Lou posing for Timothy Greenfield-Sanders, 2002

LOU: Well, I'm lucky enough to have an apartment. I live in an apartment building that has a beautiful roof, and it's all paved, and I go up and—I'd say nine months out of the year—I go up and do Tai Chi in the outdoors. I think it's great to have a great big lungful of fresh air blowing on the top floor of my building. For the winter months, I practice indoors. I have a wooden floor in my apartment, and I have a nice distance of about twenty feet to the left and right, so I can do the longest Tai Chi forms, without doing compression steps. I can take full steps and go from my window all the way to my front door. So I'm very fortunate to have a big apartment. But Master Ren invented a form called the 21 Form for when you're in those circumstances, when you don't have such great space. So say, if I'm traveling and I'm in a hotel room, I will do the 21 Form more than the other forms, because it's just made to do in a hotel room.

SCOTT: Lou, as someone who travels, sometimes 100 to 150 days a year, you've had the good fortune of practicing Tai Chi in a number of interesting locations. Maybe talk about some of the more interesting locations where you've practiced.

LOU: I've practiced in Africa. I've practiced in most of your major countries. Usually, you can always find a park, and when weather is a condition of it, in a hotel. I usually ask them if there is a conference room that's not being used, because usually these hotels have a number of rooms for businesspeople, and one of them is probably not being used. So we just get the table and chairs out of there, and in you go. The worst-case scenario is a little later at night near the elevators. There's always room over there, and assuming it's not Saturday night, you can practice and probably not scare anyone. In the hotel room, I usually have as much furniture taken out of whatever room it is as possible. I'm not going to have eighteen people up there, so I try to get the tables and chairs out of there, and I concentrate on the 21 Form and Compact Cannon Fist. The other way of doing it is—the other forms, once you know them—if there's three steps forward, you do one step forward, one step back, one step forward. You end up in the same place, but you have to know the form pretty well to be able to do that and not get mixed up. For a beginner, I would think the 21 Form Master Ren designed as an application for someone who does not have room. You ought to be able to do that in an elevator, for instance.

IGGY POP

Rock music legend and longtime Chi gong practitioner

I started with Chi gong in late '89. I was pretty beat up, with a lot of skeletal problems. I'd developed severe osteoarthritis in one hip. I basically couldn't walk. I went to the doctor, who said, "Here's the deal." It didn't look good, and they gave me naproxen, which made it possible for me to kind of waddle around. That wasn't going to cut it in terms of what I do. I was looking. I'd seen pictures of people doing Tai Chi in parks in China, and I thought, well, you know, if I could do that, that would be a way to rebuild my presentation.

A chiropractor I was seeing in SoHo recommended a Chi gong teacher named Dongkuk Ahn, who was also a painter and art teacher [and studied with Cheng Man-ch'ing in the 1960s]. He was kind of a salty type of guy. He said, "People expect me to be spiritual, but I like to listen to Led Zeppelin and party." He wasn't a vegetarian or anything. He had a nice unflappable quality about him. I think as these people do, because they're healthy and confident. He had a picture on the wall of twelve enormous guys trying to push him at once and they couldn't.

When I came to him, I still smoked cigarettes and a little dope and was just generally out of gas. He looked at me and said, "I'm going to teach you Chi gong." But he never spent much time revealing esoterica to me. He liked to relate it to the world he thought we were in, so he would say, "Watch rap videos, and when you walk, try to walk like they do, with your hips stuck out," because, he said, that's Chi gong style. He also said, "You know this old dance called the cakewalk from the '20s? You should walk like that." And, "As we get older, we lose the ability to breathe and it makes us grumpy, we don't feel good, and you start wanting to get stoned."

My life was like people who are more interesting, because of being in the entertainment biz. You can do it wildly for ten years and then you have to interface with the horrible, boring, tedious, difficult world of work and commerce. I was in that part of life. I was doing a lot of things I didn't like to do, mixed in with what I liked to do, and doing half of it poorly, which doesn't make you feel good. So life wasn't a ball. But I was hanging on in New York City and touring a great deal, which is very hard on your body. Really hard. My motivation to learn about this started in performance and from a general instinct that I had taken a hit, was weakened, and wanted to become strong.

Ahn taught me Wu Chi breathing. He said, "You might like this. It will be good for you." I was in my first class with five women. We lay on our backs on the floor, and he had us close our eyes and breathe rhythmically and deeply through the nose and blowing it out through the mouth. We kept doing this for the better part of an hour. After about ten to fifteen minutes, one woman started moaning and some of them were screaming. But it didn't have that effect on me. I just felt great. And he told me later, "It was releasing their fears, but you do that." He'd been to one of my gigs and said, "You do that in your work. You deal with your fears in the work you do, so it didn't have that effect and that's good."

WU CHI is considered a neutral or "empty" state that should characterize the start and finish of Chi gong and Tai Chi movements.

That stayed with me, and I still do it if I'm going to perform live. I breathe that way for about half an hour. He always told me, no matter what movement I was doing, "It's all invisible. It's internal. It's all about the breath." He said, "Force it down into your diaphragm and through your nose." He literally said, "Try to blow it out your ass."

Oh, by the way, we're magical beings.

LAURIE ANDERSON: Stephan mentioned something really beautiful, that you were quoted about: increasing your breathing capacity so that it becomes food.

▲ **IGGY POP**: Yeah, about Kung Fu and Bruce Lee and all that?

STEPHAN BERWICK: Yes, and about the breathing that you've learned, the breathing that you practice is so important, that it's like your food.

IGGY: Ahn said—I never had reason to doubt him—"If I want, I can change my body temperature by a couple of degrees."

LAURIE: That's crazy.

IGGY: Yeah, it's crazy, but I believe that. He told me, "I can put the breath where I want to in my body." I got to the point where I could feel where my bones were getting fused up. If I do the exercise and breathe well long enough, I hear them pop. They pop apart and I get a little air in there.

Ahn was the kind of guy who would drop in the middle of a session, "Oh, by the way, we're magical beings." He was a spiritual guy. I think he was looking at how that magic can be manifested. I was open to that, because when I was in my first band, our manager was an early foodie who taught us macrobiotics. Like a lot of macrobiotic people, we were smoking twenty joints a day. That's not really going to help you when you're eating brown rice! Still, it opened me up to the idea that you could breathe air and there could be an art to it.

d Bowie, Iggy Pop, and Lou at
Dorchester Hotel in London, 1972

Chi gong kept my attention because, like Tai Chi, the forms are so beautiful and when you're doing them you feel great. There's a grace to it, and it's also a challenge. It's challenging to do it right, but then you feel calmer. You also feel more capable and energized, like buzzed a little bit.

All your functions, whatever they are, if you have trouble with your digestion, the digestion works, and if you have trouble with your humor, you're in better humor. That kept me trudging over to his studio with my osteoarthritis. It was worth it.

Ahn also taught me a few Tai Chi movements. He made a video, and I really tried hard. It's hard to learn that stuff from a video, but he encouraged me. He said, "Learn five minutes of it and do that, because it's different from Chi gong. It'll calm you down. It's really good for you." I did learn it, but I've let it go the last few years. But I'm game to pick it up, I think, when I'm a little older, because Tai Chi is a good thing.

I worked with Ahn about thirteen years. I finally went to Florida, because it was just easier. I had twenty years in New York, which was enough for the person I am. I would see him when I'd visit New York.

I had a funny arc in my life where the full career a lot of people get when they're in their twenties came to me in my sixties, and I just got busy doing everything. Suddenly, everything I ever wanted to do was starting to happen. So I just keep up the Chi gong and a little bit of Tai Chi as something that enables the rest of my life.

