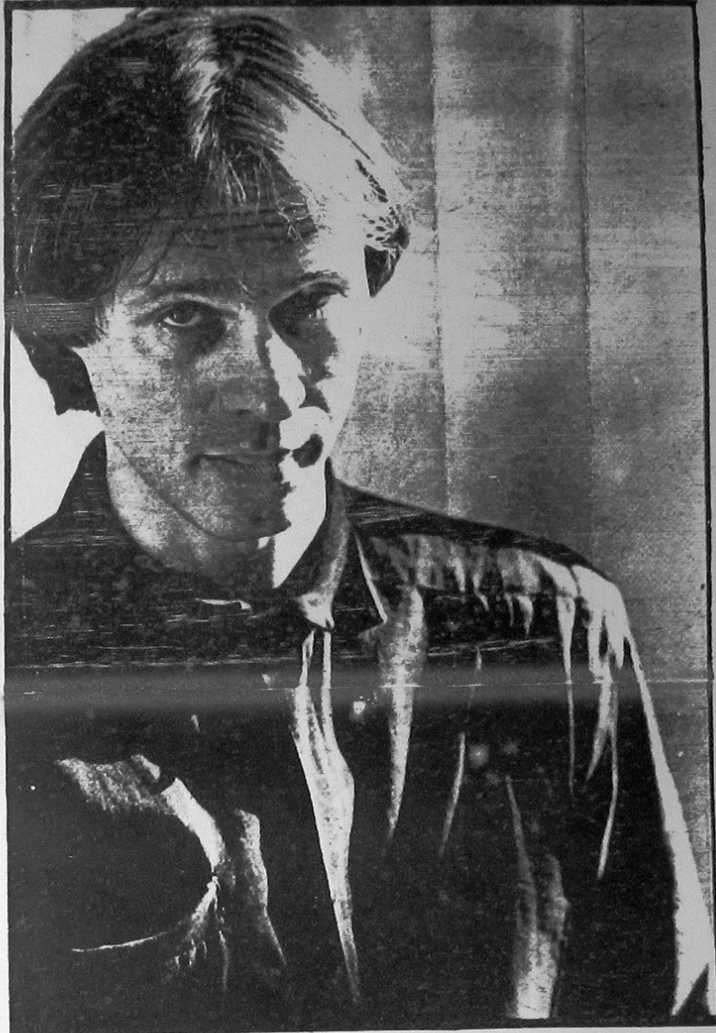


BALLAD OF A THIN MAN

Ross Fitzsimons Talks Pop, People, Poetry And Politics With TOM VERLAINE. Pix-Colm Henry



Tom Verlaine

*"Slip out of myself like a shadow/
And some result through with it"
("Careful" - Tom Verlaine)*

Tom Verlaine's been visible for some seven years now, first with Television and then on his own, and in that time he's been described in widely divergent terms - as a saint, a visionary, a wizard, a true star and the "finest rock guitarist alive"; or on the other hand as a prima-donna, a junkie, and even more unspeakable names.

Against that backdrop of extremes, it creates a sense of unease for the prospective interviewer when one of Verlaine's press officers confides that he could be, uh, difficult in conversation.

I needn't have worried. Tom Verlaine is an excellent conversationalist - intelligent, informed and erudite. Plus which there isn't a hint of contrivance or affectation about his responses - definitely among the more human individuals encountered in a business where "front" is often reckoned to be everything.

His opening gambit caught me off guard, talking about Ireland's west coast, a place Verlaine longs to visit - he hopes to get around to it later this year. We discussed the merits of places from Donegal to West Cork, then Tom asked me what the hitch-hiking was like!

Fair enough - I hardly expected someone of his sensibility to cruise the coast in a chauffeur-driven limo, but hitch-hike!?!?

Yet such a perfectly serious remark illustrates how Verlaine has kept his feet on the ground through the kind of adulation and vilification which would have turned many another head and broken many another heart.

"There are people to converse with," he says almost wistfully when I ask how he likes to spend his spare time. "I'm big on conversation, but it's hard to find people who are open enough about themselves to talk with. I'm not saying it's the end-all of life, but..."

Tom likes to talk. With a little prompting he'll quite unselfconsciously discuss a range of topics more than superficially. It's a refreshing attribute given the single-mindedness of many of today's musicians. There is more to life than dancing, yet so many people in the pop world seem to be hardly aware of the fact...

Tom Verlaine was born Thomas Miller on the 13th of December 1949 in Mount Morris, New Jersey. He grew up in Wilmington, Delaware, which he describes as being "about the size of Manchester, England, or

maybe a little smaller, with suburbs, and then maybe about ten miles from the suburbs you've got a lot of farms. Wilmington is basically owned by the Du Ponts, and a lot of people work for Du Pont and for other chemical companies. Ford Motor has a big car factory there - it's by no means any kind of cultural centre or place where you get exposed to things."

