

Television: "Authentic blood and sweat counts for something"

"Of all the rock bands that claimed to not give a shit, we're the only ones that I've ever known that don't," ex-Television guitarist Richard Lloyd adamantly declared. "We were gawky, weird and outer-space band that never pandered to anybody. Of course we wanted to be heard, but the most important thing was to make a record for ourselves." *Marquee Moon*, their dazzling debut album, 30 years later still leaves listeners spellbound. Celebrating this anniversary, Elektra reissued both of the band's albums, as well as a new set recorded live in 1978.

Television didn't evolve from Neon Boys, a trio formed in 1972 by old school friends guitarist Tom Verlaine, bassist Richard Hell, and drummer Billy Ficca; it merely renamed them and readjusted the pecking order, with Verlaine now at the top. But it was Lloyd's arrival in 1974 that brought the electricity to the former Neon Boys' sound.

"I knew right away when I met Tom and Richard Hell that it was special; for me it was like I'd run off and joined the circus. It was a very odd mix of stuff, a glorious mess. Then we struggled against it being a glorious mess for three or four years. Most people think they're fucking great. What a mistake."

During that messy period, Television established themselves as a live powerhouse via their residency at CBGB's. The third band ever to play that now revered Big Apple punk landmark, Television had deliberately sought out an unknown venue, and inspired by The

Beatles' time in Hamburg, began honing their sound in likewise fashion.

Island came knocking a few months later, with an invitation to record demos under the aegis of Roxy Music keyboardist Brian Eno. The myth surrounding this meeting — of Eno tossing amps over rafters, pressing the record button and leaving the band to get on with it — leaves Lloyd thoroughly baffled. The truth it turns out is less prosaic, but far more telling.

"[Eno] was bursting with ideas, and Television didn't want anybody to give any ideas. We weren't into experimenting; we were into honing something that we already had a handle on. The idea was we didn't need to be produced so much as a chance at an authentic representation."

This clash of intent was the first problem. The second was the studio itself, "a completely dead space" as Lloyd described it, but even taking that into account, the resultant tapes were a discomfoting revelation.

"It was very clear that between Richard and Billy there was no consensus in the rhythm section. It was just dreadful to hear. It was one of those blanching moments when you just sink and go, 'Oh God.' I didn't think there was anything salvageable out of it then, and I still don't."

Island, in contrast, believed they had one half of an album in the can and called Verlaine to set up a meeting to sign contracts. Appalled, the band requested to re-record the demos. When the label refused, Television walked away and almost into Malcolm McClaren's arms.

Returning from Florida with his red leather-clad, hammer and sickle banner-waving New York Dolls in tow (the Svengali's not so clever concept to win over the heartland to the trash-glam heroes' side), the manager set up a series of New York shows for the group with Television co-headlining. Thoroughly impressed with their performance and look, McClaren now offered to manage the band.

The quartet seriously considered his proposal, but in the end turned it down, as according to Lloyd, Verlaine was afraid they'd be forced into red leather gear as well. He was wrong. In fact McClaren was totally sold on Television's image, a look Lloyd vividly described as "the anti-glamor of poverty, the waif runaways that learn how to play, have a punk sensibility and rock down the world but can't afford to patch the holes in their clothes."

But even McClaren had no illusions about selling ripped clothes to the British masses, so he added the perfect punk fashion accessories — the safety pin and the zipper, the latter zipped straight off The Ramones.

"I have great respect for Malcolm's charlatism," Lloyd wryly concluded. "He went back to England and made his own Television, just like Television was Terry Ork's Velvet Underground. It was that simple."

Ork, whose long involvement with the band dated back to his intercession with CBGB's owner Hilly Kristal to open the club to live music, launched his own indie Ork label with Television's debut single, "Little Johnny Jewel" in August 1975.

By then, Hell was gone, the lack of consensus in the rhythm section noted by Lloyd overshadowed by the chasm that had opened between the bassist and Verlaine. The final parting, in March, was far from amicable and left a bitter taste behind.

Lloyd, for one, was sorry to see him go. "I thought there was something extremely special in that early period that didn't pass through into the recorded lexicon." Those who saw the band live might agree, but there's also no denying that his replacement, Fred Smith, stylistically better suited the group's emerging sound.

The new chemistry was already apparent on "Johnny Jewel" and reached its apotheosis on *Marquee Moon*. Although America was largely unmoved by the set's splendor, Britain was abuzz, its interest fired by the numerous laudatory pieces the British press had penned on the New York scene. Upon its release in March 1977, the set soared into the U.K. Top 30.

A British tour followed in May, albeit one that could have ended quite precipitously. Gobbing was de rigueur in the day, and when Hell regaled Television with his own band's (The Voidoids) saliva showering, the group were revolted.

"We never told anybody, but we'd have walked right off the stage, and that would have been it. They didn't know it, but they were on warning." Somehow the crowds seemed to sense that and fortuitously kept

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their spit to themselves.

The tour was a smash, and the following year, their sophomore album, *Adventure*, explored the U.K. Top 10. But America remained resistant, and when the advance for The Cars' eponymous debut album arrived, it drove over the last of the group's hopes.

"We knew we were doomed," Lloyd recalled. "There's our sound with a pandering commercialism that will just sell like pretzels." Ironically enough, most of The Cars were Television fans.

But the Boston band weren't entirely to blame. After five years together Television had had enough; Lloyd and Verlaine were already drifting apart, and the group announced their demise in late summer 1978.

They left behind a canon few others can equal: one single, one perfect aural

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masterpiece and a second full-length LP of almost equal caliber to be joined in later years by two excellent live sets. Thirty years later, this small but perfectly crafted catalog continues to overwhelm listeners.

Lloyd easily pinpoints the appeal. "The records have integrity in a very special way, and they sound the same whether they're made in 1950, 1920. They absolutely do not have faddish elements in them. Nothing wrong with that, because it's consumerism, but authentic blood and sweat counts for something and it will count in 20 more years."

Television may not have found U.S.

chart success, but instead they discovered something more important, a phenomenal aural tapestry woven by two exceptional guitarists brought vibrantly to life by the intricacies of the rhythm section, a sound so magnificent that journalists cast caution to the wind and heaped on the superlatives, while fans refused to allow their music to ever go out of print. Television never pandered; they never needed to, and so 30 years later, and 30 years from now, their achievements will still stand unsullied in their magnificence.

— Jo-Ann Greene