Lately, I practice Chi gong about twenty to thirty minutes daily when I'm not busy. During my first ten years of training, I'd do thirty minutes in the morning and fifteen minutes in the afternoon. The afternoon session

DIARY BY LOU REED

THE ACHES AND PAINS OF TOURING

WEDNESDAY, JULY 10TH

We played a five-hundred-year-old castle near Linz, Austria. The audience here is the same as the audience in Budapest—or Udine, for that matter. People have mastered the jutting neck and sliding head-and-shoulder movements associated with rock—moves that I can't do as my back has gone out.

From Linz to Rome and onward to Beret, Spain, which lies northwest of Barcelona—five and a half hours by car. We are going to fly from Rome to Barcelona and then helicopter to Beret. I ran into David Bowie earlier in Athens, where we were both doing a show. He's playing Spain, too, but is driving as he is apprehensive about the helicopter. I'm trying to think of it along the lines of the Cyclone at Coney Island rather than a Bill Graham killer. It only takes an hour.

FRIDAY, JULY 12TH • We landed on a small grassy hill in front of the hotel, the great techno-rhythm of the cutters pulsating above us. I met David in the lobby. He was watching us from his window to see if we crashed, I suppose. He's been out for almost a year now, while our tour is only heading into its sixth month.

David wears these great costumes. I wish I could, but I always end up in black T-shirts and stretch jeans from Trash and Vaudeville, on St. Marks Place. His wife, Iman, was there, looking very beautiful in a sheer white dress. It made me miss Laurie all the more. I wanted her to see these mountains, but she's in 106-degree Phoenix, in a motel overlooking a parking lot, preparing for her own show. I hope this beautiful hotel has a phone jack that can get out on-line.

SATURDAY, JULY 13TH • After the show, I met up with Iggy Pop—he's also playing. How does he stay in such great shape? I was doing crunches every day, but that's how I threw my back out. I would throw that StairMaster out the window if it would fit and someone else would lift it.

I tried a massage at the hotel, but all the guy did was poke and baste me like a chicken. Don't eat at places called Mama's, and don't get massages at resort hotels.

It's amazing, but the rooms I get on the road are always so much bigger than my apartment in New York. I really have to get a place outside the city. Bad timing levelled me—I bought and sold at the wrong time—but . . . maybe next year. I still rent, which is pretty much how I started out. And I'm sleeping on the floor (my back), which is also pretty much how I started. Only this time I'm looking out the window at the Pyrenees.

SUNDAY, JULY 14TH • We're doing a show in Antibes, but we're staying in Cannes. Bastille Day. We have so many people in the hotel that I got a special rate on a truly palatial room. A balcony looking out on the bay, yachts strewn with little lights lining up to watch the fireworks. I couldn't go out because my back was hurting again, but it was pretty good from the room: exploding trees and helix signs, dancing quarter moons, and tail-waggling dragons. All this to the music of "Gone with the Wind" and "West Side Story."

TUESDAY, JULY 16TH • Made it to Prague in one piece. These double flights are killers. Coming in from the airport, I saw how much building and expansion is going on. And now they have graffiti, which I hadn't noticed before. I hope I get to see Václav Havel. When I was here last time, his wife had died and he was in mourning.

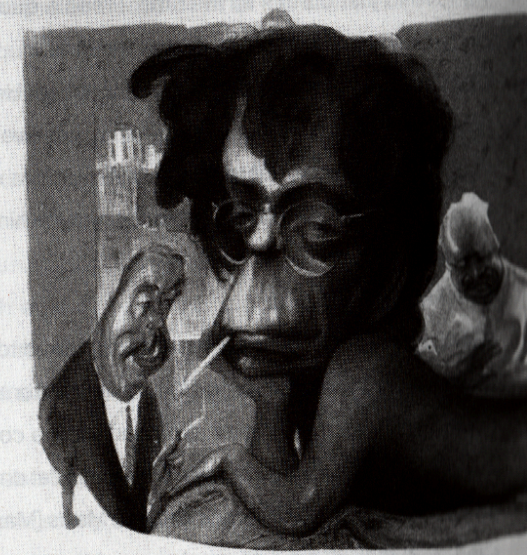
WEDNESDAY, JULY 17TH • We received a tour of the castle, with its tapestries and basketball-court-size meeting rooms. On the Presidential desk, there was a small box with the logo of a well-known rock group—a large red tongue. When they met the President, they'd all gone out on a balcony overlooking the square to say hello to the people. The door behind them locked and they had to crawl back in through an open window.

Havel looked exactly the same as before: open, friendly, inquisitive—the type of man you like, and soon love, on sight. He was chain-smoking and had a bad cough from the flu. We talked about the problems of writing. His: all he writes are speeches. Mine: I can't type when my back hurts, and I have a show to do in fifteen minutes. Havel says I could try a bottle of whiskey, or perhaps I might be able to see the trainer for the Czech Olympic swim team tomorrow. I hope he likes the show and stays afterward. But chances are he won't, because of security. We're playing in the old Communist congress; the sound is terrible, but people like having rock performed in this former hall of terror.

Backstage again, sweating and doing stretches. Have to pack later tonight. Havel decides to stay and is in one of the other rooms. I dry off and bound down the hall. We drink and smoke, and he says he liked the show. I'm relieved—I don't know why. I know we were good. It's just that we weren't as great as we can be. Actually not we, me. I wanted to be incandescent.

THURSDAY, JULY 18TH A.M. • Shampoo exploded in my suitcase and my freeze-dried breakfast mineral powder leaked across everything. I tried a wet cloth to clean it up, but then the shampoo started bubbling. Now one side of the suitcase has separated because the glue is being loosened by the shampoo. I showered, and when I went to dry my hair the hair dryer spewed green powder all over me, destroying a custom contact lens in the process. As I was cursing this luck, there was a knock on the door—the Olympic swimming trainer. Fifteen minutes and [illegible] dinary cracks later, I was back [illegible]

SATURDAY, JULY 20TH [illegible] from Prague to Vienna to [illegible] gium. Two connecting flights hour layover. Travel time: [illegible] hours. Playing time: one hour. [illegible] is lost. An interviewer asks me [illegible] smile much. I wonder if he's [illegible] Davis that question. I tell him [illegible] inner glow. Some group has [illegible] kill the Sex Pistols for [illegible] security is high. What a [illegible] by a drunken fan [illegible] Johnny Rotten. I love rock



Pages from Lou's tour diary, published in The New Yorker, *1996*

was a little bit of Chi gong and another type of Chi gong Ahn taught me. It's like an isometric. It's harder. You flex certain muscles. Usually for me, I started having trouble in my upper back. You flex those muscles while you hold a position and hold your breath in the diaphragm and then push it out, releasing the breath. It's strong and you get pretty high from it. The ideal is forty-five minutes daily of Chi gong. As I got older and busier, it's gone to twenty minutes in the morning and ten minutes in the afternoon.

I'd love to just do this all the time. I read a quote from Lou, where he said he hopes everybody does this all the time.

LAURIE: He started increasing his practice. He was doing it three times a week, and then it was four, and then it was five, and then it was seven. He was really into that—at least a couple hours a day.

IGGY: Wow, that's great! I never spoke with him about the martial arts, by the way.

LAURIE: Really? Aha.

IGGY: I never did. When I first met him, I talked to him about songs. He tolerated me, I think. Because, you know, he was from New York and I wasn't. But I was okay with that. I never really had a deep conversation with him. I hung out in his hotel room a couple times and his flat once, and bumped into him at shows. He came to a Stooges show at Max's [Max's Kansas City in New York City], and that was a nice memory, and then I saw a very good show of his at Max's that's always stuck in my memory. I'm not sure if it was even a real show. It could have been something that they call a showcase, because there were so few of us. It was in that front room upstairs that was very small with some banquettes and windows overlooking Park Avenue on Union Square. There might have been thirty to forty people, and there was a very tiny stage. He played there with the Yule brother [Billy Yule], Velvet Underground lineup, and they did "Ocean," and I remember "Pale Blue Eyes." I remember he had a very nice french-cut T-shirt on. And I said, "I want to get that T-shirt." I think he got it over on Christopher Street, and he was pretty buff.

