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Authentic artifice: accept no imitations

LOU REED played on Monday at a small, overheated club, proving himself yet again to be the un-Transformer - no evanescent stage personae for him, just rudimentary, unfeigned rock'n'roll. At 54, he rocked out with sound collages that conjure a pre-natal Sonic Youth - spare new songs delivered with tuneless passion. Unlike most ageing rock legends, Reed can still claim "to feel just like Jesus's son", and you take him at his word.

Reed addressed the maximum capacity crowd as his "true believers". He gave them an Irony-free smirk, looking like a middle-aged bachelor uncle, what with his vaguely lizard-like face sand-blasted by time, his tinted glasses and

his good-natured monosyllabic patter. "We are testing new material out on you," he warned, and then strummed his versions of songs he wrote for a 1997 Robert Wilson rock opera called *Time Rocker*.

Reed had already sold out his spate of shows at the small club this December. He was right to assume that the audience on Monday was his "hard core". The fans cried "Lou!" again and again. They were skinny girls who looked as if they spent hours in small rooms listening to the album *Berlin*, and "drinking Dubonnet on ice". There were squat young guys who became inflamed when Reed played his heavy-metal manqué. There were hirsute men in their

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fifties, muttering "Sha-la-la-la, man" under their breath.

Among the enthusiasts was a young man in a big fake fur coat, with pomaded hair and eye-liner. He sang along with "Perfect Day". This was the

glam-rocker Lou Reed, whose biography and voice were in *Velvet Goldmine*. (Ewan McGregor said he studied Reed's "fucked-up, groggily rock'n'roll voice" for the role.)

One of the film's many formulations has it that Seventies glam rock was a dialectic between authentic artifice, like Reed's, and artificial artifice, like David Bowie's. Reed's current, helplessly earnest incarnation and Bowie's recent public life seem a continuation of the *Velvet Goldmine* opposition. In his new songs, Reed keeps worrying about death and time, emulsified to his past self, while Bowie's videos have come to resemble Trent Reznor's. Meanwhile, Bowie has become the first rocker to

also be a Net-service provider, a pioneer of rock'n'roll "securitisation", raising \$55m on the anticipated flow of future royalties from his first 25 albums.

As Bowie buries his sloughed-off selves, there are people doing his archaeology for him. In Manhattan's Chelsea, the Rupert Goldsworthy Gallery is currently exhibiting a show called *Bowie*, with a room full of Bowie kultur, including a Bowie video full of Tony Oursler Bowie heads, a taped recording of Angie Bowie's "I'm Not Bi-Sexual", and photographic images of a Ziggy Stardust stand-in snorting cocaine.

Reed is also most fashionable when he's taken out of his own, living context, used as a

referent for the alternative bands, who quote Nico or Lou with a vague reverence for a faraway past, a Sixties' and Seventies' New York culture of chic and unhappy libertinism.

The crowd on Monday wanted no imitations. They sought Reed's own literal-minded, corroding soulfulness, and not the novelty band version of "Sweet Jane". The audience wanted to hear the earnest songs of degradation from the King of New York himself, someone they might see walking on Greenwich Avenue with Laurie Anderson in broad daylight, the ageing celebrity who has churned out albums in the same vein for 30 years; a living exhibit of his past, and his continuity with it.