his development, was diagnosed with breast cancer when he was thirteen. Soon after her return from the hospital, his maternal grandmother died, igniting in Cale an insecurity founded in fear. He had a nervous breakdown at sixteen and fantasized about running away or committing suicide.²¹ Music served as both a fuel and respite for his rampant adolescent emotions.

Finally, Cale's compositional endeavors, which would define his career, began about the same time as his musical education. His teachers, while confused by Cale's seeming inability to fit in with his peers, did acknowledge his musical talent. Evidence of this lies in the fact that only three people were allowed to play his grammar school's "much-prized" grand piano: the

²⁰ Ibid, 37.

²¹ Ibid, 30.

headmaster, the music teacher, and Cale.²² He composed his first piece, “Tocatta in the style of Khatchaturian,” while in grammar school. His music teacher, one Mrs. Roberts, heard the piece and was impressed enough to alert BBC Wales about her newest prodigy. The station sent out two reporters to do a recording of Cale playing his composition, an event which sparked his creative spirit. It wasn’t so much the recording process itself that inspired him, but the fact that he was forced to improvise almost the entire piece, as the two journalists had borrowed and then left behind his one copy of the sheet music. He recognized the ease with which he was able to improvise and knew, from that point on, that his career lay in music.²³ These endeavors coincided with his involvement in the Welsh Youth Orchestra, which he joined at thirteen, playing the viola.²⁴ He enjoyed this group, as they would often tour to other countries in Europe, and continued his involvement even after moving to London for university.

Cale began attending Goldsmiths Teacher’s College in London to study music, supposedly with the goal of becoming a teacher, though his mother, who always encouraged his academic endeavors, wanted him to become a lawyer or a doctor. He disappointed her somewhat, as his academic performance at the school was haphazard at best and he had no interest in teaching. He also had little interest in studying the history of music and, as a result, abandoned his assignments to write histories of the polyphonic mass and Webern’s music, to the dismay of his professors. Instead, he was more interested in using established modernist music, especially the avant-garde modernists like John Cage and Pierre Boulez, to inform his compositional endeavors. He saw himself as “a living composer rather than ... a cataloguer of

²² Mitchell, *Sedition and Alchemy*, 22.

²³ Bockris, *What’s Welsh for Zen*, 23.

²⁴ The viola was not his first choice; he ended up with the instrument as it was the only one left.

the dead.”²⁵ The head of the school’s music department, Leslie Orrey, sympathized with Cale to some extent, allowing him to create his own course of study to support this goal. Not all of his superiors were as supportive, though, and the department heads voted him the “most hateful student” of his graduating class.²⁶

Despite these negative experiences, Cale was a hard worker, spending hours practicing viola in preparation for his final exams, for which he chose to play Hindemith’s Viola Sonata.²⁷ He also practiced composition in more conventional forms, like simply orchestrated chamber pieces, despite his interest in less-conventional concepts. In December of 1961, Cale participated in the college’s musical showcase, playing viola and having one of his compositions, a setting for countertenor of two poems by Laurie Lee, premiered as the penultimate piece in the showcase. According to Cale’s biographer Tim Mitchell, the composer’s choice to use countertenor lent the works an “otherworldly quality,” one which was appreciated by several members of the audience.²⁸ He also performed as the featured soloist in a concert the following December, playing Herbert Howells’ *Elegy for Solo Viola*, *String Quartet* and *String Orchestra* and Holst’s *Terzet*.

The personal and professional connections Cale formed during his university years ended up being far more influential on his future than any academic study, especially his involvement with the avant-garde art movement Fluxus. The man responsible for introducing Cale to Fluxus was Cornelius Cardew, a fellow avant-garde composer and co-founder of the Scratch Orchestra, an experimental ensemble that used graphic scores and extensive improvisation. Cardew was

²⁵ Bockris, *What’s Welsh for Zen*, 45.

²⁶ Hans Werksman. “Timeline: 1963.” *Fear Is a Man’s Best Friend*. Last modified 2012. <http://werksman.home.xs4all.nl/cale/bio/1963.html>.

²⁷ Mitchell, *Sedition and Alchemy*, 28.

²⁸ Ibid.

already a well-traveled figure in the European avant-garde art music scene, having been involved with the Darmstadt summer program as well as some of the earliest European Fluxus performances in London. Fluxus, formed by American artist George Maciunas, did not require membership or hold to a strict set of aesthetic rules, but instead advocated an attitude “that brought into question the notion of high art.”²⁹ They perpetuated this attitude through advocating performance or concept art,³⁰ holding performances in unexpected locations. The very nature of this undefined, flexible agenda served to bring together visual and theater artists as well as composers. John Cage and La Monte Young were both important figures in early Fluxus performances, as were artists like Nam June Paik and George Brecht. The group even pulled in some popular artists, as it was at a London exhibition in 1966 that Fluxus artist Yoko Ono met her future husband John Lennon.

As mentioned above, the primary art form practiced by this group was performance art, a form that shifted the emphasis of the art from product to process. Artists also thought the human body was an important part of the art making process, even including the body as part of the artwork. In effect, the trend brought art out of its traditional location of the gallery or the university and brought it to the streets, basements, and lofts of the artists and their friends. Performance art, generally speaking, is a form that questions form itself. In the words of Allan Kaprow, one of the first performance artists and instigator of New York’s *18 Happenings*, “The line between art and life should be kept as fluid, and perhaps indistinct, as possible.”³¹ Art in this genre could include theatrical, musical, and visual elements. There was also an emphasis on

²⁹ Owen F. Smith, *Fluxus: The History of an Attitude* (San Diego: San Diego State University Press, 1998), 3.

³⁰ The term “concept art” was originally introduced by composer/artist Henry Flynt.

³¹ Allan Kaprow, “Untitled Guidelines for Happenings,” In *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists’ Writings*, edited by Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz, 709-714 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 709.

audience participation or involvement. This emphasis is most obvious in events like Kaprow's Happenings or in works like Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece*, in which audience members were invited onstage to take turns cutting pieces from Ono's dress. This attempt to erase boundaries evoked strong responses from both the general public and the art world. These were the kinds of strong responses that would have appealed to Cale. He was no stranger to rebellion or shock value, having experienced quite a bit of both himself. Fluxus might then have appealed to him as the rock and roll of art, pushing both boundaries and buttons.

It was through this group and Cardew that Cale first heard the work of LaMonte Young, one of the composers who would bridge the gap between musical modernism and minimalism through the kind of conceptual composition typical of Fluxus artists. Cardew met Young at the Darmstadt Summer School just as the latter was beginning his compositional transition from serialism and traditional notation to performance art pieces that would become essential to Fluxus' early repertoire. These later works, which consisted of written instructions intended to convey specific concepts rather than musical notation, impacted Cardew heavily. He then transferred his interest in the art form to Cale, who was quite taken with the idea and wrote both theatrical and musical works. One example of the former was a piece that concluded with a helicopter pulling the roof off a building and pushing all the walls outward, a piece Cale said embodied his "physical, destructive" nature.³² Another musical piece he titled in Welsh, "Yn y dechreu oedd y tail..." ("In the beginning there wast shit..."). One of his performance art compositions was published in the *Fluxus Review* in 1963. The work was an excerpt from his *Outdoor Pieces for Robin Page Summer 62*:

2. Make love to a piano without arms...

³² Bockris, *What's Welsh for Zen*, 40.

8. Follow the wind and listen to it.³³

He also dabbled in visual arts, creating a piece titled *Police Car*, an experiment with film, which was later included in a Fluxus anthology. The piece was a series of sequential, underexposed photographs of the flashing lights of a police car.

However, Cale found he preferred to write music or musically-inspired works, especially those with written instructions rather than notes, and he and Cardew collaborated on many works in this vein. Cale's interest in the creation and nature of sound was also revived at this time. He was able to experiment technologically with this idea through his friendship with Tristram Cary, a former employee of the BBC's Radiophonic Workshop. Through this friendship, Cale investigated his interest in *musique concrete* by creating or deconstructing various sound effects. These experiments relate to a realization he made as a teenager when the philosophy of John Cage's *4'33"* helped him discover that he had "never heard music as it was written on the page: it was always in surrounding circumstances."³⁴ According to Robert Witts, Cale took six distinct artistic theories from his involvement with Fluxus, including the action of music, noise and variations in noise, extended repetition, and the power of simplicity.³⁵

His avant-garde work in London culminated in a "Little Festival of New Music" he put on at Goldsmiths College on July 6, 1963. This was an official Fluxus event authorized by Maciunas despite Cale being unable to raise funding to compensate any of the artists.³⁶ The program included pieces by Cage, Brecht, and Paik, as well as Cale himself. Cale premiered two pieces, titled *Piano Piece (unsequel music 212b)* and *Plant Piece*, the latter instructing the performer to place a potted plant onstage and scream at it until it died. The concept is deceptively

³³ Mitchell, *Sedition and Alchemy*, 38.

³⁴ Bockris, *What's Welsh for Zen*, 30.

³⁵ Witts, *The Velvet Underground*, 68.

³⁶ Smith, *Fluxus*, 100.

simple, but is an obvious example of Cale's belief in the power of simplicity. The high point of the concert, though, was the British premier of Young's *X for Henry Flynt*, a piece composed in 1961.³⁷ The written instructions call for the performer, in this instance Cale, to "repeat a loud, heavy sound every one or two seconds as uniformly and as regularly as possible for a long period of time" on a piano. Cale chose to execute these sounds with his elbows. The concept, again, is deceptively simple, but difficult to maintain. The audience, which included his parents and many faculty members, came with some idea of what to expect, but were overall unimpressed. In fact, a small group of students arrived with dustbin lids and banged them heartily during the performance, trying to disturb Cale's concentration and prompting Cardew to join Cale onstage and help preserve the piece's rhythm. Witts postulates that these hecklers "probably thought they were marking the death of music that Cale had brought on by playing *Flynt*."³⁸

Despite these important European connections, Cale was still drawn to the United States, specifically New York City, which he saw as the locus for the avant-garde.³⁹ He developed a correspondence with Aaron Copland and applied for post-graduate study at a variety of schools, including Yale, Moscow University, and the Berkshire Music Center in Tanglewood, Massachusetts. Copland appeared to be impressed with Cale's knowledge of American music and musicians, and met with him in London to discuss the young composer's application to Tanglewood. At that meeting, Cale realized that the American art music scene was more divided than he realized, as Copland made it clear that "John [Cage] lives on one side of the Hudson and [Copland] lives on the other."⁴⁰ Despite the occasional awkwardness of this meeting, due

³⁷ Witts, *The Velvet Underground*, 66.

³⁸ Ibid, 67.

³⁹ This was probably due to his experience with Fluxus, as the group primarily operated in New York City.

⁴⁰ Bockris, *What's Welsh for Zen*, 44.

primarily to Cale's reaction to what he saw as possible romantic overtures on Copland's part, Cale ended up winning the Leonard Bernstein scholarship to study composition at the Tanglewood summer program, and traveled to the United States in the summer of 1963, not intending to return to Europe.⁴¹

The Tanglewood program was, at this point, already well-established and respected in the American music world, and Cale's involvement dropped him almost directly into that musical mainstream, though he definitely did not conform to it. His graduation from the program placed him in the ranks of other Tanglewood composition alumni like Luciano Berio, Leonard Bernstein, and William Bolcom. Yannis Xenakis, a prominent Greek composer who taught primarily modernist serialism, was Cale's tutor during his months in Massachusetts and because of this, influenced Cale most of all the composers and performers at the program. The composer's serialist style was heavily mathematical and laden with theories of statistical probability. Cale took less from Xenakis's compositional theories than from his "ferocious" style of piano composition, which was reminiscent of Stockhausen.⁴² The concepts of performance art, especially violent actions or sounds, remained central to Cale's interests. Because of the violence of his compositions, the administrators did not allowed to perform most of them. However, he was allowed to perform his final piece, one which exhibited both performance art concepts and the spirit of his tutor's piano composition, at the end of the program. The piece involved a stretch of "working away" at the inside of a piano, then suddenly turning around a whacking a table with an axe.⁴³ The work shocked the audience just as Cale intended. He got "all the reactions" as some audience members ran out of the room and others, like Sergey Koussevitzky's widow,

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid, 52.

⁴³ Ibid, 53.

broke out in tears.⁴⁴ This performance earned him a job with American Music Publishing, an offer which not only gave him an excuse to stay in America, but brought him to New York City.

