

Peter Laughner is dead.
by Lester Bangs

Perhaps the name means nothing to you. If it doesn't I would hope that you would read this anyway, because one of the reasons I am writing it is that there is more than a little of what killed Peter in me, as there may well be in you. This is a magazine created by rock writers about rock musicians for rock fans, and Peter was all three. Before dying on June 22nd at the age of twenty-four of acute pancreatitis, he founded Cleveland, Ohio's original legendary underground rock band, Rocket from the Tombs. They played an amphetamine-driven blend of Velvets-Stooges, and Peter dashed off lyrics on the order of "I can't think / I need a drink / Life stinks." Later they more or less mutated into Pere Ubu, who can be heard (including guitar solos by Peter) on the first *Max's Kansas City* album. I found it interesting that when they were interviewed in a recent issue of this magazine, they didn't mention their deposed founder once. But then, perhaps they were being kind. Peter was a great writer as well as being a gifted musician. You can get some idea of his style from what was probably the best thing he ever had published, his review of Lou Reed's *Coney Island Baby* in the March 1976 issue of Creem:

"This album made me so morose and depressed that when I got the advance copy I stayed drunk for three days. I didn't go to work. I had a horrible physical fight with my wife over a stupid bottle of 10 mg Valiums. (She threw an ashtray, a brick, and a five foot candelabra at me, but I got her down and beat her head on the wooden floor.) I called up the editor of this magazine (on my bill) and did virtually nothing but cough up phlegm in an alcoholic stupor for three hours, wishing somewhere in the back of my deadened brain that he could give me a clue as to why I should like this record. I came on to my sister-in-law: "C'mon over and gimme head while I'm passed out." I cadged drinks off anyone who would come near me or let me in their apartments. I ended up the whole debacle passing out stone cold after puking and pissing myself at a band rehearsal, had to be kicked awake by my lead singer...before dropping six Valiums (and three vitamin B complexes, so I must've figured to wake up, or at least that the autopsy would say my liver was OK)."

That is more than just the braggadocio of a post-teen druggie. I believe that the key to Peter's life and death, at least insofar as they apply to us, can be found in that autobiographical review. Later on he reminisces about his college days:

"All my papers were manic droolings about the parallels between Lou Reed's lyrics and whatever academia we were supposed to be analyzing in preparation for our passage into the halls of higher learning. 'Sweet Jane' I compared with Alexander Pope, 'Some Kinda Love' lined right up with T.S. Eliot's 'The Hollow Men'...plus I had a rock band and we played all these songs, fueled pharmaceutically...In this way I cleverly avoided all intellectual and creative responsibilities at the cleavage of the decades...Who needed the promise of

college and career? Lou Reed was my Woody Guthrie, and with enough amphetamine I would be the new Lou Reed!"

I originally met Peter via what was to be the first of many three A.M. phone calls. I had been listening to *White Light/White Heat* at the time; he told me he was listening to *Berlin*. It was the kind of thing of which long friendships were born. Later he visited me often in Detroit, and it never seemed odd to me that absolutely every time we got together we wound up blitzed out of our skulls on booze or speed or both; nor did it occur to me to wonder exactly what sort of friendship it might be in which both parties had to be totally numbed to be around one another. At the end of one of our all-night sorties Peter ended up back in the hospital in Cleveland, and even wrote about it in a Rory Gallagher story for *Creem*.

Peter was in the hospital a lot during the last two years of his life, in fact. Around the time I moved to New York from Detroit (last fall), he called me up and told me that the doctors had informed him that he was going to die if he didn't stop all drinking and the use of drugs. "It's gonna hafta be Valium and grass from here on out," he said. "Shit, you gotta have something." But it was also around this time that his midnight phone calls began to take on a creepy tinge. Sometimes he would be mush mouthed on morphine or pain pills, sometimes hoarse from a few days' bout with speed and cognac and beer. On one visit in the fall, he no sooner walked in the door than he plunked himself down in the middle of the living room floor, pulled a pint of Courvoisier from his pocket, asked for a can of Rheingold from the refrigerator, and began chasing one with the other as fast as a he possibly could. It was at this point that our macho buddy drink and drug rituals began to me to seem a little formularized.

