

"Mistrial"
Lou Reed
RCA Records

★★★★

I find it hard to believe the same Lou Reed who wrote the song on "Mistrial" rides a Honda scooter. Reed is too tough for a scooter, he needs a Harley.

During the late '60s, Reed, along with John Cale, was the creative genius behind the Velvet Underground. The Velvet Underground never sold many records but they were one of the most influential bands in rock 'n' roll history. Their music was dark and mysterious and very uncommon. The Velvet Underground's lyrics dealt with subject matter considered taboo in popular music and was responsible for styles and ideas that would later inspire Davie Bowie, the Cars, the Psychedelic Furs, R.E.M., the Violent Femmes among others.

When the Velvet Underground broke up in 1970, Reed embarked on an artistically, if not commercially, successful solo career. As a solo artist, Reed continued to work on some of the ideas he began with the Velvet Underground. Reed's first hit, "Walk on the Wild Side," a portrait of New York City street life, came from his 1972 "Transformer" album. "Walk on the Wild Side" has recently been used by Honda to sell their motor scooters. In 1973 Reed released "Berlin," a rock opera looking at the dark side of humanity, which was a huge critical success.

In 1975 Reed's experimentation peaked with "Metal Machine Music." "Metal Machine Music" was a two-album set of electronic noise and feedback. No one is sure whether Reed made the album as an elaborate

joke on his record company or as an insult to his audience.

Aside from "Metal Machine Music," most of Reed's albums, especially his live albums where he re-interprets some of the songs he wrote for the Velvet Underground, have been pretty good. Reed's last album, 1984's "New Sensations," produced the hit "I Love You, Suzanne" and stayed on the charts for several weeks.

"Mistrial" is Reed's 17th album. Like "New Sensations," it's somewhat lighter in tone and a bit trendier than his earlier albums or his work with the Velvet Underground. But the lyrics still have that Reed flair for cynicism even though Reed has received criticism from those who don't appreciate his new direction. Some of "Mistrial" answers those critics.

The title track, which is about growing up on the street of New York City, is autobiographical. Reed feels he's been unfairly labeled as a tough boy and wants a chance to correct that image. "Mistrial" features some hot guitar work that does nothing to prove that image wrong. "Outside," on the hand, shows a tender side of Reed — the side that is afraid of those outside his intimate circle of friends.

"No Money Down," the first single released from the album, is about deals — both business and emotional. The guitar work is good but the drum mix is too trendy for Reed. "The Original Wrapper" attacks Ronald Reagan, Louis Farrakhan, Jerry Falwell, MTV, the consumer culture and network news. Here again there's a lot of good social criticism but the rap style doesn't fit Reed's style.

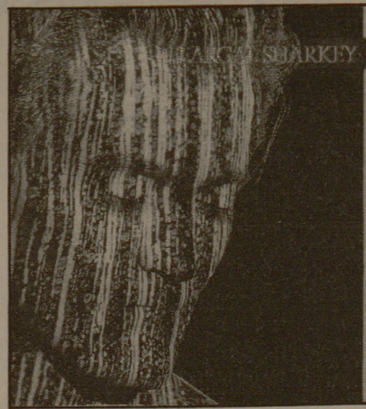
Television takes its lumps on "Video Violence," an attack on the news programs and dramatic series that feel they have to outdo each other on the gore meter. Reed asks if video violence is the cause or merely a symptom of real violence.

The Velvet Underground got their start by playing at Andy Warhol's Factory in New York. "Mama's Got A Lover" is an attack on the shallowness of the New York art scene, a shallowness Warhol helped create. Mama's new lover is a Warhol-like artist who plays off his image instead of his art.

One of the most striking songs Reed wrote for the Velvet Underground was a song about sado-masochism called "Venus in Furs." On "Don't Hurt a Woman," Reed is apologetic for mistreating his woman. "Spit it Out," however, shows that sometimes it's necessary to blow off some steam verbally.

Mexican pop star Ruben Blades provides backing vocals on "I Remember You" and "Tell it to Your Heart." "I Remember You" is a '50s-style number. "Tell it to Your Heart" is a nice, slow song about love and New York City.

Listen to "Mistrial." You won't settle for walking.



"Feargal Sharkey"
Feargal Sharkey
A&M Records

★★

Every once in a while a new voice comes along that blows away a whole generation of singers. Feargal Sharkey has one of those voices but his debut album, "Feargal Sharkey," doesn't give him the chance to use it like he should.

Sharkey sounds like a combination of Burl Ives and Johnny Mathis with a certain uniqueness that's his own and he looks like a girl I once dated. He's either a reincarnated old English minstrel or a rock star from the future. He can reach very high notes and make his voice tremor like an earthquake.

Sharkey, a native of Belfast, was a founding member and lead vocalist for the Irish band, the Undertones, from 1976 until they broke up in 1983. He has since worked on songs with members of Madness, Yaz, Depeche Mode and the Human League.

Although Sharkey has released a couple of singles since he left the Undertones, "Feargal Sharkey" is his first solo album. The album is produced by Dave Stewart, guitarist for the Eurythmics, who also co-wrote several of the album's songs with Sharkey.

As his work with Tom Petty, Bob Dylan and his own band shows, Stewart is a good producer but he missed the boat with Sharkey's album. Stewart doesn't seem to understand that Sharkey's voice is too strange and different to be tied down to typical top-40 style pop. Sharkey should try either traditional English folk, new American folk rock or experimental music instead of the top-40 version of all three at once.

Some of the songs on "Feargal Sharkey" are pretty good but would probably be better if those who wrote them were singing. "A Good Heart," written by Maria McKee of Lone Justice, is bogged down with Stewart's over-synthesized production. I hope to hear McKee and Lone Justice do the song right one of these days. Heartbreaker keyboardist Benmont Tench's "You Little Thief," with its soulful horn section, would be fantastic if done by Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers.

Bobby Womack's classic "It's All Over Now" gets a workout by Sharkey and synthesizers. Sharkey's vocals almost find the groove but the song is too slow and too computerized.

Sharkey and Stewart co-wrote the songs "Ghost Train," "Ashes and Diamonds," "Don't Leave It To Nature," "Love and Hate" "Bitter Man." "Bitter Man" and "Don't Leave It To Nature" are the best but that doesn't mean much.

Feargal Sharkey has a fantastic voice but "Feargal Sharkey" is a bad album. Sharkey's voice was the only reason I gave the album two stars. Making Sharkey sing these songs is like playing "The Cotton-Eyed Joe" on a Stradivarius. Let's hope Sharkey can find some music soon suits his voice instead of a top-40 radio format.

by Karl Pallmeyer
music reviewer