LAURIE: Lou was always telling people, "Don't eat carbs!" Do you tell people about diet and tell them what they should or shouldn't eat? Because Lou was always doing that to others.

IGGY: Well, I don't tell. I just watch and see how people do it. It's different for everyone, and it depends on your age and what sort of person you are. I eat everything, but I do it with knowledge of what I'm doing. Right now, for the life I'm living, I eat quite a bit of red meat, but high quality. In the morning I eat nuts and a banana or something like that, because there's some grain, there's some whole-grain goodness to nuts that haven't been ruined. I try to avoid too much sugar, although I'm aware a little bit of it creeps into just about everything that we consume, including most health food, which is also usually the stuff you buy at a store. It's all been processed, even the health stuff. A banana is a good bet, because you can see it. You can hold it in your hand, you can see what it is, and it's got a coating around it that actually naturally grew there. So I try to make decisions like that.

A banana is a good bet, because you can see it. ▲

SCOTT RICHMAN: What else do you do to keep in such good shape? Even with the Chi gong, Tai Chi, and eating sensibly, you're in incredible shape for somebody whose body has been put through the rigors of performance for so long. Are there other things as part of your regimen that you do?

IGGY: The other thing is what Ahn always advised: to bathe often, but not, like, take a shower. I try to be in water as much as I can, especially the ocean. The ocean beats the hell out of anything else. But even in a pool, you don't have to swim. I like swimming, but if you go to the Caribbean or summers in Miami, you see people from the southern reaches, sometimes older women, just go in the water and sort of sit there, talking for hours. Jamaicans do that a lot too. You'll see the guys just sit in the water for forty minutes, and I do that a lot. It just makes me feel better. The currents and the pressure from the water, it does something good for the body. Ahn always told me to make a daily effort. He said, "Get a little progress every day." And he said if you're tired, do less, which made a lot of sense, instead of forcing yourself all the time. That's probably been the better thing for me. That and I try not to eat bad food.

LAURIE: Did Chi gong influence your songwriting and performance, and if so, how?

IGGY: Little by little. One thing it did was it widened my voice. Like, it helped the low end go bigger and the high end go louder. The performance is where it really helped. I developed the ability to move around, breathe, and sing with a full voice at the same time. It made me way more capable of doing a good rock show, because in a rock show you should be able to sing loud or sing in a way that you're heard, which for most people means loud. You have to make yourself heard against those loud instruments. For the sort of thing I do, you have to use the stage, so it gave me a lot more strength and stamina to do that.

LAURIE: How long did it take to get there with Chi gong?

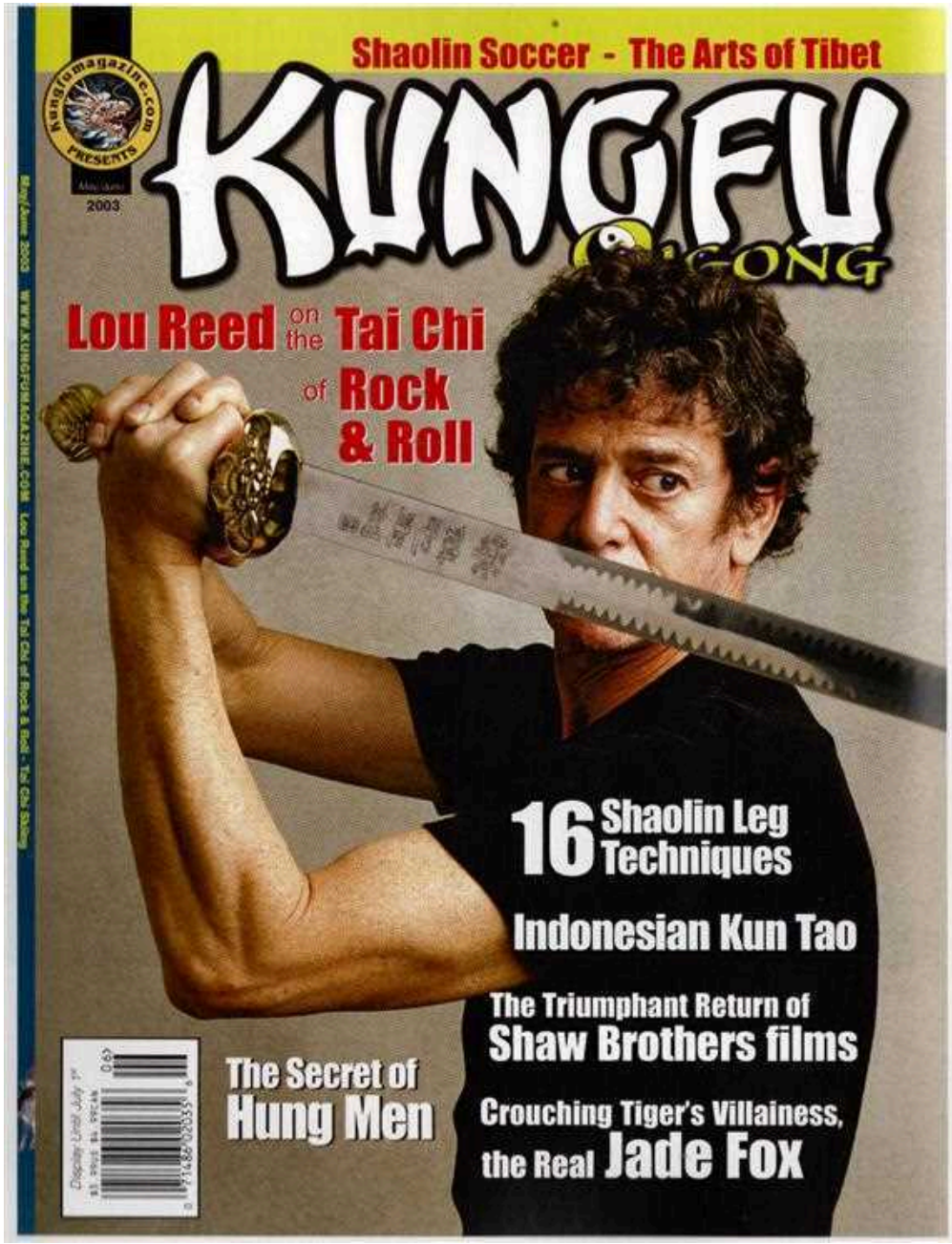
IGGY: I noticed it helping me after ten years. I went on faith for a long time, and I noticed that it was at least making it possible to walk. I used it in combination with Western medicine. If you look at pictures of me from about 2002, after about twelve years of Chi gong, you don't see this skinny guy bent over. The dude is filled out and more upright.

Iggy in the ocean

LAURIE: That's true.

IGGY: I still had my nicks from a lot of damage. There's some damage you're never going to get rid of, and that's that. But I was able to overcome it with the help of this. After about twenty years, I started noticing I could hear the bones pop. *Okay, we need to loosen this*, and I'd know how.

