



ELVIRA MYERS

# TOM VERLAINE

By Chip Stern

With influences ranging from the Byrds to Ornette Coleman, guitarist Tom Verlaine's music with Television was physically immediate, ringing, ironic, and somehow not of this world. He's the most respected new guitarist to come along in years, breaking away from the Claptonesque cliches that have plagued the genre.

There are rock guitarists, and then there are rock guitarists. You're all familiar with the garden variety type: concussion-level volume, a lot of flashy notes, maybe a bionic tongue for good measure — but not too much thought. Some people think they have to play a mile a minute to create excitement, but in the best rock, as in jazz, the dictum is that if you can't say it with a few well chosen notes — well you can't say nothin'.

As has been pointed out in other places, Tom Verlaine has the courage and integrity to play simply. With guitarist Richard Lloyd, drummer Billy Ficca

and bassist Fred Smith, guitarist-composer-lead vocalist Tom Verlaine made Television one of the most precocious, far-reaching rock bands of the 70s. They were genuine rock modernists. Coupling Verlaine's twisted, adenoidal vocals and oblique, visionary lyrics with the soaring, elemental tension between guitarists Lloyd and Verlaine, Television's music was physically immediate, ringing, ironic and somehow not of this world. Television produced two brilliant albums for Elektra before disbanding last summer: the raw, searching *Marquee Moon*, and the more textural, reflective *Adventure* — the latter

a summation of all the best qualities of classic 60s rock bands, the former more evocative of post-Velvet Underground experimentation and turmoil. Writing in *Rolling Stone*, Mikal Gilmore likened the group's sound to "Ornette Coleman coming through a Rolling Stones barrage" and the *Village Voice*'s John Piccarella has observed that they brought a quality of "rural surrealism" to the landscape of urban rock.

Television's final New York concerts in 1978 at the Bottom Line still reverberate warmly in the back corridors of my mind — in the final analysis, Television's most lasting impression was of a live band. With all due respect to Jeff Beck and Jimmy Page, those concerts cemented my opinion that Tom Verlaine is the finest rock guitarist alive (Jimi Hendrix is, after all, technically dead). Hearing Verlaine's solo on "Marquee Moon" grow from the recorded version to his expansive improvisations at the Bottom Line, I had the sensation of watching someone learn how to talk. His lines had an effortless, unhurried sense of flotation — a sweet vocal quality to every note — yet there was something unbearably urgent about his improvisation. Slowly, methodically, he built bird-like flutters, church-bell hammerings, wrong-is-right vibrato effects and singing distortion tones to an elliptical, double-timed climax, rapidly cross-picking notes so that his lines seemed to be going in two directions at once — like John Coltrane. Certainly Verlaine doesn't have the rhythmic sophistication or cascading techniques of Coltrane, and many of my rock-inclined friends derisively compare Verlaine's achievements to the more quantitative rave-ups of their favorite guitarists. All I can say is, that for my tastes, Verlaine is among the most natural melodic guitarists you're likely to hear — his syllables are more interesting than other-players paragraphs.

"There's a theory about the voice, how you voice the guitar, how you bring out that note," Verlaine mused, thoughtfully choosing every word. "An instrument is a voice — an extension of your inner self. There's a real voice inside the instrument that you can bring out. You know, I listen to a lot of saxophone players and cellists. If you listen to someone like Pablo Casals you realize that he knows how to breathe with the instrument, which is the necessity of the horn, and that might have something to do with the way I approach the guitar — putting something out on your breath instead of going whango and pouring out a million notes. I played saxophone for two years — not very well — and that might have something to do with the way I voice my guitar. I don't really think that my guitar playing is that different from that of a lot of other people, either."

"It is, really," I countered. "Yeah," Verlaine shrugged, "that's what people say."

