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How do you introduce JOHN CALE? This is the task I was gifted – as well as interviewing The Velvet Underground’s mercurial lynchpin – earlier this year, as Cale prepared to bring his 50th Anniversary reimagining of *The Velvet Underground & Nico* to the sirocco-nourished Liverpool docklands.

Returning to the port city from which he set sail to the gritty metropolis of 1960s New York as part of Sound City’s 10th Anniversary celebrations, the polyglot Welshman went full circle; the postindustrial theatre of Liverpool’s deserted docklands masquerading as the arthouse crucible of 1960s New York. Perhaps in a similar fashion to The Velvet Underground’s Exploding Plastic Inevitable performances of 1966 and 1967, Cale cast a shy figure on the night; the intent viola player in the background happy to let the joint ferocity of Nadine Shah, Alison Mosshart and Fat White Family’s Lias Saoudi steer the show into cataclysmic, experimental territory.

A trained classical musician, Cale studied composition at University of London’s Goldsmiths’ College from 1960-1963, before taking up an interest in electronic music and performance when one of his teachers introduced him to the works of John Cage and La Monte Young. Awarded a scholarship to study under the guidance of Iannis Xenakis in Massachusetts, Cale headed to the States in 1963. Xenakis was to find Cale’s style too destructive so the young composer made a beeline for New York to seek out La Monte Young, enthused by the freedom that he and Cage thrust into classical music. There, he fell in with an avant-garde crowd, forming The Dream Syndicate, a collective of voice, viola and violin; the group’s experimentation with holding notes would form the template for The Velvet Underground’s debut, which is drenched in the droning effect of Cale’s viola.

In 1964, Cale met Lou Reed and found an ally whose experimental tendencies were akin to his own. Crucially, he also found an ambitious and brilliant pop writer and freakscene poet. With guitarist Sterling Morrison and drummer Angus MacLise, they performed under various names at happenings around Lower Manhattan. MacLise quit before their debut gig under The Velvet Underground moniker – Moe Tucker was drafted in for gigs but earned a permanent position by fangling together her own drumkit. In 1965, Andy Warhol picked them up at the Café Bizarre in Greenwich Village, employing the group as the musical element of his mercurial Exploding Plastic Inevitable travelling scene. Warhol introduced them to Nico, the German singer and actress with the ominous voice.

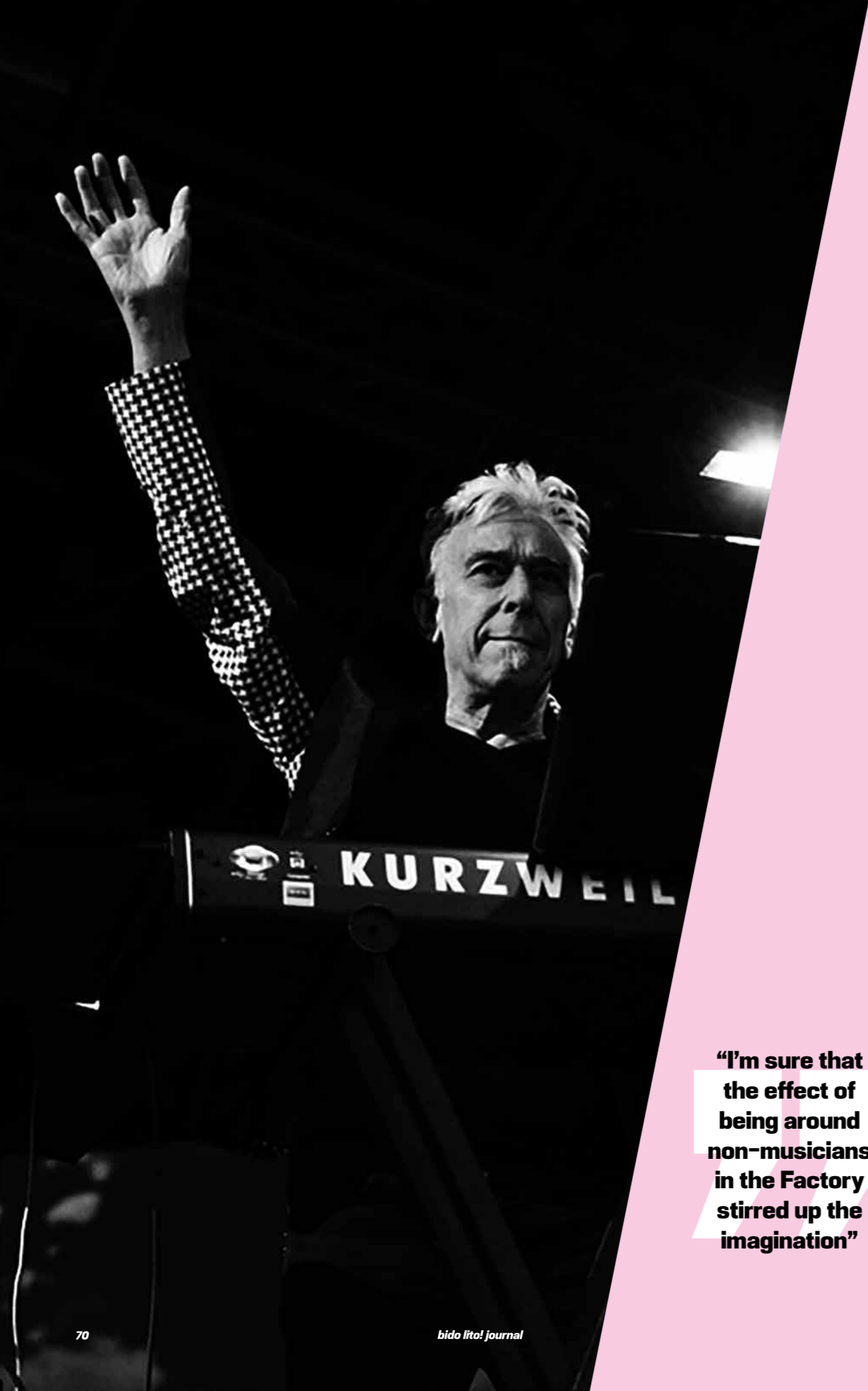
The rest is history. One reflected upon by Cale from across the pond in California in the weeks preceding the anniversary show, and one played out on the night to warped perfection; roared by a host of alternative music’s loudest contemporary voices right on our doorstep, and on the doorstep to the Atlantic.

