

TOM VERLAINE AND HIS SINGING GUITAR

"It's been said that the most marginal thinkers, everything that's over there in the corner, on the outskirts, are eventually what influence the majority. One person somewhere who's considered crazy by a large number of people ends up being an influence."

Tom Verlaine is describing, in his usual abstract way, the history of his old band, Television. The first rock'n'roll outfit to play at CBGB in New York, Television – along with fellow Bowery bohos Patti Smith, Blondie, Talking Heads and the Ramones – redefined the genre from the outskirts in '76, spawning most manifestations of punk and post-punk to follow.

Verlaine is a redoubtable influence. With Television, on his own, and especially live, Verlaine plays the guitar like someone mastering a language he's just discovered. His playing is at once unhurried and urgent; it can flow in two directions simultaneously; it's rhythmically complex, structurally convoluted, tastefully economic, and proceeds to melodic, angular exploration untried in most rock'n'roll. His guitar *sings*.



Verlaine: A sense of detachment is good.

"It is a voice," says a sleepy Verlaine, dividing his attention evenly between his early-afternoon omelette, a cup of cappuccino, and an endless stream of Export A's. "That might have come out of having played saxophone for two years. I grew up listening to Western classical music and jazz. In that stream, there's no rules about it, whereas there are definite rules about a pop song's structure.

"But I like the idea of working in a very

specific genre and turning out something new in it. So many things haven't been done with guitars/bass/drums yet, really. Most guitarists grow up playing along with blues or heavy metal bands and never consider what's possible. I think you have to be humble about it and not discount any idea."

Where Verlaine's last few records have been sonically spacious and verbally oblique, his latest, *Flash Light*, is more compact and steadfastly narrative.

"There's a lot more people and stories in it," he says. "I don't know where that comes from. Maybe I can't express myself anymore," he chuckles, "or I've given up trying!"

Verlaine isn't that inarticulate, but his latest characters are. "The Scientist," for example, writes a love letter full of technical data and weather; the couples in "Annie's Telling Me" and "The Funniest Thing" can't seem to speak their minds either. But it wasn't a conscious "theme."

"I just see people and things and write it down without knowing what I'm doing, really. I experience things in a very open-ended way. It's a sense of...flux, I suppose."

"It's good to have at least a touch of detachment about things," he says. "It's a very natural thing, very animal. Like a cat's detachment is also its defence system. You have to detach a bit just to see what's going on around you. It has connotations of being cool, but it leads to a certain warmth as well."

HOWARD DRUCKMAN