

# Television

TELEVISION, whose recent tour of Britain established them as one of the most unique and exciting American bands of the Seventies, made their public debut in March, 1974, at the Townhouse Theatre — a small viewing theatre in New York that had been engaged for the event by the group's original manager and patron, Terry Ork (to whom, incidentally, "Marquee Moon" is dedicated).

Richard Lloyd recalls the occasion: "It was hilarious. We rented the theatre and went around asking people we knew to come down to see the band and give us some quotes that we could put in the papers. The place seated maybe 88 people and I guess it was full. I don't know how we managed it. I couldn't describe the music. It was just crazy. We were so whacky in those days. We used to fall over a lot on stage and like we didn't have anything. Literally."

Television's line-up at this time was Lloyd (electric guitar), Billy Ficca (drums), Tom Verlaine (electric guitar) and Richard Hell (bass).

Ficca, Verlaine (nee Miller) and Hell (nee Myers) had attended high school together in Delaware;

Verlaine and Hell were, from all accounts, particularly close (though their relationship was to end bitterly and precipitately an extended feud). They shared an interest in literature, art and modern poetry and music, and craved an escape from the stifling parochialism of their environment (in fact, legend has it that they made one abortive run for freedom which ended with their arrest).

Verlaine remains elusive about his musical activities in Delaware, admitting only that he and Ficca played together with various individuals in a series of short-lived, apparently, experimental bands.

Verlaine, having decided that New York would be the most conducive environment in which to work and live, finally arrived in that city in August, 1968. For three years he merely enjoyed the experience and atmosphere of living in the city, working in the Strand bookstore and hanging out in fashionable artistic circles.

In the early Seventies he began composing songs and, by the time he embarked upon a tentative solo career on the New York folk circuit, he had already composed several of the songs that have since been recognised as classics in Television's repertoire, including the beautiful, hallucinatory "Venus".

Verlaine vividly remembers his first public performance in New York: "I'd been thinking about it for some time. I had these songs and I had a guitar. I just thought, 'F— it, I'll do it'."

"One Sunday afternoon I went down to this club and played for 15 minutes. I just wanted to find out what it was really like, and something happened to me and it occurred to me that this was the direction I should follow."

Verlaine decided that his songs could be best expressed in a group context and with Richard Hell and Billy Ficca he formed the Neon Boys. As Billy Ficca explains elsewhere, the group's

existence was "prematurely terminated through lack of work and financial support." Nevertheless, Verlaine and Hell began collecting the material that would form the basic repertoire of the original Television: the material, in fact, that was premiered that night at the Townhouse Theatre and would be heard over the next two years by fluctuating audiences "at CIGG's, Max's Kansas City and any other New York haunt where the group could secure a gig."

Among these songs were Verlaine's "Venus," of course, "Marquee Moon" (which, in its original version, ran to some 20 verses), and the as yet unreleased "Double Exposure" and "Hard On Love" (mentioned by Richard Williams in his column last January). Hell contributed a brace of his apparently off-the-wall ditties, including his disappointing single, "Blank Generation" (a classic, apparently, in its original form). "Love Comes in Spurts" and "Rock 'n' Roll."

It was this version of Television that was produced by Eno for a tape for Island Records; that company's head of A&R at the time was Richard Williams, who'd been impressed by the group in New York and was interested enough in their future to recommend them to Brian Eno. The sessions, however, were aborted after protracted disagreements between Verlaine and Eno.

"I think Eno was too individual," Verlaine explains. "We heard different things in the music. Maybe what he got on tape was a realistic sound for the band at the time, but his ideas were incompatible with mine. He'd put something down and I'd listen to it and I'd say, 'What's THAT? It shouldn't sound like THAT.' — Do THIS to it. And he'd tell me that he'd change it. And he'd go off, but he just wouldn't change it. He's a real clever guy."

If Verlaine was dissatisfied with the recorded sound of Television — even though he suggests it was an accurate reflection of the group as it stood — he might possibly have recognised some of the musical limitations of the group, particularly the shortcomings of Richard Hell's base playing.

Lloyd recalls that Hell responded reluctantly to Verlaine's suggestion that he play bass in Television (it was Hell, incidentally, who gave the group its name), and he accepted the offer only after displays of great enthusiasm and encouragement. Whatever, it was decided that he was relatively inadequate and he was replaced in 1975 by former Blondie bassist Fred Smith.

Hell went off to join ex-New York Dolls Johnny Thunders and Jerry Nolan in the original Heartbreakers (now resident, with a different frontline in London). He now leads his own band, the Voidoids.

Television, with Verlaine firmly in command after Hell's departure, continued to play around New York, picking up critical accolades for the music. Their performance was rewarded in 1976 with the offer of a contract to Elektra/Asylum which Verlaine, who had displayed a rare caution previously, accepted.

Andy Johns, whose previous credits include engineering stints with the likes of the Stones and Zeppelin, co-produced the group's debut album "Marquee Moon" with Tom Verlaine.

"I wanted someone who had no preconceptions about our music who could be relied upon to get a good sound," says Verlaine. "I wouldn't even send Andy Johns any tapes of the band. He'd never heard us until we went into the studio. I didn't want him to know anything about us. That way, I figured we could avoid arguments. Since he didn't know what exactly we were supposed to sound like he really responded to what I wanted."

