

TUNE INTO ENGLISH

Lou Reed's Walk on the Wild Side



L'artista newyorkese ci guida nella notte più selvaggia e libertina degli anni Settanta con testi che presentano una galleria di personaggi eccentrici come artisti, truffatori e disadattati.

An unlikely¹ radio hit in 1972, *Walk On The Wild Side* was Lou Reed's only charting song² in the US. Including references to cross-dressers³, transsexuals, oral sex and drug use, the track was taken from Reed's second solo album *Transformer*, co-produced by David Bowie. Each of the five verses tells an anecdote about the misfits⁴ who frequented artist Andy Warhol's Factory studio in New York.

Inspired by Nelson Algren's 1956 novel of the same name, which describes the New Orleans underworld⁵, the song opens with transvestite model Holly Woodlawn's journey to the Big Apple. Further⁶ characters introduced are transgender actress Candy Darling from Long Island, who used to "give head" (slang⁷ for oral sex) at a local night club, and "Little" Joe D'Allesandro, a gay actor who appeared in a Warhol film as a rent boy⁸. Another Warhol film mentioned is Sugar Plum Fairy⁹, a euphemism for a drug dealer¹⁰. The final verse is about drag queen Jackie Curtis, with "speed" and "crash" being wordplay¹¹ references to drugs and actor James Dean's death in a car crash.

Lyrically, as befits¹² its storytelling¹³ format, the song is largely¹⁴ in the past simple. The chorus features scat¹⁵ singing inspired by the 1960s Motown girl groups, but was performed on the record by a trio of white girls from the UK. The word 'coloured'

was edited from the song by some radio stations for reasons of political correctness – surprisingly this was the only edit to its controversial lyrics. Commenting on his signature song¹⁶, Lou Reed said: "I thought it would be fun to introduce people you see at parties, but don't dare¹⁷ approach¹⁸." ☒



SCAN, READ & LISTEN

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UPPER INTERMEDIATE B2

GLOSSARY

- 1 unlikely: improbabile
- 2 charting song: canzone in lista
- 3 cross-dressers: travestiti
- 4 misfits: eccentrici
- 5 underworld: mondo sotterraneo
- 6 further: inoltre
- 7 slang: gergo
- 8 rent boy: prostituto
- 9 Sugar Plum Fairy: fata delle caramelle
- 10 drug dealer: trafficante di droga
- 11 wordplay: gioco di parole
- 12 to benefit: addirsi
- 13 storytelling: raccontare
- 14 largely: ampiamente
- 15 scat: improvvisato
- 16 signature song: canzone emblematica
- 17 to dare: azzardarsi, permettersi
- 18 approach: approccio
- 19 to hitchhike: fare l'autostop
- 20 to pluck: depilare
- 21 to take a walk: fare un giro
- 22 hustle: lavoretto
- 23 bash: colpo
- 24 terms of endearment: parole affettuose

Hitch-hiked her way across the USA/Plucked her eyebrows on the way/Shaved her legs and then he was a she: 'she hitch-hiked', 'she plucked', 'she shaved'; songs often incorrectly leave out the subject.

to lose one's head: to go crazy.

to give head: to perform oral sex.

Sugar Plum Fairy: this Tchaikovsky character is modern-day slang for a drug dealer.

soul food: this is slang for drugs.

Apollo: Harlem's iconic Apollo Theater.

Holly came from Miami, FLA
 Hitch-hiked¹⁹ her way across the U.S.A.
 Plucked²⁰ her eyebrows on the way
 Shaved her legs and then he was a she
 She says, "Hey, babe
 Take a walk²¹ on the wild side"
 Said, "Hey, honey
 Take a walk on the wild side"
 Candy came from out on the Island
 In the back room she was everybody's darling
 But she never lost her head
 Even when she was giving head

[chorus]
 She says, "Hey, babe
 Take a walk on the wild side"
 Said, "Hey, babe
 Take a walk on the wild side"
 And the colored girls go
 "Doo do doo doo doo doo doo
 Doo do doo doo doo doo doo
 Doo do doo"

Little Joe never once gave it away
 Everybody had to pay and pay
 A hustle²² here and a hustle there
 New York City's the place
 Where they said, "Hey, babe
 Take a walk on the wild side"
 I said, "Hey, Joe
 Take a walk on the wild side"
 Sugar Plum Fairy came and hit the streets

Looking for soul food and a place to eat
 Went to the Apollo
 You should've seen them go, go, go

They said, "Hey, sugar
 Take a walk on the wild side"
 I said, "Hey, babe
 Take a walk on the wild side", alright
 Huh
 Jackie is just speeding away
 Thought she was James Dean for a day
 Then I guess she had to crash
 Valium would have helped that bash²³

[chorus]

FLA: Florida. Each state in the US has an abbreviation: for instance, New York is NY, and the city is NYC.

babe /honey: terms of endearment²⁴.

Island: Long Island is around 80km east of NYC.

darling: this is a term of endearment, used here to mean 'lover'.

colored: in British English this is spelt 'coloured'.

to give away: in this context, this phrasal verb means 'to have sex'.

to hit the streets: this idiom means to walk on the streets.

go, go, go: dance.

Scan this QR code with your smartphone or tablet and listen to the official song on YouTube while reading the lyrics.



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 Fergal Kavanagh runs the website www.tuneintoenglish.com, the web's largest free resource for learning English through pop music.