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# DIGNITY

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## OF THE GUITAR PLAYER



**Tom Verlaine's** guitar playing has influenced a whole generation of guitarists and has made him a legend in some circles. Yet none of it has gone to his head, or ruined his approach to music and life. And he still wears black... Story: **Andy Strickland**

In Spain they say it's poets who wear black. In Japan it's priests. In England, in 1987, it's just about everyone under the age of 40; the funeral's still going on! Tom Verlaine, an American guitar player/song writer of some repute, is sitting opposite me removing a stubborn chunk of omelette from his sleeve. His clothes are as black as coal, but one thing you could never accuse him of is pandering to fashion.

"Actually, I've had this coat since 1978," he chews. It was in 1978 that I first heard Tom Verlaine's music. As singer and frontman of the now legendary Television, he quite literally inspired a whole generation of youngsters to pick up a guitar and try to play something a little more thoughtful, a little different. Sure, he plays solos, but he's head and shoulders above rock excesses. Fragile guitar runs, an even more fragile voice and a persona that oozes cool. If, like everyone else, he thinks he's a big deal, Tom Verlaine has a pretty good way of hiding it.

A couple of weeks ago he shook 'The Tube' to its smug foundations with one of the rawest, most garage-like displays you'll ever see on a Friday evening. 'A Town Called Walker' and 'Bomb' were proof enough that Tom Verlaine is back and that he means business.

"I think it was basically the kind of thing that you'd either have thought was great and exciting, or not liked at all," he muses. "I'm sure some people thought 'what is this eight minute song called 'Bomb?'"

It's difficult to gauge the influence of this man on today's pop musicians. Though he's been based in London for a couple of years, there's still a buzz whenever his black beret pops up at gigs in the capital. If only he'd bite the head off some unfortunate cuddly animal, or grow his hair and get fat, then we could file Tom Verlaine away as a part of rock's history. However, while he continues to

make LPs as tasteful and exciting as his latest, 'Flash Light', he's going to be a welcome, if occasional, visitor to vinyl and stages for a while yet.

Do you ever hear young bands and think 'that sounds familiar', Tom?

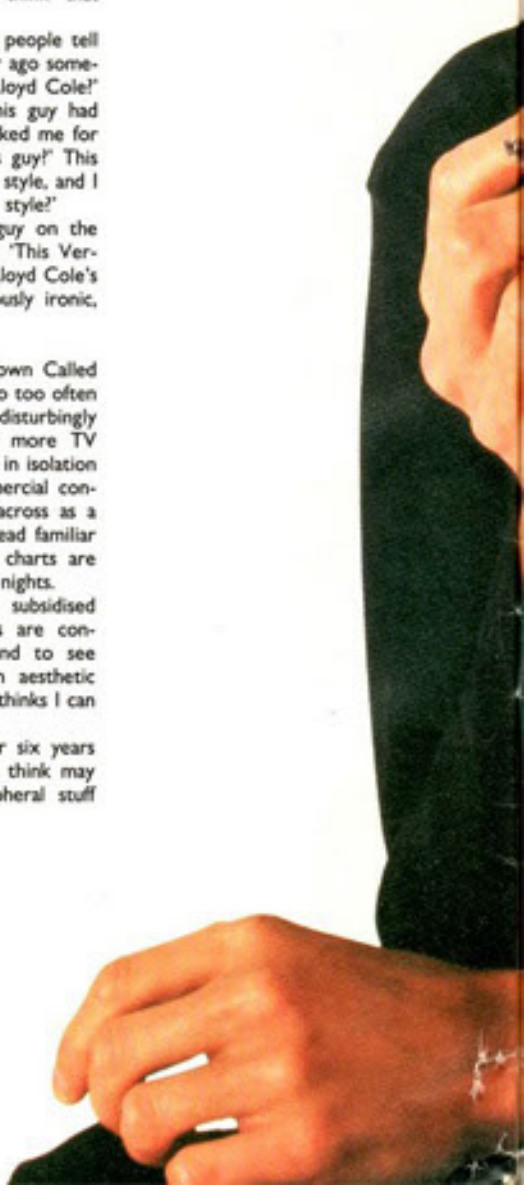
"No, I don't tend to hear them, but people tell me about them," he says. "About a year ago somebody asked 'Have you heard this fella Lloyd Cole?' and I said, no. Then I remembered this guy had come into a photographic studio and asked me for an autograph, and I'd said 'Who is this guy?' This girl told me he'd appropriated my vocal style, and I thought 'What is she talking about, what style?'"

