

alone again naturally

FOR A man whose sound has spawned 1001 imitators and earned him a seemingly permanent place on the critical pedestal some way out of the public glare, Tom Verlaine is, now as ever, decidedly reluctant to build up his role in the scheme of things.

Asked, in all innocence, just how he would rate himself as a musician, a guitarist, he responds like it's one of the daftest questions he's ever heard.

Manfully he attempts an explanation that draws comparison with a "swirly kind of ice cream you get in Italy: lots of different flavours in there, but the colours are still distinctive. I don't know how they do it. I guess they take cream and put some raspberry sherbert or lime in there or something. That might be an impromptu description", is his final offer, shrugging and smiling wanly before deciding that 'rate', as a word, is not a regular part of his vocabulary.

Verlaine, it has to be said, has never been one for the grand statement or easy, sweeping gesture. During a career spanning eight albums, two with the massively influential Television and the remainder out on his own, he has stayed pretty much in tune with his muse while others from New York's class of '74 have got sidetracked by the big picture or disappeared altogether. His concern has remained with the particular rather than with the general.

"It's like, instead of singing about the beauty of the natural world you would major in on some detail, say a guy who lifts up a rock and there's a starfish underneath it. I like a certain accuracy in the lyric even if sometimes part of the accuracy you're wanting is a vagueness, almost."

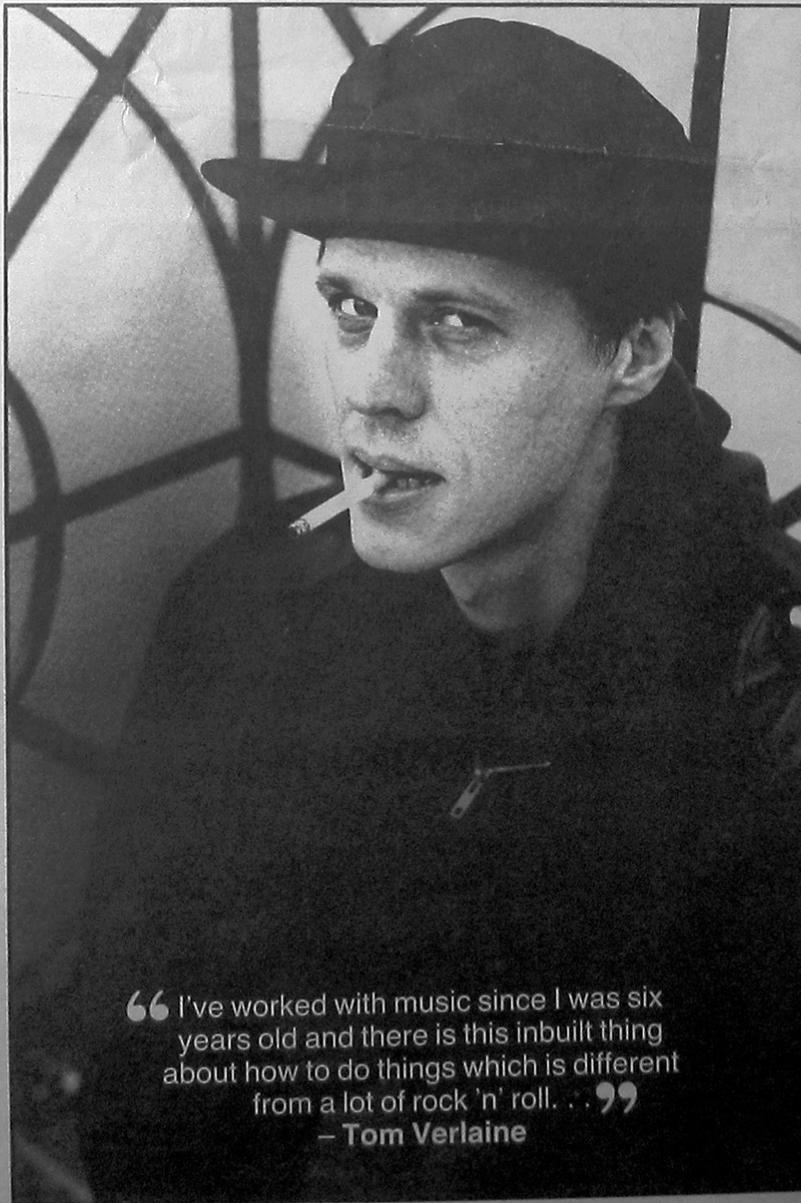
Got that? Whatever, there's an increasingly isolated sense of craftsmanship about everything he touches, made all the more covetable at a time when the cowboys have muscled in and taken over.