The practice of the breathing and doing these movements, and what you can observe from the people who teach you, gets you in that mood where you can feel that you're actually a human being. You feel a little more human and that it's okay and it's going to work out. Like Ahn said, "We are magical beings." Well, you can be a magical being in a nice, sensible way. That's how you do it.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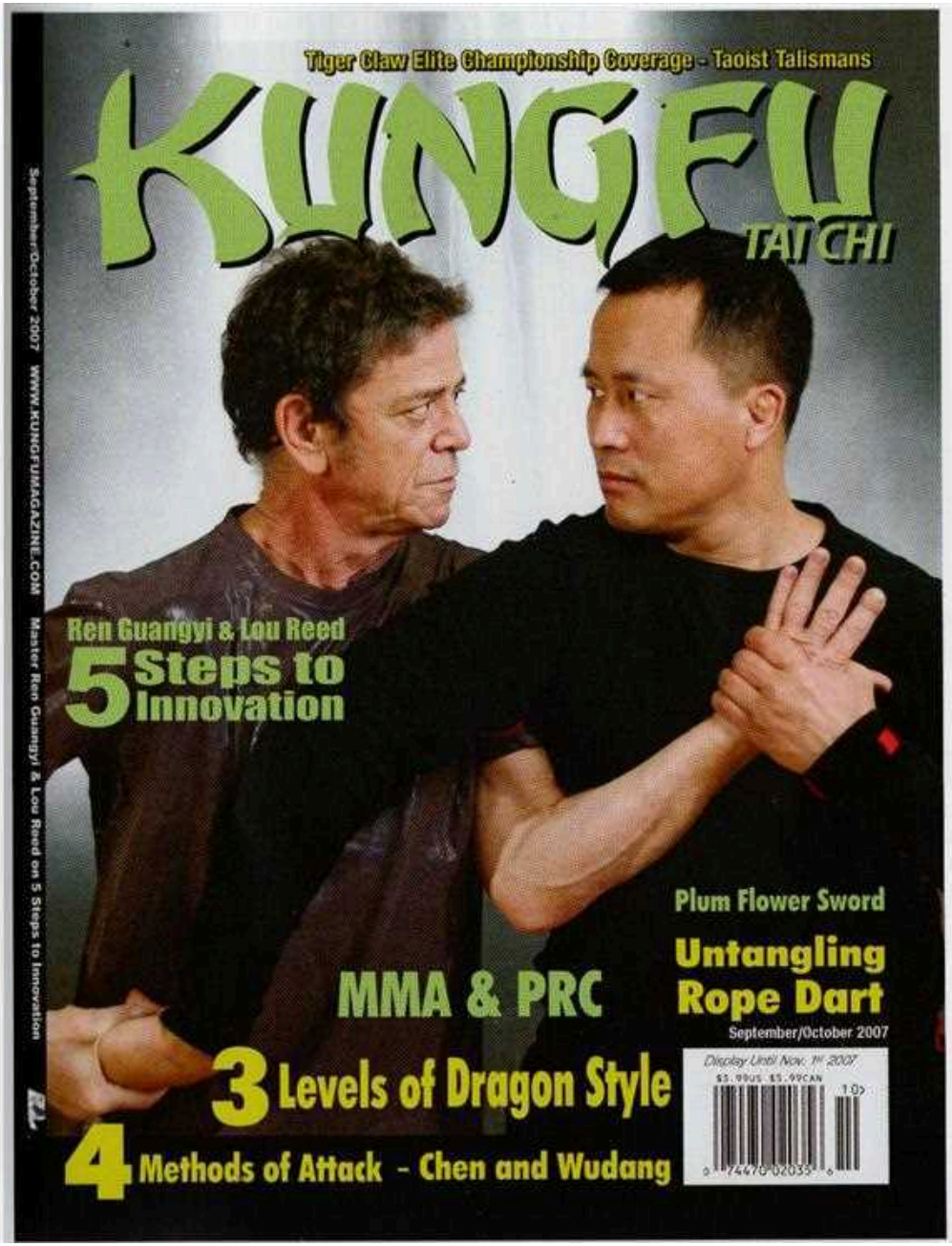
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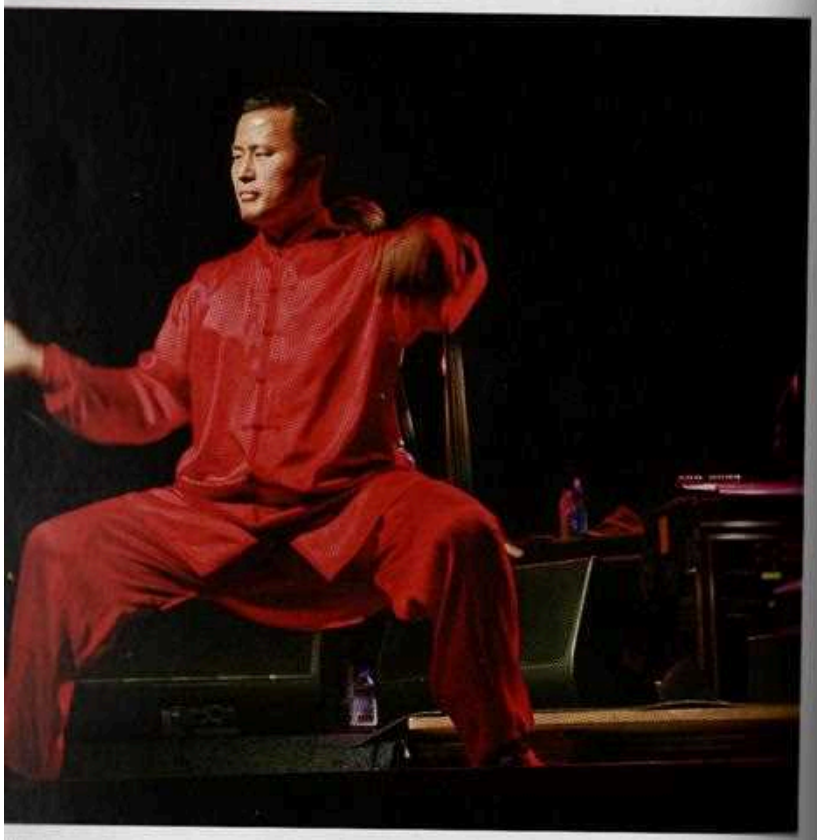


Ren onstage, 2003

CHAPTER 5

REN GUANGYI

"The power of the heart

My studies with Master Ren (MR) have advanced to a place I could only dream of and my understanding of the art has been growing to say the least. What MR has accomplished for me is beyond belief. He's extraordinary and I have passed through pain into a new twilight of abilities. To do one thing, one form well, is really the point. Within the form and the correct stance and sinking lies freedom—the freedom to change your energy.

I am not talking about fighting here. I am talking about changing your actual body and its energy supply and flow. It is startling and very real. As in many things, the smarter you are and the better teacher you have control the results. All the practice in the world won't do a thing if what you're doing is wrong and the correction usually causes pain, and you have to believe in your teacher when you are told that you will pass through this.

Never has the motto "No pain no gain" meant so much, as we are talking about anything from weekly to monthly incapacities as you march toward an improved new you. Each correction is painful, as you are being maneuvered into the correct body alignments, which are contrary to where your body has ended up due to lack of knowledge and modern life stress. The fact that these can be rectified, addressed, and conquered is the genius of Chen Tai Chi and the great MR. Practice. Change your energy.

—FROM AN EMAIL LOU REED SENT TO BILL O'CONNOR, MARCH 15, 2005

I had started also studying because I wanted to learn more about power and fighting. So I was studying how to generate power. And a lot of sparring with another great teacher—Larry Tan, the founder of a system called "Dazzling Hands." And then, in my Wu class, one of my fellow students mentioned Ren to me. He said, you have got to see Master Ren. And brought me a tape of him. And I saw the tape and then a friend of my friend's was in his class. And when I saw what they were doing, I said, well, I've never seen Tai Chi that looked like this before and I wanted to learn it particularly as Master Leung Shum was no longer teaching. But at first I didn't go because my friend said the class is SO hard, it's impossible, it's really, really hard! But finally it was just too fascinating, so I went to the class and I met him and then I called around to see if I could study with him privately. When I saw what he did, . . . I said, "Oh my God, a man who can fly. I want to start learning that." And that was almost a year ago. . . .

