

performers

# THE VELVET UNDERGROUND

The induction of the Velvet Underground into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame is the culmination of the band's slow, strange, inexorable rise to its rightful place in posterity. The Velvets' extraordinary transformation from openly reviled pop antichrists and chart exiles to universally hailed – and widely loved – pioneers of catalytic guitar violence, art-house idealism and fearless lyric candor has taken three decades. It was on Nov. 11, 1965, that the group's classic, groundbreaking lineup – singer, guitarist and songwriter Lou Reed; bassist, keyboardist and viola player John Cale; guitarist Sterling Morrison; and drummer Maureen Tucker – made its official live debut at a high school gig in Summit, N.J. The Velvets got to play only three songs and were paid \$75.

But the Velvets were always in it for the long haul.

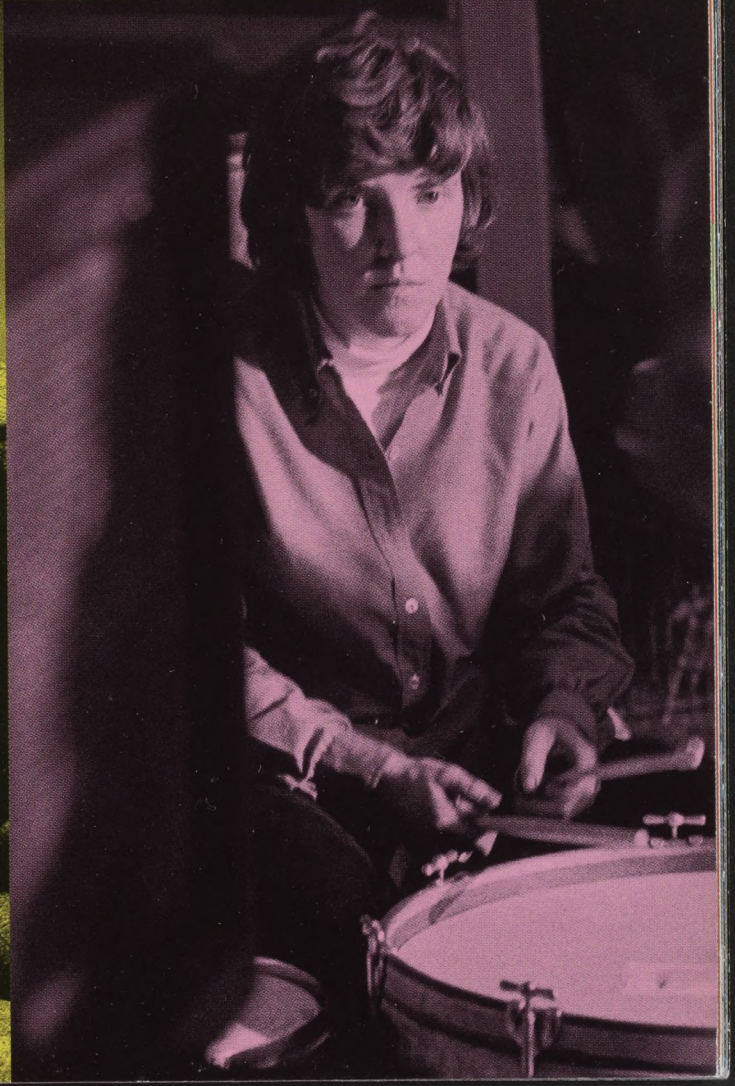
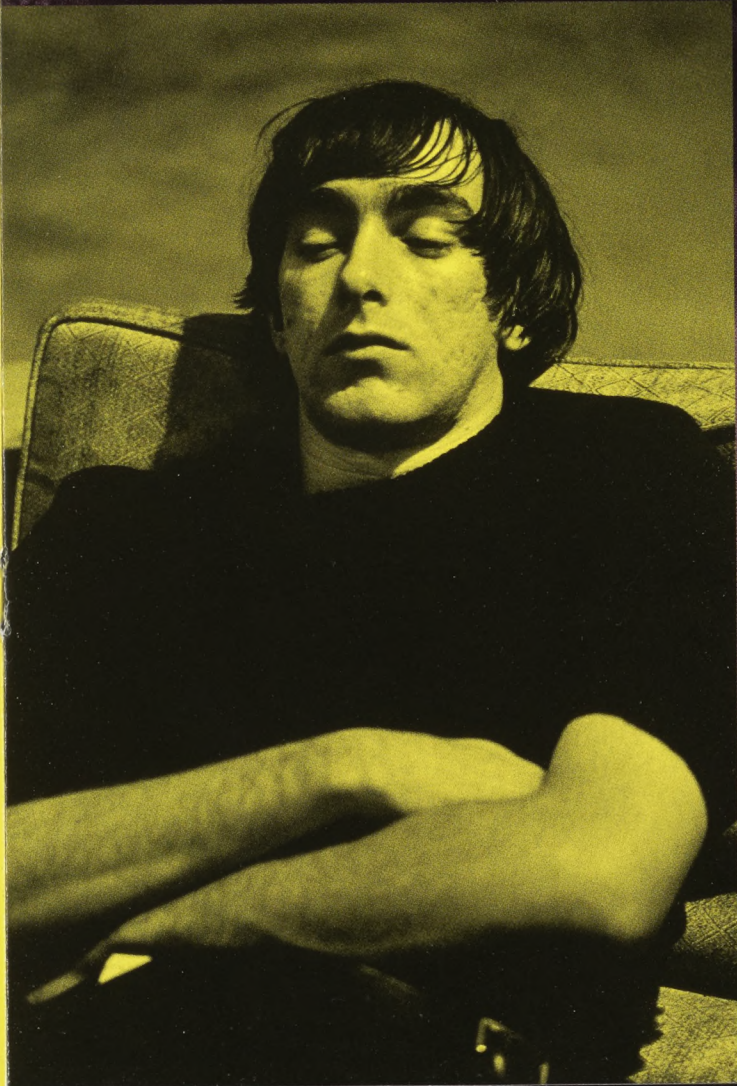
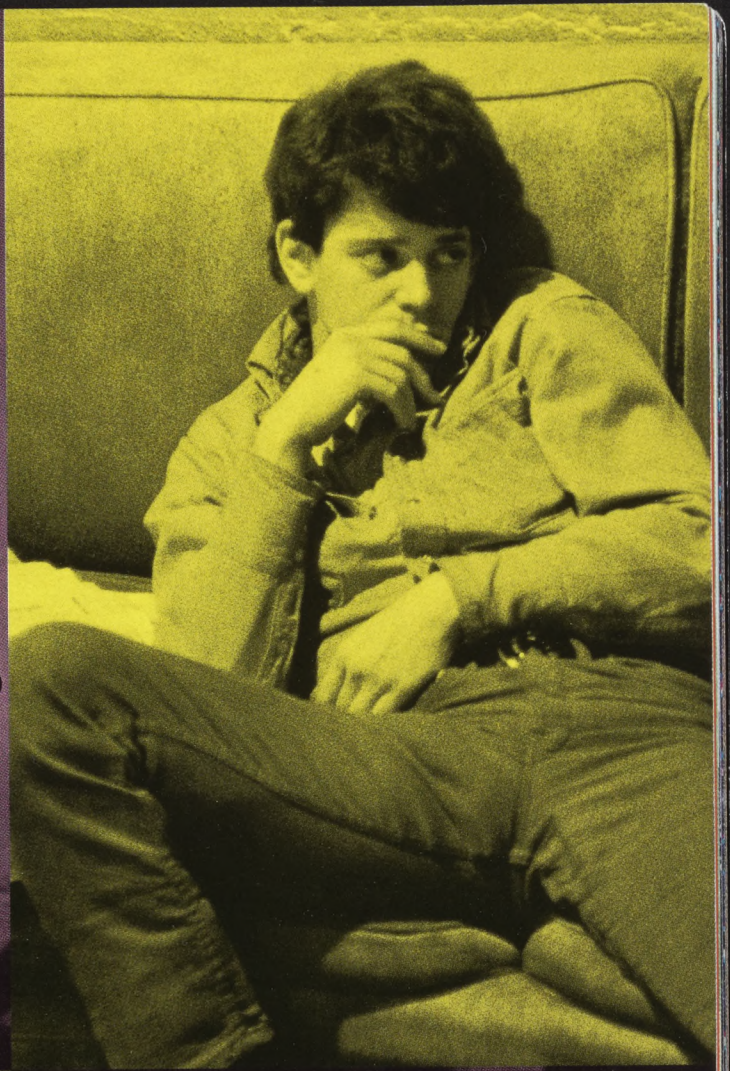
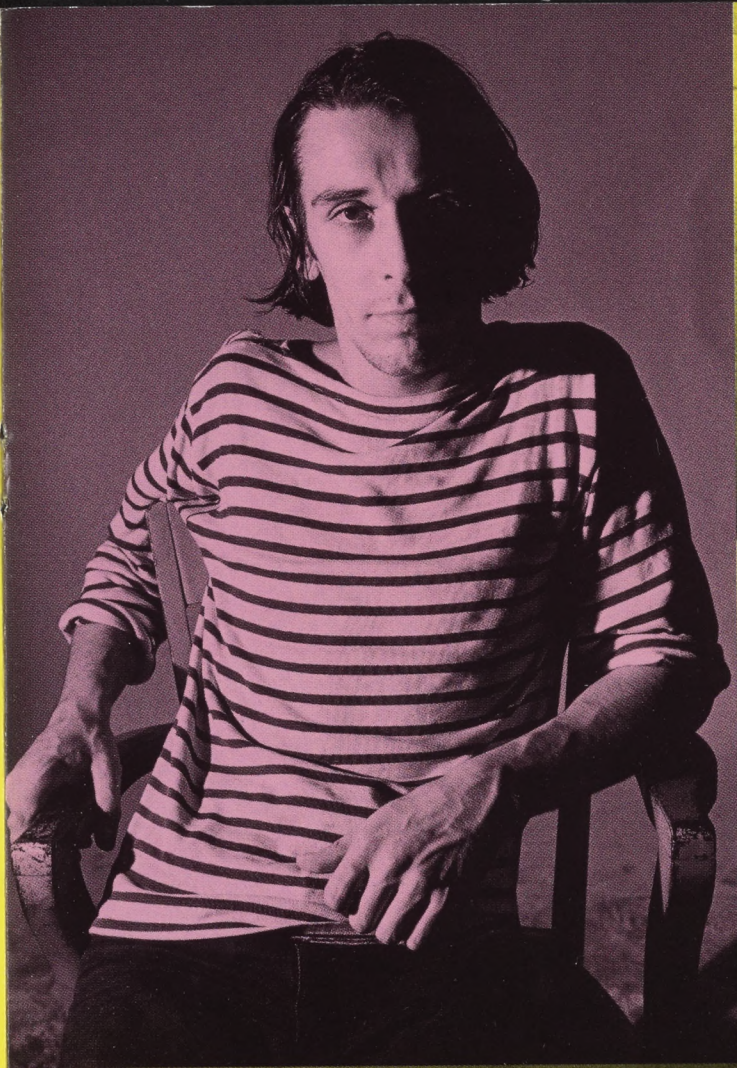
In their five years as a working band – from their first flush of notoriety in early '66 as the house combo for Andy Warhol's traveling pop-art circus, the Exploding Plastic Inevitable, to August 1970, when Reed abruptly left the group during a legendary residency at Max's Kansas City, in New York – the Velvet Underground dared with an almost reckless enthusiasm to liberate rock & roll from arrested adolescence. They aspired to the higher grounds of art and literature, addressing drug addiction, sexual deviance and the harsh realities of the decade's high times with reportorial frankness and explored the orchestral possibilities of guitar distortion and droning feedback. Even in a rock & roll era continually shaken and reshaped by the rapid-fire innovations of Bob Dylan, Brian Wilson and the Beatles, the Velvets distinguished themselves as poetic extremists, daring to marry the seemingly contradictory joys of free jazz, the classical avant-garde, doo-wop, folk-noir balladry and primal R&B into a singular music of corrosive vitality and deep, at times painful personal spirituality.