The city, during the 1960s especially, was a “ground zero” for the musical avant-garde. Cale discovered this during his first short trip to the city when he and Xenakis attended a concert at Lincoln Center featuring a premiere of one of the tutor’s piano pieces as well as some works by Cage and another composer of indeterminate music, Morton Feldman. The city was a hotbed for radicalism in general and 1963, the year of Martin Luther King’s “I have a dream” speech, the assassination of John F. Kennedy, and Cale’s move, was a time of turmoil. This radicalism was both political, especially in response to the United States’s military efforts in South Vietnam, and artistic. The city was home to artists like Jackson Pollock and Andy Warhol and soon-to-be infamous neighborhoods like Greenwich Village, the location for many of the avant-garde art world’s multi-media “Happenings.” The jazz avant-garde also had a large presence in the city through the work of artists like Charles Mingus and Ornette Coleman, the latter a major influence on Lou Reed, Cale’s future collaborator. It was the East Village, though, the neighborhood next to Greenwich and the area where Cale first lived, which drew all those “who wished to reclaim radicalism.”⁴⁵ The area was notoriously cheap and dangerous; most of the lofts, including the one Cale first rented, were unheated. He spent most of his first few weeks in the city sniffing ether with his roommate, avant-garde musician Terry Jennings, or barely making ends meet working as a clerk at a bookshop. In the end, though, these “lonely days” were good for the former Welshman, and he admits he did some growing up.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Witts, *The Velvet Underground*, 4.

⁴⁶ Bockris, *What’s Welsh for Zen*, 56.

Cale's debut, of sorts, in the American avant-garde music scene was his participation in the premiere performance of Erik Satie's *Vexations*. The piece, written in 1893, was a very short piece of music that Satie specified was to be repeated 840 times. Satie wrote the work as a piece of *Musique d'Ameublement*, or furniture music, and therefore not meant to be actively listened to, but simply acknowledged as an aural background. These aspects of repetition and a questioning of music's place in its surroundings would have appealed to Cale's conceptual aesthetic and it is likely he did not hesitate to join in the production. The piece itself was not published in Satie's lifetime, but only in 1949, in John Cage's *Contrepoints No. 6*. Cage also organized the premier performance, which required a relay team of pianists, one of whom would be playing the music and another counting the repetitions. The concert lasted eighteen hours and forty minutes, and Cage enticed audience members by offering to refund their five-dollar entrance fee in five cent increments for every twenty minutes they stayed. Those who remained to the bitter end, and there was one man who did, would receive a twenty-cent bonus. That one man and Cale then appeared on the television game show *I've Got a Secret* to represent the event. This performance was only the beginning of Cale's avant-garde endeavors in New York.

According to Cale, "everybody on [the] downtown Lower East Side scene was connected through their work and their lovers."⁴⁷ The figures most central to this scene were artists like La Monte Young and Andy Warhol, and it was Cale's relationship with the former that would solidify his place in the group. Soon after his arrival in the city, Cale made a "pilgrimage" to Young's loft on the Lower East Side.⁴⁸ Billy Name, a photographer associated with Warhol's Factory, offers a description of Young and his community that seems to validate Cale's use of this word.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 57.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 58.

...La Monte, being a Mormon, had that real patriarchal quality about him. ... Everybody else was there playing with him, but he was the hierarchal chief. He frequently had a mustache and/or a beard. He would braid his hair, wear robes. His place looked like a hashish den or Turkish coffee shop. Everything was on the floor, it was very comfortable, there wasn't a chair in that place at all. And always sex and great dope and great music. I think he got his money from selling drugs. I don't know if he started getting grants yet.⁴⁹

Cale verified this theory of Young's income as the former supplemented his slight income by delivering drugs for Young. They used a musically inspired code to facilitate the system's secrecy; opium was "oboe," a movement was a pound, and two bars meant two ounces. At one point, both Young and Cale were busted by the police and spent a night in jail. However, drugs remained a central part of the group's artistic and social lives. Cale admits that, if it wasn't for marijuana and all the friendly "giggling," he would not have been accepted as quickly; no one could understand his Welsh accent.⁵⁰

The musical practices of Young's entourage were just as adventurous as their illicit ones. Though Young originally composed primarily serialist works, he was by this point firmly ensconced in his theories of conceptual minimalism, which began with his *Compositions 1960* series. The seventh and most famous of these compositions consisted of a B and F# accompanied by the instruction, "to be held for a long time." This piece was the beginning of Young's experiments with drone, the compositional technique that has come to define his musical contribution to the Western art music canon. After 1962, he began to compose almost completely within this aesthetic, writing pieces that would specify certain pitches to be played continuously and be differentiated only by the pitches themselves and the suggested improvisatory methods

⁴⁹ Ibid, 59.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 60.

included. These experiments led Young to form his drone ensemble, the Theatre of Eternal Music, which functioned as a sounding board for new compositions and an in-house group for any performances of Young's music.

The Theatre originated as an eight member group, including Young, his wife Marian Zazeela, Tony Conrad, and Angus MacLise.⁵¹ It was first organized to perform Young's *The Four Dreams of China*, in which each member was assigned a different note to sustain. The membership of the group was constantly shifting, though, as different pieces called for different instrumentations. Cale met Young soon after the latter formed the Theatre of Eternal Music and was almost immediately invited to join the group, performing on *The First Twelve Sunday Morning Blues*, among other pieces. However, Young's position as the dominant, patriarchal figure in the group began to grate on Cale's nerves, and he began considering forming his own ensemble. This culminated in the Dream Syndicate, a group formed by Cale and Conrad in 1964 and limited to four members: the two founders, Young, and Zazeela. This group focused more on experimentation with drone and equal collaboration and less on Young's compositions, though interviews with Young would imply that the composer has more to do with the group's material than Cale and Conrad would acknowledge.⁵² Overall, it seems that the group's basic material was provided by Young, but each member was more free to improvise and create their own individual voice within the group than they would have been in the Theatre.

Cale's shift from performance art to drone seems a drastic one and, aurally, it is. However, conceptually the two genres share a great deal. First, drone can be seen as a form of performance art. Though it is easy to identify drone as an aural element, and therefore possibly musical, it also has a physical effect on the listener, therefore incorporating multiple layers of

⁵¹ Both Conrad and MacLise would eventually join the Velvet Underground.

⁵² Witts, *The Velvet Underground*, 72.

performer-audience interaction. Also, the instructions accompanying many of Young's drone pieces, his *Composition 1960 #7*, for instance, have simplistic instructions that can be interpreted in many different ways. Second, both drone and performance art can be seen as forms of cultural rebellion. Performance art rebels through its artistic anarchy, its refusal to align itself with any one "form" or aesthetic approach. Drone, according to Ilene Strelitz, rebels through its repetition. She relates the musical concept of repetition to larger structures of silence, chance, and simultaneity, the first two of which were popularized through John Cage's works and the last through events like Kaprow's Happenings. All four of these concepts are a reaction against conventional Western art in that they negate the use of story by violating a sense of the passage of time.⁵³ It is difficult to ignore any art built around any of these concepts in that they are unpredictable.⁵⁴ It is this aspect that would have drawn Cale, as he attempted to integrate it into his own works. While Cale's choice to smash an ax through a table was not left to chance, for the audience it might as well have been.

The music they performed was originally inspired when Conrad bought a clip-on electronic pick-up and attached it first to his guitar, then his violin. Cale bought another for his viola, and altered the instrument by filing off the bridge and using metal guitar strings, thus being able to bow all the strings evenly and simultaneously. The sound the instrument produced after amplification was reminiscent of a jet engine.⁵⁵ The final instrumentation of the group was Young and Zazeela's amplified voices, Cale's amplified viola, and Conrad's amplified violin.

⁵³ Irene Strelitz, "'Repetition' as Cultural Rebellion: 'Boredom,' the Avant-Garde, and Rock and Roll," *One Two Three Four*, no. 4 (1987): 45.

⁵⁴ Silence and repetition are unpredictable in the sense that they are not part of the traditional Western music system and leave room for sounds outside the written notes.

⁵⁵ Bockris, *What's Welsh for Zen*, 60.

They originally experimented with Young performing on a saxophone, but found they wished to avoid the well-tempered qualities of the instrument, striving instead for “pure” intervals.

Cale continued composing his own art music even after parting company with Young later in the 1960s. In 2001, tapes of Cale’s compositions recorded during the mid-1960s were rediscovered and released as the anthology *New York in the 1960s: Sun Blindness Music*. The compilation album consists of three tracks: the first and third for heavily distorted electric organ and the second for solo electric guitar. All three showcase the minimalist ideas Cale inherited from Young. The first and title track, recorded in October 1967 is a forty-two minute epic recorded with a Vox organ and consisting of a single chord held, with subtle changes of timbre or sonority, for the entirety of the track. Because of the nature of the instrument, these sustained tones lend themselves easily to the development of microtones. While difficult to discern these sounds in non-drone music, the unchanging nature of the basic chord highlights the changeability of these sounds created by the harmonic series. The third track, “The Second Fortress,” is a compilation of various collected electronic sounds, but each is looped and layered through tape recorders in order to increase the level of distortion.

It is the second track, though, “Summer Heat,” that foreshadows Cale’s later work, as discussed in the next chapter, most distinctly. The piece is for solo acoustic guitar, again heavily distorted, and consists of a single chord played over and over in a repeated rhythmic pattern for eleven minutes. As a result of this repetition, subtle changes in the levels of noise and the different harmonics created through variations in strumming and distortion become the most interesting aspects of the piece. Taken together, these three tracks are a clear expression of Cale’s avant-garde aesthetic during the mid 1960s. He took the concept of drone and experimented with different applications through variations in rhythm, sonority, timbre, and

instrumentation. Elements of these experiments continued to appear in his future work, specifically his collaborations with the Velvet Underground.

Chapter 2

It was during his time with the Velvet Underground that Cale integrated his experimental aesthetic with rock and roll. His experience with the group allowed him to hone this new approach especially through his collaboration with Lou Reed, who co-founded the group with Cale, and Andy Warhol, who managed the group for several years. These three men all approached their art or music through a combination of popular and experimental techniques, creating avant-garde works that would remain influential for decades. Cale was thus involved in the same type of collaborative atmosphere that he experienced with Young, and was able to determine his own distinct aesthetic approach both in conjunction with and relation to the ideals of Reed and Warhol. However, this situation did not last as Cale's collaborative mindset eventually clashed with Reed's focus on the latter's own personal style.

As previously discussed, Cale first experienced rock and roll and its accompanying culture as a teenager, primarily through listening to Radio Luxembourg and the Voice of America. This early interest was not just in the music, but also in the surrounding culture and fashion. The arrival of rock and roll was related to the idea of the "teenager" as being a viable segment of society. According to historian Christine Stephens, this was closely tied to ideas of fashion and "leisure clothing," which appeared in the United States in the 1930s and in Wales in the 1950s. Rock and roll, then, was not just about the music, but also about fashion, an idea Cale bought into, dressing as a "teddy boy," one whose clothing reflected a very particular style.⁵⁶

His overall experience was therefore different from that of many American teenagers. As rock and roll was at the time an obviously American music, he came to the genre as somewhat of an outsider, one who was probably unfamiliar with many of the social tensions and mores

⁵⁶ Christine Stephens, "Wales in the 1950s and 1960s," *Learning Space*, Accessed April 2, 2012, <http://openlearn.open.ac.uk/mod/oucontent/view.php?id=397309§ion=3.14.1>.

associated with the new genre. In the United States, rock and roll was well known as a white appropriation of the primarily black rhythm and blues genre. Elvis Presley's hips were also making their debut performance on televisions across the country, shocking more traditional older generations. The stations Cale listened to simply played the music and refrained from social commentary. The Welsh in general, at least those in Cale's sphere, accepted rock and roll simply as a new kind of music, mostly unaware of these stigmas the music carried in the United States. When the Welsh theaters showed movies like *Rock Around the Clock*, kids in the audience would jump onto the stage and dance with the music. Though this musical phenomenon was occurring in the United States as well, Welsh adults thought the spectacle was "hilarious" rather than offensive or threatening. Cale mentions that even the manager of the theater could often be seen dancing on stage with his young audience.⁵⁷

At this point in his young life, though he appreciated and enjoyed rock and roll, Cale did not yet consider it as important as art music or a viable format for a musical career. His heroes then were John Cage or jazz musicians like John Coltrane, not Buddy Holly or Chuck Berry.⁵⁸ This fact becomes more evident in his discussion of life at university in London in that he never mentions rock and roll or popular music despite the massive popularity of rock and roll in Britain during the early 1960s. In beginning university, it seems as if he abandoned popular music in order to focus on "serious" art music and creating a niche for himself in that world.

This mindset didn't change until 1964, when he moved in with fellow Dream Syndicate member, Tony Conrad. The two men spent much of their time with LaMonte Young, debating and creating art music, but the music they listened to away from that scene was vastly different.

⁵⁷ Bockris, *What's Welsh for Zen*, 37.

⁵⁸ Peter Hogan, *The Rough Guide to the Velvet Underground* (London and New York: Rough Guides Ltd, 2007), 10.