“People are the most endlessly variable technologies available, in a way”

JOHN CALE



“It seems a long time ago when a boy from the Valleys walked down the hot steaming streets of NYC at night, but the night-time was my favourite time for wandering. I got used to the grime very quickly because it seemed a small price to pay to be totally immersed in music”



“I’m sure that the effect of being around non-musicians in the Factory stirred up the imagination”

You’re known for being forward thinking and future-oriented, and have said you don’t usually like to look back on things so much; so how does it feel to be celebrating something that you created 50 years ago?

The imaginations of many different performers make up the anniversary celebrations. It is no longer as much a trip down memory lane as a new approach to the material that has lasted lyrically and melodically – the new element is what the performers bring to the arrangements.

Did you ever anticipate having such a long career in music?

I was always determined to make a long-term commitment to creating new Art. I knew it would involve many different musical elements so I was patient and careful in combining them to see which made the most promising avenues of discovery. I’m still alert to new ideas, especially the ones that present the emotions of a song in a different light.

Experimentation and use of technology feature heavily in your work; are there any new technologies you’re itching to work with at the moment?

People are the most endlessly variable technologies available, in a way – and placing them into new surroundings always brings surprises. Whatever new bit of software or tech gadget mentioned today, I’d likely be on to something new tomorrow. Addictive behaviour.

When you moved to New York from Wales, what were your first impressions of the city?

It seems a long time ago when a boy from the Valleys walked down the hot steaming streets of NYC at night, but the night-time was my favourite time for wandering. I got used to the grime very quickly because it seemed a small price to pay to be totally immersed in music.

How did your involvement with La Monte Young’s Theatre of Eternal Music shape your work with The Velvet Underground?

Mainly in the approach to rehearsals – they had to be focused intensely and allowed to be open ended in their expectations. The drone was very close to hypnosis in its effect and the amount of variation inhabiting a drone can be energising.

After Lou Reed passed away you released a statement about meeting as kids – the line ‘We have the best of our fury laid out on vinyl, for the world to catch a glimpse’ really jumped out. What’s it like to have such an extraordinary time in your life, and an extraordinary relationship, so well-documented and pored over?

I’m a very private person and recoil from too much intrusion – my only answer to the attention is to turn my focus on to the music. It’s a defence mechanism that has many benefits. When the news hit me, it was comforting to know something more powerful than words could divulge the truest sense of what was now missing.

With The Velvet Underground & Nico, did it feel like you were making something genuinely new? And did you set out with the intentions to make it like that?

Yes, I had learnt the value of daily rehearsals from La Monte Young – we rehearsed holding the drone for hours

each day so I applied it to our band – it took a while to grow but you can hear the ideas change in the [Super Deluxe] box set. What began as a type of ‘folk’ song was no longer just that. I was very excited (as we all were) when the new ideas bore fruit after a year of concentrated experimentation.

The album is known for its provocative lyrics and combative sound; were these a reaction against a specific something?

The subject matter was decided by a quasi-literary bent that wanted to expand the lyrical side in the same way as how we experimented with music – it was important to bring both sides into an original form derived from each of our four players having a unique individual contribution.

It’s also lauded for being so unlike anything released before it – what were your reference points at that time?

It all was driven by a resentment of the rules of the game at the time. No gigs unless you played many of the Top 10 of the day – we found that insulting and we insisted on playing our own songs whether anyone knew them or not.

Andy Warhol was managing you for the release of the album and introduced you to Nico; how do you think his influence moulded the sound of the album, as well as your public image?

It’s very hard to answer that, especially from inside the period. We knew we were struggling with the music as much as with the image we had, but also thought it would all sort out its difficulties by playing live shows and showing the weaknesses we had up front through improvisation, as well as [showing] our strengths. We were always happiest making up stuff on stage and if we didn’t end up in a happy place we just turned around and hit one of our strange songs like [Black Angel\[’s Death Song\]](#), [Venus \[In Furs\]](#), [Heroin](#).

Do you feel that knowing people who weren’t musicians helped hone your avant-garde sound?

Yes, I’m sure that the effect of being around non-musicians in the Factory stirred up the imagination – they were a motley group of characters that had expertise in plastic aesthetics and contributed mightily to the atmosphere that helped Andy and the band carry on their creative lives to their utmost.

Some of the Velvets’ work is imbued in literary influence – have you read anything recently that’s really resonated with you?

Yes, David Peace in his novels – he is such an immersive writer. You get dragged through the coals and end up refreshed. Really, too many to name, I’m a voracious reader.

In recent years, you’ve shown at the Venice Biennale and have performed [Transmissions from The Drone Orchestra](#) at the Barbican in London – what drives you to continue to create?

At the root, it’s probably a mixture of impatience and anger – must get things done and hope to explore new territory each time, no time to waste.!