

Words from the front

TOM VERLAINE, the dream's dream for young guitarists, is still making chilling records. **BARNEY HOSKYN**s finds the New York legend in exile, eating . . . Photograph by A J BARRATT.

Tom Verlaine, the blank generation's Neil Young, is sitting on the floor of a Phonogram press suite devouring a croissant. I'd expected someone withdrawn and a little monkish, not this amiably wry character who sees interviews as a chance to perform.

"I like the idea of interviews as performances, maybe because I'm not very good at promoting my career in other ways, maybe also because I'm not sure if I think of myself as a performer at all. I suppose the way most people have careers is by very methodically doing a series of self-advertisements, and I don't know if I can do that."

He talks with an amused smile, moving on to the omlette Phonogram have brought him for this mid-afternoon breakfast. Signed to the company since his post-'Cover' departure from Virgin over two years ago, he has a new album, 'Flashlight', released this month.

It's his best record since 'Dreamtime', as it happens, an LP of considerable bite and beauty and resounding proof that this godfather of alternative guitar heroes is no CBGBs dinosaur. Between the stabbing attack of 'Bomb' and 'Cry Mercy Judge' and the glistening melodies of 'Song' and 'The Scientist', Verlaine has drawn on all his strengths: the tension between the granite rock base of the songs and his hectic, quivering guitar work, the spectral, unearthly intonations of his voice, the sudden eruptions of violence and beauty. If the subjects of his songs are more infuriatingly oblique than ever, there is at least a new sense of real characters inhabiting them.

"There are models for these stories and I could tell you some horrific things about them. There's been a certain measure of violence in my life, not that I ever went looking for it. The other factor in this record seems to be inarticulateness. For instance, the people in 'Song' can't quite say what they

want to say, they always return to just talking about waiting and learning how to wait. And 'The Scientist' is about a man writing to a girl he still loves but can't communicate with. In 'Annie's Telling Me', a girl is talking in clichés and not really saying anything. This vagueness that goes on . . ."

Perhaps vagueness has always been the secret theme of Verlaine's work. His songs are about stilted expression, frustrated communication. Maybe they're just bad poetry.

"Many of my songs seem to be obsessed with defining or expressing a sensibility. People who've stuck with me for a while tend to point to a few songs that somehow define that sensibility—'Venus', 'The Fire', 'Breakin' In My Heart', 'Penetration', 'Clear It Away'. Again this struggle to articulate, or even to say why one is happily inarticulate. It says a lot about dealing in a non-verbal realm all the time I've found that by practicing some relaxation in the impulse to say something so desperately, you start getting pictures in your mind.

"I generally end up following something in a dreamlike sort of way. It's like watching pictures unfold. I don't really have any ideas, not even about the guitar. A lot of it has to do with developing what the physical sound of that guitar is, coming off the amp. Time and time again the music is about returning to the physicality of the sound, and maybe that in itself generates ideas."

Verlaine the guitar hero is someone slightly out of step with the tyrannical dance beats of 1987, but even he has considered dabbling in them.

"A producer in Brooklyn called me recently and asked if I was interested in doing a dance record. I'd like really to do a post-Run DMC guitar dance record with more complex beats than hip hop. I liked that record 'The Rain', I think basically it pulled in some melody."

What happened to the New York "rock" scene? Was it simply wiped out by drugs?



"I never used the stuff, but it is true. Almost everybody I knew, unless they got out of New York . . . certainly an awful lot of people around Television. I didn't even know they were using it. Later I found out that everyone assumed I was a junkie too! Another thing that's profoundly affected the New York scene is the expense of everything, and the impossibility of finding anywhere to live, let alone rehearsal."

"Most of my friends are either writers or painters. I know many more people working in those fields than I do musicians, maybe because they're more interested in being articulate than musicians. The downtown art scene, however, which was once a real underground, is now just another social scene, full of cracked actor types playing to the camera. Sometimes I think the word 'artist' is passé."

Tom Verlaine remains a compelling gash in the fabric of rock, a gaunt bohemian prince dwelling in the shadowy outlands of pop culture. He is the last great Nick Kent prototype for the dream of intelligent rock 'n' roll. A little precious, perhaps, a little lost in the haze of his own legend, but an original to the end.

Regarded in New York as a "mad scientist", Verlaine alone among the CBGBs survivors works apart from the MTV circus of pop, he makes records in a manner more like writers or painters, than musicians.