

RICHARD LLOYD CHANGES CHANNELS



Eben Roberts

By Jon Young

Richard Lloyd is late. The guitar virtuoso and former member of Television has just called Elektra Records' offices to say he doesn't have any money to get there on the subway. He can't get off that easy, though: a muttering employee, who sounds like she's been through this before, is dispatched with a five-dollar bill to meet Lloyd's cab.

This is not promising. I envision a mumbling, incoherent mess who can't remember his own name, much less offer pithy observations on Life and Art. Nor am I reassured by veiled hints in the local press that Lloyd is indeed "not together." The publicist says Richard likes to talk. But will he?

Finally! Lloyd does arrive, walking fully upright and, except for hints that he hasn't been awake long (rumpled shirt and hair), in perfect working order. In the flesh, Lloyd looks a good two years older than the 16-year-old that comes across in pictures. As it turns out, he's fun to talk to; he often speaks...like...this, measuring out words in a voice that could accommodate a drawl but doesn't. It's the way cool guys at school used to talk, deliberately but not slowly, self-confident without trying too hard. He smirks a lot between words; not obnoxious, just, well, cool.

Lloyd surprised a lot of people with his solo album, *Alchemy*. He never looked like a front man in Television, constantly being pushed to the back of the band by leader Tom Verlaine. His music is worlds removed from Verlaine's elliptical conceits; Lloyd

sticks to obvious, even corny, love songs, sung in a sweet unsteady voice. Perhaps most surprisingly, there is little display of the guitar brilliance for which Lloyd is justly known. *Alchemy* is straightforward and "normal" sounding pop music. How odd.

Asked his opinion of the LP, Lloyd lights a cigarette and responds: "I like it. A lot of people make records; by the time they write them, record them, listen to test pressings, listen to acetates, get it out, hear it on radio and play it for all their friends, they can't stand it anymore. But I still like it. I'm dying now to do a second one, and when that's out I'm sure I'll be ready to do a third one. After I do five or six I'll start breathing a little."

Lloyd says that songs pop into his head a lot. "It happens too much for one album a year. I've consciously not written stuff because I knew if I wrote 20 songs in the time an album is recorded eight of them would disappear. That's a shame."

Most of *Alchemy*'s tunes were written right after Television's breakup in 1978. Did he have a solo career in mind at the time?

"Yes. I wasn't gonna be in another band."

Why?

"I don't know." A likely story.

"If somebody had offered me a lot of money to go on tour I would have done that. If I wasn't stepping on anybody's toes and there were no ego fights, I would consider a band. But I wasn't gonna join a group and sit around trying to think up a name. I'm a little older than most people think." Oh? "I'm 28."

Lloyd laughs, as he often seems to do, at an unexpected moment. "I always knew I was going to be in just one band anyway. I

just didn't think it was going to end so soon."

Lloyd already had one potential member for his new band in Fred Smith, Television's bass player. Smith was not surprised that Lloyd wanted to start his own group. "When we broke up he asked me if I'd play with him. I was surprised he had that much material. He made the transition pretty well."

Lloyd next enlisted the services of ex-Feelies drummer Vinny DeNunzio, though he had reservations about the Feelies' neo-Velvet Underground style. "I didn't think his Feelies drumming was suitable for what I wanted to do. Just the two of us rehearsed in the basement of the Mudd Club and it turned out he liked what I liked."

Which is?

"I don't know—great rock drumming. It's not a Ramones rush, it's not jazz and it's not sloppy. Ginger Baker plays drums on Donovan's 'Hurdy Gurdy Man'—not too many people know that—that's great drumming. Ringo played great drums. Charlie Watts plays great drums."

From Paper Moon (another New Jersey band!) he recruited rhythm guitarist Jim Mastro. One big stumbling block loomed: Elektra, Television's label, held Lloyd's option. Maxanne Sartori, former manager of Boston's Reddy Teddy and now on the A&R staff at Elektra, explains what happened. "Nobody knew what Richard could do; he wasn't allowed to do much in Television. Joe Smith, chairman of the board here, had always liked the way he played guitar, so when Richard asked for money to make a demo, Joe gave it to him."

The demo ("Women's Ways," "Should Have Known Better" and "Alchemy") was not a knockout. Lloyd nevertheless won Sartori's support and got an OK from Smith for another demo, this one recorded live at CBGB's. The band, now with third guitarist Matthew Mackenzie (ex-Reddy Teddy), came off much better.

