

Verlaine's Passion Is Clear, With and Without the Words

PASSION can be conveyed through words, but often the most intense emotions are best expressed through non-verbal means. Such, anyway, seems to be the thesis of cult-idol songwriter and musician Tom Verlaine, who starts the second side of his



Sound sculptor Tom Verlaine.

Off Beat

ALEX VARTY

new record, **Flash Light**, with a few seconds of unintelligible garglings followed by the lines "I don't know how to talk... No, I don't know how to think." It's as succinct a summation of rock music's ongoing battle against articulate speech as any issued since Little Richard issued the calls to arms some 30 years ago, with the classic lines "Awop-bop-a-lu-bop, awop-bam-boom."

However, as we have always suspected, the naive persona that Verlaine often adopts in song is merely a guise for a man who knows exactly what he's doing, even if he doesn't always have the words to describe his creations.

"What people want to communicate and what gets communicated is such a problematic affair," said Verlaine, caught in Toronto during a rare tour of the east. "Only in the last 30 years have people descended on artists, asking them to explain what they are doing. And I think three quarters of the reasons why people become some sort of artist is because they can't explain anything. So that they're just trying to come to terms with aspects of their life that they can't communicate otherwise. That's a theme that comes up in a number of my songs, that everything ends up between the lines, somehow."

Indeed, what Verlaine's records make felt, if not always understood, are a range of emotional states running from resignation to the giddy heights of love. But while most songwriters, even some very gifted ones, try to avoid cliché by adopting a confrontative approach to their feelings, trying to spell everything out as if under analysis, Verlaine belies his literary pseudonym by working more like a visual artist. Using wedges of allusion and suggestion as a sculptor levels his chisels, Verlaine levels his subjects into relief, where his detailing tools, a playwright's ear for dialogue, a surrealist's feel for the perfectly loony *non sequitur*, and an inborn gift for ironic understatement, can give them character.

And such characters! Verlaine's descriptions may be skimpy, but with repeated listenings to **Flash Light** his creations come alive. There's the protagonist of "The Scientist Writes a Letter," wavering between the self-assurance of one accustomed to addressing a scientific congress and the helplessness of the abandoned lover, and there's the homesick girl Janey going back to the life-in-death of the little "Town Called Walker." The bemusedly fatalistic painter, an obvious Verlaine surrogate, in "The Funniest Thing" sums up

life by saying "I think about it all of the time but I don't wanna talk about it." All these characters seem at least as real as any fictional being found on film or in print.

The key to Verlaine's ability to project character can be found in his music: what the words only sketch, the sounds behind them fill in. His song structures, deceptively simple, flirt with time with outrageous fluidity, aping the strange loops and stretches of real life. No one else can make the basic four-four thwack of rock so elastic, save for (sometimes) Keith Richards and Charlie Watts.

Verlaine's rare ability to swing — there's no other word for it, he plays with time like a jazz musician — gives his songs an uncanny depth. They breathe, they've got air and light and space to them, particularly space. Verlaine is not the most technically gifted guitarist, but his intuitive arranging skills, plus his keen ear for subtle timbral shifts, give him powers unequalled since the heyday of Hendrix.

On **Flash Light**, layers of guitars slip over and under each other like waves intersecting, with Verlaine's particularly graceful use of reverb and stereo placement giving each part its own individual and clearly audible sheen. Over these shimmering webs, Verlaine hurls bolts of solo electricity, unpredictably shifting from angular contortions to lyrical curves. The result can only be described as a kind of musical portraiture, done with clarity of intent, joy, and honesty.

"That's the kind of thing I like," said Verlaine. "The music has its own language, and it's always saying something of its own, despite language and words. To be very simplistic about it, there's something about music that always works as a kind of lift. Even when it's a piece that deals with or portrays the darker elements from the portrayal of that there comes a kind of healthy recognition, rather than ignoring something that needs to be dealt with. Music can be a way of diminishing the darker negative effects of these darker feelings, of confronting them. Saying 'I feel horrible,' or 'I don't know what this is and it's confusing and my brain is volcanic.' [Laughs.] But by not pretending that it isn't so, by using that situation, you're able to go on." ■