

John Cale on revisiting your work



December 22, 2016 - The iconic Welsh musician John Cale, a founding member of the Velvet Underground and a constant collaborator, songwriter, and producer, has done too much to list in a basic factoid. His most recent release, *Fragments of a Rainy Season*, is a reissue of his first live album to feature him performing spare, solo, and unplugged. The original was recorded throughout a tour in 1992. The reissue is expanded with additional unreleased songs from live sessions recorded during that period of time.

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 1784 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Process](#), [Inspiration](#).

Do you get creative insight from revisiting older material?

I get to reorganize. I get to rearrange. Which, on the road, is always a lifesaver. It keeps you alert. You don't get bored with what you're doing. For instance, *Fragments of a Rainy Season* was a series of 1992 performances that were recorded all over the world, but the main body of what set off to be a solo album, happened in Europe. We had a little Steinway piano that folded up and one of those pneumatic lifts... It was a neat operation. It was a real piano—that made a big difference in how a lot of stuff happened. Some of [the record] used keyboard, but some of the takes outside of the main body of the record, the new [previously unreleased] ones for instance, a lot of those are done with real piano. It made a huge difference in how the performance went.

Does it inspire you in the new work you're doing?

It's fragmentary. When I think about new material, I think of what very simple sounds are... in most hip-hop records you just have noises, basically. Noises that happen during a performance. For instance, taking your foot off a pedal, letting the piano ring. When you take your foot off a pedal, sometimes it hits all the piano strings at once and you get this cluster happening. Noises like that really make more of a difference in my new stuff than the old stuff.

When you listen back to old songs, do you hear things you want to change? Or is it more archival in that you're documenting history?

I don't think of it as a historical moment. I try to think of it as something that keeps me awake for the next five minutes. I'm doing something new and different to this song, and that's the motivation for doing it.

The sound of *Fragments* is really stripped down. Was tearing everything to its core helpful for thinking about things later on in a more expanded form?

I think the really important value of the stripped-down approach is how naked you can be and what's revealed when you do that. I was approaching it from a concert/recital point of view. I thought it was important to focus on the voice and how you deliver the song and deliver the lines. You realize it wasn't going to work unless you did something that exposed the nerve every time you did it. You had to find something that showed people another part of you. You wonder where or what those things were. Those are the most interesting. It's where you open the door to different angles of perception.

I'm really interested in having the audience appreciate something that excited me. Doing these things that way was something that I was going through, and learning from, and I wanted them to see it, too.

You put together songs from different shows. Do you envision it as one complete show or do you literally see it as a series of fragments?

That was an issue. Every concert we did in the European section of the tour was done with the purpose of having a record at the end. We made the set the same, which didn't help the performances particularly. That's when it became interesting to listen to the stuff from Melbourne and from other places. You were in a different country and each place had a different aura. The concerts and the environment were very different. It's really method acting with music. I mean, "Who am I this time?"

Do you see it as a collage?

It could be. I don't see it as a part of a whole, though. For each individual song, you think: "Okay, well, what can I bring to this song now? Can I do this so that the personality of the singer in the song has expanded?" It becomes something else.

I mean, "Heartbreak Hotel" does that. When I decided to cover that, I needed a classic rock song for a concert in London. I went and I picked something classic, and I went and got the words for "Heartbreak Hotel." I read the words. If it didn't have words like that, that song wouldn't have survived. All the verses were really something special. You were telling a totally different story when it came to doing it without arrangement, the slowed-down arrangement. You appreciated what everybody had put into the song. It sounded to me like each contributor to the song had gotten a verse in, because if you read the verses, they're about very different things. They make a very rich portrait of a character.

What's your interest in doing cover songs? Do you learn more about your own songwriting when you're covering someone else's music?

It's the question of: How do you make an arrangement a part of the personality of the singer?

You released a [video](#) for your older cover of Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah" a few days before he died.