My attitude is that you very rarely come in contact with someone of Master Ren's level, so every opportunity I could get to learn from him I wanted to do that. So I took time off from what I normally do. And I decided I really felt I was missing a lot of things in my Tai Chi education, and that the answer to it was Master Ren. To show me the things that I hadn't been able to learn in some of the other classes. . . .

Like I said, one of the people I was with said it's really hard. They were talking about the lowness of the stance, for instance, and fajin. But it's not a really realistic appraisal, because you don't do what you can't do, and you learn how to do things. I'm not saying it's not difficult, but it's not impossible, it's a matter of application and the ability of the instructor, which in this case is as good as it could possibly get. If someone teaches you alignment, and I'm not a Tai Chi expert by any stretch, so interviewing me about Tai Chi is kind of the cart before the horse, but just from my point of view as a student, it's simply that Master Ren can show you the relationship of power, stance, and form.

I've found that from my point of view, the Chen style contained many things that I knew on a fairly superficial level from Eagle Claw, and that had Chen elements of what seemed to me the soft applications in Eagle Claw. There were lots of things that I recognized from my experience with Eagle Claw and Wu Hao, and here was the combination of the whole kit and kaboodle, the whole tamale in one. I think it's pretty astonishing. Plus, being able to really generate power in fighting . . . and that the answer to it was Master Ren. To show me the things that I hadn't been able to learn in some of the other classes. . . . He combines the very beautiful form, the great control, the focus, and a really, truly remarkable fajin. When I saw that combination of grace and power, the fast and the soft, the yin and the yang, that's what I'd been looking for. When I started studying with him I realized how much he could teach me. To say the least. So I was very fortunate that he agreed to teach me. And I try to study with him as often as possible. . . .

All Tai Chi has the martial aspect to it, a lot of people don't know, a lot of the teachers won't show it, or they do show it but you don't really learn it, what the application is. I started studying with Larry Tan because I

wanted to have street fighting. Not applications that you throw a punch and if you stand there for fifteen minutes I do the application. And you're in your pose. I'm in NY, that's not what's going to happen. So I was interested in some of the more serious applications of it. And then again, I thought that Master Ren's form and the way he taught it gave you access to all these things. From the minute I saw Master Ren do fajin, I thought, I will study this forever. To try and get some of what he can do. And he's a truly great teacher. He likes showing you. . . .

Everybody does something, some people race cars, others collect stamps, I find Tai Chi to be philosophically, aesthetically, physically, and spiritually fascinating. I was told in my fast form there are four emotions you express. I found that a fascinating concept to have.

At what point are you a martial artist as opposed to someone interested in the martial arts? And if you're looking at it that way, you've got a layman, you've got a dilettante, you've got this and that, at what point would you say martial artist? Well, that's a martial artist [*points at Ren*]. I mean, look at painters. Okay, Van Gogh, there's a painter. Lots of people paint, lots of people teach painting, are they artists? No. That's an artist [*points again at Ren*]. A martial artist. That's a goal. I don't think I'm in any position to call myself a martial artist. I'm a student of the martial arts. He's a martial artist, that's a whole other level. . . .

Chen style suits me to a tee. That's the kind of Tai Chi that was made for me, and if I'd seen it I would have gone there. It combines everything. I'd never seen it before, though. Not what Ren does. If I had, then there I would have been. I think that everything happens for a reason, everything happens when it's going to happen. Chen is made for someone like me. The attraction is, that's it, my temperament.

—FROM "LOU REED: A WALK ON THE WILD SIDE OF TAI CHI,"
BY MARTHA BURR, *KUNG FU TAI CHI* MAGAZINE, MAY/JUNE 2003

I've been interested in martial arts for very many years, probably thirty, forty years, because I had thought, I should be doing exercise. Why not do exercise that had a point? And when I saw what Chen-style Tai Chi was, I realized I was in the wrong style of Tai Chi and I should be doing Chen. And when I got back to New York—this is about ten years ago—I saw Master Ren do fajin, and the minute I saw that, I just wanted to study with him immediately, and I have.

Fajin is an expression of power. It's an extraordinary power that you can learn to access through practicing Master Ren's style of Chen.

I wasn't in pain, although with the other style I was doing, I'd started hurting my knees. And I was really worried about that. I knew the school I was in wasn't very impressed with a knee operation, and I didn't want to be one of them. So it was obviously something wrong, and just around that time, Master Ren shows up, and I took one look at what he did and it was so much what I wanted to do. And I just switched, and that was the end of any knee pain, any back pain, any of that.

When Ren speaks, it's like learning a new language about your own body. It's your body but also learning how to feel and identify certain things that he's talking about. I certainly wouldn't have believed you're walking around maybe using 60 or 70 percent of what you could be using, but you don't know it's there to even use it. And Master Ren gives you a key. He's like, "Here, do this, do this, do this." At the beginning, everybody does it really fast. Really fast. But then you do it over and over, and finally you start to slow it down. And it's when you slow it down he says, "Right there—can you feel that?" And now you can.

He works seven days a week, teaching us in our various efforts and classes. Seven days a week, and before that he would practice fourteen hours a day. That's how he got this. I said to him once, "Did you do weights?" Because it's like trying to move a car. And he said, "No, I hit trees." Because I took him out with me once and what we did is go out, find a park. "Put your feet up. Do your stretches against a tree." And then, "Hit here against the tree." Build that up, build that up, build that up. That's how.

—FROM AN INTERVIEW WITH LOU FOR *WE TALK*, SINOVISION (CHINESE-LANGUAGE CABLE NETWORK), 2011

REN GUANGYI

Chen-style Tai Chi master and Lou's last teacher

Lou loved Tai Chi. It healed him, made everything easier. He wanted to understand it and go into the details to get better. Lou would usually practice six days a week, and on Sunday before class he would sometimes practice for a couple of hours. Then after class have a private lesson for two hours at his home.

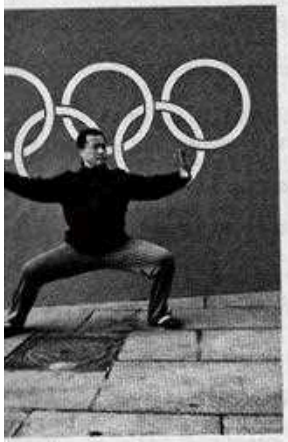
In good weather, we'd be on the roof. He knew what was best for practicing, like don't practice on carpet. That is very difficult, but he loved working out on the roof at home. He always practiced seriously. You know, it's the details; you need a focus and you must practice. He always wanted more and always tried again after I corrected him or showed him something new.

Tai Chi, like I said, was healing for him. After practice, everything was easier. Problems disappeared, and he felt good. His Tai Chi practice was very smart, very special. Show him one time and he understood. He got it. He was very, very good. He could go very low, and in low style you need a lot of legs, need a lot of energy.

When Lou was on tour and completely exhausted after the show, he didn't want to see anyone. He just wanted to rest. But then after a year of Tai Chi, he'd do a two-hour show and after be very relaxed and happy.

Before going out to perform, he'd do the 21 Form and be ready

Tai Chi onstage at the 2006 Winter Olympics



ngYi at the 2006 Winter
s in Turin, Italy

to go, feeling good. And after the show, he'd do the 21 Form maybe two or three times and he'd recover.

Lou was also a good teacher. If you practice after teaching people, you feel it differently. You go to a higher level. People ask you a question and it makes you understand more. He was a very good teacher. He especially loved showing fajin—explosive power.

