

Guiding light

A hero now to two generations of post-punk guitarists, Television's Tom Verlaine returns after 14 years with two solo albums. As a second wave of bands inspired by his innovative playing litter the charts, he couldn't have timed it better

Words by Will Simpson

"I needed a good sleep," deadpans Tom Verlaine when asked what he's been doing for most of the last decade. And then he chuckles. A sonorous, sly, 'seen-it-all-before' chuckle that suggests that he is in on some big cosmic joke.

Verlaine has always been one of rock's more aloof, detached characters. Detached both in manner and in fact – it's been a whole 14 years since his last solo album *Warm And Cool*, and just as long since Television, the band with whom he made his reputation, last put their name to a record. But now he's on the verge of releasing not one but two solo albums, which both follow hot on the heels of last year's re-issue of *Warm And Cool*. The chuckle gets aired again when he is asked about this sudden burst of activity.

"I wouldn't call it a sudden burst. It's just that I work really slowly. When I'm doing a record, instead of block-booking a couple of months solid

in a studio, I book a couple of days every other month. I went in and did a couple of tunes each time. The instrumental album (*Around*) was the other way. That was done in two days and then a second pair of days to fix the mistakes and mix it. It seems like a long time, but it's spread out. Although it was all done in the 21st century, you could say."

None of which accounts for his inactivity through most of the 1990s. In reality, aside from sleeping, Verlaine spent much of this time scoring silent films. "Silent shorts mostly, some of them were only seven minutes long. They were screened in art museums and places like that." There was also a stint in Patti Smith's touring band in 1996, and again last year.

– but the groups they influenced in turn (Franz Ferdinand, Editors, Razorlight) are fast becoming the new rock aristocracy. The post-punk guitar sound that ate the world? Blame Tom Verlaine.

BACK THEN, HE was probably the first rock guitarist whose style bore no trace of the blues, the style which had hitherto been practically a set text for every aspiring guitar player. "Up until the English Invasion of the mid-sixties my big

thing was jazz, so I kind of bypassed it all," he recalls. "I didn't even hear a Howling Wolf record until maybe 1986. Nothing against it, but somehow it's never really been my kind of thing."

Instead, in tandem with Richard Lloyd, he focused on creating the precise, intricate



Starting out

Verlaine's pre-guitar beginnings

Verlaine didn't start out on the guitar. In fact, he had played both the piano and saxophone before he picked up the instrument. He claims it gave him an advantage. "Just in terms of knowing notes right away it was useful. Maybe a lot of people learn guitar by playing along to records. In fact, I know a couple of guitarists under the age of 25 who don't know what fret equals what, or what chord equals what notes, and they can play as fast as anybody can play. But it's all kind of based on things they've learned off records.

"I think it pays to look further. I think it was Art Blakey, the jazz drummer, who told his sax guys to learn piano because it gives you a foundation to write something that you don't get if you're just learning off playing records."

"These records are simpler than things I've done in the past. I realised over the years that that's what I really like, although it's not always what I've done"

