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Crossing Cuyahoga

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Crossing Cuyahoga

ON DECEMBER 17, 2019, Lou Reed suspended his wild walk with death long enough to show me the cover art for the vinyl version of the extended single he had just recorded, a seventeen-minute-and-twenty-nine-second rager called “Koy A’hoga.” The only image I have from this dream is the cover with Lou’s thumb clasping it on the lower right corner.

I don’t remember talking to Lou or seeing him in this dream, but he must’ve shared some of the details about the song before showing me the cover because I knew, for instance, the general thrust of the lyrical themes and a bit about the orchestration of the piece, including the double-tracked guitars playing slightly out of sync with one another, not exactly like he did with Robert Quine on *The Blue Mask* album, but kind of like that. Underpinning the guitars is a dark, highly syncopated motif played on a cello, similar to the one that shapes the backbone of his eleven-minute-long noir heartbreaker “Street Hassle.”

He described the song to me as a return to form after a long silence.

THE COVER OF the extended single features a photo of a rippling river, shot from just above the surface of the water, looking upstream toward an old railway bridge rusted the color of dying embers. Given the title of the song, I presume the photo is of the Cuyahoga River. The title of the single and the artist name are in the upper-right corner; in contrast to the bold sans serif fonts found on much of Lou’s cover art, this one featured a dissonantly flowery one. It read “Koy A’hoga by Lou Reed” in a watery Monotype Corsiva font. A second guitar slightly out of sync with the first, that font.

Beyond and around the bridge, a forest presses up against the river, ablaze with autumnal color; a blaze the photographer made more emphatic by digitally saturating the color of the leaves. The forest reflected in the water is lit, and it makes the river burn.

THE CUYAHOGA RIVER that runs through Cleveland, Ohio, into Lake Erie was so toxic after settler colonialist industrialization that it caught fire thirteen times. The Cuyahoga River fire of June 22, 1969, is cited by some as catalyzing the American environmental movement. Less than two years later, on Earth Day in 1971, the antipollution organization Keep America Beautiful premiered its enduring public service announcement that featured the actor Iron Eyes Cody, in full Indian buckskin, eagle feather nobly rising from his right ponytail, paddling down a pristine river that grows progressively more polluted the closer he gets to civilization. When at last he steps ashore and approaches a busy road, some speeding white person chucks a bag of trash at his feet. He then turns to face the camera as a single tear etches a river down his cheek toward his jawbone.

Like this weeping Indian, we have to wonder, what kind of jerk would do such a thing?

IN 1986, ALTERNATIVE ROCKERS R.E.M. released *Lifes* [sic] *Rich Pageant*. It included the song “Cuyahoga,” which begins with an imperative to “start a new country up” and then observes, “Our father’s father’s father tried / Erased the parts he didn’t like.” The song is widely considered to be a condemnation of how the settlers destroyed a pristine environment as part of their genocide of Native people. The Cuyahoga River is a metaphor for these erasures. When water burns, as it did on the Cuyahoga, and when we commit genocide in order to “start a new country up,” we know the natural order of the living environment has been distorted; that it’s deadly; out of sync; burning.

THOUGH NEARLY EVERY FILM and television role he took had him playing an Indian, Iron Eyes Cody was not Native. Espara Oscar de Corti was the name Cody’s parents gave him; he was a second-generation Sicilian by birth. One of his earliest acting jobs was in 1931 when he played an “Indian After Firewater” in a Gary Cooper Western, *Fighting Caravans*, which among other things features a scene in which a wagon laden with barrels of gunpowder bursts into flame in the middle of a river as our heroes try to escape the Indians attacking them. River, fire; firewater.

Cuyahoga foretold?

Iron Eyes Cody pretended to be Indian in both his public and private lives, claiming he was Cherokee on his dad’s side and Cree on

his mom's. He even wore his film wardrobe of fringed leathers and braided wigs in his daily life, as if Indians in the twentieth century walked around dressed like that.

We have to wonder, what kind of jerk would do such a thing?

Some desire to be Indian burned within Cody.

A second guitar out of sync with the first.

IN RESPONSE TO a question concerning their song about the burning river, REM's lead singer Michael Stipe said, "We destroyed a culture to build ours. That's what Cuyahoga is about." The latter part of the song reflects briefly on this "destroyed" culture, painting a picture of Native people before the water caught fire: "This is where they walked swam / hunted, danced, and sang." Not unlike Iron Eyes Cody's wardrobe, the song's imagery is replete with all sorts of tired Indian tropes, including the destroying culture's eternal relegation of Native people to the past tense: they walked, they swam. The only thing missing from the catalog of clichés is a fire to dance and sing around, though there is always that river burning nearby.

REM's song inverts the order of the Crying Indian PSA, moving from a sort of uninterrogated settler pollution in the beginning toward a pristine, idealized past as the band power-chords toward the song's final chorus. Progress is undone in the song's chronology, but not in reality. The Native people who named the river Cuyahoga have been erased according to the song. Hunted, danced, sang. Ultimately the tune is a single tear gliding down an imaginary Indian's cheek.

"Cuyahoga" is the Iron Eyes Cody of alt-rock.

