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Dirty Blvd.: The Life and Music of Lou Reed

Aidan Levy

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Lou Reed made it his mission to rub people the wrong way, whether it was with the noise rock he produced with the Velvet Underground in the late 1960s or his polarizing work with Metallica that would prove to be his swan song. On a personal level, too, he seemed to take pleasure in insulting everyone who crossed his path. How did this Jewish boy from Long Island, an adolescent doo-wop singer, rise to the status of Godfather of Punk? And how did he maintain that status for decades?

Dirty Blvd.—the first new biography of Reed since his death in 2013—digs deep to answer those questions. And along the way it shows us the tender side of his prickly personality.

Born in Brooklyn, Reed was the son of an accountant and a former beauty queen, but he took the road less traveled, trading literary promise for an entry-level job as a budget-label songwriter and founding the Velvet Underground under the aegis of Andy Warhol. The cult of personality surrounding his transformation from downtown agent provocateur to Phantom of Rock and finally to patron saint of the avant-garde was legendary, but there was more to his artistic evolution than his abrasive public persona. The lives of many American rock stars have had no second act, but Reed's did.

Dirty Blvd. not only covers the highlights of Reed's career but also explores lesser-known facets of his work, such as his first recordings with doo-wop group the Jades, his key literary influences and the impact of Judaism upon his work, and his engagement with the LGBT movement. Drawing from new interviews with many of his artistic collaborators, friends, and romantic partners, as well as from archival material, concert footage, and unreleased bootlegs of live performances, author Aidan Levy paints an intimate portrait of the notoriously uncompromising rock poet who wrote "Heroin," "Sweet Jane," "Walk on the Wild Side," and "Street Hassle"—songs that transcended their genre and established Lou Reed as one of the most influential and enigmatic American artists of the past half-century.

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