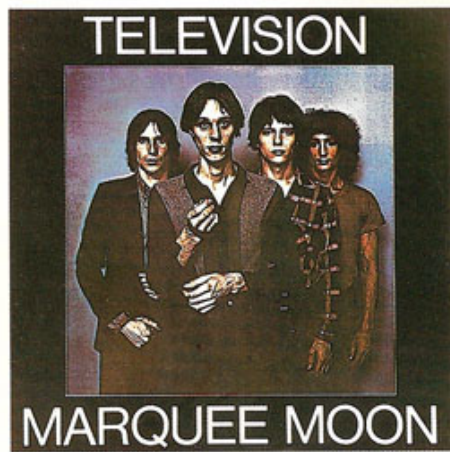


# One Big Happy Family...

... with child abuse, divorce and incest. Television can't agree why they split up and now they can't work out if they've re-formed. "We're still the same misbegotten, misshapen band that we always were," they inform Tom Hibbert.

IT WAS DURING THE PUNK ROCK REIGN OF terror, 1976-'78, that the lengthy rock guitar solo was deemed illegal, punishable by humiliation in the public prints from Mr Johnny Rotten and/or other ring leaders of the putsch. There was but one band bold enough to defy the prevailing laws of musical fashion: a New York combo called Television. Their first LP, *Marquee Moon*, released in '77, not only had many a lengthy rock guitar solo from Richard Lloyd and Tom Verlaine (né Miller), but also one song, the title track, that lasted a blasphemous 10 minutes; the rhythm section – Fred Smith on the bass and Billy Ficca on the drums – had dipped in the pools of funk and modern jazz, and Verlaine's lyrics were a little different and strange: "Suddenly my eyes went so soft and shaky/I knew there was pain but pain is not aching/Then Richie, Richie said/ Hey man let's dress up like cops think of what we could do/But something something said 'You better not'/ And I fell/(Did you feel low?)/Nah/(Huh?)/I stood up, walked out of the arms of Venus De Milo".



Television's first LP, the classic *Marquee Moon*, released in March, '77: "If you look on the inner sleeve, there's two Fender Super Reverbs right against the wall."

In the NME, writer Nick Kent devoted a page to *Marquee Moon* and called it magnificent and he wasn't at all wrong. There was a glorious career in motion. Except that when Television's second LP, *Adventure*, came out the following year, NME's Julie Burchill summoned up all the proper punk indignation to damn the group, poured scorn and contumely down on the group. Upon which Television promptly did the decent thing and split up.

*Marquee Moon* remains a classic. *Adventure* is very good, too. And now, a mere 14 years later, comes the quartet's third LP, exquisitely titled *Television*, and their first live appearance here (at Glastonbury in July) since the show at Hammersmith Odeon in 1978. Reforming old bands has been all the rage these past few years. One's usual reaction on hearing that the old-timers are getting back together again is to cry, Oh, for God's sake, why? (Answer: for the money, of course). Television are somehow different because during an all-too-brief career, there was such promise, unfulfilled. And besides, their excuse for breaking up in the first place was so damned cool: no wafflings from the New Yorkers about irreconcilable musical differences; Television just said that as Moby Grape, the excellent San Francisco pop group of the late 1960s, had split up one full moon night, they (Television) felt inclined to do the same thing too. That was it. (Moby Grape, incidentally, have recently re-formed).

TOM VERLAINE IS WELL KNOWN FOR BEING A grouch. When he last granted an audience to Q magazine in 1987, on the release of his *Flashlight* solo LP, he was diffident, unwilling to discuss the past, more eager to talk of art and the meaning of life. It was so dull and stuffy that the piece was never printed. The man on show today, old chums in attendance, whiffs of another kettle of fish altogether. Television's Duce is padding up and



The re-grouped Television in London, July, 1992: (from left) Richard Lloyd, Tom Verlaine (cunningly disguised as a pillock with a T-shirt on his head), Fred Smith, Billy Ficca: "It always seems like yesterday."

down atop a luxuriant wooden table in a conference room of Television's record company, EMI. In socks. While his rhythm section, Smith and Ficca, stare up at him, cross-armed in silence, and the other guitarist, Lloyd, seems irritated by the display ("As you walk back and forth like that, the comments that you make are beginning to have a Doppler effect on me"), Verlaine cackles to himself, keeps murmuring something about "religious pornography" (whatever that might be). Verlaine seems in bright spirits. Verlaine, tall and thin and well-preserved, also seems a jolt insane.





“What a lot of rubbish it was, the old days. We got dreadfully bored. It was tedium, dreadful tedium, the horror . . .” Tom Verlaine

Why, pray, have Television chosen to reform? It can't be for the money, surely (they never even got paid for Marquee Moon and have no idea how many copies it sold).

Tom mutters something about how “it always seems like yesterday”, while Richard says, “We haven't re-formed, obviously; we are still the

same misbegotten, misshapen band that we always were,” and the rhythm section, folded arms, inscrutable, say absolutely nothing.

Ask about the reasons for splitting in the first place, about the Moby Grape scenario and Billy Ficca doesn't seem to know what you're talking about. “Moby Grape?” he murmurs in disbelief.

“Maybe Richard said something about Moby Grape,” says Verlaine padding o'er the table to where his colleague sits and peering down in accusatory fashion. “Did you ever make a statement saying we wanted to break up on a full moon like Moby Grape. Did you ever say that?” Lloyd: “Yeah, uh-huh.”







Smith, Verlaine, Ficca and Lloyd at New York's CBGB's in '76: "What a shabby place it was. It was shabby. We were shabby."

