

# TOM VERLAINE: FACTS ABOUT SNEAKERS

**SANDY ROBERTSON**  
cancels his membership of the Tom Tom Club

**T**HE BLACK sneakers are now worn and faded, but the eyes are as wary as ever. This is the man who used to mumble his lyrics so Lou Reed wouldn't steal them; Tom Verlaine, leader of Television, darlings of New York circa 1977, full page reviews in the British pop press, guitars aimed at the sun, heroes.

So what happened? Thin between his bones and skin, gone the way of all fleshly delights. After the praise heaped on 'Marquee Moon', Television's flashing mercury debut, the knives came out in force.

A second album shot to hell. No stamina; band split up. And who would have thought back then that David Byrne would steal TV's position as the main man from Manhattan? Fame is a bitch.

Tom is in town to promote his latest solo LP, 'Dreamtime', a record which only superficially evokes the wonderment of old. The moves are predictable, fire reduced to embers, glowing but hardly dangerous. In the offices of the brothers Warner his handshake is cautious and his glance sideways. A weary guy.

The first Verlaine solo disc led to him leaving his label, Elektra, the rumour being that the company wanted a more commercial mix which TV, ever the artist, refused to deliver.

"Not really," he says, "I had mixed it and run out of money, and they said 'We want it remixed'. And I was happy to, so long as it wasn't out of my royalties. So they paid me, but then they didn't come up with money for tour support. It's kinda boring, it took like 8 months to get off that label".

He exudes ennui so heavy you could eat it with a spoon.

Surely after the acclaim given Television there must have been a time when Elektra saw him as the golden boy?

"I doubt it. I don't think they even knew who the band was. Basically, I think they sent somebody to New York from California and said let's sign up a couple of New York bands. So they signed Television and The Dictators".

Fans, you'd have to hear his voice at this point to get the sense of lethargy he's emitting. Did 'Marquee Moon' now feel like a millstone round his neck, something he always has to live up to?

"I don't think it was so good. You know? Just another record. First records everybody likes a lot. I can't remember what they said specifically. I remember it got good reviews, and the second one got bad reviews. This is the first time I've had to do



TOM VERLAINE: "Bored? Who, me?"

pic by Justin Thomas

that. And the solo record I never saw a single review of". I try in vain to get the man interested in some topic that'll provoke more than ten seconds of conversation. Did the bad reviews of Television's 'Adventure' create the split up?

"It didn't split up. It wasn't like everybody had a fight. I told the band I wanted to do something different."

"Yeah, yeah. He even refuses to acknowledge much of anything unique in his music, Television to him being merely a traditional 2-guitar outfit. Friendly but hardly enthusiastic. One last ditch effort: Will David Bowie's cover of 'Kingdom Come' on 'Scary Monsters' help the Verlaine career?"

"I dunno. I guess that stuff helps. I dunno. You would think it might. I made some money on it, paid the rent for a few months".

**T**IME to confess: Somehow I feel I'm not asking you the right questions, Tom. What would you wanna talk about?

"Well, maybe I'd talk about my plans to take over Moscow in 1982. I got this plan to take it over using a new sound effects weapon, and then I'll become the Czar of the new regime. After Russia, maybe China."

It goes on. He's giggling. We banter. Drool, eh kids?

"My tendency is I'm not talkative. I don't have a ready-made rap. . . . Ok, here's a question. How much similarity is there between a gambling casino and the human eye? When the eyes turn is it some kind of gamble or not? Is there anything to win by turning the eyes at any time?"

Yeah. You can avoid the issue, mate.

"In what way is the letter S like an act you regret? So there's a couple new questions you can ask all the guys you talk to". I think I'll pass.

"Ask anything you wanna ask. Are you curious about my sex life? It's colourful!". Did you join a band to improve it?

"I think lions are inspiring," he exclaims, indicating a picture of one on the wall. There follows a discussion, which I'll spare you, on the nature of cats. How poetic! What would you expect from a man who studied that cartoon.

Verlaine's last written work was a collaboration with Patti Smith, 'The Night'. Seen her lately?

"Nah, she's still in Detroit. She'll probably make a comeback record with solo clarinet and maracas".

**A**S WE discuss American bands, a certain snobbishness emerges.

He hates all those groups who sell records. I like 'em. You can be an artist and successful at the same time, like say, Jim Steinman.

"Oh no! Schlock! He's shit on a stick, he's the worst. A total hack. You know what a hack is? He doesn't have enough feeling to love anything".

Mr Verlaine laughs smugly, like mother-knows-best.

"I'm convinced you could be Jim Steinman. Take a year of piano lessons and listen to the thousand greatest songs ever written. Everything that comes out of him is received."

Tom does not claim to create 'art', thankfully. But wouldn't he love to sell 8,000,000 records like Steinman?

"I never think about it", he says with wide eyes. Well, even the fact that so many people would love what you're doing.

"I would have thought it would bring more drawbacks than advantages."

Think of the money!  
"If I made a million dollars I'd probably build a studio", says the gaunt young man, ever in search of the ambient, hard-wood sound. After all, he did want Neil Young's producer David Briggs to do that first Television LP, live sound, country boys together and all that.

Instead, he ended up driving Andy Johns to alcohol.

"I've never seen anybody drink so much," he snickers.

"He kept saying, 'What is this, TOM? Is it The Velvet Underground?'"

In the final analysis, Tom Verlaine sits uneasily on the borderline between whimsical cynicism and commitment.

Somebody stole his thunder, and I wonder if the passion will ever re-emerge. Why the hell do you make records, Tom? An invisible shrug. "Some kinda weird compulsion".

An odd. They can't let be David Lee Roth. I guess.

Your daily bread!

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37 Soho Square London W1V 5DG. 01-439 1845