

Lou finds the rhythm of life

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Drink, drugs and rock'n'roll used to be the staples of rock's hard man Lou Reed. Now, he tells Celia Dodd, his perfect day involves meditation and lots of t'ai chi

Lou Reed has just taken off the wooden beads he wears around his neck and is suggesting good ways to start meditating. For the past couple of years (he can't remember how many exactly) these beads have become as important a part of his sartorial armour as his trademark shades and torn shirts.

It's a surreal moment. Meditation is the last thing you might associate with the so-called Godfather of Punk, who made his name in the early Seventies with songs such as Perfect Day and Walk on the Wild Side. As a founder of the Velvet Underground, one of the most decadent, drug-fuelled and influential bands of the Sixties, he built a career writing songs about heroin and sadomasochism and transvestism.

Perhaps Reed, 65, really is a changed man. Years ago he swapped drugs and alcohol for water and cappuccino, although cigarettes proved a tougher nut to crack.

He now seems poised between the past and the present: he is on a sell-out European tour of his bleak 1973 album Berlin, which features the old themes of drug addiction, domestic violence, prostitution and suicide. At the same time he has just released a meditation album called Hudson River Wind Meditations. It is not intended for his usual audience, but as a background to t'ai chi, yoga (which he has decided isn't really his "cup of tea") and something he calls "bodyworks", by which he means things such as the oriental massage shiatsu.

"I leave the meditation music on all day"

Reed originally wrote the album of meditation music for his own use a couple of years ago, but then other people wanted copies. "It's geared up to help to you to focus," he says. "I call it centring. I use the music all the time. I leave it on all day because living in the city it has an intriguing ability to absorb the outside sound and kind of weave that into itself somehow. So a car horn or a fire engine -all this background noise -just somehow filters into it in a nice way.

I'm not sure that I know why, but I know that it does that.

"I found that the vibrations of the music affect the body in much the same way that loud music at a rock concert can. It's multi-layered: sometimes a deep rumble, sometimes the real wind whistling over the Hudson, sometimes what sounds like an electronic version of Tibetan

chimes. All in all it's a welcome relief from the New Agey, dolphins-singing style of meditation CDs generally on offer."

Reed lives in New York and has been in a relationship with the musician and performance artist Laurie Anderson for the past 13 years. He clearly loves the city: an exhibition of his photographs of the place is showing at the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh. He looks good for his age, and particularly for a musician with such an archetypal rock'n'roll past.

Raised by overbearing parents on Long Island, Reed was sent to Creedmoor Psychiatric Centre as a teenager to undergo electroshock therapy to "cure" his homosexual tendencies and mood swings. During the 1970s he spent debilitating years as a heroin-addicted mainstay of many rock journalists' "Most Likely to Die" lists. When he sang the Velvet Underground's song Heroin, he would pretend to inject the drug. But then in the early 1980s, after all the bad narcotics, bad albums and bad times, he publicly quit drugs and alcohol, and started proclaiming the joys of a healthy life to anyone who was prepared to listen.

In 1987, as part of an anti-narcotics campaign, he explained his stance on the MTV music channel: "I did drugs...don't you."

"If I don't practise t'ai chi my body aches"

Nowadays his face is crumpled but he has a fine head of tousled dark hair and splendid biceps. "People think that I work out," he says with what sounds like a touch of pride, "but it's all t'ai chi." His handshake - brief and vice-like - sets the tone. He's not tall, yet he has a foreboding presence. He says that he's feeling physically compressed after his flight from Berlin, and hasn't had a chance to practise his daily t'ai chi session.

As the interview begins, he certainly lives up to his reputation for being cantankerous. He snatches my notes away and demands that I tell him the name of his new album. Then he continually responds to questions in a spikily overbearing manner. I start to feel as if I'm undergoing some kind of surreal nerve racking exam about the interview itself. But then, when Reed discovers various hitches in the run-up to our meeting, he miraculously melts and suddenly it's all "You poor thing", and tips on how I can quieten my busy brain.

Reed has been a dedicated practitioner of t'ai chi for 25 years. He practises a particular tradition called Chen Style, which promotes the martial arts side of t'ai chi and which many prefer to ignore. He does about two hours a day, in the open air if he can, on rooftops and in parks. He also attends a small class with a Chinese teacher. Tony Visconti, the record producer, probably best known for his work with David Bowie, is in the same class.

"If I don't do it my body really hurts," Reed says. "It just starts aching and hurting. It's terrible." When I ask if he finds it a hard discipline, he looks amazed: "As opposed to what? Writing? Songwriting? Touring?"

Interviews? What: are you kidding? To me it's candy. It's my idea of fun. But it requires the tenacity of a lion. Otherwise it shows and you're in class and you're the one going in the wrong direction. But if you tag into it, it's beyond belief.

"It makes me feel great in every way. It gives you tons of energy. It makes you very strong, very balanced and very focused. It's good for everything." It was t'ai chi that finally forced Reed into giving up cigarettes 18 months ago because, he explains: "I just couldn't do a certain kind of sparring any more. I'd be on the floor. I couldn't breathe."

"Meditation doesn't have to be complicated" He's a huge fan of Allen Carr's classic book *The Easy Way to Give Up Smoking*. "Someone gave it to me years ago when I was trying to stop and I thought it was a big help. It's a great book: I love to read, 'Don't try to stop now... just puff away'." He is shocked to hear that Carr has recently died of lung cancer.

In the end it was Chinese herbs that helped Reed with the nicotine withdrawal. He is a fan of Chinese medicine, acupuncture and homoeopathy, but as a complement to conventional medicine rather than a substitute for it. He still misses cigarettes and says that giving them up was a struggle "every minute of every day". But then he explains: "I would like to have a cigarette. I would like to have a lot of things. But so what?"

The next book that Reed recommends is *The Joy of Living: Unlocking the Secret and Science of Happiness*, written by his new mentor, Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche, a Tibetan Buddhist monk. Reed came to meditation through t'ai chi, but it took on a new meaning a couple of years ago when he met Rinpoche at the Shambhala Meditation Centre, in New York.

Was it a turning point? Reed says that he "wouldn't make that big a thing out of it". Yet the meeting clearly had an impact.

Although Reed isn't a Buddhist, he says: "I would like to be able to achieve something of it. I try." And meditation is very much part of that. "I met a teacher whom I like a lot. He teaches Buddhist philosophy so I'm a student of Buddhist philosophy. If he was teaching table tennis I would learn that. I think this guy is incredibly intelligent and compassionate." He acknowledges that it can be hard to start meditating: that's why you need the beads.

"Meditation doesn't have to be complicated," he insists. "What I do is about as simple as you can get. You could just count the beads, one, two, three, with your eyes closed or open, whatever makes you happy. And no matter what happens, keep counting. I personally like it when I can feel that I'm actually moving the beads when I'm counting. And once you make it to a minute, see if you can do a minute-and-a-half. Eventually you can do it without the beads."

The book that Reed recommends is in part an exploration of the science behind meditation, based on the author's work with neuroscientists and physicists. I look into Reed's mournful eyes and promise to check the book out, hoping that *The Joy of Living* will do more for me than it appears to have done for him.

Lou Reed's new album, *Hudson River Wind Meditations*, is released by Sounds True and can be ordered from amazon.co.uk.

For further information, visit www.loureed.com

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