Conrad had a large collection of 45 rpm records, everything from Hank Williams to the current popular hits, and the two artists “blasted” this music at almost every opportunity. According to Conrad, this was the point when Cale began to become interested in rock and roll and possibly notice its potential as art music. “John [Cale] had really not been soaked in pop music until he came and lived over at my place,” said Conrad. The latter pointed out aspects of popular music he thought applicable to their work with drone, including Phil Spector’s “Wall of Sound” recording techniques, which would play a large part in Cale’s later work both with and after the Velvet Underground.⁵⁹ Not only was he being immersed in this music, but the British Invasion, fronted by bands like the Rolling Stones and the Beatles, hit the United States in 1964, and American groups like the Beach Boys had already been massively popular for two years. The excitement generated by the burgeoning rock and roll scene, especially in New York City, made “a future in the avant-garde ... dim.”⁶⁰ Cale himself later said that “there was a certain futility in avant-garde music that was really mystifying. People were really interested in extreme statements ... performance pieces like *Climb into the Vagina of a Live Female Whale*.⁶¹ But there is no futility in rock & roll; it’s too urgent. That’s what’s great about it.”⁶² However, Cale remained a participatory member of the art music avant-garde, continuing to perform with Young and other conceptual and performance artists until he almost literally stumbled into the popular music scene in November 1964.

⁵⁹ The “Wall of Sound” recording technique involved mixing the instrumental tracks in such a way that they formed a solid aural mass upon which the vocals would then be layered, thus creating a distinct difference in sound between the vocals and instruments.

⁶⁰ Bockris, *What’s Welsh for Zen*, 65.

⁶¹ Cale is referring to performance artist Nam June Paik’s *Danger Music* #39.

⁶² Clinton Heylin, *From the Velvets to the Voidoids: A Pre-Punk History for a Post-Punk World* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 7.

This notable event occurred when Cale met fellow New York musician Lou Reed. Reed's background, though taking place across the Atlantic from Cale, had many hardships as well. Reed had similar familial problems to Cale's, often fighting with his father or lashing out at both his parents. They suspected Reed was homosexual, and on the advice of a physician, signed the seventeen year old up for electroshock therapy, then a common "treatment" for homosexuality. Not only did the therapy fail to "cure" his violent tendencies and sexual proclivities, it "caused memory loss and badly affected [Reed's] sense of empathy and identity."⁶³ This explanation sheds a great deal of light on the man Reed would later become, especially in his interactions with other members of the Velvet Underground.

In 1959, Reed began studying at New York University, but transferred to Syracuse the following year. Like Cale, Reed was not a star pupil. He took copious amounts of drugs and was known by his fellow students as "very shocking and evil."⁶⁴ He also DJed for the university radio station, playing everything from doo-wop to rockabilly to the free jazz of Ornette Coleman and Cecil Taylor, both of whom were influences on his later music primarily through their association with Beat culture. His supervisor later fired him, however, as there were too many complaints about the "noise" of his free jazz shows. The radio's program director, Katharine Griffin, said, "It was just too weird and cutting edge. ... We just weren't ready for it. [Reed] was right on the cusp of two generations."⁶⁵ Academically, Reed was immersed in literature, reading the writings of others and creating his own. Possibly the most important personal connection Reed made during this time was with Sterling Morrison, future guitarist for the Velvets, who

⁶³ Hogan, *Rough Guide*, 6.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Richie Unterberger, *White Light/White Heat: The Velvet Underground Day by Day* (London: Jawbone Press, 2009), 17.

lived directly under Reed and was therefore forced to listen to the latter playing overdriven electric guitar overhead.

In September of 1964, Reed landed a job as a songwriter at Pickwick Records, a New York-based recording company. Pickwick was known as a “copycat label,” identifying each new musical trend as it appeared, then churning out a mass of records reflecting that trend. At the end of 1964, the trend was dances inspired by pop singles, such as Chubby Checkers’ “The Twist.” Reed, capitalizing on this phenomenon, wrote a song called “The Ostrich,” a catchy, satirical jab at the music industry, but with a few notable musical elements. First, the lead guitar was tuned so that each string would play the same pitch. The sound can be heard most clearly at the very beginning of the song, when Reed strums the open-stringed guitar. The result, after amplification, sounds like a police siren or tornado alarm, not the opening of a trendy pop number. Second, the production is low fidelity and full of noise, a “grungy garage take on Phil Spector’s Wall of Sound.”⁶⁶ The casual listener might have been able to look past these musical slights, but the lyrics would stop them in their tracks. Reed orders his audience to “get down on your face,” then “take a step forward; you step on your head.” Reed yelps and whoops between these lines, adding to the noisy background chaos. Somehow, and this is perhaps a testament to the unblinking, unthinking mob mentality surrounding rock and roll at this time, the single was distributed and proved popular enough to warrant a few live performances.

Reed’s first meeting with Cale was in November 1964, when both men were twenty-two years old and Reed had been working at Pickwick Records for only a month. They were brought together by a record producer for Pickwick Records, Terry Phillips, who was looking to form a live band behind Reed, one that could perform “The Ostrich” on *American Bandstand*. Phillips,

⁶⁶ Ibid, 33.

spotting Cale's long hair at a party they both happened to be attending, approached him with this offer, assuming the latter was a rock and roll musician. Cale thought the gig would be "fun," and agreed to join the band.⁶⁷ He showed up at Pickwick the next day with Conrad and conceptual artist Walter de Maria in tow.⁶⁸ Cale was almost immediately impressed with Reed's innovation, particularly his unusual guitar technique. According to Conrad, "[Reed] said, 'Don't worry, it's easy to play because all the strings are tuned to the same note,' which blew our minds because that was what we were doing with La Monte [Young]."⁶⁹ The line-up was quickly decided: Reed would sing and play guitar, Cale would also play guitar, Conrad the bass guitar, and de Maria, who moonlit as a jazz drummer, drums. The band, named The Primitives, did a few performances of the song at high schools in Pennsylvania, but the *American Bandstand* gig fell through and Reed and Cale soon became frustrated with the musical restrictions imposed by Pickwick. Cale became so intrigued with Reed's concepts and the artistic possibilities that could result from their collaboration that he finally said, "Fuck [Pickwick], if they don't want to do it, we'll do it ourselves."⁷⁰

After this point, the band's membership went through many personnel changes. Most of the early members came to the band through Cale, having worked with him and Young. De Maria, for example, an acquaintance of Young's, decided to focus on a future in conceptual art and was replaced by Angus MacLise, another sometime member of the Theater of Eternal Music. Until September of 1965, three of the four members of what would later become the Velvet Underground were also past or current members of one or more of Young's experimental groups.

⁶⁷ Bockris, *What's Welsh for Zen*, 69.

⁶⁸ De Maria is most well known for his 1977 work *Lightning Field*.

⁶⁹ Heylin, *Velvets to the Voidoids*, 8.

⁷⁰ Bockris, *What's Welsh for Zen*, 70.

Young himself takes pointed notice of this in an interview with *Creem*.⁷¹ “They had all come out of my group,” he said. “Even Henry Flynt, who had worked with me, played in the Velvets at one point. Lou Reed was the only new element who was outside my circle, and I hardly knew Lou Reed. I don’t take any credit for him.”⁷² Young is obviously assigning himself some kind of formative role for the Velvets, one perhaps not undeserved, as will be explained later.

Maureen Tucker and Nico, both later additions to the group, came from very different walks of life and musical backgrounds. Tucker was the sister of one of Sterling Morrison’s friends, and the band invited her to join because they needed a last-minute drummer to cover for MacLise, who had recently quit. Though she was originally intended to be a temporary fix, her unique drumming style, one that used drumsets made of tambourines, trashcan lids, and drums laid flat on the ground, endeared her to both Cale and Reed, and she became a permanent member. Nico, on the other hand, was never invited to join the group, but was instead forced into the line-up by their current manager, Andy Warhol, who will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter. Nico’s musical background was limited, and she was both relatively tone-deaf and mostly unable to keep a steady tempo. Her contribution to the band was primarily visual, as she was a striking presence on stage, though her voice did lend some softness to the songs Reed allowed her to sing.

Reed and Cale’s relationship was fiery and volatile, but also creatively productive. As the two men discovered each other, both musically and through the bonding experience of sharing hard drugs, they each became more impressed by the other’s creativity, but less so with the

⁷¹ The very organization of this article is evidence of Young’s importance. The piece is primarily an interview with Lou Reed, but features shorter interview with other band members. The only person with a featured interview who was never officially a part of the group was Young.

⁷² John Neilson, “Some Kinda Love... 20 Years of the Velvet Underground – LaMonte Young,” *Creem* 19, no. 3 (1987): 44.

other's personality. Reed, whom Conrad labeled a "punk," was surprised that avant-garde classical musicians could and did approach music as violently and viscerally as he did.⁷³ Cale was impressed with Reed's lyrical skills and his ability to "go out there without anything in his head at all and just sing songs."⁷⁴ When Conrad moved out of the flat he shared with Cale, Reed moved in; it was then that Cale's reserved, European personality began to clash with Reed's impulsive, even reckless behavior.

A great deal of this dischord came from Cale's and Reed's different experiences regarding collaboration and the role of the individual in the creative process. Cale's avant-garde background made him no stranger to the collaborative process; in fact, he preferred it. At the beginning of his working relationship with Reed, their collaborations were generally successful. "Collaboration can feel like stealing ideas from the cosmos," he said. "The ideas form from the surrounding stimuli. When I was working with Lou [Reed], ... there was a running joke between us that our improvisations (his with words, mine with noises) were an attempt to frighten our subconscious minds into writing great art."⁷⁵ Even Sterling Morrison, the guitarist who would replace Conrad, acknowledged this process: "Our music evolved collectively. Lou would walk in with some sort of scratchy verse and we would all develop the music. ... We'd all thrash it out into something very strong."⁷⁶ It was the devolution of this collaborative environment, triggered by Reed's personality and individualist creative aesthetic, that would end up proving fatal to the

⁷³ Bockris, *What's Welsh for Zen*, 71.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 70.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 207.

⁷⁶ Joe Harvard, *The Velvet Underground and Nico* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, Inc, 2010), 67.

Velvets. As Cale said later, “[Reed] has this thing in his persona about having to struggle alone, not as part of a group.”⁷⁷

This same impetus of will inspired musicologist Richard Witts to place Reed on the same level as Chuck Berry and Ray Davies of the Kinks, three songwriters who “turned the ordinary into the extraordinary” in that each musician was able to take complex ideas and humor and translate them into simple, direct lyrics.⁷⁸ Perhaps because of Reed’s literary background, his lyrics were more intellectual in concept and form than other popular song lyrics of his time.⁷⁹ One example of this is “The Black Angel’s Death Song” that Reed wrote in 1965 and the Velvets recorded for their first album, *The Velvet Underground and Nico*.

Cut mouth bleeding razor’s
Forgetting the pain
Antiseptic remains cool goodbye
So you fly
To the cozy brown snow of the east
Gone to choose, choose again

The key for Reed was realism, not lyricism, and in the colorful world of the 1960s Lower East Side, the pictures he painted were not always pretty, but almost always striking.⁸⁰ This subject matter brings to mind the topics often portrayed by another “popular” musician of the time, Bob

⁷⁷ Victor Bockris, *Transformer: The Lou Reed Story* (Cambridge, Da Capo Press, 1997), 124.

⁷⁸ Witts, *The Velvet Underground*, 42.

⁷⁹ Dai Griffiths, “‘Home Is Living Like a Man on the Run’: John Cale’s Welsh Atlantic,” In *The Popular Music Studies Reader*, edited by Andy Bennett, Barry Shank, and Jason Toynbee (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 31.

⁸⁰ Witts, *The Velvet Underground*, 45.

Dylan, a figure to whom Reed is often compared, but even Dylan seemed to have “balked” at the topics in which Reed reveled.⁸¹

It is perhaps Reed’s personality, combined with his comparative ignorance of art music that allowed Cale the musical freedom to establish the “proto-Velvets” as a true avant-garde musical group. Reed was a follower of free jazz, especially Ornette Coleman, but, as mentioned above, knew little about New York’s avant-garde art music scene. Cale was then able to take the bit between his teeth to some extent and flex his avant-garde muscles. By mid-1965, the group, which then consisted of Reed, Cale, Sterling Morrison, and MacLise, was playing underground film screenings at the New York Cinematheque. They did not perform as a rock band, but an avant-garde group that happened to be playing typical rock instruments, creating live “improvised sound” to accompany the films.⁸² This New York scene, in which the soon-to-be-Velvets participated was a small but diverse collection of artists, musicians, dancers, and filmmakers. Cale and MacLise were the figures tying Reed and Morrison to this world as both were still performing with Young’s group.⁸³

The films, in particular *Venus in Furs* by Piero Heliczer, provided the Velvets with their first television appearance. The *Walter Cronkite Show* on CBS produced an episode on “The Making of the Underground Film,” which explored *Venus in Furs* and its featured musical artist, The Velvet Underground. This appearance, in which the group played “Heroin,” is a testament to their avant-garde roots. The group painted their bodies and faces, dressing up in costumes the filmmaker had left behind in his apartment. Moe Tucker was in a wedding dress and Lone Ranger-esque mask and the bass player wore a mitre. At one point, the filmmaker dropped his

⁸¹ Ibid, 21; Heylin, *Velvets to the Voidoids*, xii.