Many of the biggest stars and prime movers in rock & roll during the last 30 years have been ardent VU disciples, and among them are David Bowie, Patti Smith, Brian Eno, Talking Heads, R.E.M., U2, Henry Rollins and Sonic Youth. For many bands – known and unknown – covering a Velvets song is like a rite of passage; one of Nirvana's early recordings was a version of "Here She Comes Now," on a 1991 VU tribute album.

During VU's lifetime, however, the band members were forced to labor as prophets without honor. The original chart stats confirm Sterling Morrison's

At the Factory: John Cale, Lou Reed, Maureen Tucker and Sterling Morrison (clockwise from top left)





PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEPHEN SHORE, FROM THE BOOK THE VELVET YEARS: WARHOL'S FACTORY 1965-67, TEXT BY LYNN TILLMAN, THUNDER'S MOUTH PRESS



rather tart observation that the Velvet Underground “never had an agenda for success.” Two of the group’s four original studio albums, *The Velvet Underground and Nico* (1967) and *White Light/White Heat* (1968), made dismal showings on *Billboard*’s Top 200 – peaking at 171 and 199, respectively. *The Velvet Underground*, which was released in 1969, and *Loaded*, recorded in the summer of ’70 and issued after Reed left the band, never charted at all. But in steadfastly refusing to compromise what they truly believed to be the enduring art and soul of their music, the Velvets established ruling standards for creative possibility and aesthetic purity that long outlived the original group.

They were unlikely rock & roll heroes. A former English and drama student who had been a confidant of the poet Delmore Schwartz, New York’s Brooklyn-born and Long Island-raised Lou Reed was working as an assembly-line songwriter at Pickwick Records and trying to form a group to promote his latest creation – a dance tune called “The Ostrich” – when he met John Cale in 1964. A native of Wales, Cale came to pop music via the European classical tradition. He wrote his first symphonies as a student at art college in London, and after going to Tanglewood to study modern composition on a Leonard Bernstein scholarship, Cale moved to New York City, where he joined composer LaMonte Young’s improvisation ensemble the Dream Syndicate and developed the style of harmonic droning and serrated viola shriek that would become Cale’s instrumental trademark.

Cale and Reed actually did the faux-Beatles thing as the Primitives a couple of times. But after Cale heard some of the songs that Reed had written on his own time, including the powerful junkie’s hymn “Heroin,” the two agreed to start a real band together, ultimately naming the group after a book about sadomasochism. In early 1965, they recruited Sterling Morrison, another Long Islander and a Syracuse University classmate of Reed’s who had a potent, understated style of guitar playing. When their original percussionist, Angus MacLise, quit on the eve of the Summit High School show, the Velvets turned to Maureen Tucker, the younger sister of Morrison’s Syracuse roommate. Tucker’s propulsive, pulsebeat style of drumming was part Charlie Watts, part Africana.

Under the protective tutelage of manager and producer Warhol and with the short-lived addition of the vocalist Nico, a stunning blond Euro-beauty with a drop-dead Dietrich-esque delivery, the Velvets in the spring of ’66 recorded their first album. It wasn’t released until nearly a year later and was subsequently crushed by the hubbub over the Beatles’ *Sgt. Pepper*’s LP. Nevertheless, *The Velvet Underground and Nico* (often referred to as the banana album, after Warhol’s unforgettable – and peelable – cover art) still stands as one of the most important and influential albums in rock. It is a primer for nearly everything that has subsequently happened in glitter rock, punk and alternative music – “We were trying to do a Phil Spector thing with as few instruments as possible,” Cale once said – and features many of Reed’s most famous songs, including “All Tomorrow’s Parties,” “Femme Fatale,” “Venus in Furs” and “I’m Waiting for the Man.” (Nico left the group in the spring of ’67 and recorded several brilliant solo albums during the next two decades; she died of head injuries sustained in a bicycle accident in 1988.)

Ironically, the banana album’s failure to sell and the band’s growing estrangement from Warhol meant that the Velvets – already marginalized by the music-business establishment and largely ignored by the mainstream rock audience – were truly free to go their own way. Recorded in September 1967, *White Light/White Heat* was an unrepentant exercise in guitar holocaust, cut at a time of intense frustration over the band’s commercial hard luck and increasing tension between Reed and Cale (who left in September 1968 and was replaced by bassist Doug Yule). With the whispery intimacy and bittersweet melodic nuance of their mostly acoustic third album, the Velvets proved that they could make heated drama without a big noise. And although it was recorded as the band was literally falling apart – Tucker was on sabbatical, pregnant with her first child; Morrison had resumed his English studies between shows and sessions – the classicist-pop radiance of *Loaded* and straightforward passion of Reed’s songwriting (“Rock & Roll,” “Sweet Jane,” the gorgeous ballad “New Age”) testified to the healing, liberating spirit that had always been at the heart of the Velvets’ music.

