

## Tom Verlaine

debut, *Tom Verlaine*. That album offered a stripped-down version of the style Verlaine premiered with Television: oblique lyrics set to his jangling, hypnotic guitar riffs, punctuated by saber-toothed solos. The album sold poorly, however, and Verlaine blames Elektra.

Sitting in my apartment for an interview, he doesn't mince words about the company. "I went through so much shit with this label," Verlaine says. "I tried to dump them. Elektra made me master the album at a volume lower than it could have been, because they felt all this shit hurts on the radio. Their staff is a California staff, and they just don't know what to make of it [the music]. To me, it's unethical."

(Counters Mel Posner, vice-chairman of Elektra/Asylum Records: "This company doesn't have to be based in New York to sell records in New York. When he first submitted the album, we asked him to remix it, to make something that wouldn't compromise him as an artist but would suit our purposes. He didn't want to. Eventually, the A&R department insisted we put it out. From the moment the album was released, we got no major activity on radio. We bought spots on the New York stations playing the record, but at best we were getting light airplay outside of New York. We tried as many things as we could, but unfortunately it just didn't happen.")

When Television first appeared, the band's music was widely misunderstood: Many saw a connection with Sixties psychedelia in the guitar interplay between Verlaine and Richard Lloyd (whose solo album, *Alchemy*, is also on Elektra); the result was at times reminiscent of Neil Young or the best of Jerry Garcia. Verlaine claims to know little about either guitarist, however, and considers Miles Davis a more important influence.

Television's two albums, *Marquee Moon* and *Adventure*, received rave reviews but didn't sell well. I wonder aloud if the band would have hit it big a decade ago. "I would have thought the opposite," says Verlaine. "In 1982, it could be a big band. It seems that in this country, it takes something English to make people aware of what's going on in America. Most people still think punk started in England."

Verlaine, who wrote and arranged most of Television's songs, left the band because he wanted to play with other musicians. "It wasn't like working with someone with a real give-and-take," he says. "I did sixty to ninety percent of all the arranging on the songs, so a lot

of it was showing people parts to play. Todd Rundgren used to say, 'It's so much faster to do it yourself—why just show someone else how to do it?' Like on *Let It Bleed*, almost all the guitars are Keith Richards'."

Verlaine also wanted to escape Television's arty, aloof image. And while he admits that press acclaim is what sold the band's albums, he has little patience with the introspective, "sensitive-artist" label given him by the media. Granted, he encouraged the stereotype when he changed his last name from Miller to that of the French symbolist poet, and his song lyrics have always been abstract. "That's the unfortunate sign of the times," he says. "That's the disease of

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modern life—some degree of ambivalence. That's why I write like that. It's also the corny idea of being estranged from nature. If you take a drive in the woods, there's a wholeness there that's not present on the Bowery. Walking through the woods is like walking through your own sleep.

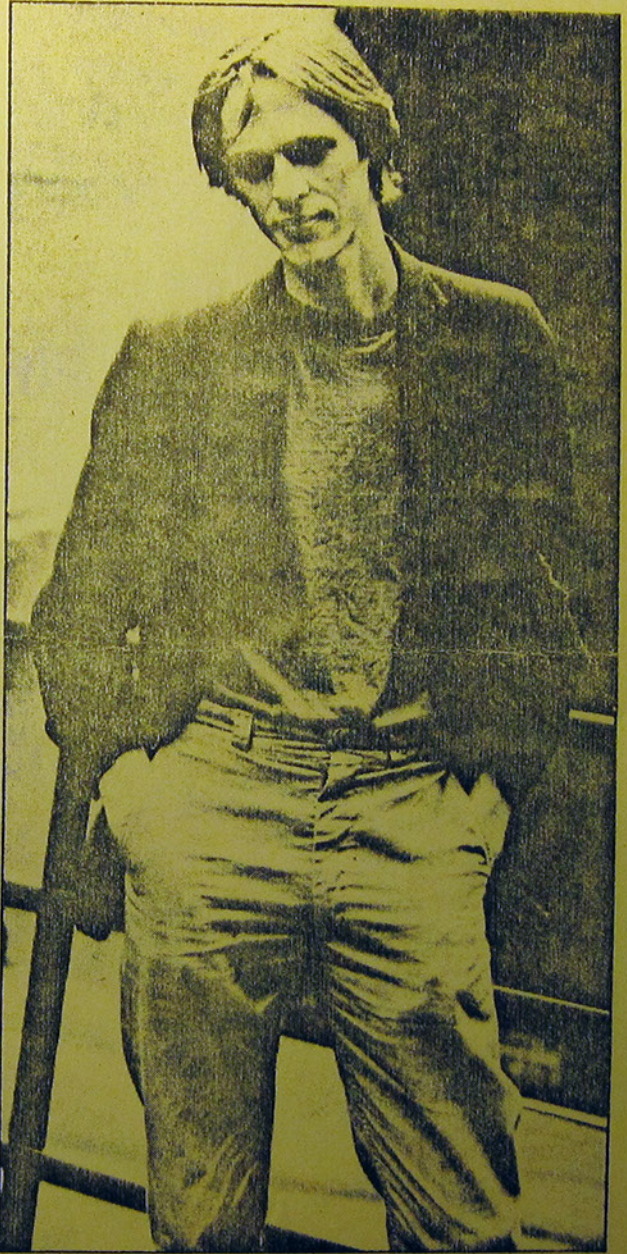
"The sensitive artist," he muses, rolling his eyes. "That's an image—who knows where it comes from. Probably from some book by Fitzgerald or somebody I haven't read. It's inhuman to paint somebody like that. It's a media stereotype: in rock & roll, you're either sensitive or you're crazy. In this country, artists are seen as oversensitive. In other countries... the ambassador of Guatemala is a Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist. In France, you have the old existentialists involved in government life. But there's a split in America."

On a more practical level, Verlaine feels that his image caused Elektra to see him as a cult artist, not to be taken seriously on the rock market. His immediate priorities include finding a new record label and assembling a four-piece touring band.

"I've spent a lot of time in the realm of the imagination," he says. "Now I'm starting to read a newspaper to see what the pattern is, to see what goes on out there." He smiles, then laughs. "I'm trying to get hold of what real life is about."

## Ex-Television star's fall and rise

# Tom Verlaine: looking for life



By Jim Farber

NEW YORK

**T**OM VERLAINE IS looking for sex in ice cubes. He's studying a liquor ad in a glossy magazine and has just found, concealed in the ice cubes, the shape of an s, an e and finally... "There's the x!" he yells. "Sex! Do they call this subliminal advertising? It's incredible. I'm glad I saw

this. It's important to see through these things."

As Verlaine sorts out his troubled musical career, he's finding it necessary to "see through" other corporate maneuvers. Verlaine helped define the punk-New Wave ethos more than six years ago as founder of Television, but he's had a tough time of it since the band broke up in July 1978. Elektra Records dropped him from its artist roster late last year, shortly after releasing his critically praised solo

PHOTOGRAPH BY ELIVIRA MYERS