⁸² Witts, *The Velvet Underground*, 30.

⁸³ Cale continued performing with Young until the end of 1965, when he was replaced by minimalist composer Terry Riley.

camera to pick up a saxophone and add to the general cacophony. This appearance illustrated that the Velvets were not just about the sounds they produced, but the general atmosphere of performance as well.⁸⁴

These film showings led the Velvets to meet journalist Al Aronowitz. Aronowitz attended one of the film showings in the summer of 1965 and again later that winter. It was after this second viewing that he offered the band what would be their debut show on December 11, 1965 at Summit High School in New Jersey, opening for Aronowitz's band, The Myddle Class. It was at this show that Cale's "ferocious" music received a similar reaction to when his ax went through a table in Tanglewood, Massachusetts. Sterling Morrison, the guitarist for the Velvets at the time, said the crowd gave "a roar of disbelief once we started to play 'Venus' [In Furs] and swelled to a mighty howl of outrage and bewilderment by the end of 'Heroin.'"⁸⁵ Cale's avant-garde music and Reed's incendiary lyrics had finally come into their provocative own.

Aronowitz found the whole situation hilarious, and therefore negotiated another gig for the Velvets at the Café Bizarre, where they were set to play for six weeks. The job, however, proved to be short-lived. As one might imagine, the group was not popular with the café's daily crowd, one that consisted primarily of tourists. The band was also working with limited equipment, and was therefore forced to route two or three instruments through a single amplifier, resulting in a distorted, noise-ridden sound. The death knell of this endeavor revolved around the song "Black Angel's Death Song," though the exact circumstances are not clearly defined. Cale claims the band was fired after disobeying a direct order from the manager's wife to stay away from that particular song, while Reed claims the piece upset a group of drunk sailors and Nico,

⁸⁴ "The Velvet Underground 1965 – First TV Appearance," *Youtube*, Accessed April 1, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1KNWQ2KZWY4>.

⁸⁵ Witts, *The Velvet Underground*, 32.

who would later join the Velvets, thought the group was fired because people couldn't dance to the music.⁸⁶ Despite the disastrous circumstances of this initial gig, it proved to be the job that would end up moving their career forward, thanks to audience member Andy Warhol.

Warhol, by the end of 1965, was already a significant figure in the art avant-garde. His role as a leader in the pop art movement had been well-established through works like the *Marilyn Diptich* and *Campbell's Soup Cans*. He was also a renowned underground filmmaker, and had likely met Cale and other members of the Velvets during their early stint improvising soundtracks for the New York Cinematheque. Warhol's work drew controversy during the early 1960s because of his choice to realistically portray commercial objects. Used to modernist abstract expressionism, the art world was unprepared for Warhol's avant-garde reinterpretation of everyday objects. He was, in a sense, doing what the performance artists and Cale himself were doing with music; they attempted to remove it from its isolation in the "ivory towers" of universities and art galleries and allow the art to be more accessible to the general public. It is because of this goal that Warhol's work is known as "pop" art, as it strove to reflect popular culture and society back to the audience. His work was a distinct reaction to the intense individualism expressed by artists like Jackson Pollock, who determined art's value by the artist's gestures. Warhol rejected this construction and sought, instead, to portray the world as it actually existed. He later stated

The Pop artists did images that anybody walking down Broadway could recognize in a split second—comics, picnic tables, men's trousers, celebrities, shower curtains,

⁸⁶ Unterberger, *White Light/White Heat*.

refrigerators, Coke bottles—all the great modern things that the Abstract Expressionists tried so hard not to notice at all.⁸⁷

Cale's choice to join the Velvets is analogous to Warhol's emphasis on artistic accessibility. As mentioned earlier, Cale sensed the seeming futility involved in many performance and conceptual art endeavors and wanted to be involved in something more "urgent." In meeting Reed and joining a rock group, he put these wishes in action. He later said, "We were really excited. We had this opportunity to do something revolutionary—to combine avant-garde and rock and roll, to do something symphonic."⁸⁸ Guitarist and producer Lenny Kaye later said, "[The Velvet Underground] were the one group that proved you could scissor together the perverse side of art and the pop side of rock & roll."⁸⁹ The result of this combination was decidedly avant-garde, as was Warhol's particular artistic practice. He was working in the realm of fine arts, creating works that were avant-garde in message, content, and practice, yet still accessible to the general public. Cale was operating with a similar aesthetic, taking the typically accessible genre of rock and roll and combining it with avant-garde instrumental and formal techniques. Both Cale and Warhol thus combined the mundane with the arcane. Both were also familiar with collaboration. Warhol, after establishing his place in the New York scene, opened his new studio, which he christened The Factory. Here, he surrounded himself with the Warhol Superstars, a group of people made up of everyone from fellow artists to drug users, drag queens, and porn stars. Warhol relied on these people to help him create his art, both paintings and films.

⁸⁷ Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett, *POPism: The Warhol '60s*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), 39-40.

⁸⁸ Bockris, *Transformer*, 129.

⁸⁹ Heylin, *Velvets to the Voidoids*, xiv.

It is likely, then, that Warhol recognized this similarity of intent and background when he first saw the Velvets play at Café Bizarre.⁹⁰ Barbara Rubin, who had the Velvets play for some of her films, suggested that Gerard Malanga, who worked with Warhol, go see the band at the café. Malanga was impressed and brought back Factory regular Paul Morrissey, who brought Warhol and Nico. Warhol deemed the group “fabulous and demented” and invited them to join his entourage at The Factory.⁹¹ He presented them with his plan to include the group in a multi-media show involving dancing, music, lights, and film. The Velvets were interested, but Warhol’s stipulation that German model Nico join the group as frontwoman caused some controversy as the group did not want to alter their fully conceived sound. However, Warhol’s offer of a steady paying gig, rehearsal space, and the notoriety that would come with being associated with the artist soon tipped the scales in his favor. The Velvet Underground were now Andy Warhol’s house band.

One aspect of the Warhol/Velvets collaboration that likely proved more significant than any of the previously mentioned was the fact that Warhol provided the group with a protective bubble known commonly as “art.” Outside this bubble, the Velvets would have had to reconcile themselves to either never making any money or compromising their avant-garde techniques. Within it, however, the Velvets had a greater measure of artistic creativity than they could have managed on their own. However, this fortuitous Warhol connection may not have even occurred if not for Cale. Billy Name, who was familiar with Cale’s work with Young, convinced Warhol that Cale “was a very respected musician of truly high quality ... that [the Velvet Underground]

⁹⁰ Another possible reason for his interest could be that it was instigated by his own previous rock experiences. At one point, Warhol was part of a rock and roll group in which he sang, La Monte Young played saxophone, Walter de Maria played drums, and the lyrics were written by artist Jasper Johns.

⁹¹ Mitchell, *Sedition and Alchemy*, 49.

wasn't just a toy group."⁹² Later, Paul Katz asserted that Cale and Warhol "respected each other as creative artists."⁹³ It was these credentials and association with the world of fine art that made the group's transition into the Factory all the more smooth.

In January 1966, only one month after the band's debut show as the Velvet Underground, they signed a management contract with Warhol. He immediately placed them center stage in his multimedia production, known as the Exploding Plastic Inevitable. These performances included film, dance, and various stunts and dances often involving themes of bondage. The band would play on a stage, wearing all black, and Warhol would project lights and films on the band and the walls near them. The stunts and dancing took place either in front of or next to the band. Gerard Malanga was an integral part of this aspect of the show, as he danced with a long leather whip or reenacted shooting up heroin with a large plastic syringe.⁹⁴ The performance situation was one that would have been familiar to the band, as they had experience performing with projected films. Cale in particular would have been comfortable in this setting as his performances with Young often involved light shows crafted by the latter's wife, Marian Zazeela.⁹⁵

Oddly enough, the Velvets' first appearance as part of EPI was at the annual dinner for the New York Society for Clinical Psychiatry. The psychiatrists at the event were not only there to be entertained, but also to "study" Warhol, though they may have ended up with more than they bargained for.⁹⁶ The event was described by various attendees as "a short-lived torture of cacophony," "decadent Dada," "ridiculous, outrageous, painful," and one doctor said "it seemed

⁹² Bockris, *What's Welsh for Zen*, 87.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ "Andy Warhol's Exploding Plastic Inevitable 1967 Part1," *Youtube*, Accessed April 1, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gh0OhO-OhK4>.

⁹⁵ The Velvets are often seen photographed with dark sunglasses, an accessory which became a necessity because of the bright lights of the EPI shows.

⁹⁶ Grace Glueck, "Syndromes Pop at Delmonico's," In *The Velvet Underground Companion: Four Decades of Commentary*, edited by Zak, Albin (New York: Schirmer Books, 1997): 4.

like a whole prison ward had escaped.”⁹⁷ Despite these responses, it was only through the band’s alliance with Warhol that they were able to express their unexpected aesthetic.⁹⁸

It seemed, finally, that Cale had met a collaborator who agreed with his views on the way art should affect the audience. The EPI was a show meant to overwhelm, and by numerous accounts of audience members, overwhelm it did. The following is a quote from an audience member at a performance from June 1966 in Chicago.

The music is lost in the chaos of noise. ... It all builds to a tremendous climax. Then it goes on and on and on and on. You wish it would stop. The musicians build wilder and wilder. ... It’s all coming to an end. But it doesn’t. It goes on. The lights flash in your eyes. The noises all blend into one and your mind tries to sort out little bits of rhythm or tune.⁹⁹

Other concert reviews present similar overwhelmed responses. Cale wrote that the intention of the show was to “disturb people’s consciousness.”¹⁰⁰ One reviewer makes a particularly disturbing analogy, comparing their music to “the product of a secret marriage between Bob Dylan and the Marquis de Sade.”¹⁰¹

The Velvets’ live show, whether accompanied by the EPI or not, was characterized by their improvisation. The instrumentation for the songs and the decision of who would play what instrument were flexible; even the manner of Reed’s lyrical delivery was improvisational in style, an intentional choice by the singer. Cale stated that the goal of the band was simply to “go

⁹⁷ Ibid, 5.

⁹⁸ “The Velvet Underground – Super 8 Films,” *Youtube*, Accessed April 1, 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WzicbU5YV_w.

⁹⁹ Heylin, *Velvets to the Voidoids*, 27.

¹⁰⁰ Bockris, *What’s Welsh for Zen*, 90.

¹⁰¹ Heylin, *Velvets to the Voidoids*, 29.

out there and improvise songs on stage.”¹⁰² Warhol himself encouraged this approach, going a step further and telling the group to “go out there and rehearse.”¹⁰³

“[Cale’s] completely mad,” Reed said, “But that’s because he’s Welsh.”¹⁰⁴ Regardless of his ethnicity, Cale’s musical contributions to the Velvets “popular” music were indeed somewhat “mad” for their time through his use of drone, massive amplification and distortion, and complex bass lines. The source of his drone aesthetic is obviously taken from his work with Young, but the way he implements it in the context of rock and roll gave the avant-garde technique new layers of meaning. One reason for this is Cale’s experience with music writer and producer Phil Spector’s “wall of sound” ideal. Spector’s idea, though, was oriented towards musical post-production and mixing in order to fill the speakers with a thick texture. Cale backed up and applied this to the very fundamentals of the created sound. He wanted to create a “tapestry” of sound over which Reed would “spontaneously create lyrics.”¹⁰⁵

An important part of this tapestry was his aesthetic of drone through sustained notes. The two most obvious examples of this practice are “Venus In Furs” and “Heroin,” both from the group’s debut album *The Velvet Underground and Nico*. The drones in both pieces are executed with Cale’s amplified viola. In the former, the drone begins at the outset of the song in a middle ground verging on foreground position in the texture. The drone is punctuated during the song’s verses by the occasional, quick upward “squeaks,” functioning as a rhythmic counterpart to the steady guitar and drum parts. The chord, which was static during the verses, changes during the bridge to more clearly reflect the different guitar chords. Cale shifts its sound again toward the end of the track to indulge in a quick, but intensely chaotic solo. In “Heroin,” the drone begins a

¹⁰² Ibid, 25.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Griffiths, “Welsh Atlantic,” 30.

¹⁰⁵ Witts, *The Velvet Underground*, 83.

few seconds into the song, after the guitar and drums have established the key and tempo. Its original position is definitely in the background, but as the intensity progresses, it moves closer and closer to the foreground until about five minutes in, when Cale breaks out in an screechy and even more chaotic solo that occasionally lapses into a yet more intense drone until the end of the song. Without this viola part, it is likely the song, which musically and lyrically describes the process of shooting heroin, would not be nearly as effective.