It was still there in 1993 when Reed, Cale, Morrison and Tucker reunited for a short but historic and critically acclaimed tour of Europe. (Morrison died in August 1995 after a long battle with non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma.) It has always been there in the group’s rich, diverse catalog of solo and collaborative projects. And it lives on in the work of those artists and bands who continue to be influenced and inspired by the music and integrity of the Velvet Underground. “I belong to the generation,” the late critic Lester Bangs once wrote, “for whom the Velvet Underground was our Beatles and Dylan combined.” The Velvets now join them in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame – where they belong.

—David Fricke

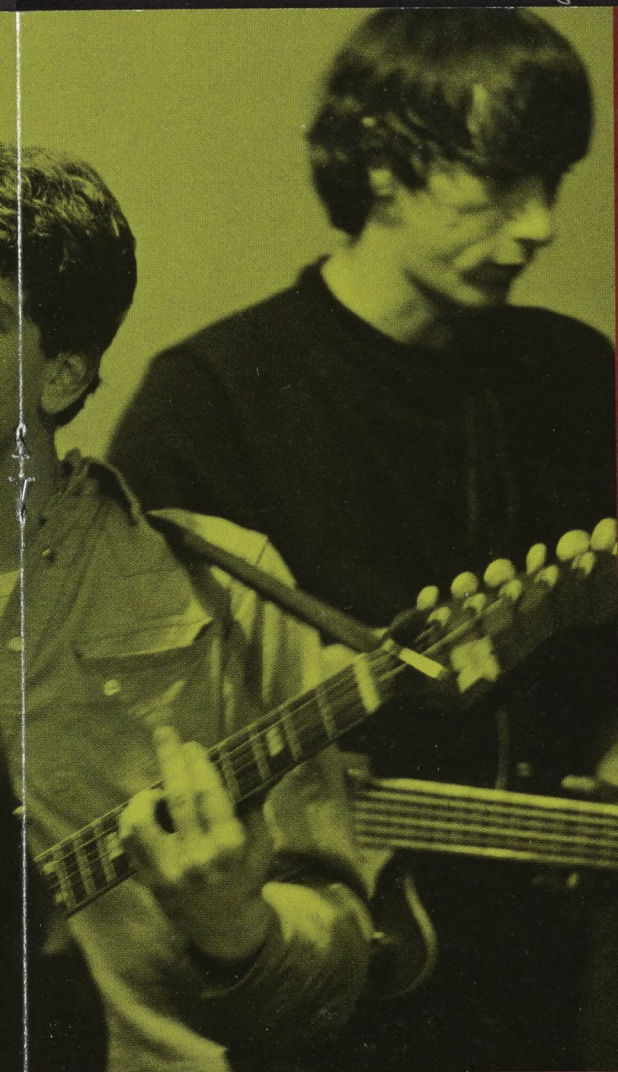
**Clockwise from top left: John Cale, Lou Reed and Sterling Morrison (from left); Cale and Tucker; Tucker** poised to pound; Reed with Nico, who was the guest chanteuse on the group’s debut album.

## THE VELVET

UNDERGROUND











# THE BIRTH OF PUNK

Fast-forward from the Velvet Underground and Detroit's MC5 and Stooges to the music of the '70s and the roots of Nirvana, et al.

Oh, God, rock & roll had become so awful – there really was a song that went, “disco, disco duck!” And on the radio stations there were these stoned-out DJs playing this horribly sensitive folk rock! Folk rock. God, what a concept – hippies moaning about riding through the

Proto-glam in the boys' room – the New York Dolls in the lounge at the Santa Monica Civic Center, circa 1972: David Johansen, Sylvain Sylvain, Jerry Nolan, Arthur Kane and Johnny Thunders (from left)





PHOTOGRAPH BY BOB GRUEN/STAR FILE



desert on a horse with no name (it felt good to get out of the rain).

But just when things looked their bleakest, a handful of desperadoes emerged – Patti Smith, David Johansen, Joey Ramone, Johnny Rotten, Johnny Thunders, Sid Vicious – looking for its turn in the rock & roll spotlight. Here were kids who grew up on the bad-boy fantasies of the Rolling Stones, the Who, Jimi Hendrix and the Doors – but when they came of age, it was too late.

Rock & roll had become so corporate that it no longer made room for the outlaws who gave birth to the music. So this group of malcontents banded together, created its own scene, and in the process of returning rock & roll to the gutter (where it belonged), it created punk – a new American folk art that flourishes until this day.

