

Slurs from the front

TOM VERLAINE
The Venue, London

TRUMPETED by a reputation fringing on the modern legend status, Tom Verlaine arrived at The Venue with shroud of enigma removed, a one-time shock trooper from rock's forward guard apparently falling into the comforting, linear predictability of the "solo artist" syndrome.

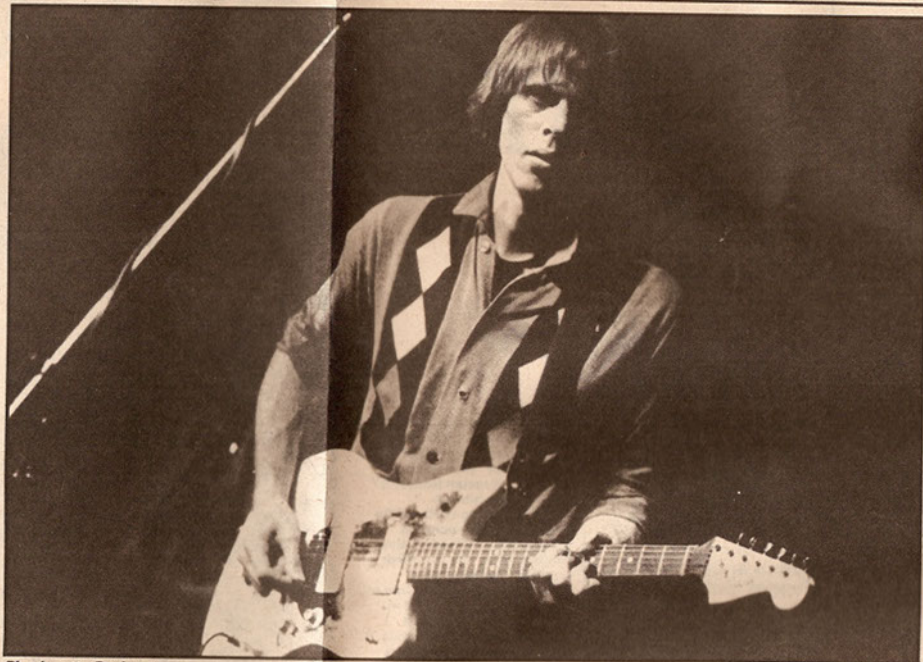
This band were supposed to be "better" than Television — that's what Verlaine had said — and though no-one really believed it, we at least expected something that might make the nerve endings stiffen, the spirits bubble inside, the hairs — just a few of them at least — rise on the back of the neck. They didn't.

The man's finest work, whether with Television or on any of his three patchily brilliant solo albums, has always been invested with an astute concern for form and understatement, mocking the imbecility of hard rock at its worst by taking some of its basic elements and re-building them into new shapes and structures.

Instead of the nail-on-the-head tendencies of traditional rock, we heard liquid flows, bitter twists, wide open spaces in the midst of a convoluted fracas — and all played with loud guitars.

At The Venue on Wednesday these advances seemed to be trampled underfoot as this big, brash machine revved its motor and proceeded to bulldoze the audience into submission. On record the "heavyness" of some of the solo material has always been balanced by a clear and disciplined execution, but live such finer points were generally lost to a deadening, metallic sludge.

The sound system didn't help — a



Pic: Janette Beckman

blanket of middle frequencies that recalled the drowsiness of a Monday morning — but neither did the band, either. Verlaine's music has to be gripped tightly, stretched taut; this line-up (Jay Dee Daugherty on drums, old Television bassist Fred Smith, Jimmy Ripp on second guitar), seemed content to keep things slack, casual and loud.

When Verlaine turned to "True

Story" and "Words From The Front", the two stand-out tracks from his new album, the results were more successful, the spaciousness of the pieces acting as a spur to the band, the tension rising to more electrifying levels; "Glory" came across with a simple warmth, though "Marquee Moon" was a bummer, played so fast it almost tripped over itself, and padded with guitar doodling so lax as to insult

the memory of the original.

Joined on stage by a cooling Lene Lovich during the banal "Postcard From Waterloo", Tom Verlaine seemed like a figure who had served his time as a hero and was now settling in for a long, unspectacular career as a respected singer-songwriter/musician. His new album suggests otherwise.

Let's just hope it was just an isolated, duff night. — LYNDEN BARBER.