Amplification and distortion in rock music were not uncommon in the mid-1960s. However, no one was implementing it to the level heard on the Velvets' second album *White Light/White Heat*. The guitar, especially on the title track and the seventeen minute noise marathon, "Sister Ray," is distorted almost beyond recognition. Though none of the parts were drones in the sense of a sustained note, the amount of noise created electronically with various fuzzers and compressors amounted to a kind of white noise drone. The resulting effect is one of various notes or chords being mere shades of noise rather than distinct pitches. This practice is the rock version of the Dream Syndicate's experiments in amplified drone. The results are an almost exact duplicate, though the process in "Sister Ray" is perhaps a maximalist approach, while the Dream Syndicate was distinctly minimalist. While Young and his fellow performers were sustaining a single chord, the members of the Velvets were all playing different parts in the recording of "Sister Ray," each fighting for supremacy in the mix and creating an aleatoric jumble of dissonance and distortion. Therefore, the final result has a similar sound profile to the Dream Syndicate recordings, one laden with white noise through which subtle variations in pitch can be heard.

The band especially managed to capture their improvisational spirit in "Sister Ray," the final track on the album. This is perhaps due to the fact that the group recorded the song in the

manner of a jam, that of a single take with no later edits. They recorded other songs from *White Light* in multiple takes, but the band members would invariably argue for the take in which each sounded the best. The recording of “Sister Ray” thus eliminated the arguments when, before the recording, they decided “this is going to be one take. So whatever you want to do, you better do it now.”¹⁰⁶ Each member turned their amplifiers up to ten, disregarding leakage and the fact that every needle was in the red, and, after beginning the song conventionally enough, began a collective improvisation. The result is a recording capturing the band’s seeming “permanent state of over-excitation.”¹⁰⁷

Cale’s bass lines are probably due to his “very hazy understanding” of typical rhythm and blues bass lines, but only served to augment his musical “tapestry.”¹⁰⁸ He built the lines on many of the basic tenets of a blues bass line as they center around tonic, dominant and subdominant, occasionally moving from one to the next through chromaticism. However, it is his placement of these lines in juxtaposition to the guitar parts that are unusual. For example, in “I’m Waiting for the Man,” Cale inserts two unexpected sections of chromatic movement to bass notes that end up being non-chord tones. The song opens with the guitar part moving back and forth between the tonic and subdominant. At the end of each bar of subdominant, instead of remaining on the root, G, Cale moves up chromatically to the dominant, A. Similarly, in the chorus the bass moves up chromatically to the tonic under a solid bar of dominant. Sterling Morrison, who was occasionally called upon to play bass when Cale moved to a different instrument, called the parts “weird.” “I had to play bass guitar when John was playing something else,” he said, “and I hated

¹⁰⁶ Jeff Schwartz, “‘Sister Ray’: Some Pleasures of a Music Text,” In *The Velvet Underground Companion: Four Decades of Commentary*, edited by Zak, Albin (New York: Schirmer Books, 1997): 95.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 101.

¹⁰⁸ Witts, *The Velvet Underground*, 87.

it. Hated it!”¹⁰⁹ It is possible, though, that these bass parts are only resulting Cale’s theory of a musical backdrop for lyrics. By obscuring chords through the addition of non-chord tones in the bass line, he is moving away from traditional I-IV-V tonality and towards tonal centrality instead, revolving around a central note but with no distinct harmonic progressions. In the end, then, the practice has a similar effect as drone; in effect, he erases distinctions created by sections of block chords and replacing them with a jumble of sounds all relating to the tonic key.

Cale’s avant-garde background comes through obviously and hilariously in the *Nico* track “European Son.” The song itself is an eight-minute extended jam, not unlike that in “Sister Ray,” though with less distortion and even fewer formal elements. “Sister Ray” contains lyrical material throughout the track and “European Son” has only two short verses in the first minute; the rest is instrumental. The music’s most notable moment comes just after this vocal section, as at that point the recording picks up the sound of Cale dragging a metal chair across the floor of the studio, followed closely by Reed dropping a handful of dishes. The other members of the band appreciated the moment as well, as Tucker later commented, “The engineer, he’s saying, ‘My God, What are you doing?’ ... It was tremendous, because it is in time, and the music starts right up. I don’t know how we timed it like that.”¹¹⁰

However, this time of prolific creative collaboration, especially between Cale and Reed, was short-lived as the two men grew apart both personally and creatively, resulting in Cale’s departure from the Velvets in 1968. Reed often felt threatened by Cale, especially given the latter’s relationship with fashion designer Betsey Johnson. When the two announced their engagement, Reed assumed this meant that the band was no longer Cale’s first priority.¹¹¹ The

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Heylin, *Velvets to the Voidoids*, 20.

¹¹¹ Mitchell, *Sedition and Alchemy*, 72.

split also came as a result of the divergence in their working processes. Reed was also pushing for a more commercial sound, one in which his songwriting would be more highly featured. Cale was not the only member who resisted this change, as Morrison later said, “Lou wanted something within a more ‘pop’ context. ... John and I were very happy with Sister Ray-type music...Lou placed heavy emphasis on lyrics. Cale and I were more interested in blasting the house down.”¹¹² Tucker was also unhappy about the split occurring between Cale and Reed. According to Peter Hogan, “[Tucker] later stated that she wished the band had done at least one more album with Cale, and that without him the constructive “lunacy” that had fueled their first two albums was lost.”^{113, 114}

¹¹² Heylin, *Velvets to the Voidoids*, 28.

¹¹³ Hogan, *Rough Guide*, 56.

¹¹⁴ In a way, this split prefigured the division punk rock would experience in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Cale’s experimental approach is analogous to No Wave, while Reed’s quirky commercialism is more in line with New Wave.

Chapter 3

Cale's work after the Velvet Underground is massive in quantity and varied in style. From 1968 to the present, Cale has released solo and collaborative albums with composers like Terry Riley, written soundtracks for Andy Warhol, and produced a number of albums for artists like Nico, Patti Smith, and the Stooges. His role as a producer and collaborator has placed him in the thick of some of the most pivotal popular music releases of the twentieth century, such as Smith's *Horses*, the Stooges' eponymous debut, and Nick Drake's *Bryter Layter*. His solo work is, for the most part, critically acclaimed and spans genres from spoken word and pop-influenced art music to folk pop and rock.

The genre in which Cale's work holds the most influence is punk rock, as the Velvets' music is often cited as a pre-cursor to punk. Cale himself was an inspirational figure for other artists acknowledged in the evolution of punk, namely The Stooges, Patti Smith, and the Modern Lovers, producing albums for these artists that would prove influential for later punk rock groups. Cale's contributions to the Velvets, specifically those of noise and an aggressive performance art aesthetic, were especially prominent in later punk groups. His own solo career was also intertwined with the punk scene in New York City in the mid-1970s, as Cale toured extensively with Patti Smith in 1976 and often performed his solo material at music venue CBGB at the end of 1976 and beginning of 1977. Cale's involvement with Smith and the historic venue lauded as "the birthplace of punk," as well as his performances with groups like Blondie, effectually place him directly in the middle of America's growing punk rock scene.¹¹⁵

One theme that seems to unite his musical endeavors after the Velvets is their collaborative nature. Though this fact is obvious in his production work and artistic

¹¹⁵ "John Cale Gigography," Accessed April 2, 2012, <http://www.schmitt-hall-studios.com/ron/JohnCaleGigography.htm>.

collaborations, many of his solo works feature other strongly creative music figures. For example, five of his solo albums feature famous music producer and ambient musician Brian Eno, with whom Cale had a long-term creative relationship. Other albums, like his 2003 album *HoboSapiens*, have a large number of personnel and feature a two-man production team, in this case Cale and British producer Nick Franglen. This collaborative trend is not unexpected, especially in light of Cale's avant-garde experiences. Until the Velvets' split with Andy Warhol, Cale functioned within groups of like-minded avant-garde musicians, specifically Fluxus, the group surrounding La Monte Young, and Warhol's Factory. It makes sense, then, that Cale would continue in this vein. Reinforcing this interpretation of his work is the fact that his collaborations were almost exclusively with fellow avant-garde musicians. Much of this interaction was also through an involvement in certain avant-garde groups. His connections with the American art avant-garde led to his *Church of Anthrax* album with Riley. His involvement in the forward-thinking proto-punk scene in the United States brought him to Smith and the Stooges. In this way, Cale kept his past close while finding his personal, individual voice through the release of solo albums.

Cale's first venture into production was with former lover and Velvets co-member Nico. Besides working with her in the Velvets, Cale and other members of the band teamed up with producer Tom Wilson for her first album, *Chelsea Girl*. None of the songs on that album were Nico's; she sang each tune and the album was released under her name. Unfortunately, Nico was unhappy with the finished product. In an effort to make the songs more commercial and folk-influenced, Wilson overdubbed many with flute and string arrangements. She said in a later interview, "Oh, the flute, oh my God! I was so unhappy when I heard the result of that flute

taking over.”¹¹⁶ However, Cale’s role in the album was minimal, his involvement limited due to the number of personnel that impacted the final product. His contributions to her later albums were much greater, the first of which being *The Marble Index*, released in 1969. Cale did not produce this album for Nico, but instead wrote all the instrumental arrangements. His art music background comes through strongly in the music, which is spare and dominated primarily by Nico’s harmonium.

Cale, confident in his arranging abilities, completed the instrumental parts, including their recording and mixing, in four days. He liked working with Nico, despite their occasional disagreements, as she left him a great deal of creative freedom to incorporate all his “European stuff,” the avant-garde art music in which he was trained.¹¹⁷ This is obvious in the album’s music, even the first track, a one-minute prelude. The song consists of a slightly out-of-tune piano playing block chords as a glockenspiel improvises a melody that cycles through several modes, often clashing sharply with the low piano chords. This disjunct sound continues throughout the album. Cale often creates surprising, hauntingly beautiful soundscapes for Nico’s voice through a combination of seemingly unrelated melodic parts. “Lawns of Dawns” sounds much more like an art piece than anything else. Layers of instruments play rhythmically free melodies or snatches of melodies in tangentially related keys, united only by the repetitive, monotone harmonium line. “No One Is There” opens with a viola fugue, Cale recording each part separately, then layering them afterwards.

“Frozen Warnings,” perhaps the most popular song on the album, especially showcases Cale’s background in minimalist drone. The track begins with Nico’s solo voice, a viola drone

¹¹⁶ Steven Walker, “Nico, Interview,” *3RRR FM*, Accessed April 2, 2012, <http://smironne.free.fr/NICO/rrr.html>.

¹¹⁷ Bockris, *What’s Welsh for Zen*, 120.

entering quietly, then growing in volume and depth. After about a minute, the instrumental track starts sounding very similar to solo experimental recordings, especially “Sun Blindness Music,” the piece he recorded while still with the Velvets. “Evening Light” also displays a minimalist style, but one more related to the layered, process-driven techniques of Steve Reich or Philip Glass. Two simple harpsichord melodies, thickened with reverb effects, are repeated on top of each other, and this texture is punctuated only by the occasional low string countermelody that sounds against Nico’s melodic line. The complete texture is very much like his approach to the Velvets’ music, one in which Cale’s “orchestral chaos” would be the backdrop for Reed’s vocals.¹¹⁸ The approach is only more effective as a result of Nico’s seeming inability to sing in tempo. The album is, for Cale, a solid avant-garde contribution to popular music. His and Nico’s collaboration on this album has influenced and continues to influence generations of gothic rock artists, including Siouxsie and the Banshees and Dead Can Dance.¹¹⁹ The groups primarily admire the dark, funereal sound of Nico’s voice and Cale’s ability to express both the eerie and dissonant and the simple and direct.

Cale both arranged and produced Nico’s next album, *Desertshore* (1970), which features darker, heavier arrangements primarily centered on drone produced by Cale’s organ and Nico’s harmonium or simple piano arrangements. Each song on the album revolves around one of these two poles, thus breaking up what could have been a monotonous series of arrangements. As it is, the complete work comes across as more pop-oriented than *The Marble Index*, partially because of the interspersing of these lighter songs. However, Cale proves himself competent in both aesthetics. “The Falconer,” the second track on the album, highlights these abilities. The song

¹¹⁸ Heylin, *Velvets to the Voidoids*, 12.

¹¹⁹ Richie Unterberger, “The Marble Index,” *Allmusic*, Accessed April 2, 2012, <http://www.allmusic.com/album/r14087>.

starts with Debussy-esque planar chords, transitioning into a sustained minor chord balanced heavily toward the lower registers in the harmonium and organ. The texture, almost medieval in quality, transforms unexpectedly to a major key and Cale layers a nostalgic, folky piano part over the organ. A minute later, though, the minor tonality is back full force, ending the song the same way it began. In songs like this, Cale found himself confident arranging and composing in both avant-garde art and popular styles.

Cale's approach to the production process was nearly as important as the music itself. Nico later noted, "Yes, [the songs] might not be perfect, but John likes the feeling that a song should be like being performed on stage. That it shouldn't be perfect."¹²⁰ This ideal was nothing new for Cale as "Sister Ray" from *White Light/White Heat* was recorded in a single take in order to capture the energy that only a live performance can produce. His propensity for this aesthetic most likely began as far back as his work with Fluxus in London. Performance art, which was usually documented only with photographs, is almost solely reliant on live performance. It makes sense, therefore, that Cale would draw on this idea for inspiration in his production.