Next, Sartori recalls, "We had a bunch of meetings on the West Coast to decide the fate of a number of people. When Lloyd's name came up I said, 'He has X number of dollars and I think a good record can be made.' One person, who's no longer with the company, said, 'You can't make a record for that kind of money.' This was before the Knack." She got her way.

But why would someone in A&R take a chance on what was still just a long shot? "He had the nerve to call me up and say, 'I want you to listen to my demo.' He literally dragged me up to where they practiced to listen to him play. I could tell he was grabbing at straws. He was desperate for something; he really wanted a chance. That influenced me into thinking he deserved better than to be a former recording artist for Elektra. Something said you should believe in this kid for a while, at least until he shows he shouldn't be believed in."

For that Sartori got "special thanks" on Alchemy's back cover. The LP was recorded in five weeks at Bearsville Studios with Michael Young producing.

Was it strange being frontman? "I don't know if it's something I always wanted to do," Lloyd muses. "Up until I saw that Television wasn't gonna last forever, I was happy to be a guitar player, period. I also realized that when I would write a song Tom Verlaine wasn't gonna sing it. When I ended up with a portfolio of 15 or 20 songs, there were two possibilities: either become a songwriter on retainer, like a hamburger man, or do it myself. People can complain all they want about my voice. I'm doing it for my pleasure and anyone else who wants to listen."

Acknowledging complaints, Lloyd assumes an air of mock (I think) belligerence. "I've read things like, 'The weakest thing is his singing.' Fuck! How am I gonna be a good singer if I don't open my mouth? So that doesn't affect me very much."

Asked why he didn't indulge in more guitar solos, Richard explains, somewhat impatiently, "I could do that 24 hours a day but I'm writing songs. Songs don't always have room for extended solos."

Why didn't Television do any of his songs?

"Because Tom had plenty. I brought it up in the first year but when I realized he was so headstrong, I figured, 'Why should I beat my head against a brick?'"

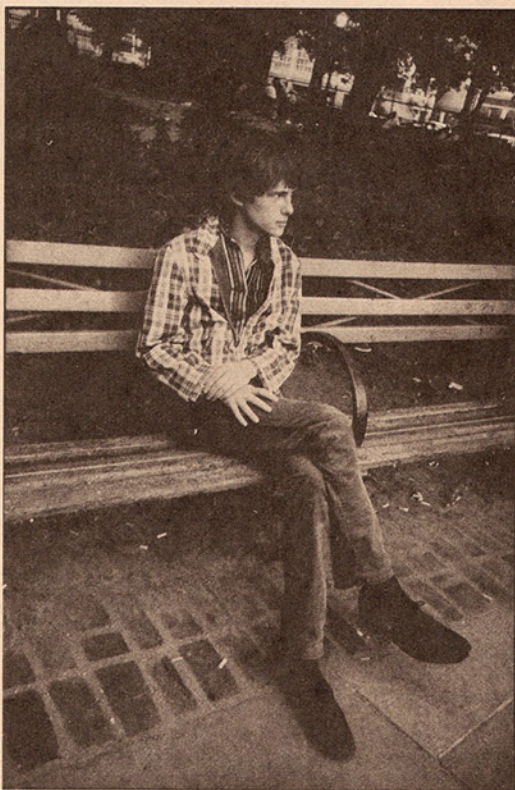
But he stayed in the band regardless. "Yeah, sure. That was a great band. I had a barrel of fun."

Born in Homestead, Pennsylvania, Richard Lloyd moved to the New York area as a kid and began listening to AM radio in 1962. "Be My Baby," that Spector stuff, that big sound can still really get to me. In those days 45s were worth their weight in platinum," he recalls fondly. "You

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Bob Roberts



Goellis



Gottlieb

had this little thing with the entire universe on it."

Not until the emergence of Hendrix, Pink Floyd, and the Grateful Dead did he get into guitar. Strangely enough, he never played in a band before Television. Lloyd says he practiced "by playing 20 hours a day to records, to the radio and to myself. I demanded it. I insisted. You can do anything you want if you insist. I wasn't a born guitar player. After six months some people go 'zip zip.'" Some Alvin Lee noises here. "They're the ones whose guitars end up in the closet 'cause it came too easily. I had to sweat to play guitar. I had to blister my fingers."

Terry Ork and Richard Hell worked at Cinemabilia, a New York bookstore. Hell, Verlaine, and Billy Ficca had a band called the Neon Boys. In 1973, Ork took his friend, Lloyd, who was trying to assemble a group, to Reno Sweeney's to see Verlaine solo on audition night. Lloyd "liked Tom's persona" and thus Television was born.