ORIGINS OF THE WORD "Cuyahoga" are obscure, though most agree it was borrowed into English from the Iroquoian language family. Some claim it is the Mohawk Indian word for "crooked river," while others claim it is a Seneca phrase meaning "place of the jawbone," which has been said to refer to the shape of the river. Since a jawbone is kind of crooked, these seemingly different interpretations of the word may be closer to one another than they seem at first. They're double-tracked guitars, only slightly out of sync.

In my dream, Lou disputed these interpretations, the conventional spelling of the word, and its inflection. "Koy A'hoga" is an Iroquoian word, Lou agreed, though how he knew that was not clear to me. Where would you learn such a thing after a career spent onstage and

in studios? I attributed his knowledge to the afterlife. Who knows what goes on there? Maybe Lou had spent the six years since he left here sitting with tribal elders.

Unfortunately his translation of “koy a’hoga” got garbled in my transition from sleeping to waking. I want to say I recall him saying the words “law” and “river,” but I know what he really said was “raw” and “liver.”

I also have a strong impression of an association of the word “liver” with some animal. I wish I could say it was a deer or a moose, but it wasn’t. The feeling I had upon waking was that Lou was implying the rock ‘n’ roll animal: a human.

BASED ON LOU’S DESCRIPTION of the lyrics in the parts of the dream that I don’t recall, I woke up with the sense that thematically “Koy A’hoga” was sort of like his track “Last Great American Whale” from his album *New York*. When this record was released, in 1989, I remember critics describing it as a return to form. As an avid Lou fan for most of my teenage and adult life, I noticed early on that nearly every album Reed released was invariably described as a “return to form,” without ever really identifying what the form was. Was the form the late ’60s Velvet Underground sound or the early ’70s glam stuff? Maybe it was the crunch of the ’70s live sets? The weird domestic bliss of the early ’80s? I’m still not sure. The only two exceptions to this “return to form” rule I can think of are his form-busting, double-disk feedback opus *Metal Machine Music* and *Lulu*, his 2011 collaboration with heavy metal arena titans Metallica. *Lulu* was the koy a’hoga of records if, indeed, koy a’hoga means “raw liver” as the dream Lou suggested to me. I cannot stomach liver, whether raw or cooked. I feel the same about *Lulu*.

In contrast to the raw liver of *Lulu*, Lou’s song “Last Great American Whale” is a tasty and cynical story-song linking injustices against Native people to the rampant disrespect that Americans exhibit for animals and the environment. Unlike “Cuyahoga” and Iron Eyes Cody, at least the “tribal brothers” in Lou’s song exist in the present and the song they sing summons the whale to liberate them from the racist traps that settler culture has set for them.

The American disrespect for nature is exemplified in the song by “some local yokel member of the NRA” who keeps “a bazooka in his living room” with which he blows out the whale’s brains. Lou ends “Last Great American Whale” by quoting a painter friend of his, Donald, who says with reference to Americans: “Stick a fork in their ass . . . they’re done.”

ABOUT SIX MONTHS before he died, in October of 2013, Lou Reed received a liver transplant at the Cleveland Clinic in Cleveland, Ohio. Though he had long since cleaned up, the years of alcohol and other chemical abuse had left his liver ablaze with hepatitis and cancer.

The Cuyahoga River flows through Cleveland. After mapping the clinic's location I am pretty sure that Lou did not have a view of the Cuyahoga from his room at the hospital, but if he flew to Cleveland from his home in New York, he most certainly crossed the river's path. The route he likely took from the airport to the clinic's main campus would also have taken him over the Cuyahoga.

How many times he crossed the river during his course of treatment, I can't say. How those crossings shaped the song inside the cover he showed me, I can't say. How he arrived at his "raw liver" translation of *koy a'hoga*, I can't say. I can't say why, but for some reason that river stuck with him enough to write a song about it six years after he died.

Thinking back on those Cuyahoga crossings, Lou may have realized his liver and the river were double-tracked, though slightly out of sync. Both were polluted, toxic; both failing; both burning; but their failures were the symptoms of some other disease because the impression of "*Koy A'hoga*" that Lou offered me in the dream, the sense I got of it, was that it was a harsh, dissonant, raging takedown of all the jim-jims who deny climate change, the ones in the song who flay Greta Thunberg and Autumn Peltier and wear their skins as capes when they break into the White House, where their hero dwells. They are not there to praise and uplift Donald Trump, though. In a classic bit of Lou's deadpan humor, they instead break into the White House to eat the Trump family, literally believing that "you are what you eat."

They become stupider after their feast and begin gutting one another, pulling out their livers and stuffing them down one another's throats as Lou's guitar chops through a choice riff in the left channel and Lou's other guitar squalls a similar riff but with a feedback bloodlust in the right.

Koy a'hoga. Raw liver. Stupidity. A body inflamed from firewater; a river on fire; people enthralled and appalled with the destruction they make. People crossing rivers, crossing over. Killing, dying. Burning. A fake Indian weeping a hunted-danced song. Peoples destroyed to start a new country up and burn it down. Toxic. Enthralled and appalled. Lou crossing the burning river, seeking raw liver.