He also made up descriptions of parts of the forms, making it easier for students, like Delivering the Pizza. You know, like when holding a pizza like a tray over your shoulder and with the other hand ring the doorbell.

But fajin is what he loved me to teach. It is power that enters from the ground through your legs to your trunk, and all this energy goes to the tip, to the fist. Fajin then goes from left side to right side of the trunk, then hip, knees, ankle, and to the foot to the floor, all while twisting. All the power goes to the tip. If you want to use your shoulder, the energy goes to [the] shoulder, want to use [your] elbow or fist, it goes there.

With Tai Chi, you need to first wake up your body. You warm up, then enter practice, but it comes from the mind. Energy comes through your body and your trunk. It's like an engine, but I told him, "Don't stretch the body muscle—stretch the inside energy. Stretch your brain."

Tai Chi makes your mind big. Lou kept notes about mind and body control and the power. From the beginning, people learn by copying and move Tai Chi energy from outside to inside. After it is inside your mind energy, you move it back to the outside and make a powerful body.

Lou had a good Tai Chi body—relaxed, fast, then slow. This is very hard, but his body could do it. He knew Tai Chi very well and understood a lot of information. His feelings and understanding were very deep. He could do a very low style and his kicks were very high. His fajin was super strong. Maybe he was feeling another part of an ocean. A deep-water power.

Lou said, "We are one body, one big tendon. We have to be a peacemaker with ourselves."

I'm no professor of this, but I think Lou's music, like Tai Chi, had a lot of chi, you know, the feeling of opening your heart, moving your heart. Move your heart, yeah.

WIM WENDERS

Film director

I must have met him before we did *Faraway, So Close!* That was in '92. He appeared in the film and gave a concert that we filmed, where he played one song for the shot.

We filmed in an industrial building out in what was then still the East. Berlin wasn't unified yet. The building was gigantic and had all this machinery still around. Really wild. Our character Cassiel was an angel

Reed and Otto Sander in Faraway, So Close! by Wenders

who had just become a human being, and one of the first things he does on his first day of life is he listens to Lou in his hotel. His first day in existence, and on his last day as an angel, he listens to Lou's thoughts. Later he sees a poster for a performance Lou is doing and goes and watches from the rafters. Lou selected "Why Can't I Be Good" to play for the scene. The tragedy of Cassiel, my angel, is that when he becomes a human being, he instantly gets into the wrong circles, and he sort of is involved with gangsters and goes down the drain very quickly, so "Why Can't I Be Good" was perfect.

He played the song three or four times. The shoot was finished, but the crowd was still there. Lou said, "Wait a minute, guys, I'll play you three more songs." And the crowd went wild. He did that because that crowd was so nice and they had all gone through the scene several times. We all gave up our shooting positions and just became the audience.

He was actually in three of my movies. He was also in *Palermo Shooting* and *The Soul of a Man*. In *Palermo Shooting* he plays a sort of ghost coming out of a jukebox, and in *Soul of a Man*, a film about my favorite blues musicians, he played a song by Skip James—"See That My Grave Is Kept Clean." An amazing song. And though I couldn't say that anybody is ever easy to work with, Lou made it always so easy. We never had a problem.

You know, I contributed a little story I wrote for a book called *The Songs of My Life*. My story was about "Pale Blue Eyes." It was a song that saved my life. It's a story about me in my revolutionary days in '68. I was living in a commune, traveled with all these people to Italy to meet these radical socialists. This was the moment when a lot of people I knew in Germany decided to go underground and start using violence. And some, like me, said, "No, we won't do that. We like our activities so far, and they are sort of fun and they are provocative, but nothing that would involve anybody getting hurt." Someone on the way home stole everything I had except my little tape recorder. I had one tape left and it was a Velvet Underground tape, and I listened to it over and over. That's where the story came from.

It was a terrible time for me. It was a time of great insecurity. Some of my best friends decided they were going to go and be part of something that I didn't want to be part of. Some died or disappeared, but I went back to being an art/film student and sort of disassociated myself from those revolutionary guys. "Some Kinda Love" and "Pale Blue Eyes" were running on a loop in my head. I didn't have anything else. It was his voice more than anything. He had this completely unique voice, like nobody else sang. This very charismatic, sort of rough and tender voice at the same time. It's what I liked most about the Velvets, Lou's voice. And when he was not singing, I thought they were not that great.

We met quite often, and Lou would always have to leave to do his Tai Chi. He spoke to me at length about this. He spoke of it very dearly. He thought I should do it, because I was complaining about getting stiff. He said, "Well, there's nothing better."

The only time I actually saw him do Tai Chi was when he stayed in Berlin. This was in early 2002, '03, '04? He said, "I can't practice in my hotel room. You know a place?" And I said, "Yes, I know the perfect place. We have a big gym in the house where I live. There's the gym and

a swimming pool and a big flat area, and you're going to be totally on your own. Nobody is there ever during the day. You can have the whole place for yourself." I went along and did my own stuff at the gym, and Lou occupied this whole big area by the pool and was busy for about an hour.

I was sweating on the treadmill and every now and again peeking over to what he was doing. I didn't want to sit there and watch him, but every now and then I looked, and he was very intensely working on it. It looked to me like he was defying gravity, and it looked to me like some of it was defying time, because everything was in slow motion. In a way, it was dance. It was beautiful. And he was like an angel dancing in this big gym and the sun was just falling through the windows.

He was like an angel dancing in this big gym.

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ANOHNI

Singer, composer, visual artist, and vocalist with Lou's band on tour and on records

Hal Willner gave one of my CDs to Lou in 2001, while Lou was looking for some different kinds of guest vocalists for his album *The Raven*. It was one among a big pile of CDs, and Lou, for one reason or another, chose my voice out of all of those voices that he'd heard that day, and told Hal to bring me into the studio. Hal warned me that if Lou didn't like me that I would be escorted out of the studio through the back door, so he tried to prepare me, just in case anything bad happened. And I just went in. To be honest, I didn't know that much about Lou, and I'd been told that I was going to be trying to sing "Perfect Day." So I learned the song "Perfect Day." I knew of Lou's work through people, through another generation of musicians who'd covered Lou's work, so it was strange in a way.

ohni and Lou

Anyway, I went in, and Lou liked what he heard, and he set up some candles for me. I was just along for the ride. I didn't have a lot of expectations. He liked me. It was thrilling to be liked by Lou. You immediately felt like you were someone special if Lou liked you. If Lou gave you his stamp, then you were in his psychic space and you were treasured.

He embraced my voice. I learned later about his history with the singer Jimmy Scott, and that also helped to shed light on what it was that Lou liked. He was taken by the meeting point between his incredibly rough voice and something more feminine . . . an androgynous voice that was supple. I think he was enchanted by that combination; he liked to have that energy around him, while he stayed his course.

And so in some ways, I think I filled a role that he'd explored, fleshed out, when he toured with Jimmy. But then I think we became friends because he saw in me a life experience that in some way he recognized. There was always this push and pull between the world that I came from, as someone who is transgender, and the broader society.

Lou's movement towards healthfulness is something that started long before I arrived . . . his movement towards a different kind of life, and a sort of shedding of, even a sort of silencing of, some parts of his story. At the same time, I felt he was drawn to me because I held space for certain points of view that were somehow magnetic for him.

He loved me, and I knew that, and I loved him. He understood something about the predicament I was in. This was the early 2000s, and the environment in music was particularly homophobic, particularly transphobic. So much has changed in the last fifteen years, it's hard to remember that there was literally no space for someone like me in music, and in

popular culture. He once wrote a letter on the eve of the release of *The Raven* to Seymour Stein and it just said, "If there's one thing left for you to do in this life, it's sign Antony and the Johnsons."