We ended the night with me speeding my brains out dashing off inferior reviews of records I barely began to listen to, Peter on the couch in a drink-and-Valium coma. The next time he came to town the first thing he did was ask for my *PDR*-he had a pill he wanted to look up. He didn't even know what it was, but he wanted to shoot it. I advised him to slow down a little, so he settled for another coma from orally ingested liquor and codeine and Valium.

By this time I was beginning to have reservations about a lot of aspects of our friendship, so before he hit town the next and last time, I laid it on the line: I told him that I thought he was committing suicide, and that I couldn't subsidize it by getting high with him any longer. I said that I would see him but wouldn't drink with him and that he couldn't stay here. I didn't say that I was afraid of him dropping dead on my floor. He promised to abide by my wishes. He didn't. The next and last time Peter hit town he had his father (almost literally) in tow. I walked into my apartment and there they were: father and son, business suit and black leather, both drunk, both smiling in their horror. It was a tableau worth more words than I have. He told me his father was Sgt. something of the New York police force, and I believed him, and asked Sgt. something what the hell he was doing in my house. Things got a little hostile, then things got confused, then he left almost as soon as I realized who he

really was, though I may be ascribing to him furtiveness he did not really possess, leaving me alone once again with Peter. I was getting ready to form my own band at the time, so we spent the afternoon trying to work up arrangements to go with lyrics I'd written. The music came quick and fast, because Peter was brilliant, but he had a little bottle of wine he kept taking nips off of. I did not have the guts to say anything about it. Jamming the next day we got totally shitfaced, and he gave me some Dalmanes, which are approximate to Librium, before rushing out the door, where he met my girlfriend on the way in. "I just gave Lester some Dalmanes," he breathlessly told her, "so you better go up and check on him because he may be dead! I gotta go see Patti Smith."

That night was the occasion of the *Punk* magazine benefit at CBGB's at which the well-known incident of Peter trying to push his way onstage to jam with Patti's group and getting kicked off by Lenny Kaye and her brother occurred. J. D. Daugherty said that for the rest of the night Peter just stood around the club seething in wounded rage, glaring at everyone with splintered red eyes. He came by my place to drop off something he'd borrowed (every time he visited me he borrowed something, always an album or a book or a pair of sunglasses to take away as some kind of memento or fetish...) next day, and when I saw him down in the street (because I wouldn't let him up here) he looked terrible: dressed in his usual Lou Reed uniform of black leather jacket and gloves, he also had on a red T-shirt with holes cut into it by scissors, and a really corny imitation black leather plastic hat that I hadn't known he'd taken the night before (Lester's dead but I'm wearing his hat), which he begged me to let him wear back to Cleveland. I said no, and told him that he could buy one just like it for five dollars at Korvette's. He thought I was making fun of him; his state had been and was such that he couldn't tell the difference between the real thing and a piece of apparel that got me laughed at when I wore it to CBGB's. He looked at once ghastly and pathetic, the T-shirt and askew cap creating a nightmare Little Rascals effect of some horribly diseased eight year-old. I got really angry and lit into him: "You're *killing* yourself just so you can be like Lou Reed and Tom Verlaine [who doesn't even take drugs, but was Peter's idol], two people who everybody in this town knows are complete assholes!" It was the last time I ever saw him. It would have been the last time anyway, because had he called again I was planning to tell him that my own will-power was too flimsy: I could not trust myself to be around him and not get drunk or take drugs, so I had no choice but to never be around him. To tell the truth, being his friend had become so harrowing and ugly that I was looking for an out anyway.

When he went back to Cleveland he checked immediately into the hospital. I saw Patti a couple of days later and asked her about the incident at CBGB's, and she said: "It's nothin'. Peter's all right, everybody gets thrown off our stage." I called up his mother and told her to relay the message that Patti was not mad at him; she later wrote me that when she did, it was the only time she saw him smile. Now he is dead, and I hope you don't take this as mere sentiment or another antidrug lecture. I would just like to try to preserve some of the meaning of Peter's life and death for those of us both in and out of the scene he immolated himself to emulate. I especially

would like to direct it at a certain little Cleveland asshole who laughed when I went to CBGB's the night of Peter's death and told everyone about it. Because this kid's death was not meaningless, he wasn't just some fool who took too many drugs and so what because we all knew it was coming.