Punk had its origins with the Velvet Underground. British bands, meanwhile, were singing poppy love songs, and San Francisco groups like the Grateful Dead and Jefferson Airplane were playing bright, positive rock & roll that imagined a world in peace and harmony.

In stark contrast, the Velvet Underground's songs were straight observations on how things *were*, not of things *hoped for*. And that perspective scared people. The Velvets wore black leather; the hippies dressed in colors. The Velvets read Genet, took speed and included homosexuality; the hippies were into free love, Khalil Gibran and LSD.



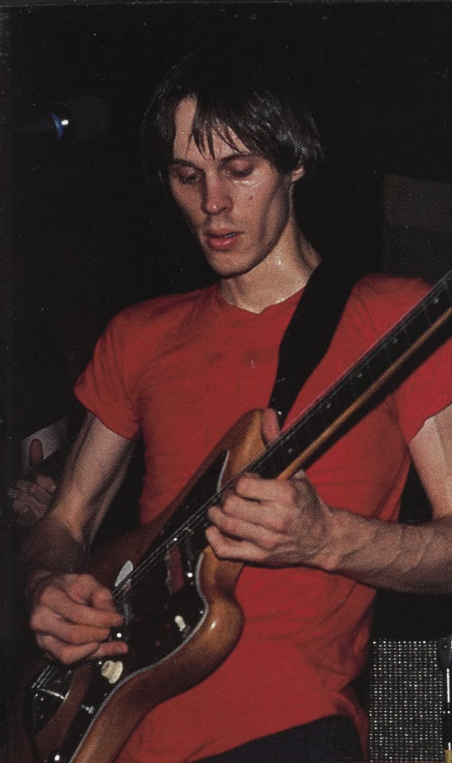
## PUNK

For a time, the hippie culture won out. But in Ann Arbor, Mich., two bands, Iggy and the Stooges and the MC5, learned from the Velvets (and certainly from avant-garde jazz musicians like Sun Ra and Coltrane) and continued to push rock to its most abusive extremes. As Danny Fields, who signed both bands to Elektra, put it, "It was the music I'd been waiting to hear all my life."

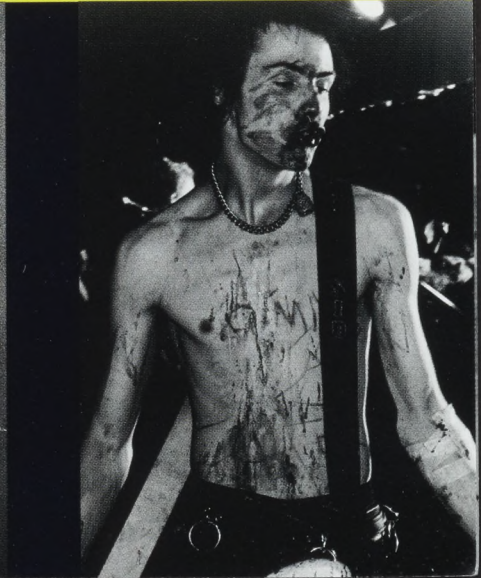
Unfortunately, not many people felt the same way. But there were some fans, mostly living in New York City, and it seemed like all of them who heard this new music immediately went out and started their own bands. A new generation – spawned by the wit, raw power and manic drone of the Velvets and the Stooges – gathered at two Manhattan clubs, Max's Kansas City and CBGB. By 1975 this disparate group of rockers, including the Patti Smith Group, Television and the Ramones, had come together under the banner of punk.

But if it weren't for Fields and rock journalist Lisa Robinson, this new music might never have made it off the Bowery. Fields signed on as the Ramones' manager, and Robinson – besides giving the new music exposure in her columns and magazines – took the record-company people by the hand downtown to experience the rebirth of rock





This page (clockwise from top left): Television's Tom Verlaine; Richard Hell of the Voidoids; the Sex Pistols doing what was expected of them; a bloody Sid Vicious; a glittery Iggy Pop; and the first meeting of recent tour mates Patti Smith and Bob Dylan backstage at the Bitter End, on New York's Bleecker Street, circa 1974.