TOM VERLAINE, the enigmatic leader of Television, has been variously described as a potential rock and roll genius and the most original and exciting new writer and guitarist to have emerged in American music in this decade.

Alternatively, there are those who subscribe to the rather less complimentary opinion that Verlaine is an arrogant and conceited individual, a pretentious and facile talent and a paranoid ego-maniac who's callous and vicious toward those with whom he comes into contact. He's also said to have a megalomaniac streak that would reduce Hitler to the status of a shambling introvert.

"If you believe in yourself, people usually attack you," he says, defending himself against these charges, most of which have been made by his former associate Richard Hell.

"Those are all the things Richard said about me when he quit the band," he adds wearily, obviously tired of the feud. "It's spiteful. If it wasn't for me, Richard Hell would never have had his name in the papers."

"He wasn't about to go start a rock and roll group. He just had a friend who played guitar. He couldn't possibly have played in any other band. We let him play with us and we hoped that he'd improve musically as we developed. Eventually we decided that we needed someone better."

"I'm sure that there are other people who share that image of me. The kind of people that hang around CIGG's. People that I've never said a word to. And because I don't go over and talk to them, they start to think that you're being aloof and distant. But I'm not the kind of person who enjoys that kind of socialising."

## Manner

It is, in fact, not difficult to imagine Verlaine's manner antagonising those who might test his tolerance. There is about him, for all his polite calm, an impatient air: talking about his adolescence in Delaware, for instance, he expresses an intolerance of the provincial atmosphere in which he grew up.

He missed in that environment the excitement and artistic activities that he imagined would abound in New York. Indeed, such was his impatience and desire to become part of a more exciting world that he would highlight it out of Delaware and into New York at the earliest opportunity.

Richard Hell had been living for a year in the city when Verlaine, then 17 years old, moved into his apartment. "It was an exciting time. It was a great experience, meeting people who had a certain atmosphere about them that you just didn't find in Delaware."

He had, at the time, vague plans for forming a band, although he had no specific ideas about the style of music he would pursue. "That was the first idea I had," he continues, "but when I got to New York the place just excited me so much that I didn't think seriously about doing anything. I was just taking in everything. I didn't start writing for a couple of years after I got there."

Although, as he admits, he was infatuated with New York, he was discriminating enough to recognise the superficiality of much that surrounded him. "There were lots of different cliques," he remembers. "People seem to form schools there very fast."



Tom Verlaine

"Like all the poets would get together in various groups, and develop similar styles and share the same ideas and the same girlfriends. I don't know if incest is the right word, but it got to the point where everyone was just patting each other on the back and congratulating each other all the time."

He has still a romantic vision, he confesses: it remains for him a city of intrigue, mystery and a strange beauty. Indeed, much of the music on "Marquee Moon" betrays this infatuation with the city: there's a romantic evocation of the nocturnal underworld filtered through a romantic vision that's at once confused by the potential violence of the environment and yet curiously seduced by the darkness.

In some ways, it seems to me, Verlaine and Television are direct heirs of the Velvet Underground; however, where Lou Reed portrayed New York with a graphic, documentary clarity, Verlaine deals more exclusively with atmosphere, evoking startling images of metropolitan anguish, loneliness and despair allied to a characteristic romantic yearning for spiritual perfection in the face of this darkness.

"That's very much the case," says Verlaine. "Living in New York you somehow become very night-orientated. Especially in the summers, when it gets so hot and the streets get so dirty. I've thought of New York as an inspiration. It isn't for many people, but

it is for me. Obviously, it was for Lou Reed, too."

Verlaine thinks we capture different aspects of the city, but there is some sort of connection between Television and the Velvet Underground. It goes beyond any musical connection, although I think we share the same sort of energy.

"New York is a really concentrated microcosm of emotions, you know, and atmosphere. The songs do deal mostly with atmosphere, yes. I think that's what art is all about. It's all about what you don't have ideas so much as feelings; a sense of what's happening around you."

## Touch

"I think that's an important part of the performance... and every performance should be some attempt to go beyond yourself, or get in touch with something beyond yourself... music, writing, things... It's all about experience, learning, growing."

"To me that's what life is all about. An opportunity to enjoy new experiences. And it's all tied together... music, writing, things... It's all about experience, learning, growing."

"I know that as we become more successful we're going to be restricted, but success is something so abstract that I can't really think about it in specific terms. We'll just have to figure out a way of circumventing the restrictions... it's one of a problem artists."

## Records

### SINGLES:

"Little Johnny Jewel" (ORK — limited edition release).

"Marquee Moon" (Elektra K 12252).

### ALBUMS:

"Marquee Moon" (Elektra K 52046).

## Equipment

TOM VERLAINE: two Dan Armstrong guitars, both same model but one with a perspex body. Uses 100-watt Marshall super-lead, linked up with 100-watt 4 x 12 cabinet.

RICHARD LLOYD: Travis Dean and Fender Stratocaster, Mossa Boogie amp, linked up with 100-watt 4 x 12 cabinet. FRED SMITH: Fender bass with acoustic amp, 301 bottom and 370 top. BILLY FICCA: Camco drums.



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