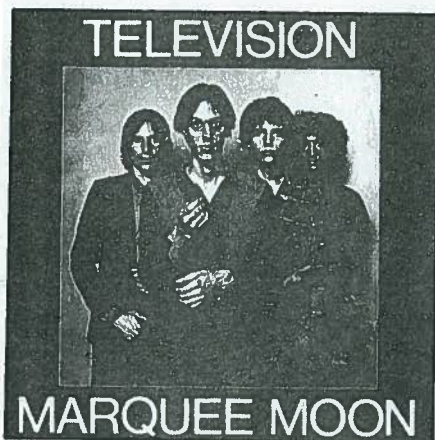


TELEVISION



by Peter Laughner

TELEVISION
Marquee Moon
(Elektra)

Like, what's worth keeping in music is the kinda thing like anybody, even from another time or say, another dimension, could get even pieces out of. Some of Dylan's stuff maybe, a lot of that horn player, Albert Ayler. That's got that, ya know?—Tom Verlaine

I'm writing this from my hometown—Cleveland, Ohio. The biggest "progressive" FM station, a station renowned as a big breaking point for new events in rock music, once played Television's *Marquee Moon*. They don't know what to do with it; something from their preconceptions keep whispering "New York... punk rock." But what's actually going on here cuts far above and through such labels. Sure, Television lives and plays in New York. Simple geography. Expand that to "urban" and you can include Portland, Memphis, Houston, Washington, L.A., New Orleans, Minneapolis...as for "punk rock", it's a term that we coined stillborn. To me it means nothing. If it's supposed to mean rock music played with deliberate lack of finesse and intelligence, then it means less than nothing when applied to Television.

Musically speaking, Billy Ficca is a match for any percussionist working in any field today (including his idol, Tony Williams); Fred Smith, on bass, knows just what not to play and where—he never misses a tone; Richard Lloyd and Tom Verlaine make veritable celebrations of the Fender guitar: technique, emotion, thought and pure sound ringing out of Stratocasters and Telecasters, jazz masters. Even the obscure .22 Magnum Derringer of the pre-CBS line, the Duo-Sonic. Without modication between guitar



Steve Stone

PROVES IT

and amp, chords haven't chimed so wild since the Byrds, or maybe Love's first album, or ripped and bitten since the Velvets were on Verve. And the lead lines—sometimes angular and unpredictable, yet always conceptually logical. What was Verlaine saying about Albert Ayler?

The album kicks off with "See No Evil", what I would have to describe as a neo-Velvets riff. Verlaine gets in some droll, yet purposeful word play—"What I want/I Want NOW/And it's a whole lot more/than 'anyhow'..." Fred Smith and Billy Ficca pound out a bottom that rolls and flows more than simply rocks. Lloyd rips out leads that sound almost like good old conventional...but it's a wholelotmorethan "anyhow." It's pretty damn frenetic, especially at the end, where what sounds like about 25 over-dubbed Verlaines start screaming "Pull down the future

with the one you love" and awholelotmore that I don't think made it to the lyric sheet.

Then into the arms of the "Venus di Milo". Now I have ideas, glimpses if you will, of what these songs are "about", but like a good mystery, a giveaway only serves to deaden the scope of the work. I will say that "Venus" has a lot to do with space, but not the kind of space thought of in terms of star or satellites; more like McGuinn's "5 D" and the immediate impact of the song musically does seem to be Byrds like, yet by the chorus then the guitar solo underscored by gorgeously profound-but-dizzy drum rolling, "Venus" becomes totally Television and the album remains totally Television from there on out. You might hear traces of the Stones' "Moonlight Mile" and "Guiding Light", but Verlaine's head is full of much more than snow. Someone has remarked to me that the fade of "Torn Curtain" might owe something to the Beatles' "She's So Heavy"; I doubt it, although I wonder if Verlaine's title was inspired by Hitchcock's film or, for that matter, "Prove It" by psycho-dramatic light fantastic readings of Raymond Chandler, or "Elevation" by the theories and practices of a certain now deceased band from Austin, Texas. Use these as handles, if you wish.

It's been said that to fully grasp what Television's all about, you must see them live. This is probably more or less true for any band (or at least should be), but in Television's case it does seem to bear more strongly. Physically, they never present so much an image (read fixed, understood stance) as a presence; a sort of mirror of the possibilities that the listener/watcher feels up to facing. Like Lou Reed said, "Oh, I do believe/You are what you perceive." I myself recall hearing Television for the first time (April '75 at CBGB's). I had come to hear Patti Smith who, at the time, had neither a drummer nor a record contract. A year before, Smith had written what I believe remains the definitive piece on Television for *Rock Scene* and I felt it important to stick around for Television's second set after Patti's first, which was magnificent.

Sure enough, I was transported. Where Smith's music had been too tight to the point, Television was loose, loud, daring. It was like hearing rock 'n' roll for the first time. I couldn't understand a single word or Verlaine's strangled vocals but the feelings came on like razors and methedrine. His singing voice has this marvelous quality of slurring all dictions into what becomes distortions of actual lines, so that without a lyric sheet you can come away with a whole other song...which means you're doing one third of the work. I went around for a whole year singing what I thought was the opening line of "Venus"—

"twisted sick with night of sweet surprise," when the actual lyric is "tight toy night/streets were so bright."

Marquee Moon is an album like a memory of a thing that has never been before. It's like everything that makes Television the most unique band playing in America today. Television suggests auras, edges, images of things when they play. There is a direct visceral hit (no mistake that Verlaine used Andy Johns as co-producer), but every time I hear this group there is a shadow cast further from the moment that seems to imply an infinity of moments, of further shadows.

Television takes experience and abstracts it, not to the point of obscurity, but to the point of suggestion, that it not be Verlaine's experience per se, but exists on its own, of itself without prior awareness of form. Like rock'n'roll, like its art, it's simply a frame that we put around a magical process. Whether that be the movement of a switch on a Fender or slurring of a word that does things like dig holes in silence, it's the kind of thing anybody, even from another time or dimension, could get pieces out of.

Verlaine has created a poetry which is indeed his alone, a poetry of inspiration at once childlike and subtle, entirely of nuances, evocative of the most delicate vibrations of the nerves, the most fugitive echoes of the heart...and I stole that whole last bit from a funeral oration delivered back in 1896 over the grave of the guy Tom V. stole his name from. One of the truly gifted poets of the 20th century, Delmore Schwartz, said, "In dreams begin responsibilities."

Well, he could have been speaking about this group and about this record. You take it from here.