The idea certainly influenced his decision to produce the first album for up-and-coming Ann Arbor, Michigan band, The Stooges. Cale first saw the band open for MC5 in Detroit, and fell in love with their approach to performance, especially that of lead singer Iggy Pop. Pop himself admits the influence the Velvet Underground had on the Stooges, though he was not immediately attracted to their music.

The first time I heard the Velvet Underground and Nico record ... I just hated the sound.

You know "HOW COULD ANYBODY MAKE A RECORD THAT SOUNDS LIKE
SUCH A PIECE OF SHIT? THIS IS DISGUSTING! ALL THESE PEOPLE MAKE ME

¹²⁰ Walker, "Nico, Interview."

FUCKING SICK! FUCKING DISGUSTING HIPPIE VERMIN! FUCKING
BEATNIKS, I WANNA KILL THEM ALL! THIS JUST SOUNDS LIKE TRASH!”

Then about six months later it hit me, “Oh my God! WOW! This is just a fucking great
record!”¹²¹

In producing the band’s eponymous album, released in 1969, he wanted to preserve not only the
“electric” live quality of their music, but the bizarre personality of Pop. It was his intention that
probably led directly to studio situations such as these:

[Pop] had this impish quality – he’d be threatening you one minute and hugging you the
next – and that was what I wanted to get across. It was incredible seeing him in the
studio: he’d be climbing all over the amps and the desks like a mad animal, while the
band just played as if nothing out of the ordinary was happening.

Despite Cale’s good intentions, the sound he sought did not always come through, mostly likely
a result of technical rather than creative deficiency. Mark Deming, in his review of the album,
surmised that “while John Cale seemed sympathetic to what the band was doing, he didn't appear
to quite get it, and as a result he made a physically powerful band sound a bit sluggish on
tape.”¹²² This interpretation rings true even on first listening to the album, which appeared only a
year after *White Light/White Heat*. The Velvets’ album is powerful and noisy, much like the
Stooges’ live shows. However, *The Stooges*, especially in songs like “1969,” sounds toned-down
and quieted. While Demers attributes this sound to Cale not “getting it,” the more like
explanation is that Cale was still new to the technical aspects of production and was simply
unaware of how to obtain the results he wanted.

¹²¹ Legs McNeil, *Please Kill Me*, 17; Bockris, *What’s Welsh for Zen*, 127. Pop also saw the band
perform with the EPI in Ann Arbor in 1966.

¹²² Mark Deming, “The Stooges,” *Allmusic*, Accessed April 2, 2012,
<http://allmusic.com/album/the-stooges-r19171/review>.

An album that was even more challenging for Cale to produce was Patti Smith's groundbreaking work, *Horses* (1975). It was during the recording of this album that we see, yet again, the creation of a significant musical release in spite of and perhaps because of intense conflict. Smith's background was similar to Cale's; she was involved with performance art in London in the late 60s and the St. Mark's Poetry Project in New York City in the early 70s, writing poetry, painting, and participating in performance art, becoming a well-known figure in the scene.¹²³ Her status as an intellectual in the arts scene also allowed her to publish some of her music journalism pieces in *Creem* and *Rolling Stone*. Her first album, *Horses*, combines spoken word and sung vocals with music that ranges from powerful hard rock to more subdued piano parts. Cale's challenge in producing this album came because of a clash in artistic vision. Smith recognized this just as much as Cale did.

In my mind I picked him because his records sounded good. But I hired the wrong guy.

All I was really looking for was a technical person. Instead, I got a total maniac artist. ...

It was really like *A Season in Hell*, for both of us. But inspiration doesn't always have to be someone sending me half a dozen American Beauty roses. There's a lotta inspiration going on between the murderer and the victim. And he had me so nuts I wound up doing this nine-minute cut ["Birdland"] that transcended anything I ever did before.

He was like -- getting into my body ... he has all this warmth in him and he gets inside you and he goes through all the pain you go through. I get very sentimental about that.¹²⁴

¹²³ Paul Hoard, "Patti Smith," *Rollingstone.com*, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/artists/patti-smith/biography>.

¹²⁴ Dave Marsh, "Her Horses Got Wings, They Can Fly," *Rolling Stone*, no. 203 (1976); Lisa Robinson, "Patti Smith Talks About Radio Ethiopia," *Hit Parader* (Summer-Fall 1977).

The final product of all this angst was one of the most influential albums of the twentieth century; it is number 44 on *Rolling Stone's* 500 greatest albums of all time list and has influenced artists like Michael Stipe, founder of rock group R.E.M.¹²⁵

Another of Cale's successful production that figures heavily into the early development of punk rock was the debut self-titled album for The Modern Lovers, headed by Jonathan Richman. Richman's connection to Cale dated back to the late 1960s, when the teenager became infatuated with the Velvets, moving to New York City at eighteen to sleep on Velvets manager Steve Sesnick's couch. In early 1973, Cale heard Richman's song "Hospital," liked it, remembered the young musician, and decided to produce a demo for his band. The tracks he recorded with the group, including "Roadrunner," a song directly influenced by "Sister Ray," were collected with recordings the band later made with another record company and released as *The Modern Lovers* in 1976. The album and "Roadrunner" both made in on to *Rolling Stone's* top 500 lists for albums and songs as notable "proto-punk" releases.

Through these productions, Cale seems to be asserting that album production is much more than making an album saleable; it is about creating a work of art. Cale himself said, "I always try ... not to give the artist a direct answer to all his questions, but to suggest a solution by other means. You've got to stick to what you believe in. It might be lucrative for me to work with a particular personality, but if I don't feel sympathetic to what he's doing, I'm just letting myself down. And you lose all your credibility if you do that."¹²⁶ Even in collaborative situations, Cale maintains a strong sense of personal perspective. However, this sense did not always mesh the those of the groups he produced. For example, his production of Squeeze's

¹²⁵ Ethan Kaplan, "Michael Stipe," *A Patti Smith Babelogue*, accessed May 1, 2012, <http://www.oceanstar.com/patti/bio/stipe.htm>.

¹²⁶ *Ibid*, 144.

eponymous album in 1978 led to creative differences that nearly doomed the effort. Cale forced the band in a direction they didn't want, resulting in an album that was stylistically nonsensical. The two singles from the release, one of which, "Take Me I'm Yours," was especially successful, were the two with the most pop sound and ended up being produced by the band.

Cale continued his collaborative efforts not just in production, but also through performing on some albums and co-writing others. He appeared playing viola and various keyboard instruments on Nick Drake's highly acclaimed album *Bryter Layter*, and viola on a eponymous album by the group Chelsea, a band most known for their drummer, Peter Cris, of future Kiss fame. Cale's most significant collaboration in the early seventies was his album with Terry Riley, *Church of Anthrax*. This work is a reminder that Cale, despite his forays into popular music, never really left the avant-garde art music scene. The music created by these two men, however, is something that stands out in contrast to the rest of their works, perhaps a result of their respective musical backgrounds. In his autobiography, Cale expresses neither satisfaction nor dissatisfaction with the final project, but notes that Riley was not pleased with the final mixing. The latter felt his parts were buried under the tracks Cale recorded, and Cale was forced to finish producing the album himself.¹²⁷

The final album is a rollicking combination of minimalism, free jazz, and rock. The contributions of both artists can be clearly heard throughout the album, especially the opening title track. The song itself is a near-perfect example of how smoothly the postmodern minimalism as practiced by composers like Riley and Young can mesh with popular forms like rock. Cale's influence is immediately apparent as the nine-minute song opens with a pulsing organ drone and ends with an overdriven saxophone drone. The minimalist style comes through

¹²⁷ Ibid, 122.

strongly in the overall form of the track; most notably in that, harmonically, it has no form. Every four beats, either an overdriven guitar or pulsing organ play the same chord over and over, thus creating a harmonic drone and minimizing tonal movement. Other typical rock instruments, like drumset and electric bass, are included in the arrangement, playing grooving rhythms that keep the momentum up. Most obvious in the texture is Riley's virtuosic organ melody, which weaves in and out of the other parts in a manner reminiscent of his work *A Rainbow in Curved Air* (1969). This basic aesthetic, free-jazz influenced rock in a minimalist context, continues for the majority of the album through various instrumentations.

The only exception is the short track "The Soul of Patrick Lee," a song written solely by Cale. The piece is about three minutes long and sounds much more like Donovan-esque folk rock than avant-garde minimalism. The structure is the verse-chorus structure typical of popular song and features vocalist Adam Miller, who does nothing exceptional with the admittedly simple vocal part, and a densely arranged folk rock ensemble. However, the fact that Cale brought in a singer rather than singing the track himself is telling of his current musical mindset. *Church of Anthrax*, though released in early 1971, was recorded almost a year earlier, before Cale recorded his first solo release, *Vintage Violence*. It may be that Cale was testing the waters with this song, trying his hand at popular songwriting while cushioned by the song's inclusion in a collaborative album release and another singer's voice. Because of this, the song feels out of place within the larger context of the album and would likely have fit in better with one of his solo albums.

The majority of Cale's major collaborations came during the early part of his musical career, specifically before mid-1974, the summer he moved back to London from the United States. Cale himself commented on these collaborations, though obliquely, by attempting to explain his interpretation of the working atmosphere in those years.

The thing was, between the years of 1963 and 1973 tranquility was your enemy. You had so much fun with the bunch of people you were around, but as soon as those people went away you really could not survive trying to do it on your own. The common living of all those years entered the fabric of your personality and fed it.¹²⁸

Although Cale does not explain exactly that this aversion to tranquility directly impacted his creative output, an artist's work is not separate from his or her life. Cale, in his autobiography, never states directly that collaboration was so important to him. However, his choice of output, company, and the way he tends to talk about his work almost always in relation to the work of others speaks volumes.

His work with other artists influenced his creative choices, but his personal decisions and behaviors affected those choices equally. His personal life, from after the Velvets to the birth of his first child in 1985, was fraught with heavy drug use and a plethora of short-lived relationships. In the mid-60s, while still with the Velvets, he became addicted to heroin, drug of choice for many in the Village, including Lou Reed and Nico. Cale stayed with the drug until 1970 as he believed it helped him work his late-night hours at the mixing board.¹²⁹ He moved to Los Angeles that year and took a full month off work to end his addiction, going cold turkey. While in Los Angeles, Cale became hooked on a new drug, cocaine, an dependence that lasted for almost fifteen years. Cale then moved back to London in 1974, hoping that the move would revitalize his musical career and help him break his cocaine addiction. While the first motive may have been successful, the second certainly wasn't. In the mid-70s, Cale was making about \$40,000 a year and spending most of it on drugs and alcohol.¹³⁰ In an interview with the BBC,

¹²⁸ Ibid, 145.

¹²⁹ Ibid, 128.

¹³⁰ Ibid, 170.

Cale admits that he was “in over his head.”¹³¹ The height of this last addiction came in the early 1980s when Cale claims, in the same interview, that his drug-induced performances were “shambolic” and “trashy.” He also believed he created his best work when sober, though an overview of his solo albums and their critical reviews may prove otherwise.

Cale began that solo career in the midst of his many collaborations with the release of *Vintage Violence* (1970). In all, Cale released a total of fifteen full-length albums, six live albums, three EPs, and five compilations – a massive output for any artist, much less one who was also producing and collaborating with other musicians. The period between 1969 and 1975 were his most productive years, and from 1970-75 he released an average of one full-length solo album per year. Four of the five, including *Vintage Violence*, were rated very highly by reviewers on allmusic.com. However, Cale did not see *Vintage* in such a positive light. For him, the album was all about exploring songwriting and seeing if it would be successful. In the end, the album was not financially successful, something Cale might have foreseen as he recognized “there’s not too much originality on that album.”¹³² The album as a whole is more accessible than anything Cale had done previously, containing a more obvious pop sensibility that does not stand out when compared to the other pop music of its time. Cale freely admits the simple nature of the music, but again, for him, this was almost more of an experiment in songwriting than a serious piece of art. Many listeners, however, seem to feel differently. Ed Ward, reviewing for *Rolling Stone*, called the album “amazingly complex” and said most of the songs sounded like “a Byrds album produced by a Phil Spector who has marinated for six years in burgundy, anise, and

¹³¹ “John Cale’s ‘Shambolic’ Drug Past,” News.BBC.co.uk, Last modified Jun 16, 2009, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/wales/8101850.stm.

¹³² Bockris, *What’s Welsh for Zen*, 123.

chili peppers.”¹³³ Regardless of its critical reception, both Cale and his record company, CBS, were not fond of the final product.

Despite the supposed simplistic nature of the music, the lyrics are more enigmatic. In the opening verse to “Gideon’s Bible,” he sings:

Holding on, with both eyes, to things that don't exist
Peering through the cutting wrist, at grand old mother greedy
Rolling out the cotton ship, upon the carpet pillow
Throttling children callously, a messy day with Clancy.