Peter Laughner had his private pains and compulsions, but at least in part he died because he wanted to be Lou Reed. That certainly was not Lou's fault; it was Peter's. Though he was a casualty of the times, he brought it all upon himself. In a sense Peter reminded me of a character in an old Terry Southern story, "You're Too Hip, Baby." It was about a guy in the bohemian scene in Paris around 1960, who followed all the jazz musicians, poets, and hipsters around, took all the right drugs, did and said all the right things. Eventually he became so rigidly correct that another hipster dismissed him with, "You're too hip, baby. I just can't carry you anymore." And there is something of that aspect of Peter in myself and almost everyone I know. Inasmuch as today I would not walk across the street to spit on Lou Reed, not because of Peter but because Peter's death was the end of an era for me-and era of the most intense worship of nihilism and deathtripping in all marketable forms. (And perhaps just one more signal that the twin concepts of nihilism and the antihero have had it. What began with *The Wild One* and James "nobody understands me" Dean, ran with increasing vehement negativism up through the Stones and Velvets and Iggy has finally culminated in the ersatz jive of groups like Suicide who are not just oppressive and offensive but so *boring* that they lead you to think that it may be time to begin thinking in terms of heroes again, of love instead of hate, of energy instead of violence, of strength instead of cruelty, of action instead of reaction.) But I suspect it's also the beginning of an era-the "new wave" can boast it's first casualty, and given the predilection of this scene for drugs and general destructiveness you can bet there'll be plenty more. It seems just too corny to say that you might prefer to give yourself over to life and the pursuit of positive energies. I recall sitting around my mother's parlor with one of my old speed-shooting buddies in 1971, telling him I was going to try to give up drugs (of course I didn't) and haltingly explaining: "Well...it's just...I kinda wanna devote myself to *life*..." I was embarrassed. He laughed for fifteen minutes. Three months later he was dead. But if Peter Laughner died in part for my sins I tell you now that I will never take amphetamines again (all they ever make me write anymore is crap anyway) and if you wanna kill yourself you can too but stay away from me because it's just too sad, besides which *I haven't got the time*. Perhaps the best epitaph I could offer Peter comes from the conclusion of his own *Coney Island Baby* review:

"Here I sit, sober and perhaps even lucid, on the kind of winter's day that makes you realize a New Year is just around the corner and you've got very little to show for it, but if you are going to get anything done on this planet, you better pick it up with both hands and DO IT YOURSELF."

Good-bye baby and amen. You know what? I don't care that he's dead. That's what I wrote in a letter to his sister-in-law after finishing the above, and then I went out and mailed it to her, but walking down Sixth Avenue something in the sunlight

struck me, a glint in the leaves made me dizzy, the sounds and the feel of breath and being lifted me above myself right into the middle of the street, and I don't know if Peter was looking down on me then but the sky was crying warm blood, and it may have been only that pounding in my veins at the ecstasy of being alive. See because when all is said and done I don't care that he is dead, although I do feel a certain complicity, because other than that there would be only anger left, anger at life and anger at our blood that spills out of our weakness into troughs of uncaring. If I let myself get started I will only begin to rant and threaten those who glamorize death, but there is a death in the balance and you better look long and hard at it you stupid fuckheads, you who treat life as a camp joke, you who have lost your sense of wonder about the state of being alive itself, I AM OUT FOR YOU, I know who you are and I'll shoot you down with weapons at my command and I don't mean guns.

An ultimately this lance of blame must turn back upon myself, whom I have nothing to say in defense of, any more than I can honestly say I will never take drugs again because of Peter Laughner, which would only be a terrible insult to his memory. Realizing life is precious the natural tendency is to trample on it, like laughing at a funeral. But there are voluntary reactions. I volunteer not to feel anything about him from this day out, but I will not forget that this kid killed himself for something torn T-shirts represented in the battle fires of his ripped emotions, and that does not make your T-shirts profound, on the contrary, it makes you a bunch of assholes if you espouse what he latched onto in support of his long death agony, and if I have run out of feeling for the dead I can also truly say that from here on out I am only interested in true feeling, and the pursuit of some ultimate escape from that was what killed Peter, which is all I truly know of his life, except that the hardest thing in this living world is to confront your own pain and go through it, but somehow life is not a paltry thing after all next to this child's inheritance of eternal black. So don't anybody try to wave good-bye.