The young Verlaine began piano lessons at seven, took up the sax at eleven and spent a few years exploring jazz before switching to guitar at sixteen. His explanation of what prompted this concentration is typically matter-of-fact.

"It was just my own desire," he says. "Some people just take to things in life - somebody might take to printing or fixing car motors, whatever they seem to have an aptitude or desire for, I guess."

He moved to New York with friend Billy Ficca (later drummer with Television) in 1967, but it took quite some time before people began to take notice of him.

"Well, I wasn't doing anything to be noticed!" he protests. "I'm not sure I am now either!"

His time was spent doing odd jobs to support himself while writing lyrics and "little things" ("I wouldn't call them poems!") and playing guitar for his own amusement. Some of his poetry appeared in a magazine run by one Richard Hell, who of course went on to play bass with Verlaine and Ficca, first with The Neon Boys and then with the first line-up of Television.

Between The Neon Boys (who, Tom says, never played live "because we could hardly afford to rehearse") and Television, Verlaine started playing guitar on his own around New

York "hoping that someone might see me and like it and want to play with me, which is sort of what happened with Richard Lloyd."

Lloyd became Verlaine's partner in guitar crime, and with Hell and Ficca the quartet began gigging as Television in CBGB's in 1973 - it was a folk club at the time. A following developed for the band, and other groups soon latched onto this independent venue, in particular The Ramones, Patti Smith and The Stiletos (later to become known as Blondie). But Verlaine is anxious to dispel any notions that there was an identifiably exciting "New York Scene" at the time.

"We didn't feel a part of anything," he says quite definitely. "To us, it was just a place to play in the worst part of town - a derelict alcoholic neighbourhood - and it was sorta fun because it was so unpretentious. In retrospect, there are so many things you can think about, but the way it really was, was very simple. This was the place where you played and the guy would let you play Sunday nights. After six months he put us on Saturday nights when he realised rock 'n' roll was starting to pull in more people than folk music. Now he's all rock, seven nights a week and he's basically kept the same policy all along in that it's a place where you audition and if he likes one of your songs he'll give you a night. He's a very good guy."

After "cult success" with the single "Little Johnny Jewel" came the masterpiece "Marquee Moon", arguably one of the finest debut albums of all time. It was a record which found favour with critics and fans from all shades of the musical spectrum - perhaps because it owed little to any influence or genre

or tradition. It was new, exciting, enticing and yet also enduring, a quality which has sent and which guarantees the continuing public loyalty and affection which Verlaine inspires, even after a lengthy period out of the limelight.

"Maybe 'Marquee Moon' and the others are the kind of records that hold up," he agrees reluctantly, "but I don't know, because I don't listen to them once they're done. I've always tried to make records that will hold up in a certain way rather than figuring synthesizers are the thing this year or whatever. I'm not opposed to any of those things, but they're like tools you can use if you have a certain kind of song at that time."

Verlaine doesn't disown praise even if he occasionally seems bemused by it. He was in London when "Marquee Moon" was released and remembers well the excitement with which it was received: "I was walking down the street and all of a sudden I see we're on these covers. So I started reading all these 'hot reviews', as they say, and I called up Warners. They didn't even know I was here! But they said 'Come down here right away!'. So I did all these interviews. It's great to be well-received."

He's also gotten the other end of the stick from the press occasionally, a good case in point being with the release of Television's second album "Adventure", which met with mixed reviews, some extremely hostile.

"The bad reviews weren't about the music," he says with exasperation. "But by that time, for some reason, people started saying things about what they thought was my personality or something. There'd be all these little scandalous shadings that were really nauseating. Probably writers writing on methedrine, feeling angry about things... I don't know, seriously!"

"I've been called everything. Before I left the States, I couldn't believe that I would meet people who would say 'well, I heard you got married!'. Apparently most of American record company thought I was on heroin for years. None of these things are true. I don't know why I attract those sort of rumours. I think if you attempt to live a private life you attract all those sort of projections from people who have nothing else to do."

It's certainly true that numerous journalists, despite their protestations otherwise, have scant regard for the truth. The tremendous responsibility which people who commit themselves to print have is often ignored, despite the assumption of a veneer of concern. Neither is the press as almighty as some of its participants seem to imagine.

"You have that attitude," Tom responds, "but most people don't, and it's also true that most people are willing to believe anything they

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Verlaine: anybody got any translations of pre-Christian Irish poetry?

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hear about someone, particularly if they're in rock 'n' roll."