"During that first year Hell and Tom pretty much sang evenly," Lloyd recalls. "Then Tom started to take over." Unfortunately, Lloyd is momentarily stricken with amnesia when asked about Hell's departure from the band. "Uhhh...I don't really, uh, that really is"—short laugh—"dead sea scrolls. You'd have to talk to them because I really didn't have much to do with it. I was sad to see it happen because I was just watching these two guys chewing themselves up, getting to the point where they wanted to kill each other." Lloyd emits a weird chuckle. "I thought it was hilarious, but it was a real drag when Hell left the band. When Fred came in I couldn't deny that the music got twenty times better."

Why did Television finally break up in 1978?

"Why not?"

Great. Was he surprised?

"No. I was thinking of leaving for quite a while. I'm sure Tom was too. Nobody wanted to rock the boat, throw the meal ticket in the gutter. You've got to follow

your guts, though. That's why when Tom said, 'I want to leave,' I said, 'You don't have to leave, let's just break it up.' I wanted to do my own stuff."

So it wasn't that Verlaine and Lloyd couldn't work together? "That's true too." As bad as with Hell and Verlaine? Lloyd sounds less certain. "Not as bad, but I don't think we could work together again. I am not going to let anybody be in control of my life the way he wanted to be in control of my life. At one point he was going to get a big cash advance from a European publisher; to do it he had to sign over all the members' publishing rights. Tom said, 'You gotta sign this paper or I'm never gonna write another song with you.' I said, 'Damn right you're never gonna write another song with me. I ain't gonna sign it, so you go to hell!'" Lloyd acts out this tense situation very convincingly.

"Now he can do whatever he wants," Lloyd says, calming down. "I can do whatever I want. I enjoy life a lot more." He laughs again.

Fred Smith diplomatically downplays the subject of ill-feelings. "I don't think that was why the band broke up. It was a frustrating time for the group. We were having problems with acceptance. We were having problems with management. It wasn't an overnight thing. It was a blessing; everybody's doing much better now."

As for the current state of affairs between Lloyd and Verlaine, Smith says, "They don't speak to each other, but they didn't talk a lot before either. If we weren't working they didn't hang out together. We've all been in the same room together since the breakup. There's nothing heavy about it."

In retrospect, Lloyd sees two reasons for Television's "failure." First, no commercial new wave bands had come along to open the door for less accessible outfits. Second, Lloyd says, "Not to put Tom down, but he refuses to say anything outright. There's nothing for anybody's heart to hold." He places a fist over his heart as his voice becomes almost inaudible. "Tom's too elusive; he did himself in. Also, he wouldn't follow through with anything. He didn't want to tour, do TV or interviews. He's undaunted by the world, I suppose. Good luck to him. I hope Television's albums continue to sell; I'm proud to have been on them. But I've got my own work cut out for me."

Right now it's not clear exactly what Richard Lloyd's priorities are. His career could benefit from attention in any number of areas. He still doesn't have a manager.

"I figured I'd wait until the album came out and see what the response was, rather than sign with somebody and be sorry later. Even if my album goes into the grave, I'm still gonna be able to make a second one. I'm still looking at a career. Why should I sign away 25 percent just for somebody to give me what both Springsteen and Petty have gone through—heartache?"

"I'm not gonna disappear. I'm gonna be around for a while. I don't want somebody who's gonna let me go down the drain. I can do that myself if I so desire."

Richard Lloyd is caught in a vicious circle, as are many other new artists in this era of tight record company money. Although

Lloyd emphasizes he's "bored stiff" and wants to hit the road, proven stars have a much easier time getting on tour these days—however, it's easy to become a proven star if you go on tour.

A more immediate concern is the next LP, which he would probably start tomorrow if given a studio. It'll be in the same vein, he says, although with "more straight, hard, cruncho rock. I hate to compare it to anything. It'll be closer to the Knack album. [Where, in alphabetical record store browsers?—Ed.] The moment you put it on it'll go 'zoom.'"

"You know what I've been doing lately?" he enthuses. "I bought a harmonica holder and I've been playing harmonica all day and night. And slide guitar—I used to play slide guitar before Television. All this stuff will turn up eventually. I couldn't have put it all on my first album: a goddam country blues with harmonica, a song with a string section, one that sounds like Barry Manilow, one that sounds like Ornette Coleman. People wouldn't know what to think. You gotta open up slowly. It's all there."

Richard Lloyd has already surpassed many people's expectations; as far as he's concerned he's only getting started. With good old-fashioned determination on his side, Richard may pull off even his most outlandish plans. It'll certainly be fun cheering him on.