YET MORE than the opaque precision of the songs, Verlaine's reputation is founded on a guitar style that can alternate between rich, golden, melodic clusters and angular, jazzy structures without an apparent need to pause for breath. Often working in tandem (as with Richard Lloyd in his Television days), what you often get is two guitars going at it hammer and tongs. The effect has frequently been stunning.

"A lot of it is instinct and intuition. I don't really think about that chord sequence, or whatever. I've worked with music since I was about six years old and there is, I think, this inbuilt thing about how to do things which is different from a lot of rock 'n' roll from any period.

"I grew up playing piano, then saxophone, so I had this very wide base. I didn't have much patience for rock because it was so... I don't know. 'Five Live Yardbirds' was

Tom Verlaine's recent refreshing solo acoustic dates see him still taking full advantage of his artistic freedom, unlike some of his original peers. Peter Kane gets the idle talk from a TV idol. Eyes in Wonderland: Mary Scanlon



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— Tom Verlaine

TOM VERLAINE: still fighting the three-minute la-di-das

the only rock record I liked. I remember hearing that and thinking, God, this is great. These guys just going wham, building things up, breaking them down. A lot of action going on, not just a three minute la-di-da. Then over the years I got to appreciate this three minute la-di-da an awful lot, hearing a lot of good songs over the radio that weren't just twee. I guess that's the word."

Such an appreciation of the humble pop song has never really cracked the surface of his own work, though. The new album, 'The Wonder', fits easily on the shelf alongside its predecessors, if rather more restrained than a lot of what has gone before.

Tom himself reckons there are a number of differences in it. "The main thing being melody. You look at 'Dreamtime' (the second solo outing) and there's this big pile of guitars going wang. The new one is more, there's your voice, there's your melody and here's the guitar too. It's more varied in moods."

'Still', 'Kaleidoscopin', 'Stalingrad' and 'Ancient Egypt' in particular have a slanted, staccato immediacy to them that is pure Verlaine; unless you imagined it to be a certain stubby Scot up to his old tricks again.

"The funniest thing I heard lately was that Lloyd Cole apparently made a statement that I must've listened to his records before I did 'Flash Light'. That is so outrageous because he's the most obnoxious simulator I've ever heard. Some of the other ones are nice. Of all the guitar players, I don't think any of them copied a style. They've merely learned little things, or an approach, from a number of people of whom I'm just one. But he's ridiculous. To mime to somebody's records and then go do it is really silly."

WHETHER MR Cole will shortly be undertaking some solo acoustic dates remains to be seen. But that's precisely what our Tom has been doing on his current European promotional jaunt with a couple of performances at London's Bloomsbury Theatre. More than a few eyebrows were raised at such a prospect.

"It's a refreshing change, as they say. In some ways it's more demanding. There's a lot of spontaneity involved in it. Maybe that makes it easy for me because I can do something in the middle of a song, like change the tempo radically or whatever I feel like at that moment."

"There's also the narration thing. You can stretch things out. You can tell stories; all that impromptu stuff. After all, the songs were written on an acoustic guitar. To me it's no big thing."

The intention is for the next record to be an unamplified affair; something his record company, according to Tom, aren't exactly going a bomb on. There again, "I might get back home and want to whack out the electric. I got this new little amp before I left. I've got it right next to my desk there. Sometimes you get this funny little amp for about 50 bucks and just want to go make a noise with it. I can see myself getting back there and saying, 'Maybe I'll book a day down the studio, because you just want to play that thing and make that sound.'"

You know the one. There's still no real substitute.