Tom Verlaine smokes cigarettes — a lot of cigarettes — but as to any other "habits," the evidence is that he's remarkably free of the tracks and tears with which many musicians mark themselves. Over dinner with Verlaine's manager Steve Raborlsky and drummer Jay Dee Daugherty that evening I recall this section of the interview, at which Daugherty almost falls off his chair with laughter before confiding that Tom may actually have smoked a joint once — in 1973 — adding that the guy doesn't even have a TV! There's scandal for you!

Verlaine split with Television in 1978, just when things seemed to be going their way — it would appear that tension between himself and Richard Lloyd was the main contributory factor.

Nowadays he can laugh about it, but there's still a trace of rancour when he comments, "I go on record as saying if I could have started the band over I would have found a different guitarist — not because I wanted to play more things myself or anything like that, just for personal reasons."

He explains why he left Television: "I wanted to work with other musicians and do things on my own without responsibility. I was also somewhat managing the band and making all these decisions for everyone."

Since the split he has continued to work occasionally with Billy Ficca and Fred Smith, but he has also broadened his frame of reference, working with Tommy Price and Joe Vasta (currently with Mink De Ville), Ritchie Flegler, Donald Sosso, Rich Teeter and Bruce Brody. The current touring band comprises Jay Dee on drums, Fred Smith on bass and former Coconut (I kid you not!) Jimmy Ripp on guitar.

For Verlaine, it's no longer a desire to just work with other musicians.

"I would like to have a band but I can't afford to do it," he explains. "I'd love to give people a salary for a year and have them available at any time — that's the ideal situation if you find the guys whose styles are completely adaptable to anything you might want to do, and that kind of person becomes very expensive to hire. Someone who plays with some kind of feeling and understands all sorts of ideas and is very receptive. Fred and Jay Dee are very good with certain things, other rhythm sections are good with other things."

"Jimmy (Ripp) has been with loads of bands — the Coconuts was just one particular thing he fell into. He has background in everything, which is what's really great about him. If you want to do a really tight rhythm thing he can play that type of guitar instantly. If you

want to play something more open... he's just a very adaptable guy, which is a key factor when playing in a band."

Speaking of guitarists, Verlaine himself is revered by many as a guitar-player supreme, venerated as "guitar-hero" by some who would otherwise scorn the term. His playing has been a major influence on dozens of bands; he's a stylistic innovator, someone who can play long dazzling solos which somehow maintain continuity while spiralling hypnotically, oscillating between dizzy heights and murky depths, hypnotising the listener with a sometimes astonishing power.

But the man doesn't really (uh!) see himself as a guitarist: "Anything like that I do is off-the-cuff. Any guitar-work on a record is just arrangement you might say. I'm still very enthusiastic about two guitars, bass and drums. I think there's a whole lot of possibilities that haven't been explored with it. Now that I'm working with a really good player who has some good ideas of his own, it's like I've got a whole new enthusiasm for the thing, so I'll probably keep working that format."

The new album "Words From The Front" represents something of a departure for Verlaine, particularly in the area of rhythm. For example, "Clear It Away" comes closer than he's ever done before to reggae, although that's a pretty simplistic description of it.

It was originally fifteen minutes long, but was edited down to four minutes. The same technique was used throughout the album, bar "Postcard From Waterloo", which appears in its entirety. It's a classic three-minute Verlaine pop song, short and bitter-sweet.

"Right," he agrees. "It's a certain kind of song that I always like to put on. I like that kind of song, but I also tend to like longer things — I don't know why. Unless it's a really good short song, concise, and really has something to say, longer pieces are what I'm attracted to."

But Verlaine freely admits that analysing the creative process is not his particular fascination: "Most writers are real interested in process, like 'how was this done?'. But to me it's like the elements. You've got your four elements in life — earth, air, fire and water, and somehow those have something to do with music. I tend to find that those words come up in my own mind a lot with music, they have something to do with your own feelings and how you work."

"I find myself thinking in those terms when I'm in a studio or working on a song or when something's done I'll listen to it for a water element — something comes up and reminds me of the ocean. This is part of it, not the whole thing, but I find this sometimes happens."

He also does his best to avoid "influences": "Someone asked Robert Graves who influenced

him and he said 'It sounds like you've got something hanging over your head'. At certain times in your life there are records that you hear that

excite you in a certain way, some because it's just such an unusual idea, exciting you rhythmically or physically or emotionally. But I don't choose to imitate what turns me on. I've never really sat down in my life and figured out any record. Anybody knows how to play the lick for 'Satisfaction' by The Rolling Stones, but that's probably the only one I could play. I admire Richards' way of generating rhythm, Townshend's chord sounds and things, but I wouldn't choose to imitate something because it's exciting or it's the commercial thing to do or anything, which is what a lot of American bands do."