Opposite page: Iggy Pop and the Stooges upstairs at Max's Kansas City in 1973. This short-lived lineup featured guitarists Ron Asheton (left) and James Williamson and drummer Scott Asheton.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHUCK PULIN, ROBERTA BAYLEY, BOB GRUEN/STAR FILE, BOB GRUEN/STAR FILE, GERARDO MALANGA, DANNY FIELDS (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT)

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DANNY FIELDS



& roll for themselves.

Most of the music-industry types couldn't wait to leave, with one notable exception: Sire's Seymour Stein, who signed the Ramones, Richard Hell and the Voidoids, Talking Heads and the Dead Boys within the next year and a half.

In a weird twist of fate, the breakup of the New York Dolls in 1975 also helped make punk an international phenomenon. Inspired by the Stooges, the MC5 and Bowiesque gender bending, the Dolls had been passed the torch by the Velvet Underground and were New York's greatest hope for taking the new music to mainstream audiences. With killer three-minute songs and a knack for outrageousness, the Dolls succeeded in returning sex, delinquency and street smarts to rock & roll.

Unfortunately, the Dolls fell on rough times and found themselves in Tampa, Fla., with a weirdo Englishman, Malcolm McLaren, managing them. But it was too late for the Dolls; their mock drag got them stigmatized as a "fag" band, and they never recovered from the signature look of lipstick, teased hair and high heels that was to become sine qua non for a generation of "hair" bands 10 years later.

In New York, after his failure in rock & roll management, McLaren was blown away when he walked into CBGBs during the summer of 1975 and saw a rock & roll vision with the name of Richard Hell. "Here was a guy all deconstructed," said McLaren, "as if he'd just crawled out of a drain hole and looking like no one gave a fuck about him — and like he didn't really give a fuck about you! He was this wonderful, bored, dirty guy with a torn T-shirt. And this look — there was no question that I'd take it back to London. But I was going to transform it into something more English."

But the thing that really pushed the music over the top was the Ramones' London debut. Just as McLaren was starting to manage a bunch of kids who hoisted small items from his clothing shop — he named them the Sex Pistols — the Ramones took to the stage at London's Round-

house Theater on July 4, 1976 (the 200th anniversary of you know what), and punk no longer needed any urging.

What had taken more than 10 years to break in America exploded in London within weeks after the Ramones showed how to do it. The members of the Clash, the Sex Pistols and Generation X (featuring Billy Idol) got the point when the Ramones told them: "Don't wait to get any better; just get up onstage and start playing now." It was a lesson the Ramones had learned from the Dolls and the Stooges.

Punk was soon labeled an English phenomenon, and British ownership of punk was confirmed by the American media when the Sex Pistols arrived in January 1978 for their first American tour. The surrounding hysteria, media hype and resulting breakup of the Pistols in San Francisco two weeks later served to confirm what many in the music business always believed about this obnoxious noise: It was uncommercial and self-destructive.

When Sid Vicious' girlfriend Nancy Spungen was murdered later that same year, the record industry shook its head and went on to the next big thing: New Wave, a synthesized form of pop with harmonies and catchy hooks. All thoughts of "authentic" rock & roll seemed to die along with Sid Vicious, who overdosed on heroin a few months after Spungen's death.

But the freedom of kids making their own music for themselves and by themselves, and getting it out themselves, refused to die. In the '80s all across Europe and America, hundreds of hardcore groups sprang up, and though most suffered an uncommercial fate, one band of alienated kids who grew up on homemade cassettes of Flipper, the Ramones and the Sex Pistols put out its first record on an independent label, and the whole thing started over again. Nirvana was the group's name, and its second record on DGC provided the voice for the next generation — punk had finally broken through to the mainstream. It just took longer than anyone thought. —Legs McNeil



**This page (from top): Jayne — formerly Wayne — County drinks to the health of her audience; the MC5 in 1968 with their White Panther Party buttons and other revolutionary accoutrements; and Cleveland's own Dead Boys, circa 1977, the era of "Young, Loud and Snotty," their Sire debut. Opposite page: Johnny, Tommy, Joey and Dee Dee Ramone (from left) after advising the Ford-Carter transition team at work in the house behind them.**





OPPOSITE PAGE: PHOTOGRAPHS BY DANNY FIELDS; LENI SINGCLAIR, MIKE HODGK (BELOW TOP); THIS PAGE: PHOTOGRAPH BY DANNY FIELDS