That guy was a gentle soul, and he always had this touch with the mystical. He always walked back and forth between the mystical and the real, and it was really... I don't want to say moving, I would say... it explained a lot of things about human behavior, just the way that he can go from mysticism to reality.

I talked to him about zen and what that meant to him. I just came across an essay by his rabbi. His rabbi was teaching about a particular school of Judaism that Dylan was also following. His basic viewpoint was that the world was broken. In the article he talked about some guys from Toronto, I think, some of the guys from his old Judaic background. He wanted to come down to Mount Baldy and say, "What's a Jew doing studying in the Buddhist monastery?" I think he had a bottle of Scotch around. By the time they left they were very happy.

Do you think that for young songwriters, something like doing cover songs can be useful to strengthen their own songwriting? Or do you think if you haven't first established yourself, there could be a danger of imitating someone?

I can't put the kibosh on them like that. If they feel they've found a song they identify with, then depending on how interested they are in learning about themselves and about other people and all of that, you know, that's how you appreciate the tapestry of the personality. The personality is really foremost in my mind when I come across a song.

There was another Cohen song, "Alexandra Leaving," that I loved I haven't figured out how to do yet. I remember recording it, and it didn't quite work out, but maybe it's worth a revisit. I thought I'd put the brakes on a little bit because the song is really about classic literature, based on Antony leaving the city of Alexandria. Anyway, there are certain things that stop you from going any further, like, "Wait a minute. That's really going to..." I mean, it's easier to deal with "Heartbreak Hotel" than it is to deal with "Alexandra Leaving."

You want to release the song from its current ghost. You want to have another birth, give birth to another person in the world.

You've often put Dylan Thomas' poetry to music.

I grew up with him. You can't get away from him. I didn't know that I was going to get lucky. When I started working on those, Allen Lanier from Blue Oyster Cult and I went messing around in his studio and got the book *The Collected Poems of Dylan Thomas*. I said, "Okay, now what we're going to do is... we're going to do them all. We're going to do the lot." I don't know, we ran aground because of our own tendencies more than anything else. I got involved with Ezra Pound, and that didn't end happily. I mean, there were certain things about Pound that I really admired but I had no idea how to deal with it as a basis for a song.

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Do you find that these sort of tasks keep you going with other kinds of songwriting, too?

They do. You don't have to worry about being successful when you're dealing with other people's words. You get excited when it works. You feel like you really contributed to the poem.

John Cale recommends:

[Mike Will Made It](#)

[Helen Marten](#)

[The Missing and the Dead](#) by Stuart MacBride + any book by [Hurst Publishers](#)

[Prokofiev's Piano Music](#)

Everyone standing guard on the principles of humanity

Are there any songs that you want to tackle now or things that you could imagine trying to cover at this point?

I'm still thinking about "Alexandra Leaving." Cohen's "[The Queen And Me](#)". I already did. It took a long time. The portrait of the guy in "The Queen And Me," I couldn't understand what he was talking about, what they were talking about, and why Queen Victoria was in the song. My image of Leonard Cohen at the time was really an American poet that was on the Rolling Thunder review, a friend of Dylan's and had been a rabbi, then he became a Zen priest, and so on. It just blew right by me that he was Canadian. It all made sense all of a sudden. It was, like, "Oh, okay. Now, I get it." The difference between Canada and America and what Queen Victoria brought to all of that and the image of the Queen. The way the furniture and housing changed and all of that. Especially on Victoria Island, I would imagine that all of that is there. I mean, Victoria Island, I think, is still the retirement home for many British diplomats.

After all these years and outputting so much music and creating so many things, how do you manage to keep finding inspiration?

An easy answer would be to say frustration. You need something new, and I don't feel like doing anything that's repeating my old stuff. I'm careful about listening to the radio because I don't want to end up one day with a song that I've heard somewhere else. I don't want to get stained by music I've heard.

Name

John Cale

Vocation

Musician, Composer, Singer-Songwriter, Producer, Founding Member of The Velvet Underground

Fact

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Photo: Ebru Yildiz