This lyrical style is likely a combination of two inspirations: his literary interest as a child and young adult and his work with Lou Reed. Cale began writing lyrics while in the Velvets and, as he respected Reed’s talent for lyricism, often brought them to his bandmate for criticism. Reed’s more “disciplined” style of writing, likely a result of his literature studies and time with *Pickwick*, helped mature and hone Cale’s style.¹³⁴

Cale’s next solo album, released in 1972, was an attempt to return to his art music avant-garde background, as perhaps evidenced by its suggestive title, *The Academy in Peril*. However, the album is an unsuccessful hodge-podge of too many textures and ideas crammed into a single release. It combines solo piano writing in “Brahms” and the title track with pop-influenced tracks like “The Philosopher” and “Days of Steam” with symphonic orchestral writing in “3 Orchestral Pieces.” It is as if Cale is trying too hard and simply manages to explore too little of any one idea. However, there are moments of brilliance within the unorganized madness. Two tracks, “Legs Larry at the Television Centre” and “King Harry,” implement spoken word in a jarring,

¹³³ Ed Ward, “John Cale: Vintage Violence,” *Rolling Stone*, Accessed April 2, 2012, <http://www.rollingstone.com/music/albumreviews/vintage-violence-19700917>.

¹³⁴ Bockris, *What’s Welsh for Zen*, 123.

but captivating fashion. The first pairs the voice of what sounds like a typical television producer with a string duet that would sound more appropriate at a funeral. The second is a snide, whispered drubbing of what sounds like King Henry VIII dubbed over a reggae-influenced, upbeat track. Despite these worthy efforts, though, the complete effort is lacking in unified vision and focus.

Cale himself admits these failings, despite originally having high hopes for the album. His approach to the compositions was unique in that he did not sit down and write them out, but rather dubbed multiple tracks in the studio after the fact, an approach he presents as a much better alternative to “sitting around in an ivory tower and just waiting around for ten years.”¹³⁵ However, the short time available in which to work with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, which recorded the orchestral tracks, disturbed this process and sent him in a direction he did not intend. In the end, in what he must have thought the ultimate insult, he thought the album “was a paltry excuse ... wishy-washy Vaughan Williams stuff.”¹³⁶ His goal in orchestral writing, which again he did not achieve, was a Romantic sound idealized by composers like Sibelius, Brahms, or Mahler through their individual, personality-driven scores.¹³⁷ Cale would not attempt orchestral writing for another seventeen years.

After this disappointing venture back into art music, Cale returned once again to rock. During the period immediately before and after his move back to London in 1974, he released four albums one right after the other, *Paris 1919* (1973), *Fear* (1974), *Slow Dazzle* (1975), and *Helen of Troy* (1975). The first, *Paris 1919*, Cale recorded and released in the United States; it is perhaps his most accessible album. The work combines his open-sounding pop writing with slide

¹³⁵ Dave Demartino, “The Academic in Peril: John Cale Addresses the Inevitable,” *Creem* 13, no. 3 (1981): 59.

¹³⁶ Bockris, *What’s Welsh for Zen*, 139.

¹³⁷ Demartino, “Academic in Peril,” 59,

guitars and the occasional orchestral appearance. For the most part, the album is subdued and pleasant, reminiscent of early electric folk rock. In this context, the track “Macbeth,” appearing right in the middle of the album, stands out like a sore thumb, or at least a more exciting one. The track opens with a drumbeat and electric guitar sound that would not be out of place in an arena rock band, then progresses on to a chorus where Cale sings with an energy that pushes his voice more towards scream than sing.

Despite being out of place on that album, it was a sound that foreshadowed his later work, especially his very next release, *Fear*. The summer before the release of this album was a significant time in Cale’s collaborative career as on June 1, 1974, he recorded a live album with Nico, rock musician Kevin Ayers, and British musician and composer Brian Eno. Eno would prove a significant figure in Cale’s musical life and the two men collaborated on albums for almost the next twenty years. Cale himself points to Eno as being the most significant figure he met and worked with while in London.¹³⁸ Eno was also a fan of Cale’s work, being a long-time fan of the Velvet Underground. The two men had vastly different work ethics and methods, but enjoyed their collaboration, thus sparking Cale’s creativity.

Brian Eno is a formidable force in both twentieth-century art and popular music. He got his start in the music world in the late 1960s while in school at St. Joseph’s College in England. Before graduating in 1969, he performed in the Scratch Orchestra run by Cornelius Cardew, the man who introduced Cale to Fluxus and performance art. Two years later, he performed frequently with the infamous Portsmouth Sinfonia, producing their first two albums. In 1970, Eno joined the rock group Roxy Music, thus participating in both worlds of music. However, Eno is most known today for his avant-garde production techniques and experimental ventures

¹³⁸ Bockris, *What’s Welsh for Zen*, 153.

into electronic ambient music. Eno saw himself as an artist and composer, functioning solely in the realm of electronic technology, as he could not read music. In fact, he went so far as to call his studio practices a “compositional tool,” citing the ability to work directly with the sound, leaving no space between the composer and the finished product.¹³⁹ When credited for his contributions on various albums, including *Fear* by John Cale, no instruments or specific titles like “engineer” are listed. Instead, he is credited as contributing “Eno,” or his own specific take on the production process. These approaches to studio production put him in high demand in the popular music world, and he produced historically significant albums by artists like the Talking Heads, U2, Devo, and Coldplay.

Fear was the second of six albums on which Cale’s and Eno’s names would both appear, and the first time Eno contributed to one of Cale’s solo albums. Cale not only pulled Eno into this project, but also Phil Manzanera, the current lead guitarist for Roxy Music. Cale states his intentions in grouping together these musicians in his autobiography: “I still surrounded myself with talented musicians and producers, thus assuring a continued creativity and originality which might otherwise have been allowed to stagnate.”¹⁴⁰ This combination of Eno’s production skills with Cale’s ideas creates a near perfect combination of skills. However, Cale is quick, though perhaps too quick, to reassure his audiences that Eno’s contributions did not overshadow his own. He claims, whether rightly or not, that Eno was merely a “musical adviser to one of his self-confessed idols.”¹⁴¹ Regardless of the specific level of the guest musician’s contributions, the album is likely better for his presence as Cale seems to function most creatively when he has

¹³⁹ Brian Eno, “The Studio as Compositional Tool,” In *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, edited by Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner (New York and London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006), 129.

¹⁴⁰ Bockris, *What’s Welsh for Zen*, 153.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

other musicians off which to bounce ideas. An anecdote from one of the album's recording sessions exemplifies this:

"We need some brass in there to answer it ... pah PAH ... pah PAAH," says Cale. "Can we get a French horn in?" "Do it on the organ," says Eno fervently, "Use the brass stop." "No, man," says Cale, "Real instruments are always better than the electronic version."¹⁴²

One example from the album that highlights the best product of their collaboration is the song "Gun." In the conception of the track, Cale returned to his aesthetic of presenting recorded material in the fashion of live material. It was, he said, "a blueprint for improvisation on stage."¹⁴³ The sound of the track is distinctly reminiscent of *White Light/White Heat* in its storytelling lyrics accompanied by feedback- and distortion-ridden guitar parts. Its eight-minute length recalls the extended form of "Sister Ray" as the intensity of the sound slowly grows and progresses. Manzanera's minutes-long solo in the middle of the track embraces all the chaos, if not all the fury, of that Velvets track. Long-time music critic Robert Christgau said the solo was "a landmark of six-string aleatoric."¹⁴⁴ Other highlights of the album showcase Cale's ironic sense of humor. "The Man Who Couldn't Afford to Orgy" combines a Beach Boys-esque innocent surf rock sound with layers of sexuality, especially through the voice of guest vocalist Judy Nylon, a female denizen of 70s punk rock. In the music of this album, Cale makes it clear that pop music is no longer just an experiment for him; he is actually quite good at it.

His next two albums, *Slow Dazzle* and *Helen of Troy*, released soon after *Fear*, were also musical successes, if not financial ones. Brian Eno contributed to both these albums as well.

¹⁴² Mick Gold, "White Light to Grey Eminence: The Mysterious Journey of John Cale," *Creem* 6, no. 5 (1964): 95.

¹⁴³ Bockris, *What's Welsh for Zen*, 153.

¹⁴⁴ Robert Christgau, "John Cale," RobertChristgau.com, Accessed April 2, 2012, http://www.robertchristgau.com/get_artist.php?name=John+Cale.

Highlights of the first album are “Mr. Wilson,” a tribute to Brian Wilson of the Beach Boys, “Guts,” a surprisingly lighthearted take on his wife’s infidelity with former collaborator Kevin Ayers, and Cale’s own manic take on the classic “Heartbreak Hotel.” This album, according to Cale, was an exercise in writing singles, which perhaps explains why the album lacks some of the interest of *Fear*.¹⁴⁵ The next release, *Helen of Troy*, regains some of Cale’s former experimental sounds. On the title track, Cale’s voice crawls through the vocals accompanied by a grungy, punctuated guitar part. Towards the end, the music dissolves into a chaotic mess of distortion and reverb. The album also included a cover of “Pablo Picasso,” written originally by Modern Lovers founder Jonathan Richman. Together, these three albums, released over such a short period of time, were musically the highlight of Cale’s solo career.

Just after *Helen of Troy* was a six-year gap between that album and his next studio album, a time filled primarily with live tours. His live sound during this time was recorded and preserved on the album *Sabotage/Live*, recorded in 1979 at CBGB in New York. The kind of sound he prepared for with songs like “Gun” is obviously apparent in this recording. His attitude is upfront and snotty, the guitar is grungy and dirty, and every song has significant sections of improvisation. The title track, “Sabotage,” contains all these aspects but with the kind of creative layering heard on Nico’s *Marble Index*. Each part is playing a different rhythm, spaced over different parts of the bar, but the result is cohesive enough to continue to carry the overarching punk rock aesthetic of the performance. His aggressive style, as heard clearly in the 1970s, marked the height of Cale’s performance career. New York Times reviewer John Rockwell said as much in a review of a 1976 Cale performance: “All John Cale had to do was put together a

¹⁴⁵ Bockris, *What’s Welsh for Zen*, 156.

band and automatically he becomes one of the leading figures on the whole New York art-punk-rock scene.”¹⁴⁶

Another track from *Sabotage*, “Chickenshit,” hints at the direction in which Cale’s live performances would turn. The song directly recalls the sound of *White Light*’s “The Gift,” as Cale spins the story of the time he cut the head off a chicken and threw its body into the crowd. These antics were directly related to his heavy drug use, especially cocaine, and he admits as much in his interview with the BBC. In that interview, he shows a video of one of his 1984 performances, just before the birth of his daughter and his subsequent decision to get clean. “There I was trying to create an exciting performance,” he admitted, “and it was just shambolic.”¹⁴⁷ Rockwell, who had previously praised Cale so thoroughly, was equally harsh when he reviewed a 1982 concert, saying that Cale’s performance was far below his previous showmanship, and the concert in general was “one for sad reminiscence.”¹⁴⁸

In 1985, when Cale’s first child Eden was born to his third wife, Rise Irushalmi, he got sober, giving up both drugs and alcohol. As part of this life-changing experience, he gave up recording and touring for a year, deciding, when that was over, to start writing classical music again. He began with a string quartet, commissioned by the Massachusetts College of Art, and continued with incidental dance music commissioned by the Randy Warshaw Dance Company. During this time, his interest in Welsh poet Dylan Thomas was resurrected, and Cale chose to set four of his poems in *The Falklands Suite*, a name inspired by Cale’s opposition to the 1982

¹⁴⁶ John Rockwell, *Outsider: John Rockwell on the Arts, 1967-2006* (Pompton Plains: Limelight Editions, 2006), 102.

¹⁴⁷ “Shambolic Drug Past,” BBC.co.uk.

¹⁴⁸ John Rockwell, “Rock: Three at the Kitchen,” *Nytimes.com*, Accessed April 2, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/1982/09/11/arts/rock-three-at-the-kitchen.html>.

Falklands War. This writing process took more time than Cale had spent on any of his previous albums, likely because of his desire to do his childhood literary hero justice.¹⁴⁹

This suite eventually became his first solo album after gaining sobriety, *Words for the Dying*, released in 1989. The complete work included *The Falklands Suite*, two orchestral interludes, two solo piano pieces he called “Songs Without Words,” and another piece named “The Soul of Carmen Miranda.” The music is solidly tonal, combining tonal, neo-Romanticism with pop-inspired rhythms, melodies, and orchestrations. Cale’s Dylan Thomas settings, the pieces that made up “The Falklands Suite,” come across more as orchestrated folk-inspired pop songs than orchestral art songs, especially through tracks like “There Was a Saviour.” It is only the orchestral interludes and “Songs Without Words” that sound like pure “art” music, though they come across as amateurish and forced. The final track, “Carmen Miranda,” makes little sense in the context of the album, but is perhaps the most creative among them. Perhaps collaboration is yet again the reason for this success, as Brian Eno had joined forced with Cale yet again to both play keyboards on this track and produce the entire album.