Which strikes a chord with something Orson Welles said recently when interviewed on TV: "I'm a moviemaker, not a moviegoer." Welles consciously avoids seeing too many good films on the grounds that he would otherwise end up imitating them, producing inferior versions of the same things. Verlaine professes great admiration for Welles' work, and mentions Frank Capra as being an even bigger favourite: "He basically did a certain kind of film about an unsophisticated country man up against very corrupt and sophisticated city people — simple man against a complicated money-making man. His films really have a heart quality, that still holds up."

Verlaine's own work often generates a response similar to that evoked by film, rather than the music of his peers: it has a panoramic sweep, an epic quality, a cinematic scope which is unusual in music in 1982. Take the title track of "Words From The Front":

January, 23rd
There's no road.
It's been raining now for three days.
We're in mud up to our knees.

If luck prevails and I'm given leave
I should be home by the 17th.
One word I hear all the time
This word I hear
Blind

John died last night.
He had no chance
Beneath the surgeon's drunken hands.
It's hard to see
Who's about
The fires we light
Soon smoulder out.

Up on the ridge
They're dug in deep
We move in waves
As if asleep,
And there they lay
Four thousand men
The general orders "Attack again"

But Tom points out that he's trying to create an accurate picture rather than simply commenting.

"It's like when you see film footage of Viet Nam, it connects much more with you than reading what someone has to say about it. Although 'Despatches' was a good book, actually, I read that when it came out, I was real surprised because I didn't know much about Viet Nam."

He himself was never drafted, although had he been, he says candidly, he was ready to go to Canada. And although it's hardly an obsession Verlaine has strong views on corporate mismanagement of resources and abuse of the environment.

"I think it'll get worse," he comments, "definitely it'll get worse. That's the tendency of the age, you know. I don't read newspapers much but whenever I pick one up I find a little fact which just shows things are getting worse and worse."

He cites the loss of much of America's topsoil over the last thirty years among other examples of corporate rape, as a result of the widespread dumping of chemical waste all over the States in such random sites that the location of some of these dumps has now been forgotten!

"But these aren't preoccupations of mine," he adds, "just when people ask me about it, it's my opinion. There is another side to it — organic farming, for example, and the fact that more and more people are working against it. Just before I left New York there was a huge anti-nuclear demonstration there, apparently the biggest one ever."

Verlaine himself has never really been identified with causes: "No, well, I don't know... I just don't feel that's the best place to devote my time. If I met the governor of the state at a party I'd feel totally obligated to say 'why don't they do this?', but otherwise... I think most people in politics are a certain type of personality who are not open to other points of view really anyway. They're also there to protect money interests..."

In view of the quality of his own lyrics, it's hardly surprising that Verlaine is fascinated by poets and poetry. But his interest is somewhat more esoteric than might be expected.

"The pre-Christian Irish poets are the ones who interest me," he tells me. "The one that really caught me — I don't know if I have this straight — was a legend that a real poet had the ability to rhyme rats to death! In New York a guy will write a poem like 'I woke up and lit a cigarette and then put my hand on the telephone' This garbage is really just a blind form

of prose. When you come across such a legend though, I find that very inspiring in a certain way... I think there was also another secret or sacred, or both, tradition that connected poets with more than the history of their clan or time. It was definitely prevalent in the Mid-East with poets like Hafiz. But I'm having such a hard time finding translations into English of the Old Irish. In other cultures, what the poet was really up to, maybe only other poets knew, or what his bond was with life itself if it's hard to say or know.

"It strikes a certain chord in me that that existed or still exists somewhere. I wonder if there's a bard walking around Ireland now who through oral transmission is still connected with certain things?"

Storytelling is also something which excites Verlaine's interest: "I'm really attracted to storytellers and to that ability. The fact that you can do it with music too is a whole other thing. Some jazz people do it, and some composers do it, but you don't find people in rock communicating in that way."

What he says is true — only a limited number of rock artists transcend the here and now to create something of real lasting value. If nominations were sought, I'd propose Verlaine as one such.

His music is made to last, etched with care and love on the surface of pure marble. What's more, he makes such beautiful music without a hint of pose or affectation but with a definite commitment to a life of the imagination and to developing his ability to express that life.

That he is only marginally successful in his own country is a matter of some concern to him, but it's more important to Tom Verlaine to express himself than to achieve massive commercial success.

But surely it's a misconception to suggest that Verlaine is too arcane, mysterious, "difficult" for large numbers of people to readily accept? Isn't it a misconception that people want everything on a plate?

"It's true, they don't," he concludes, "although I've got to say that in America the majority are still frightened by anything different. They're so conditioned by TV and advertising that when they do find themselves responding to something that isn't the norm, you can see it on their faces, and the most they'll say is 'Well, that was different'. It shakes them up somehow and they don't like it 'cos they're used to a certain thing."

Nothing good ever comes easy.

"That's the way it seems!"