Perhaps the reason Verlaine is hearing something else is that as a youngster growing up in Wilmington, Delaware he was attracted to an unusual variety of musics. "I like weird sounds, you know." Verlaine said with a twinkle in his eye. "I'm a great lover of weird sounds, the weirder the better. As a kid I liked classical music a lot, then around 1961 or so I had this friend who had a bunch of jazz records, and I remember that I really fell in love with jazz. The first guy I really loved was Roland Kirk, especially the early things with Jack McDuff and Horace Parlan. Then around '64 or '65 I saw these ESP records advertised in *down beat* and I thought 'gee these things look great.' So when my mother asked me what I wanted for Christmas I said all I wanted were these ten ESP records. Well, she didn't know what they were, so Christmas day I started blaring these Albert Ayler records on my father's stereo, and they couldn't believe it — it was really hilarious. Albert Ayler was the greatest thing I'd ever heard, I couldn't get over it. And my parents said 'do you think maybe you could wait a few days before you play those records again.' I listened to the early Ornette Coleman Atlantic's a lot, too. I particularly liked his drummer Eddie Blackwell. The way he tuned his drums you could tell he was really in the *sound* of the drums; some of those solos he took on *Ornette*, God, they were great. I also loved Coltrane and Eric Dolphy — I still love them. The only trumpet player I really liked was Miles Davis. Miles is another one of those musicians who knows how to voice an instrument so it's coming from the whole person and not just one part."

So how did rock and roll come into all of this?

"My brother was buying Motown records and I really liked the way they sounded. Then he got 'All of the Day, And All of the Night' by the Kinks and '19th Nervous Breakdown' by the Rolling Stones, and those were the songs that really get me in terms of rock. It was a super kind of aggressive quality in those records — not a macho aggressiveness or any stupid stuff — but just a real push, a real drive. I also loved the Byrds and Love. The Byrds just had such a sound. The Band did some nice things, too. Robbie Robertson is a really special guitarist. Cream and Hendrix were great; Cream just had such incredible energy; I tried to play some of the things off of Hendrix's records and I'd get so frustrated because I didn't realize they were using overdubbing. There were a lot of things I listened to, but so-called pop music never killed me, you know, the type of stuff that always seems to make it on the radio. The whole radio thing seems so... it's like they've accepted the whole "new wave" thing only because this kind of pop element

came into it. In Europe they really love emotion, but here it's like 'let's stay away from it because we might cry or something.'"

With all of Verlaine's feeling for music, and his fascination with the guitar (starting in 1966), Wilmington offered little inspiration. "I would just characterize it as a lack of ambition in any direction — it's just sort of a place to float, a pretty standard American place in a lot of ways. The reason I left there is that nobody wanted to do anything. I was just starting out myself and I wanted to have a band, but it was always 'well maybe we'll get together Saturday or I've got to mow the lawn Sunday.'"

So Verlaine came to New York City in 1968. "It was a learning experience for 5 or 6 years of finding things out that you wouldn't get to in a place where no one was interested. Everyone here was an individual, with a sense that they're unique." Verlaine put together an abortive early version of Television called the Neon Boys. That failing, he went on to perform as a solo electric guitarist which led to his meeting one Terry Ork, who was to be something of a patron; convincing CBGB's owner Hilly Kristal to feature rock and roll instead of country and western music. Television became the regular Sunday night band, and in a way, progenitors of the whole Manhattan "new wave" scene which was to give birth to Patti Smith, Blondie, Talking Heads and the Ramones, to name a few. Original bassist Richard Hell split to form his band the Voidoids and was replaced by former Blondie bassist Fred Smith (a subtle type of melodic player, the kind of musician who provides an underpinning so unobtrusive you don't even notice him unless you take the time to listen), and the band solidified into a powerful rock entity, albeit an emotionally unstable one. These personal tensions, particularly between Verlaine and Lloyd, were to tear the band apart just as they were beginning to peak.

By way of clarification, Verlaine hastened to add, "People have got a wrong impression about those tensions in regards to our performances. Friction doesn't play a part in the music once you hit the bandstand. I can't presume to speak for the others, but I never felt anything negative from anyone when I was onstage with Television. When I played rhythm behind Lloyd, the only thing that concerned me was to push him as hard as I could so that he'd go beyond what he was capable of and come up with something new, and vice versa. That's the only thing that mattered."

