



TOM VERLAINE

The Television man explains his absence...

UNCUT: It's 13 years since your last album release. Where in the hell have you been, Tom?

VERLAINE: Well, my coffee pot was broken and I was attached to it. That took up a few years. Then I went to Iceland to look at volcanoes. I had a friend who was a juggler and his veins needed repairing. That's where the time's gone. On jugular veins, mostly.

You have two new albums coming out – one vocal, one instrumental. Can you dance to them?

People can dance to almost anything. I personally dance at airports when I hear jet-noise. When I listen to my own music, I tend to spin on my head. These new records – they might possibly be good to dream to.

Musically, what was your first love?

When I was seven, I'd listen to these classical compilations – movements from different symphonies. A little later, I got into jazz – people like Albert Ayler and Ornette Coleman. The first rock record I loved was *Five Live Yardbirds*. Followed by the Stones' "19th Nervous Breakdown".

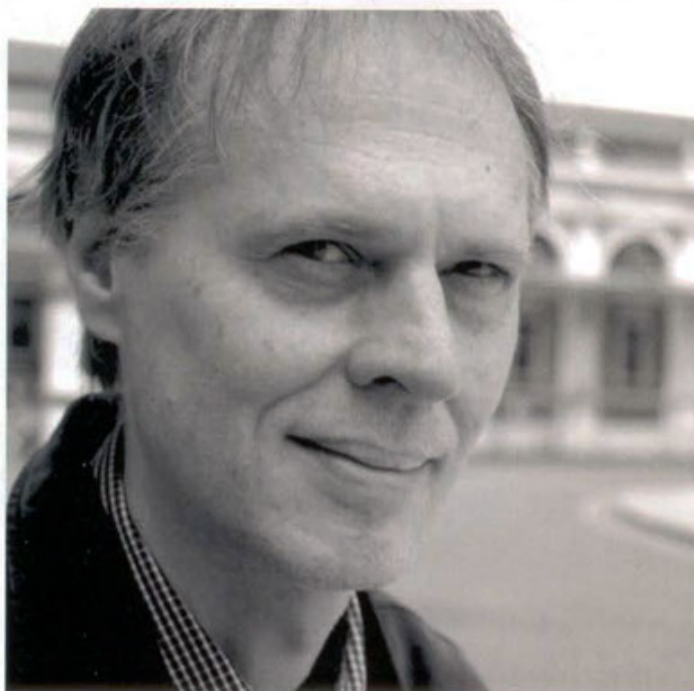
True or false? You and a young Richard Hell once absconded from a private boys' school in Delaware and were arrested in Alabama for setting a field on fire.

It was more of a pine forest than a field. Since then, I've not started any fires – at least not any arrest-me fires. I've more or less tried to stay on the right side of the law.

In the space of a couple of years, Television went from being "the worst band in the world" (© CBGB's owner Hilly Kristal) to making *Marquee Moon*. How in God's name did that happen?

Hilly wasn't far off. At the start, we were out of tune and wobbly in terms of tempo. The difference came when we learned how to tune up. Also, we practised three times a week. We were driven. Personally speaking, the drive was to satisfy my craving for honey.

***Marquee Moon* has become a fixture in Top 100 albums lists. Deservedly? I'd put it right next to my collection of schlock-organ records. Just for contrast. My all-time favourite album?**



“Neil Diamond is a much worse singer than me, and I'm right up there with the worst”

When I woke up this morning, it was a new collection of Sonny Rollins live recordings. Either that, or the record about a guy who drank 36 milkshakes in one sitting. That's pretty good, too.

U2's Bono swears blind that *Marquee Moon* has had as much influence on his generation as Dylan's *Highway 61 Revisited* had on the previous decade's. Is that true? He said that? Those are nice words but I'm not sure that's true. Maybe I should start bragging more.

One of the best rumours about you is that you spent a large part of the '80s playing darts in London pubs with Scott Walker and, as a result, you became a world-class darts player. Any truth in that? Well, that's almost true. But the true story is that there were no darts, no pubs and it wasn't Scott Walker.

Another good rumour is that you were a heroin addict for many years. Mmm. That's completely untrue. I never had a drug problem. That

rumour came from a record label promo person who confused me with another New York musician. Another record company person spread the rumour that I was afraid of success. That's not true, either. It's just that I don't know what 'commercial' is.

The public perception of you is that of the moody poet laureate of Eternally Disaffected Bohemians, Downtown Division...

Yeah, that might be true. Except for blind people. They're my favourite audience and appreciate the fact that, when I'm not doing music, I sell plums. That's right. I'm a part-time plum salesman.

NEED TO KNOW

- 1 Born Thomas Miller in New Jersey in 1949, he later adopted the surname of 19th-century symbolist Paul Verlaine.
- 2 An early version of Television's 1977 classic *Marquee Moon* was produced by Brian Eno. Never released, the recordings are available in bootleg form.
- 3 Verlaine is an ex-lover of Patti Smith, who wrote "Space Monkey" about him. Television's "Little Johnny Jewel", meanwhile, was written about Iggy Pop.

Patti Smith compared your guitar style to "a thousand bluebirds screaming". Would you thank her for that?

I'd thank her more if she'd said "robins". Or "vultures". You don't see too many vultures in cities, except for New York. We have thousands here, but they only come out at night. They like to keep themselves a secret.

Your songs have been covered by acts as diverse as Bowie, Siouxsie & The Banshees, The Rain Parade... do you have any particular favourites? Echo & The Bunnymen did a version of "Friction" that was pretty good. I'd like to have heard Ray Charles cover one of my songs, but it's too late now.

Neil Diamond would do a cracking version of "Torn Curtain", I suspect. Hmm. Unfortunately, Neil is in my top five list of singers I can't bear to hear. I'm number six, by the way. Neil is a much worse singer than me, and I'm right up there with the worst. I'll tell you who the most underrated singer is: Todd Rundgren. He's astonishing.

Jeff Buckley's *Sketches...* includes songs that you produced. What are your memories of working with him? All good. But it wasn't like I was hired to do a record with him. He only wanted to work with me so we went in and did whatever we wanted. In the final mix, they managed to bury all that was good about those recordings. A huge shame, because he was the best vocalist I'd heard in 15 years, and an amazing guitarist, too.

Are you at all smitten by the current wave of New York bands?

I haven't heard any of them. I'd hear them if I went to places to get my hair cut. But my girlfriend cuts my hair. Only one time did I pay to get my hair cut. That was in England in 1984 and it was the worst haircut I ever had.

Frankly, what are the chances of another Television album? A fair chance. It's slowly developing. We've got about half of it done.

Richard Hell is regarded as the John The Baptist of punk. So, Biblically speaking, who are you? Jesus or Judas?

How can I possibly reveal that? If you're pushing me on this, I'd have to go for Mary Magdalene. ■

Tom Verlaine will release two new albums in April on Thrill Jockey