



Lou's Blues: The Velvet Underground and the Blues

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Though rock and roll in its various permutations wouldn't exist if weren't for the blues,¹ some rock musicians try to distance themselves from their genre's wellspring.² In more than one interview,³ sui generis art rocker Lou Reed (1942-2013) explained that his incandescent band the Velvet Underground adhered to a single edict: "No blues licks." Sometimes he'd simply say that wasn't what they set out to do. In one highly entertaining episode of Elvis Costello's short-lived television talk-and-music show *Spectacle*,⁴ Reed elaborated that he didn't think they'd earned the right to play the blues. This part of the musicians' conversation didn't explicitly address race. Yet I understood Reed to mean that a group of white people (though certainly as likely as any blues artist to have hellhounds on their trails) should not emulate—or, in contemporary parlance, appropriate—a sound and style forged by Black musicians.

¹ In the "Ancestors" section of *Mystery Train* (first published in 1975), rock critic and educator Greil Marcus dedicates a chapter to blues singer and guitarist Robert Johnson (1911-1938). In it, Marcus writes that "a good musical case can be made for Johnson as the first rock 'n' roller of all. His music had the vibrancy and a rhythmic excitement that was new to the country blues. On some tunes – 'Walking Blues,' 'Crossroad Blues,' 'If I Had Possession Over Judgment Day' – Johnson sounds like a complete rock 'n' roll band, as full as Elvis's first combo or the group Bob Dylan put together for the *John Wesley Harding* sessions, and tougher than either."

² "This ain't no blues song," Henry Rollins yells toward the end of "What Do You Do," the track preceding "Blues Jam" on the 1992 Rollins Band effort *The End of Silence*.

³ See, for instance, the September 1998 issue of *Guitar World* magazine (<https://www.guitarworld.com/magazine/lou-reed-talks-about-velvet-underground-songwriting-and-gear-1998-guitar-world-interview>).

⁴ Reed appeared on the fourth episode of the two-season show's first season, which initially aired in 2008, about a decade after Reed used the "no blues licks" line in the *Guitar World* interview.

The rule certainly did not emerge from an aversion to or lack of admiration for Black musicians. In the interview with Costello, for instance, Reed lauds singer Jimmy Scott (1925-2014), with whom he toured and performed. Rather, the Velvet Underground had to come up with their own thing rather than adapt what had already been done by too-often-underappreciated Black artists. It's an unexpected observation from someone who cultivated a persona as a prickly curmudgeon rather than a nuanced thinker on U.S. race relations. (After all, Reed in his post-Velvet solo career perpetrated the unfortunate song "I Want to Be Black" and, at the conspicuously late date of 1972, crassly referred to "colored girls" in "Walk on the Wild Side.")

Velvet Underground records may not obviously come across like anything Muddy Waters, John Lee Hooker, Son House, B.B. King, Charley Patton, or Howlin' Wolf⁵ would've made. Yet music historian Ted Gioia lists themes embodied by the blues—"explicit sexual references, celebrations of violence, allusions to altered mind states (whether produced by intoxicants or shamanistic-type visions), magic⁶ and superstition, and other indecorous matters"—that reads like a description of Velvet Underground songs. Some of those songs address one of these at a time, like "Heroin" or "I'm Waiting for the Man" (which concerns scoring heroin), both from the Velvet Underground's 1967 debut album. Others involve several of them simultaneously, as with sex-, drugs- and violence-saturated "Sister Ray," from 1968's *White Light/White Heat*.

Clearly, then, the Velvet Underground may not have been as distant from the blues as Reed liked to claim. And this is the case sonically as well as thematically, as demonstrated by some rockers who make no efforts to conceal their debt and devotion to the blues. The Rolling Stones, to cite the unavoidable example of overtly enthusiastic blues-licks-deployers, adapted their name from a Muddy Waters song and covered blues songs throughout their career. A less obvious but equally apt act in this tradition: the U.K. Subs, the rare punk rock band to include the harmonica—an instrument more closely identified with the blues—alongside the standard electric guitar, bass, and drums. The group titled its first album *Another Kind of Blues* (1979), as concise a definition of punk rock as was ever coined. Then again, its openness about the rock-blues link may owe something to the age of the band's lead singer/mouth harpist. Before the formation of the U.K. Subs in 1977, frontman Charlie Harper had performed in other groups; by the time he was inspired by the then-teenaged members of the Damned to start a punk rock unit he was already in his 30s (and "still loved [his] blues and rock n roll" and worried he was "too old," as he explains in the liner notes to the 2016 compilation of stray Subs-affiliated tracks, *Friends and Relations*).⁷ Indeed, Harper was born just one year (1944) later than the Stones'