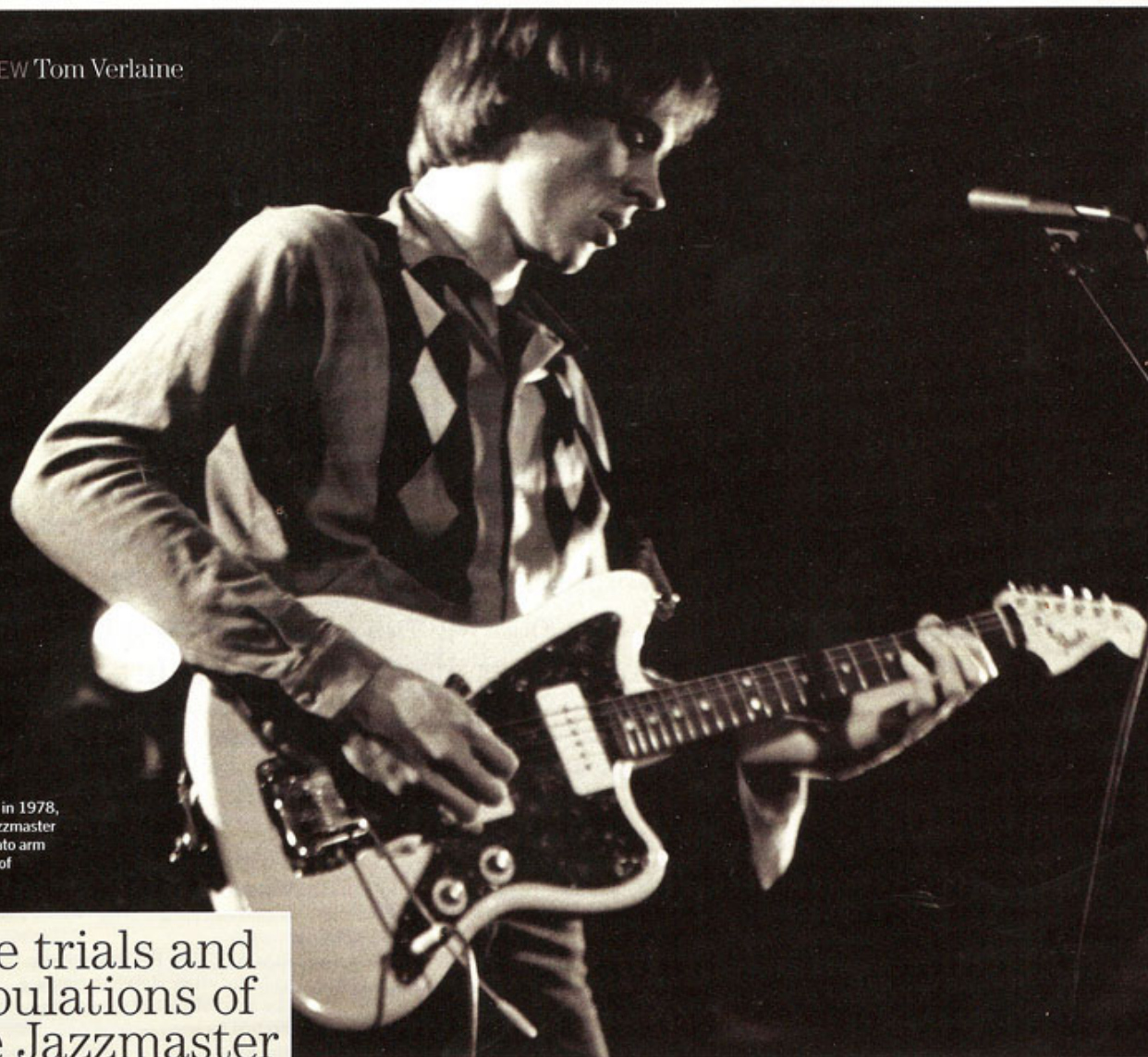
Still, you have to admit that Verlaine has earned the opportunity to rest gently on his laurels. Now 56, he was one of the few guitarists from the punk generation to forge a new direction for the instrument. Television were the most musically adept of the CBGBs bands who emerged in the mid-seventies, and arguably today their influence has never been greater. Not only are many of their first generation disciples still around – the likes of Echo And The Bunnymen, Sonic Youth and even U2 (The Edge is a huge Verlaine fan)

style that defined Television. Verlaine and Lloyd were one of the great guitar partnerships, and in an era when musicianship was frowned upon, stood out like a gloriously sore picking finger. The band's debut album, *Marquee Moon*, is awash with the sort of interlocking guitar lines that sounded like the product of hours of brow-furrowing rehearsals rather than the '1-2-3-4' aesthetic their peers preferred.

"Sometimes it would just happen," Verlaine recalls. "But I'd say 80 per cent of the time it was

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Verlaine live in 1978, playing a Jazzmaster with its vibrato arm given a stay of execution



The trials and tribulations of the Jazzmaster

Tom Verlaine on the guitar he helped make cool

Until he started using his current guitar, Verlaine's main instrument was an old Jazzmaster that caused him no end of problems. "It was a total pain to keep in tune. There were things I ended up doing to it over the years that I learned from one person or another. Even by the mid-eighties I was still able to keep it in tune really well. I always used really heavy strings - A .12 or .13 to a .50 or .52 - which helps, and a wound G string.

"Because I didn't use my vibrato a lot I pulled out the bridge and placed a tightly wrapped piece of masking tape around the poles, and then jammed it back in, so it wouldn't rock. That was a big help; it disabled the vibrato bar. I can't remember exactly how it worked. I do remember the masking tape around the poles of the bridge being a big advantage in staying in tune."

→ really worked on. A lot of times I would have two guitar parts and I would think; oh my right hand would play that on a piano and my left hand would play that on a guitar. The song Venus was literally recorded in that vein. Then in other cases it would be like playing this chord thing, then thinking; maybe that guitar should be doing that part, and vice versa. We always had so many ideas and we'd use them, rather than just jamming."

Verlaine and Lloyd were, strictly speaking, a lead and rhythm partnership. But the lines were sometimes so blurred that it was difficult to make

"The problem about listening to rock is that I know what they're doing within 13 seconds. It's often something you've done, or thought of doing, 20 years ago"

out who was playing what. "As for who got which line, mostly it was if I didn't feel like playing that one, he would play it. Or if we were working on a song and it came to a solo, it came down to whoever wanted to play it. We had no fixed notions of who should do what. It just happened. Sometimes I would get tired of one solo, and by the time we got to record it he would be playing the solo instead, or vice versa. There wasn't a lot of discussion. It just worked its way out."

