



W.P. Miller

*"Look, I watched Bush for his first hundred days and now I'm trying to take a nap, O.K.?"*

### Nearly Remarkable

WHEN Lou Reed did a six-night gig at the St. James Theatre recently, it was not merely a sign of how hard it has become for even a house of Broadway legend, like the St. James, to find a bona-fide theatrical tenant, nor was it solely an indication of Lou Reed's mellowing as an aging legendary rock-and-roll reprobate. Actually, the paths of this theatre and that rocker had been crossing now for many years. Sort of.

Back in 1957, for example, the comic-strip musical "Li'l Abner" was beginning the first year of its run at the St. James when Lou, aged fourteen, released his first recording, "So Blue," on the Time label, with a high-school group called the Shades. The production running at the St. James on the evening of Lou Reed's birth (March 2, 1942) was a limited-engagement joint presentation of the Boston Comic Opera Company and the Kurt Jooss Ballet Dance Theatre. Almost exactly a year later, Rodgers and Hammerstein's "Oklahoma!" opened at the St. James, and it played on for twenty-two hundred and forty-eight performances, but this, in all likelihood, had little impact upon Lou Reed's infancy and pre-adolescence.

Very nearly remarkable, though, are the following congruities: In 1964,

while Lou, in his last year at Syracuse University, was writing poetry for Delmore Schwartz, his mentor and drinking buddy, and playing guitar with various campus rock bands, "Hello, Dolly!" opened at the St. James. In 1965, around the time Lou was forming his seminal avant-garde rock-and-roll ensemble, the Velvet Underground, Ginger Rogers was replacing Carol Channing as the star of "Hello, Dolly!" Martha Raye was just stepping into Ginger Rogers' shoes at the St. James when Lou's first album with the band, "The Velvet Underground and Nico," was released—that was in March of 1967. And in mid-November of that year, just before Lou and the Velvets released their second album, "White Light / White Heat," the King of Hi De Ho, Cab Calloway, assumed the co-starring role of Horace Vandergelder, Dolly's romantic interest, at the St. James. In March of 1970, Ethel Merman took over the role of Dolly, and that August, after a performance at Max's Kansas City—some twenty-seven blocks south of the St.

James and at least six avenues east—Lou Reed announced unexpectedly that he was quitting the Velvet Underground, a band that had made him something of a celebrity, though not nearly as famous as Dolly.

A souvenir stand in the lobby was selling Lou Reed headbands on the night we went to the St. James to see Lou, and much of the incoming audience was from a demographic group that today's hard-pressed Broadway producers would dearly love to see more of: a "thirtysomething" crowd, for the most part—older than your average rock-concertgoer but younger by far than most of Broadway's current ticket buyers. These people lingered in the lobby to smoke and drink just a little longer than your typical matinee ladies, but when Lou sauntered onstage, sometime after nine o'clock, they herded themselves toward their seats as politely as any theatre party. "Hello," a spotlit, leather-jacketed Lou murmured appreciatively to his fans. "Nice to see you."

Lou devoted the evening's entire

first act to his latest solo LP, "New York," spitting out the tunes on a stage set evocative of Forty-second Street, which is to say the 1989 boulevard of burnouts, and not the 1933 backstage musical: chain-link fence, "No Trespassing" sign, slashes of neon, all surrounding an oversized tenement-style window-casing that hung from the flies. It seemed more than a little stagy, what with Lou reading his lyrics from a music stand, but why not?

After a five-minute break, Lou returned to crank out a hits sampler set on an empty stage. The crowd roared, much the way other St. James crowds roared for Ray Bolger when he took his curtain calls in "Where's Charley?" after crooning "Once in Love with Amy"; the music throbbed, much the way Richard Rodgers' music for "The King and I" throbbed there, without electronic amplification, during that show's twelve hundred and forty-six St. James performances; and we could swear that the chandelier and the muraled walls of the St. James Theatre moaned just a little at the impact of Lou Reed's decibel levels. Could the sounds of sixty-two years at

the St. James—the sounds of all the music played and all the voices raised in all those musical-comedy performances combined—ever be as loud as Lou Reed is right now, we found ourselves wondering. Who cares, a louder voice seemed to holler in our head. And afterward, as we came out under the St. James marquee, which trumpeted on its Eighth Avenue face the arrival of "Lou Reed on Broadway" while still inviting all those who passed before its opposite face to "Come and Meet Those Dancing Feet" (the recently departed feet of David Merrick's "42nd Street"), only two things seemed certain: that Lou Reed was alive and well, thank you very much, and that the St. James Theatre was still standing, one way or another—like the quartet "on the corner" in Frank Loesser's "The Most Happy Fella," which never actually played the St. James but could have.