⁵ In *Music: A Subversive History* (2019), Ted Gioia lists these "innovators" among those who "would not only establish the significance of Mississippi blues, but also provide the key ingredients that led to the rise of Chicago blues, R&B, rock 'n' roll and other mainstream styles."

⁶ The title of Reed's 1992 album, *Magic and Loss*, would work well with many blues records.

⁷ Covers, of course, give some indication of artists' enthusiasms. In 2018, the U.K. Subs released *Subversions*, an unimprovably titled album of covers of songs by what could be called proto-punk precursors like the MC5 and the

Mick Jagger (1943) and very well may have grown up listening to some of the same music that so heavily influenced members of the better-known band.⁸ Both the U.K. Subs and the Stones guitarist Keith Richards recorded covers of “I’m Waiting for the Man.”⁹ Both found blues licks in it, and I suspect Reed knew they were there.

He also knew that the blues and rock—those inseparable rebel genres—have rule-breaking in common, in terms of both subject matter and sound.¹⁰ It’s what makes Charlie Harper and Keith Richards as well as Lou Reed musical descendants (perhaps even friends and relations of a kind) of Robert Johnson, Howlin’ Wolf, and John Lee Hooker. Maybe Reed and his band did have one rule, but breaking it was the rock ’n’ roll—and the blues—thing to do.

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Stooges, contemporaries like Motörhead, and (somewhat) newer groups including Queens of the Stone Age as well as unexpected choices such as Bob Seger. The following year’s follow-up, *Subversions II*, leaned more toward classic rock, covering the likes of Led Zeppelin, the Who and Donovan (along with the Velvet Underground and the Rolling Stones). Perhaps a more intriguing second volume would have consisted of Subs versions of the blues songs Harper loved—perhaps an album akin to the Rolling Stones’ 2016 cover album, *Blue & Lonesome*. In Harper’s case, one need not rely on covers for clues about inspiration and influence. In his 2025 autobiography *An Anarchy of Demons*, he explains that his adopted last name (his original one was Perez) was adapted from a Muddy Water’s song. He notes that one of his pre-Subs bands played only covers by the likes of Bo Diddley and Howlin’ Wolf. As for the Sub, their “inspiration came from [pre-punk] earlier decades—MC5, The Stooges and Velvets.” Its members “loved Iggy Pop. Our mentor would be Lou Reed and his drug-soaked lyrics....”

⁸ Several years younger than Jagger and Harper, Tom Petty (1950-2017) also was explicit about his love for the blues. Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers’ *Live at the Fillmore 1997* (somehow not released until 2022) mixes Petty originals with covers of songs written by the likes of Albert Collins and Little Richard, Willie Dixon, and Booker T. & the M.G.s and features a guest appearance by John Lee Hooker (1917-2001), a major influence on, among countless other rockers besides Petty, the Rolling Stones. (Petty also covers the Stones, but not Lou Reed.)

⁹ The U.K. Subs released its version, titled simply “Waiting for the Man,” as the B-side to a 1980 seven-inch single. It was included as a bonus track on the 2000 compact disc version of the 1980 album *Brand New Age*. Richards recorded his take for 2024’s *The Power of the Heart: A Tribute to Lou Reed*. Of course, countless other musicians have covered the song, not all of them as blues-rooted as Harper and Richards.

¹⁰ Gioia again: “The explicit references to sex and violence in blues lyrics went far beyond anything the mainstream music business had previously permitted.... The same rule-breaking extended to the larger structure of musical form.” In taking such rule-breaking farther, rock bands, including Reed’s, are being true to their blues roots.