Stein didn't sign me, but the fact was that he wrote that letter. . . . It was shocking to have someone like him, this kind of hyper-masculine tough guy whose bark was so loud, advocating for me.

Lou had a straight line to his power. There was a dam built between his power and his rage. And sometimes, depending on where he was psychically, that dam was in better or worse shape. Sometimes the dam would break. When he was in his grace, it was about building this new kind of composure and grace, reaching for this kind of deeper strengthening that worked for him. Especially in the last part of his life, when I knew him, it often really served him, not just in his practice but in his life in terms of being able to express the generosity and grace that was the essence of him. We all know Lou. We know the size of him. He had a lot on his plate.

Did his decision at that point in his life to defend a trans artist reflect on his previous relationships with transgender people? I think he would hate me for saying that. He would probably say, actually, "That's bullshit, I just liked you."

The Raven tour was a cavalcade. Lou had banned the drums; he hated drums at that point because he couldn't control them in the way he wanted. He had Mike Rathke on guitar, who also was asked to play this tiny electronic drum kit. It was very idiosyncratic.

But if we're talking about a straight line, the straight line was his emotional commitment. Everything fell to the wayside when Lou started to sing or started to deliver. Lou playing guitar—that was always my thing. I was always begging him, "Lou, please play the guitar," because often he didn't want to play. He would say, "I can't remember how to play anymore." And I'd say, "Lou, when you play the guitar, it's like a lion's paw clawing at a guitar. No one else sounds like that." It's just this intuitive way of playing that is so emotional. He was such a good guitar player.

And then of course when Master Ren came out and did Tai Chi, it was Lou daring the audience to challenge his values. "Just go ahead and don't embrace my values. See what happens next."

I remember sitting with him in a coffee shop on Perry Street and he was just so peaceful. He'd really arrived at this plateau of peace. And that was why his last album was such a shock. He channeled rage for his last record. I always see it in the context of the medical treatments he was dealing with at the time. Because it kind of boiled his blood from the inside, when he was taking that interferon. It can be a very difficult treatment to endure, and it just changed him.

Lou had a straight line to his power.

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But I remember so well the stability of his spirit, prior to those treatments. He was in a place of graciousness that evolved during the years that I knew him. When I was first on tour with him, he was still full of grit. If his steak was too tough, or if something was going wrong on tour, a head had to roll. Someone would say the wrong thing to Master Ren, and Lou would fire the cook. So many cooks' heads rolled on that tour. He could be volatile and mercurial. You didn't always know what to expect.

Ren was a different kind of tough. I think Lou loved Ren because Ren's story was so hard-knock. He was sleeping on a concrete bench as a young apprentice. Ren had mastered his demons through training, sheer force of will, and mental control. I think that idea of mental control really appealed to Lou.

It wasn't "Dive into the ocean and let it carry you." It was like "Build a fortress and lock it down." And within that, "Find your own line that connects you down into the center of the earth." And that was what Ren exhibited every night onstage. He would do these dances. . . . Lou was

obsessed with the idea that Ren could basically knock over a building if his mind was set on it, almost like a bulldozer or a battering ram. I think Lou was drawn to this idea that if a mind was clear enough and perfectly aligned with its body, it could move a mountain. That power impressed him, but I think it also appealed to his desire to be the master of his life, and of the things that had happened to him, and to the oceans of feeling, power, confusion, and expression that poured through him.

He felt life really intensely. He was a deeply feeling person. He cried from the tiny peep of a violin. He was so emotional, and so receptive, and that stood in dramatic contrast to his volatility. So he's dealing with this huge spectrum of tenderness and intensity, and it was Tai Chi that drew all of those strands together, into a person that felt self-actualized, self-realized. It gave him authorship over the spectrum of his experience.

He'd put in the time, he'd invested the time, he'd done the work, and he had it in the bank, and that was what gave him access to such grace. That foundation of grace that he'd achieved did carry him through, especially through the last months of his life, when he was really shining.

But I remembered the same tenderness from before the interferon treatments, a few years earlier . . . because he'd already gotten there on his own. Before he was dealing with his mortality so explicitly, he'd gotten there. He had gotten to his grace. And then he got assaulted with medical stuff.

When we talk about the metaphor of the straight line, I think there were certain straight lines in his crazy life, within all his complexity. . . . This sheer force of will, I think, was ultimately what he embraced as his straight line, and what drew him to this notion of mastery, more than to surrender. It was really mastery that offered a kind of a solution to him.

I remember even the last time I had dinner with him, he was telling me, "You've got to get it together." I miss him so much, because life is lonely without those people that feel so deeply the experience of living. Lou was one of those people that when you're with him, you're with someone who is really alive. Most people aren't very alive. They don't feel that much. Lou would make you feel. No matter whether you felt claustrophobic or you were laughing or you were a little frightened, or fascinated, or whatever feeling you were having next to Lou, you knew that you were alive next to Lou.

Most people aren't very alive. They don't feel that much. Lou would make you feel.

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I made a post when he died that said he was like a father to me. My own father probably would've acknowledged that. Lou died shortly before my dad died, but Lou had mentored me. He saw what was beautiful in me and wanted it, in stark contrast to how my own father dealt with me.

So Lou knew what I was, and he tried to protect me. Sometimes when parents are protecting children, they crush parts of them that they're worried will make life more difficult. It's classic and paradoxical. He knew where I wanted to go and used all of his faculties and resources to try to make that happen. That my life transformed so dramatically and that I developed a platform—these were both in large part because of Lou.

I think of Hal's pile of CDs. Had he just skipped over that CD, none of this would've happened. That's so bizarre.

LAURIE ANDERSON: It would've happened. It would've happened in another way. There's no way that people can't hear your music.

ANOHNI: But I was thirty-five when that happened. I'd been banging on doors for well over a decade. Everyone had said no. Lou turned the no around. It wasn't just, "We haven't heard you yet." It was like, "We've heard you and we are saying no. We're not going to let this pass through the doors into the daylight of popular culture." Lou was the one who pried that door open for me. He reorganized all these straight guys to listen to me through Lou's ears. Lou gave tough guys permission to cry when they heard me sing.

He was an artist. He embodied creativity and suffering, and a very, very fierce life force.

He'd just been through a lot more hell than most people. So when you've been through a lot more hell than most people, you just have different skill sets. Most people couldn't fathom his life experience. Sometimes we make artists of those individuals; we marvel over them. They're like these weird pearls that our culture has made. You know, our society mulches people's spirits, and then the ones that survive turn into these glistening pearls, and then we're fascinated by them, because they contain this depth of experience, especially if they start to express themselves in these transcendental ways. It shocks people. It shocks the heterosexual experience. It disrupts the performance of suffering complacency that most people are forced to exhibit in daily life. Lou just had a very vivid life. He experienced vivid joy and vivid suffering, and from very early on he was burned into the form that was him. Sometimes he was a mountain of scar tissue. And flowering, he was flowering.

LAURIE: Yeah, he was a flower.

ANOHNI: What does it take for scar tissue to flower? Nina Simone has it in her song "Compassion," where she talks about . . . creativity. It's a real gift, especially for those who have suffered. She says, "Because I have loved so deeply . . . God, in his great compassion, gave me the gift of song." It's about survival.

Creativity is available to us all, but it is a rare thing when a child feels that they have permission—for one reason or another—to reach for their creativity as a means of survival, whatever it is that they're enduring. When that neural pathway opens in our society, which mostly tells children to shut up, when a child for one reason or another reaches for self-expression, if only in secrecy, to compensate in some way for what they've endured, then you get a lighthouse.

The second part of the lyric is "Because I have loved so vainly, sung with such faltering breath." Nina talks about her depth of feeling as a reason that God gave her song. Finally, she talks about her depth of singing as the reason "the master in his infinite mercy, offers the boon of death." It's just a very amazing lyric. It's talking about being like a soldier of God, or a soldier of creativity. I see God and creativity as interchangeable.

