

Stop Me

if you've heard this one before

WHO: TOM VERLAINE

WHERE: LONDON, APRIL 1978

Tom Verlaine, thin as a nail, rips the filter from a Lucky Strike, lights what's left of it and leans back against the wall of the bleak little dressing room somewhere in the depths of Bristol's Colston Hall.

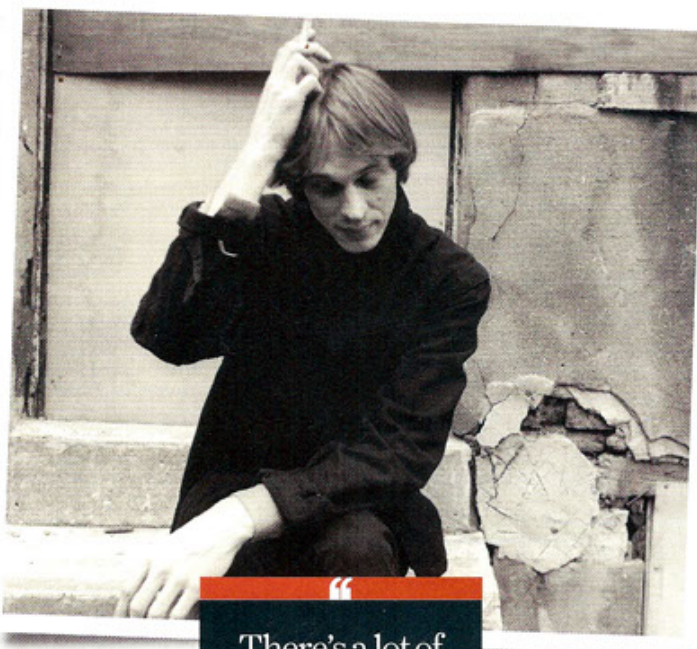
It's the last night of Television's first UK tour, so this would be June 1977, and the band are riding high. Their debut album, *Marquee Moon*, has recently been released to ecstatic reviews and the tour has been a triumph. It won't get much better for Television than this and Verlaine apparently knows it. He takes a long drag of his cigarette, winces as the dull thud of Blondie's opening set momentarily reaches us and then answers the question I've just asked him, which is: how exactly are Television going to follow one of the greatest debut albums ever made?

"I simply don't know," he laughs nervously. "I've don't have a clear idea what the second album will sound like. I keep thinking in terms of, I don't know, atmospheres. It'll be different, I think, but I don't know how. I can't hear it yet. I mean, we haven't even started writing anything for it. I think we might go for a more spacious sound, though, and a way of exploring atmosphere, sensation, feelings that are maybe beyond emotions. I don't know how to explain it. These are just, like, thoughts I'm having about one possible direction we might follow."

"The only thing I do know is that whatever we do, people aren't going to like it as much as *Marquee Moon*. That's just inevitable. But since I know it's coming, it's something I'll be prepared for, you know. It's not anything that, like, worries me, you know, what critics think. I don't take any notice, you know."

A year later, we're sitting in a record company office in central London, and Verlaine's fuming.

Television's second album, *Adventure*, has just come out and the reviews have been largely hostile, most of them more than vicious, critics falling on the record like jackals on carrion. The thing has been ripped apart. Julie Burchill, in the *NME*, has been especially savage, as she is paid to be. I think the only good review *Adventure* gets in the UK is the one I write for what used to be *Melody Maker*. Contrary to the indifference he'd earlier expressed for critical opinion, Verlaine is baffled, angry and hurt.



“There's a lot of fucked-up people out there writing about music. They're not critics. They're just plain stupid!”

"I think there's a lot of fucked-up people out there writing about music and they're just stupid," he says, clearly not taking the critical flak in any kind of measured stride, getting, in fact, quite worked up here. "It's ridiculous what some of them have written about the album. I mean, these reviews I've read, they weren't like music reviews. They seemed like some other kind of review I've never encountered before. They're unbelievably funny, you know," he goes on, no hint of laughter. "There are very few critics who ever get it right, but these reviews, they didn't even talk about the music. That's what upsets me. These people, they're not critics. They're not writers. They're just plain stupid."

"It seems," he continues, really no stopping him now, "like every first album that gets a good review, especially in England, is bound to be followed by a second album that gets slammed. Whatever its merits, you know. It's almost like a whim the critics have. I'm not indifferent to criticism," he says, stating the somewhat obvious.

"Like anybody else, I like to read good reviews of the band and what we do or what we've done. But I'm not afraid of someone tearing the music apart if there are grounds for it and if the writer is thoughtful in his criticism."

"But most of the stuff I've read is just nonsense. And I find it, you know, really offensive that critics should ignore the music and attack the personality of the musician, especially when they don't even know the people involved. Like, I don't think I've even met these people. They don't know what they're talking about. They don't know a thing about me."

A recurring criticism of *Adventure* echoed claims that Television in performance were often cold and detached and their music lacked emotion. They had also been described as "the prodigal sons of doom, gloom, destruction and general slash your wrist downness".

Verlaine laughs derisively when I quote him this line.

"I just don't know where people get these ideas from," he snorts. "These people just don't listen. I don't think

there's any doom on the records. I don't hear any doom at all. To me, doom is like - what? - no life or something. I just don't hear what they're talking about. As for lacking emotion, it could be the more feeling you have, the less you show it. I think that may be the case with Television. I mean, I don't know what we look like onstage, but if you look at, like, Muddy Waters or any of those classic blues performers, you could say they look pretty cold, too. They don't move around a lot. They just, like, stand there and do it. Just because a guy doesn't want to make an object of himself and throw himself around the stage, that doesn't mean he has no emotion. I mean, I don't move around the stage a lot. In fact, I hardly move at all. So what? If that's a problem, go see Elton-fucking-John."

Another thing about *Adventure* that had uncommonly annoyed its many rabid detractors was the fact it had been pressed, for reasons not apparent to anyone, on red plastic. Verlaine nearly goes through the roof when I mention this.

"Oh shit," he seethes, and is that steam coming out of his ears? "Christ, I got nothing to do with red vinyl. I come over here and some guy hands it to me in a taxi on the way in from the airport. So the album's pressed on red plastic. I don't care. I happen to, you know, like red plastic. But to criticise the band for anything like that is plain stupid. What did people criticise it for - that it's a sales gimmick or something? It's stupid. I just happen to think it looks better than black plastic. I think it's great, regardless of the reason it was done. I like it. I like red. Big deal. I wouldn't have given a fuck if they'd pressed it on clear vinyl."

"I've got an Albert Ayler record that came out in the United States that was done on white vinyl with a silkscreen on one side and music on the other. I think it's great. Did anyone accuse Albert Ayler of cheap promotional gimmicks? What a fuss about red vinyl."

"Will somebody please remind these people there's music on the record?"