"Anyway, last week I heard some guy on the radio playing the new single and saying 'This Verlaine guy sounds like he's appropriated Lloyd Cole's vocal style.' I thought it was horrendously ironic, such a joke."

It's unlikely that the excellent 'A Town Called Walker' will be blasting out of your radio too often during daylight hours, or that Tom's disturbingly long fingers will be putting in many more TV appearances this time around. Operating in isolation as he does, free from too many commercial constraints, Tom Verlaine's records come across as a breath of fresh air even though they tread familiar and essentially traditional ground. The charts are unlikely to cause him too many sleepless nights.

"I seem to have become almost a subsidised artist as far as the record companies are concerned," he laughs. "They look around to see what's worth keeping from a certain aesthetic viewpoint, though this company actually thinks I can sell a lot of records."

"It's very funny. You write songs for six years and you end up writing something you think may be interesting and then all this peripheral stuff





starts happening and all of a sudden you're called a guitarist, when all you've been trying to do is do stuff that you yourself would like or would buy.

"Even Television's success, at the time, was a mystery to me. I couldn't figure out why we should be picked up on like that, but a producer friend told me it was the whole look of the band on the sleeve of 'Marquee Moon', and that guitar sound was classic, I guess."

I sigh with relief that it's Tom who mentions Television first. Does he ever get tired of people going on about what a great band it was? A reputation like that can be a heavy burden, surely? "No, I don't mind the references," he says. "People mention Television in relation to so many other things as well, and I guess you have to have a degree of background in any article that's written about you. Mind you, I don't have a lot to say about it."

**Something that becomes** increasingly apparent as Tom Verlaine's solo career continues, is the class of his lyrics. Often overlooked in the enthusiasm to hear his music, songs such as 'The Scientist Writes A Letter', on the new LP, display a consummate skill for standing back and telling a story with an economy and style that belies his image of simply being a guitar player.

"I'm not really sure what people hear when they listen to one of my records, or how I'm perceived," he ponders. "Some people listen to the guitar playing, some the song, but I do get people writing to me about the lyrics, wanting to discuss poetry and stuff."

"To me, the guitar playing is completely matter-of-fact. Even being a guy who plays so called solos, I'd be perfectly happy to play rhythm and other things. I don't even see myself as a guitar player, you know? I know the chords, and I know music from when I was a kid and I had piano lessons, but I don't sit around the house and practice lead guitar!"

As this is the time of year when American guitar bands are traditionally thrust upon the British market, I wonder how an American guitar player rates them.

"Oh, they are horrible," he emphasises. "They're the worst type of American bands, particularly lyrics wise. It's incredible what some of them come up with. The worst lyrics I've ever heard."

A safe bet, then, that Tom won't be supported by a bunch of revivalist cowboy boots when his British tour gets underway in March. In fact, his recent trip to eavesdrop on the likes of Felt, seems to suggest that his active support for young British bands will continue.

The nation's phone lines are reportedly already scorching as young bands try desperately to get onto some of Tom's dates, such is the esteem in which he's held.

"Really?" he raises an eyebrow. "I hadn't heard that."

How about making a record with no guitars on it all, to confound everyone?

"Oh yes!" he smiles "Actually, I don't know about no guitars at all. I'm not keen on synthesisers and things, but on some of the ballads we've been more sparing with the guitars. On 'The Scientist...', when it was a demo, the record company said 'Where's the guitars, Tom? Where are the trademarks?' Everyone else thought it was great, though, so I'm really glad it got onto the album."

The problem with most instrumentalists is their lack of songwriting ability. Watching someone display their skills, and nothing else, for an hour is possibly the most boring way to spend an evening. Do yourselves a favour, go along and see Tom Verlaine on tour and you'll not have to worry. The man radiates taste from his Mustang to his monkey boots.