I think 2006 was a golden period for Lou, going into the restaging of *Berlin*. Doing *Berlin* was such a point of joy for him. I'll never forget how happy he was. He really reached the mountaintop when that *New York Times* article came out, and Lou was celebrated for a crucial piece of his work that had previously been defiled in the media. Lou was the one that helped me to understand that a malevolent media assault on an artist can create PTSD. When you get assaulted that publicly, really, it's a kind of violence. An artist can be thrown into the coliseum and recreationally shat upon in front of millions of people. It's a sacrifice to appease the collective hunger for a misplaced moment of revenge. It is part of who we have become as a species, and another indication of our collective brokenness as a society.

LAURIE: We were talking to Bill Berger who was his tour manager and lighting designer a little while ago. He was just talking about Lou crying. He said, in the airport he had read a couple of really bad reviews of his work, and that he was crying. And that really shocked me, because he seemed, in many ways, so secure.

ANOHNI: Oh God, wasn't he the opposite? Even one negative word would upset him. If it was only four stars, it was an assault. Lou carried trauma from previous assaults, and that's why he couldn't actually endure one word. I can relate to that. When you have been publicly shamed by

people who wish the worst for you, in exchange for a little bit of money from your actual fans, and that's the final extent of the transaction . . . as if a little pile of money from those who appreciate your work gives the rest of the world license to say whatever they want about you, no matter how biased or personally defamatory. That happened to Lou, and reached an apex with the initial release of *Berlin*.

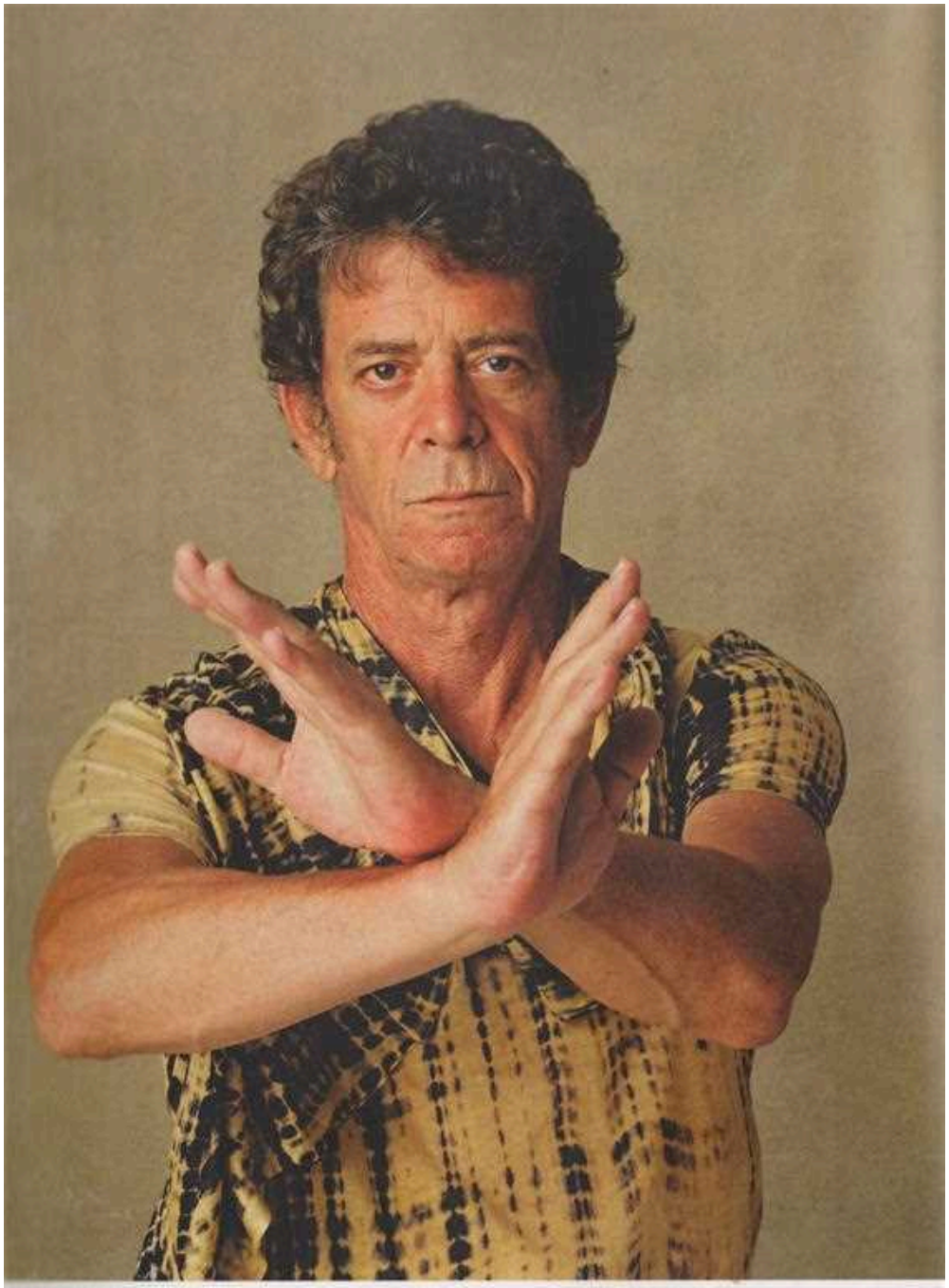
When he was talking about restaging *Berlin*, Lou initially wanted me to sing that whole show, and that wasn't a fleeting idea. He wanted *Berlin* to happen, but he did not want to sing the show. It took many dinners for me to convince him. I said, "Lou, no one wants to hear me sing *Berlin*. People will just be frustrated. Everyone wants to hear you sing *Berlin*." He's like, "No, no, I can't sing those songs." I don't know, but I think he was traumatized by the earlier rejection of that work, and his gut reaction was not to risk it again.

So then he got up the courage, the band pulled together, the orchestra, it got more and more exciting. He was living inside the cocoon of the work being restaged, and it sounded so good, because that album is *so good*. It's one of the great albums of the twentieth century. But he was so fucked over with the reviews of that album that he did *Metal Machine Music* next, which is basically just like: "I hate you. All I can feel is my hatred for you. All I can feel is my rejection of all your judgment of me. I annihilate your rejection." You know what I mean? I'm not saying *Metal Machine Music* didn't have musical merit; of course it did have tremendous musical merit. But I feel like I understand the impulse to try to annihilate a culture's rejection of you as an artist. Your only remaining agency is to try to build a wall high enough to prevent that toxicity from soaking into your psyche.

Yoko Ono once told me that when John Lennon was shot, the second bullet that hit the window was meant for her. And in the aftermath, the whole society, internationally, blamed her for the end of the Beatles, and even for his death; people expressed so much hatred for her at that point of such terrible loss in her own life. And she said, "My solution to it was to imagine that the energy that was hitting me was a form of universal love." What kind of strength of will does that take, to reimagine a diseased and overwhelming assault upon you as an impersonal flow of love from the universe? It was such a brilliant and visionary concept, in response to the tragic ways that we treat each other.

Lou had his own way of dealing with it. This is a long way of saying that when we staged *Berlin*, it was so beautiful, and that glowing *New York Times* article came out, and it was a game changer. This time Lou was celebrated for being a pioneer. His contribution to culture was reassessed, thirty years later. The paper of note acknowledged that he had given something of himself to the world and taken a risk on everyone's behalf.

Berlin tour, 2007



Lou on the cover of LA Yoga, *2007*

[See Lou Reed and Ren GuagnYi in performance here.]