VERLAINE HAS ALWAYS been a picky player, with a reputation for taking his time finding the exact sound he's after. "I would say that happens less and less the older I get," he claims. "The last bunch of years I have managed to pick up a lot of public address system amplifiers that were used in bingo halls and church basements. Especially in the nineties I was finding these things for as little as \$10. With a little adjustment they could become really nice guitar amps. The

transformers in them have a greater bandwidth, so they have more deep stuff and a nicer high end. That was what was used on both these two new records. There was very little guitar amp. No Fender amps. No Marshall, or anything."

He describes the guitar he uses these days as a 'lucky accident'. "I had an old Jazzmaster neck lying around. I had an unfinished Strat body and I had these Danelectro pickups. So I took all this stuff and managed to make a guitar out of it. I got kind of used to it and I love the way it sounds. It looks kinda funny but it sounds superb. This goes back quite a way. I've had that guitar 12 years. I find I don't have to fiddle around to get the sound I want now. I don't play very loud, which makes me different from a lot of other players. If I want to play louder I have a few old amps that were usually used for hi-fis that I use to bring up the gain a bit for pure distortion."

That low-volume policy is partly an enforced one. "I try to play guitar every day but I don't



Verlaine with his iconic Jazzmaster. "It was a total pain to keep in tune," he says

always manage it. I have a new neighbour and it really bothers him. I used to play all night and really put up the volume. But now because of this stockbroker neighbour who gets up early and goes to bed early, my nightlife is kinda ruined."

The two new albums are contrasting pieces. The self-explanatory *Songs And Other Things* is a laconic set that drips with classic studied New York cool. Its companion, the aforementioned *Around*, is an album of haunting, spectral instrumentals. Long-term fans will be intrigued, but it's *Songs And Other Things* that they'll find themselves reaching for regularly.

"I'd say the most noticeable thing about these two records is that they're simpler than things I've done in the past," Verlaine muses. "I don't know why but I find something I like about that more these days. There are less overdubs, there are less guitar parts too. It's a matter of trying to think of something essential to say." Simplicity seems to be Verlaine's watchword these days: "When I play a jazz record and listen to the sax, piano, bass and drums, there are only four things going on there. Or on instrumental records of the fifties and sixties, there's not much piled in there. It's harmonically simple. I realised over the years that that's what I really like, although it's not really always what I've done."

GUITARIST ASKS VERLAINE whether he's heard many of the recent bands who, whether they're aware or not, are indebted to Television.

"Well, yes, I hear them when I go and do festivals. In fact, I probably heard 30 or so bands under the age of 25 last year but I can't remember the names of any of them," he chuckles. "A lot of it is just not very memorable, but that could easily be me and my taste. Some of them even come up and speak to me but it's all a big blah."

"I don't listen to a lot of rock stuff nowadays. If I want to listen to something I'll probably put on a jazz record or a classical record. The problem about listening to rock is that I know what they're doing within 13 seconds. It's often like something you've done yourself, or thought of doing, 20 years ago, so personally speaking it's not so interesting. It sounds kinda harsh, but so be it."

Harsh, but then an old dog doesn't tend to be impressed by tricks he mastered decades ago. Whatever, Verlaine says he won't leave it another decade before breaking his silence again. There are even plans for a new Television record next year. "It's just a matter of finding time to get together and work things out. We've been trying to rehearse at least once a week for the past year. But sometimes with everyone's schedules that is more than a little difficult."

So does he feel he's still on a roll creatively? "Well, I'm going to try to get a record out once a year of one kind of another," he replies. "Whether it will actually happen is another matter." And he chuckles again, at another of life's imperceptible absurdities. **■**

Television Addicts

How Verlaine and Richard Lloyd influenced a whole host of guitar players...



Will Sergeant of Echo And The Bunnymen is a Verlaine devotee

The angular, twin-guitar attack developed by Tom Verlaine and Richard Lloyd may not have delivered huge commercial success for Television in the seventies, but its influence on post-punk players was profound. As Edge of U2 puts it: "The electric guitar had really become such an unoriginal-sounding instrument. Hearing Marquee Moon at the end of the seventies was just such a throw-down to me." Echo And The Bunnymen's Will Sergeant admitted the choppy riffing style of debut album *Crocodiles* was directly influenced by Verlaine. The Gang Of Four's Andy Gill took some of Television's cerebral style, adding a credo of: "No jamming, everything [was] thought out in advance, plotted. Valve amplifiers were forbidden. We were against warmth." Talking Heads and REM also used guitars in similar fashion while these days, the interlocking guitars of The Strokes and The Rapture are deemed to be influenced by Television, though The Strokes' Albert Hammond Jr told *Guitarist*: "I don't even own a record of theirs!" No matter, if you like The Strokes you

might like Television. As Richard Lloyd writes on his own website: "If every musician who has told me that they were influenced by Television bought one of our records, I'd be a wealthy man."