This collaboration highlighted the different working processes of the two men, a fact explored thoroughly in the documentary *Words for the Dying*, made about the creation of the album. It is in the very first scene of this film that the difference is made clear. Eno is sitting in a chair, preparing to answer a question, and Rob Nilsson, the director, is in a headstand a few feet away. Nilsson asks Eno why he has been fighting the filming process, not wanting to be taped while working. Eno points out Nilsson’s unexpected position, claiming that “it’s this kind of behavior that you don’t want going on in a recording studio.” The camera then cuts over to Cale,

¹⁴⁹ Bockris, *What’s Welsh for Zen*, 218.

who is sitting on a nearby couch and laughing uncontrollably.¹⁵⁰ In a later interview, he called the film “a big distraction,” but continued on to explain that “John [Cale] loves distractions, he thrives on them.”¹⁵¹

This statement may perhaps explain the entirety of Cale’s body of work after the Velvets. The drugs and the collaborations could definitely function as distractions. The first pulls one out of their own minds, adding elements of unreality that distract from reality. The second also pulls one out of himself, but in a different way. If two people are involved in an artistic project, one of the other cannot isolate themselves, relying solely on his own mental process. Instead, he must integrate what the other is saying, thus possibly becoming distracted from the creative path that might have resulted from solo work. Finally, if Cale’s statement about his self-defined identity as a classical music composer is to be believed, popular music in general may have been a distraction for him. If he truly believes his processes are solely rooted in classical music and expression of that aesthetic, anything else would be a diversion from that path. His self-definition, however, means that his popular music must be examined as a manifestation of his art music aesthetic.

¹⁵⁰ *Words for the Dying*, Directed by Rob Nilsson. 1990 (Provocateur Pictures, 2008) DVD.

¹⁵¹ Mark Prendergast, “Brian Eno: Breaking the Silence,” *Sound on Sound* 5, no. 12 (1990).

Conclusion

"I only hope that one day John will be recognized as ... the Beethoven or something of his day. He knows so much about music, he's such a great musician. He's completely mad - but that's because he's Welsh."¹⁵²

Overall, the popular music genre in which Cale seemed to have the most impact was punk rock, a genre often defined as having begun in about 1974, when the Ramones first appeared in New York.¹⁵³ Bands like the Velvet Underground, the Stooges, and Patti Smith are labeled “proto-punk,” figures whose work pre-figured punk rock or influenced its final form. However, it seems more likely that punk rock really did begin with the Velvet Underground. According to Reebee Garofalo, “punk’s maxim was: whatever is popular, do the opposite,” a slogan the Velvets embodied perfectly. Their music, lyrically and musically, was the opposite of popular and their stage performance sought to disturb, not attract. The stage presence of Iggy Pop, frontman for the Stooges, sent a similar message, one that flipped an often not-so-subtle middle finger to common popular music performance practice. Patti Smith’s use of spoken word and her personal lifestyle also places her solidly within the boundaries of “punk” that Garofalo attempts to establish. It makes little sense, then, that these artists are excluded from a genre they seem to perfectly manifest. The genre itself contains widely varied types of punk music, from the repetition of the Ramones to the virtuosity of the Damned. The inclusion of groups like the

¹⁵² Hans Werksman, *Fear Is a Man’s Best Friend*, Last modified 2012, <http://werksman.home.xs4all.nl/cale.html>.

¹⁵³ Garofalo, *Rockin’ Out*, 260.

Velvets or the Stooges would simply add another layer to the complexity of the genre that is punk rock.

The problem seems to present itself as a result of a faulty definition of “punk” – one that includes groups like the Ramones to the exclusion of the previously mentioned artists. I would argue that these earlier groups were not “proto-punk,” but in fact punk, and later artists canonized as punk were self-conscious parodies of the genre’s true roots. These roots, as seen in the supposed “proto-punk” groups, are distinctly avant-garde. Punk rock itself could be seen as an avant-garde genre at its core. The music is descended, for the most part, from avant-garde musical genres or practices. Minimalism is an aesthetic most obviously present in the music, especially that of the Velvet Underground. The ideal – to produce as much sound with as few resources as possible – became a staple of punk rock. Groups like the Ramones exemplified this minimalist approach by using simple chord structures and even simpler song forms while still exuding a great deal of energy and sound. This sheer quantity of sound, often described as noise, also has its roots in the avant-garde, specifically Young’s drone groups, though an appreciation for the musical possibilities inherent in all sound dates back to Luigi Russolo and the Italian Futurists of the early twentieth century. As John Lydon of the Sex Pistols put it, “I’m not a musician. I’m a noise structuralist.”¹⁵⁴ Within the realm of popular music, then, punk music is clearly an avant-garde genre. Thurston Moore, lead singer of the experimental rock group Sonic Youth, also saw the avant-garde in punk rock, especially punk in New York, when he said, “The genuine tradition of New York bands was art rock, with punk being merely just one of its aspects. In a certain light, even the Ramones, who presented such a complete, high-concept package, could be viewed and surely were by the boho brain trust, as some kind of performance-

¹⁵⁴ Bill Martin, *Avant Rock* (Chicago and La Salle: Open Court, 2002), 90.

art piece.”¹⁵⁵ Punk artists like the Velvets and those who followed after them pushed musical boundaries both formally and conceptually while simultaneously questioning the role of popular music in society.

Beyond the music, punk also incorporated many aspects of 1960s performance art, once again a connection first established by the Velvets and their involvement with Warhol’s EPI performances. Punk rock performance echoes the attitude of Young’s *X for Henry Flynt* (“Repeat a loud, heavy sound every one or two seconds as uniformly and as regularly as possible for a long period of time”) or Cale’s own *Plant Piece* (Scream at a potted plant until it dies.), it simply implements the concept in a different way. For example, Iggy Pop was known to smear himself with peanut butter or raw meat during performances, attempting to provoke the same reaction that Cale’s piece likely received from his earlier audiences. Malcolm McLaren had a similar approach in his management of the Sex Pistols, carefully constructing their image so the band would communicate an image and aesthetic along with their music. Tony Conrad later commented on this aggressive aesthetic and the relationship between Cale and Lou Reed:

[Cale] was moving at a very very fast pace away from a classical training background through the avant-garde and into performance art and then rock. It was phenomenal for Lou [Reed] considering his interest in what would be referred to today as punk – somebody who is really living rock and is interested in an extremely aggressive assertive position – to discover that classical musicians and avant-garde artists were also engaged in that.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁵ Thurston Moore and Byron Coley, *No Wave: Post-Punk, Underground, New York, 1976-1980* (New York: Abrams Image, 2008), 6.

¹⁵⁶ Bockris, *Up-tight*, 18.

The pursuit of this aesthetic continued after the Velvets, but the practices are distinctly rooted in performance art and the avant-garde.

Cale is therefore an overwhelmingly important figure in the evolution of punk rock, a position the popular music canon has thus denied him. It was his background in experimental art music that instructed him in the aesthetic ideals that would prove so fundamental to the punk rock genre. His musical contributions to the Velvets combined art and popular music to a level previously unforeseen and so arresting in its nature that it continues to prove influential even today. As Robert Palmer wrote, “The era *The Velvet Underground and Nico* calls up is our present one. ... It is a tribute to music so radical it seems scarcely to have aged at all.”¹⁵⁷ It was even his connections to the underground arts scene in New York City that allowed the Velvets to form the connections they needed to have the kind of artistic freedom that enabled their musical experimentation. He was the buffer between the art music avant-garde and the aggressive pop songwriting of Reed, a combination that resulted in punk rock.

Cale’s music and the band’s approach to musical performance also influenced many experimental rock musicians, especially those who comprised the no-wave movement in New York City in the 1980s. Though similar in sound to punk rock, their musical approach tended to be much more experimental, as seen especially in the guitar music of Glenn Branca, who worked with alternate tunings and drone, and Rhys Chatham, who was known for his “guitar orchestra” compositions. Descriptions of some of the sounds these musicians produced are eerily similar to Cale’s descriptions of his first experiments with electronic noise and distortion. Johnny Dynell, who performed with DNA, said, “My bass (which never had more than two strings) was also just a noise generator. I had it hooked up to flangers and phase shifters and anything else that would

¹⁵⁷ Robert Palmer, *Rock & Roll: An Unruly History* (New York: Harmony, 199), 231, 232.

make noise. When I played, it was like a jumbo jet taking off.”¹⁵⁸ One of the most important bands to appear in the course of this movement was Sonic Youth, who first performed at New York City’s 1981 Noise Fest. Moore, co-founder of the group, later said, “The ‘existence’ of La Monte Young was influential. I had no idea what his music sounded like until later, and at that point we were already playing music that was coming out of his lineage anyway. I found it really beautiful, but it didn’t change my world. It had already changed my world through others.”¹⁵⁹ One of the “others” he refers to was certainly Cale and his influence on the Velvets.

Cale’s aesthetic approach came through also in the albums he produced, especially The Stooges’ first release and Patti Smith’s *Horses*. He recognized in Iggy Pop the same drive to incite that appeared constantly in his own musical career. His decision to produce the band helped carry them forward and, according to Garofalo, “[create] a direct link between the Stooges and the Velvet Underground.”¹⁶⁰ In this case, however, that Cale produced the album and Lou Reed and the rest of the Velvets had nothing to do with the Stooges’ final product. Cale is the one creating these early punk connections, not the Velvet Underground as a group. Cale’s avant-garde musical aesthetic comes through even more clearly on *Horses*. Smith’s execution is raw and unapologetic, a trait she likely inherited from her own performance art experiences, and the musical texture, that of a shifting tapestry of sound serving as backdrop to the centralized voice, is one Cale himself attempted to implement with both the Velvets and Nico. He wanted the artists he worked with to push past limitations imposed by either society or themselves and create something challenging and exciting—something avant-garde.

¹⁵⁸ Moore, *No Wave*, 31.

¹⁵⁹ Sarig, *Secret History of Rock*, 18.

¹⁶⁰ Garofalo, *Rockin’ Out*, 258.

What is the place of the avant-garde in music history, whether art or popular? How should this music be integrated into the canon? Obviously, musicologists have already begun building the place of the twentieth-century avant-garde in our modern canon. Names like Arnold Schoenberg and Steve Reich are now common and expected in even the most mainstream of Western music history survey courses. However, there does seem to be a discrepancy, especially in the music of the last half-century, in *which* avant-garde musicians are to be selected for canonization. For example, Reich has been solidly canonized while Young, who began composing minimalist music at least five years before the former, has been relatively neglected in the canon.¹⁶¹ Similarly, Jimi Hendrix, whose fame was established by his avant-garde approach to the electric guitar, is given more recognition than the Velvets, though Peter Hogan claims that “it’s almost impossible to overestimate the influence of the Velvet Underground upon the rock music of the last forty years.”¹⁶²

It is likely that this discrepancy has a great deal to do with accessibility and popularity, especially in the popular music canon. Reich’s music, like his *Music for 18 Musicians*, is far more accessible than, for example, Young’s *Trio for Strings*. Hendrix’s music is also more readily accessible than the Velvets’, even though both engage in noise and aleatoric techniques. Because of this accessibility, the former works are much more popular, a fact that propels them quickly into the canon. The writers who help determine canon seem to hold back on the less popular material, waiting for the “test of time.” This test seems to be arbitrary when the influence of these less-popular artists has already been widely acknowledged.

As mentioned in the introduction, it is also difficult to canonize artists who work in multiple genres or even multiple fields. This difficulty grows exponentially in the postmodern

¹⁶¹ Jeremy Yudkin, *Understanding Music*, (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2010).

¹⁶² Hogan, *Rough Guide*, 261.

era as artistic and musical movements are no longer linear and progressive, but circular and constantly overlapping with other movements. Young is an example of this overlap as it is difficult to discern whether his work is conceptually inspired music or musically inspired concept art. Many contemporary composers, especially those in New York City, are similarly integrating popular and art music forms, music, and performance practice. Similarly, is Cale an art music composer or a popular musician? Is he both? This musical diversity, while admittedly difficult to contextualize, does not negate his importance. If anything, it increases the significance of Cale's work. Musical canon, however, seems to disagree, catering primarily to popularity or perceived stylistic influence.

Issues like these necessitate a closer look at the idea of "genre" itself. When styles are progressive, moving from one distinct sound to the next, it is fairly simple to categorize artists into genres. When styles lose their evolutionary tendencies, instead becoming smaller circles of individuals who share a common ideal or approach, it problematizes the very idea of genre. In these cases, genre becomes less an auditory or compositional style and more a common mindset or community. Punk, for example, encompasses many different types of rock music, though they are all united by their mindset of negation, of pushing against what is popular. With this approach, "avant-garde" itself becomes a genre, one that unites many different styles and techniques under the banner of innovation. John Cale's music, whether art or popular, epitomizes avant-garde.

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