Verlaine: "You said something like that?"  
 Ficca: "Moby Grape?"  
 Lloyd: "Yeah, those were things said during that dinner in Chinatown."  
 Verlaine: "I don't remember that."  
 Lloyd: "You don't remember that?"  
 Verlaine: "Richard remembers this dinner in August 1978 where we all got together and broke up. I don't remember that. Billy doesn't remember that."  
 Ficca: "I don't remember that."  
 Verlaine: "Fred doesn't remember that."  
 Smith: "I really can't remember that."  
 Verlaine: "Richard says we went to Chinatown and ate chow mein or something."  
 Lloyd: "No, no. Tom called me up and he said, I'm thinking of leaving the band and I said, Well, you don't have to leave the band because I'm thinking of leaving the band too, so why don't we just call it a day? And we called up Fred and Billy and we said, We'll meet at The Loft, which was in Chinatown, and we'll make it a happy event rather than a sad one. And then when we got there, Tom was the one that mentioned Moby Grape because I had Moby Grape records..."  
 Verlaine: "The man's memory!"  
 Lloyd: "... so we went out to this Chinese joint in an alley in Chinatown we used to call Whore Alley..."  
 Verlaine (*deciding at this point to stop his pacing and lie face down in the middle of the long table*): "The guy is cracked!"  
 Lloyd: "... and we had dinner and we told jokes and then we split. And then we went on our dismal way."  
 Verlaine: "Speak for yourself!"  
 Lloyd: "I just did. I have a very good memory..."  
 Verlaine: "Nevertheless, my child, you do not remember what amps we used to use."  
 Lloyd: "Sure I do!"  
 Verlaine: "No, you don't!"

This heated discussion betwixt the greatest twin guitar troupe of the blank generation is on the point of turning distinctly sour and surly.

One is beginning to wonder how long Television will stick together this time. The tiff continues...  
 Lloyd: "Amps? Amps? Oh, yeah, when did I blow that one?"  
 Verlaine: "In December. You insisted we used Fender Twins."  
 Lloyd: "I never said that!"  
 Verlaine: "Ha! You did. And, my child, if you look on the inner sleeve of Marquee Moon, there's two Fender Super Reverbs right against the wall!"  
 Lloyd: "Well, if you want to use that to dismiss everything else I say..."  
 Verlaine: "I'm not dismissing what you're saying. I'm merely saying that I don't think that anybody's memory is infallible. All I'm saying is that the three of us don't remember the dinner..."  
 Lloyd: "That we all went to! That's incredible!"

**T**HE ROW CONTINUES. OH, DEAR. TELEVISION are human after all. And we thought they were some kind of Gods because they played guitars so thrillingly when people weren't supposed to play guitars properly at all. Back then, in the so-called Summer of Hate, for those who were down the Roxy watching Generation X and Chelsea (and Johnny Moped) and hating every punky minute, the New York scene - Richard Hell And The Voidoids, Talking Heads, Patti Smith, Johnny Thunders and his Heartbreakers, Blondie and Television playing in a club, CBGB's - all seemed so faraway romantic. It was really nothing of the sort, according to Tom Verlaine.

Richard Lloyd: "You don't remember that?"  
 Tom Verlaine: "Billy doesn't remember that."  
 Billy Ficca: "I don't remember that."  
 Tom Verlaine: "Fred doesn't remember that."  
 Fred Smith: "I really can't remember that."

Lying on his back on the table now, as he inspects a record-company-supplied sandwich, he muses on the question. "That all had an aura to the European, didn't it?" he says. "But it wasn't romantic at all." Lloyd, for once, agrees. "You just walked into the joint and there was dog shit on the floor and urine coming off the ceiling."

Verlaine: "It was that bad, actually. The smell of the place was incredible."

Lloyd: "There was this dog that used to crawl up on stage and go to sleep during the shows."

Ficca: "That dog actually died. Under the stage. It was a terrible smell because he was there for a week."

Lloyd: "But it was the only place we could play."

Verlaine: "What a shabby place it was. It was shabby. We were shabby. What a lot of rubbish it was, the old days. We got dreadfully bored. It was tedium, dreadful tedium, the horror..."

**T**HE HORROR AND THEY MADE NO MONEY. Only once did Television ever feel at all like rock stars: when they came over to England for the first time (Hammersmith Odeon, May 28, 1977, supported by Blondie), Lloyd and Ficca arrived on an aeroplane, in the normal fashion, but Verlaine and Smith wafted over on the QE2.

Verlaine: "We thought it would all be gambling, a riot, but it was nothing but senior citizens and two porn stars. It was like being in a geriatric ward except for this one ridiculous porn star who had all this coal under his eyes and kept hitting on this Danish tennis girl. Remember that?"

Smith: "Er... yeah."

Verlaine: "And they said they'd have a limo waiting for us in Southampton. But we got off the wrong end of the boat..."

Smith: "All I wanted was to be churned to pieces by the propellor. Like in *The Poseidon Adventure*..."

Verlaine: "I aspire to be as pompous as Charlton Heston. Was he in *The Poseidon Adventure*?"

No. That was a Gene Hackman/Ernest Borgnine vehicle, actually.

Verlaine: "Oh, well, I'm just warming up for that 50-year-old age where I can sing at the Holiday Inn..."

With this he turns over to lie on his back and to warble things from the Frank Sinatra songbook and to cackle some more. Ficca and Smith fold their arms and look abashed just to be in the presence of such a mad genius. Lloyd strides from the room. Television are back. Hurrah for that. There seems little point in prolonging our dotty conversation...