Still, it seems apparent from a listen to the guitarist's solo album *Tom Verlaine* that something is missing, or perhaps it's just that something else is emphasized. In retrospect, it would seem that *Adventure* was actually the first Verlaine solo album. Verlaine's concerns on the

new album are primarily compositional and textural — the creation of a multi-layered set of songs that give Verlaine's lead guitar voice less primacy and electrical intensity than we'd have liked. Maybe Personally, I like the relaxation and increased humor ("Souvenir From a Dream," "Mr. Bingo," and "Yonki Time"), although Verlaine's recurring fascination with dreams and night, and his sense of — dare we say — divine mission are much in evidence on "Last Night" and "Kingdom Come" ("The river is muddy/But it may come clear/And I know too well what I'm doing here/I'm just a slave of the burning ray... And I'll be breaking these rocks/Until the kingdom comes"). The fact that Verlaine played nearly all the guitar parts reduces the amount of exquisite tension that occurred onstage with Lloyd everything is more self-contained. On "Yonki Time" (written with the help of the famed New Orleans session turtle Professor Hardshell), amidst the sound of breaking glass and general mayhem, Verlaine's chorded solo infers the seminal 1930s electric guitar work of Eddie Durham and Charlie Christian — it sounds like Japanese reggae. On "Mr. Bingo" the influence of Ayler, Coltrane and Hendrix is felt in the highly vocalized guitar breaks, and on "Breakin' In My Heart" the seed pod of Verlaine's "Marquee Moon" solo has grown into an exquisite small plant. On the latter two songs and "Red Leaves" Verlaine's achievement is a sort of technicolor Americana, like the perspective of the small town boy come to the big city, with all the prismatic irony that implies. Quite plainly this puts Verlaine in the same quasi-country space as the Byrds, the Band, Neil Young and the Grateful Dead.

At this suggestion the affable, introspective Verlaine shifts his eyes slowly in frustration. "I can see the Byrds, the Band and Neil Young... but the Dead? People are always making that comparison, and I can't see why. The only Dead song I ever listened to was "Dark Star," because I liked the relaxation, the way the guitar seemed to just float through. But if you listen to most Dead songs, you'll hear that they favor this one tempo most of the time, a kind of medium speed. There's a lot more rhythmic drive in my music, a lot more push, and I ought to know, because I'm doing most of the pushing. I think it's more like the Stones. Where do you hear country?"

"Certain pastoral overtones on songs like "Glory" and "Days," a kind of ringing, open sound," I offer.

"Well, "Days" is just "Mr. Tambourine Man" played backwards, but I don't hear the Byrds as being country."

I push on. "Perhaps what I hear is that rural sounds transfigured by the city, a sort of countrified response to the pace and varied pressures — a kind of

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enlightened boogie."

Verlaine looks truly aghast. "Boogie! I hate boogie, God. I mean, not the Chicago boogie like Willie Dixon or Howlin' Wolf, but all those awful white bands . . ."

Hmmmmmm, guess I better change the subject. "Let's talk about your, er, lyrics Tom. I get the impression from many of your songs that you're a kind of light-hearted Christian martyr. Like on "Guiding Light" where you sing "Tell me who sends these infamous gifts/To make such a promise and make such a slip . . . Never the rose without the prick." Or on "Friction": "If I ever catch that ventroloquist/I'll squeeze his head right into my fist."

Verlaine giggles. That 's obviously one of his favorite lines. "I don't like dumb lyrics. By that I mean lyrics where you can't feel that there's a real person behind it — unthoughtout, sentimental, conditioning type stuff. And people use the excuse 'well this is rock and roll' so they can turn out the same songs that everybody's heard for 20 years."

"Sometimes I get the impression you're weary," I interject.

"Of what?" Verlaine gently inquires.

"Life."

He smiles as if to say not really. "If you read the poet Rilke or if you *really* listen to Coltrane . . . if you're interested in inward directions, Coltrane would say you have to be able to be alone and go into yourself. It's . . . it's really hard for me to talk about lyrics. Some of them are like me trying to describe something so I // know what it is, instead of letting it all go by — so you focus on something to figure out what the hell it is. It's underneath your daily awareness, so to speak.

*"Chirp chirp*

*the birds*

*they're giving you the words*

*The world is just a feeling*

*you undertook*

*Remember?"*

"Prove It — Tom Verlaine