

Obituary

Robert Quine

Guitarist who played for Lou Reed and Tom Waits

Garth Cartwright
Friday July 2, 2004

The Guardian

The relentless, agitated, angular guitar-playing of the rock guitarist Robert Quine, who has been found dead in his Manhattan home aged 61, was both highly original and influential. While Quine never enjoyed great commercial success, his ability to mix dissonance with melody made him the guitarist of choice for singers as different as Richard Hell and Marianne Faithful.

Prematurely bald, possessor of a law degree and given to dressing in button-down shirts and sports jackets, Quine was never going to be a conventional rock musician. He once memorably described himself as looking like a "deranged insurance salesman". Born in Akron, Ohio, Quine recalled that as a child he enjoyed listening to records of Brazilian folk music, Gene Autry and Django Reinhardt. He started learning the piano, but stopped when he was transformed by the sounds of rock'n'roll in 1955.

Quine began guitar lessons in 1958, and would later claim that he learned everything about guitar from listening to the rock and blues pioneers that initially excited him to make music in the 1950s. As a college student in Indiana in 1961, Quine hosted a radio programme where he concentrated on blues and later jazz music.

In college, Quine formed his first band to play in local bars, and after passing the Missouri law exams in 1969 he relocated to San Francisco. Failing to pass the California bar exam and feeling out of place in the hippie capital, he relocated to New York in 1971. There he spent three years writing tax law. Bored by his job and still obsessed with music, he took a job in a film memorabilia shop where co-workers included Tom Verlaine and Richard Hell, founders of the group Television.

Hell formed The Voidoids in 1976, with Quine on guitar. Their first single Blank Generation set the template for the punk aesthetic and their only album, 1977's Blank Generation, is widely regarded as classic of the genre. Quine's imaginative, virtuoso technique marked the band out among a scene where noise and non-musicianship was often upheld. A disastrous UK tour supporting The Clash put paid to The Voidoids, but Quine's abili ties marked him out and he was rarely without work.

"I try to be spontaneous and creative, and generally pull it off," Quine told an internet interviewer in 2000. "I've had a lot of influences but somehow have managed to come up with my own touch, my own style. This can work for me, sometimes against me. I also make a point of listening to the lyrics. I try to play with them in a way that will move people, musically, emotionally."

Quine had always been a fan of art rock band The Velvet Underground, so leapt at the chance to work with their founder, Lou Reed, in 1982. Reed employed Quine as a perfect guitar foil for his much-praised The Blue Mask album, critics and fans noting that Quine's driving, innovative playing pushed Reed to make some of his best ever music. Quine joined Reed's touring band, but he and Reed fell out over the mix of 1983's Legendary

Hearts album. Quine would go on to play with Marianne Faithful, Tom Waits, Brian Eno, John Zorn and Lloyd Cole.

Quine lent his distinctive guitar playing to numerous sessions. Recently his sound has been carefully imitated by such new New York bands as The Strokes. Having faithfully recorded all The Velvet Underground concerts he attended in 1969, Quine released these as a three-CD set Bootleg Series, Vol 1: The Quine Tapes.

• Quine's wife, Alice, predeceased him, as did his uncle, the philosopher Willard Van Orman Quine (obituary, December 30 2000). He is survived by his brother.

Guardian Unlimited © Guardian Newspapers Limited 2004