

TOM  
VERLAINE SWERVES  
WAY AND THAT TO  
THE LOGICAL, BOTH  
OFF RECORD. CHRIS  
BERTS USES HIS NEW  
FLASH LIGHT, TO  
SOME CLUES FROM  
MANIFOLD PAUSES.  
PIC: ANDY CATLIN

"I THINK about it all the time but I don't want to talk much about it. Oh, okay, anything you say. Striking up another match..." "The Funniest Thing (Work Of Art)"

**SO WHY DID YOU STEAL A POET'S NAME?**

WHAT inspired you before people did?  
"Um... breakfast foods. Croissants. Omelettes. The striking similarities in colour between two different substances."

When did people usurp omelettes?  
"I think... um... when I was living with this cave-dwelling tribe on an island near Borneo."  
Yeah? (Credulous? You could say.)  
"I'd gone there to study their language, because these people were known to have an incredibly sophisticated sense of humour. They had their huts covered in pictures that were like... jokes. I thought this was very interesting given the Freudian idea about jokes being a kind of secret code or something. So I thought 'Yeah, I'll have a look at this.'"

And were you impressed?  
"Uh? Mmm! Mmm-hmm! I was when I talked to the leader of the tribal musicians. He said there was no difference between sexual technique and playing an instrument. He wasn't really referring to sex but to a kind of er... deliberate disorder of what we call language. Like, they would make things signify the wrong things. Like a beautiful holy tree would be called a match. They would juggle it all around..."

Why? Because they were bored?  
"I think they'd just reached a level of sophistication that... uh..."  
Are you fond of unfinished phrases?  
"But that is how people talk! Also... it makes me very nostalgic for this tribe, because... at least they finished their sentences."  
"THESE difficult questions! Tell me a joke."  
"Song."

"This tribe, they'd give human personalities to abstractions. Like they had names for all their huts. Like... Mr Joe. The hut called Mr Joe would have a big smile painted on it with lipstick that they'd found washed up in crates from a shipwreck or something."

What was the name of this tribe?  
"Uh... I can't remember now."  
He cheats. He looks at his cigarette packet.  
"The English name is Piccadilly. Or Craven. But the real name is... Bacchybacchybimboo or something."

Later I ask for 20 Bacchybacchybimboos in the tobacconists. A boring man stares at me, suspicious. Worried, considering shaving, I back down and settle for a Wispa and two cans of Lucozade.

**WHAT — YOU MEAN YOU'VE HEARD OF TOM BACCHYBACCHYBIMBOO, THE GREAT BARD?**

VERLAINE, a tall legend in a useless hat but a legend all the same, is demonstrating the art of The Pause to me on a day when, first it's very sunny, and then it snows like crazy. Anyone with a "solid interview technique" would be completely thrown by his opening non-salvo.

Is your music a clash between science and art?  
"Mmm. I'm not sure what you mean, actually."  
A weak smile of some strength.

But sit, just sit your ground with him, and he pours it out on everything under, and including, the sun.

"The weather's not the weather, it's everything. Swedes are Swedes because they live in that place, Brazilians are Brazilians... it does affect, more than people wanna admit. I know a woman whose chronic depression was cured by having 10 sunlamps around the flat."

Oh — Television, two seminal (let's revive a word that's similar to semolina) albums, Tom Verlaine solo, five albums, this one, a good one: "Flash Light".

Now let's get back on the field.  
"Me and Richard Hell both wrote poetry. Part of the reason for Television was being able to sing this stuff. Patti Smith wrote our first review. The first time we met, she said, 'You write poems, don't you?' This later led to writing a book in one day."

Verlaine played on "Horses" and hates it when he says interesting and wicked things in interviews only to read the usual tedious historical



Verlaine, 10 years ago, fronting Television in New York

perspective stuff a fortnight later. He likes Sonic Youth and The Moodists.  
"The sad thing about the music industry today is that, for the price of a video, one could make a real film. Jarmusch's first film cost less than an A-Hi video. And, of course, with a film you can get across so much more of everything. Your own superb perfect personality, for example."

How do you see yourself?  
"I don't. I improvise."  
How do you gauge success?  
"Uh... I don't. 'Success' is not a word I think about much. I'm trying to think of a word I do think about. I know... proliferation. Warhol said success is what sells. He had a point. I'm not sure I'd agree with it but that it at least how success is perceived, certainly outside the world of... even half-serious journalism. Sometimes music is like his early art: people say 'Is this allowed? Can we get away with it?'"

Do you try to get away with things?  
"They just come out that way. I've never been aware of being unconventional. Since day one, I've thought I write Top 10 singles. They're just not perceived as such. Yet."  
Why aren't you REO Speedwagon? Or Boston?  
"Hmmm..."

The longest pause yet. A good minute. Before he answers I've started thinking about the way Meryl Streep looks vaguely to her left when she's speaking directly to someone on her right.

"I was talking some years ago to someone who was genuinely psychic, and she was saying very arrogantly 'Look, there isn't any why. What's with this why? There's no why. There's just how it is.'"

"But this is somehow the big question that people flatter themselves with. In their own lives, I mean. What's often more relevant is how something happened, how the fact came to be."

How has Reagan come to power in the United States? Because a little over one-sixth of the voting population elected the guy, that's how."

I hadn't thought of you as the "shake-yourself-out-of-apaty" type!

"Oh no, I don't think there's anything to be done. It's just a cycle of history. Some are long, some are short. I think the bomb exists and has to exist because it's... ha ha... significant of a spiritual event that people somehow carry with them. This whole thing of a bomb dissolving us into this incredible heat and golden light is a kind of Fantasia people have. Thus when this memory, this wish, becomes concrete, it's not really so surprising."

Is fear necessary?  
"I don't think it's fear, it's desire. Desire to feel oneself expand and dissolve into warmth and light."

And oblivion?  
"No, the concept of oblivion no longer exists. It's become an event. I don't know if you've ever been knocked unconscious in your life; I have twice, once by a couple guys in the street in New York and once by an electric shock. But — the violence of it is just completely unbelievable. You really never can quite believe it, no matter what you think about it."

Is that because most of life is safe and comfortable?

"It is, but... well... most people aren't violent by nature. It has more to do with education. And when people get spiteful it's amazing how they can stretch themselves. The vast majority cannot accept that someone can find a meaningfulness to their experience, can find something extraordinary about everyday living. Or has an ability to reflect, the way a child does. So they envy them, attempt to get it from them."

**WHY YES, I THINK HE'S DONE SOME FINE THINGS...**

DREAMS, Tom Verlaine ventures, are resolving the tensions of everyday life by making you more conscious of them. As we talk, he realises that the character in one of his new songs gets killed at the end. He hadn't realised this before. I take quite a liking to Tom Verlaine today.

"You can't attack dreams and pull them apart, you have to let them speak in their own irrational way, which does communicate something of vital interest."

Sometimes Tom has dreamed music.  
"You explain, and people say 'No no, we must have the dialectic! If a dream or anything is already contained in life, why must they make it such a struggle to use this tool?'"

Oh they do like their recognized channels...  
"Yeah, it's felt safer to process ideas. A lot of that has to do with prevalent Marxist thought in Europe whereas, in America, that's basically regarded as archaic... as something of limited use..."

Do you have... "roots"?  
"I do feel a pull to a home. But I don't know where it is."

"LOVE is a savage thing... must have its way."  
"One Time At Sundown"

"Ah... this must be the influence of my tribal visits, my world journeys. The 'personas'... I hate that word... in most of these songs they are not trying to convey any aesthetic values or in-jokes or recommendations or sensibilities. There is something insipid of kitsch about them: I think — is this coming out of me? These clichés? But... they seem human..."

"I think there is a savage quality about love often though. Seems like when you fall in love — well, in my experience, maybe it's because I'm so sick — there's always this feeling you're being called to make a great sacrifice of some kind."

As if to a religion?  
"No. Well — it could lend itself to that imaginative stream, depending on one's cultural upbringing. An experience of love calls everything forth — all the horror and all the ecstasy of your childhood. You're confronted with something you don't have any words for. You meet somebody and suddenly it's riveting, compulsive."

"One of Milan Kundera's characters describes love as a continual interrogation. Either of the other person, or back and forth with that person, or of oneself. Trying to adapt to something that seems so high. Is it always too much for us, being of this earth?"

"I was just thinking how many marriages there are of couples who are completely unsuited. Not just now but in history — reading lives of composers and authors you read it over and over. And if you look back on your life over a series of love affairs, there's this incredible repetition. Variations on some theme. Whether that's just human limitation coming to the surface over and over, or whether it's the style of a certain kind of love, I don't know..."

So Tom, Have you ever witnessed everlasting love?

"Actually I haven't but I know of people who say they know somebody who has..."

What about you? (Both grinning.) Are you chasing some kind of ideal?

"Everybody carries an ideal, and sometimes that's the whole problem, because you miss something that could've been better than what you imagined. Something about somebody is amazing and you can't really come to terms with it so you try almost unconsciously to put it into a mould. It's almost a cry to try and understand it all, but it can spoil the thing. Because your ideals are always based on some childhood memory or wish."

"When you're a child you can make your wishes come true when you're lying in bed at night; I remember doing this..."

"Interviewing" Tom Verlaine was a labour of continual interrogation. Or was it watching snowdrops fly like pauses?

**MMM. I FELL RIGHT INTO THE ARMS OF VENUS DE MILO. THAT WAS ONE OF HIS**

"SOMETIMES stuff manifests itself that you can't really explain..."