

TOM VERLAINE. The name could hardly be more romantic, implying as it does the common man caught in the ever-appealing glamour of 19th century France. It was self-chosen and it's apt.

On the way to the sound check, standing in the foyer of one of Houston's swanky Holiday Inns, Verlaine looks every inch the English schoolboy. He is also calm and unimpressed — the drummer. Exchanging the usual American instant buddy-buddy come-on, he is just quietly polite. Indeed, his laconic hauteur would tone in admirably with the sound of nicely-pronounced waltzes and cocktail shakings in the bar of London's most discreet hotel.

His smiling "hello", however, is unmistakably East Coast — and, although he is wearing cowboy boots or jeans, there is obviously a breath to his character which could only have been nurtured in the Big Country.

What a character of contrasts! Tom Verlaine would like us to believe he is cultured — after all, he's lived ten years in New York surrounded by cotton, the fringes of, that city's sophisticated, cosmopolitan art scene. But press him a little about his country's more influential artists like the painter Morris Lewis for instance, and you draw a blank.

He is scathing about the level of creativity in the USA and UK — new wave/punk music, which, for reasons he won't say, he has chosen to dissociate himself from, implying that Television is far superior, both in natural talent and technical competence.

Natural talent abounds in Television. But Verlaine has yet to learn how to sing on stage without sounding like a tinny Johnny Rotten with Sid Vicious holding a knife at his throat.

It's heart he is a perfectionist — an aspiring professional, but many lyrics on the album "Marquee Moon" are barely discernible, unfortunately for him, it was a bad sound mix and lack of technical expertise which made the audience boo him on the first leg of the "Peter Dinklage" tour — the first sortie out of the CBGB's scene into the real rock world the band has made.

Verlaine is athletic and lively looking with obvious proportions which would have pleased Pythagoras. But he has bad lungs, an addiction to lucky strikes, and eyes that on this particular evening, are headachey.

On stage, he moves with the animal grace of a racehorse in steeplechase. His on-stage persona, however, is that of a imploded intensity and he stands statically fixed to the spot.

Of course, it's these contradictions which make Tom Verlaine such a charismatic knock-out. He has his ambition and self-determining capacity, his personality is softened by more than a hint of hesitancy, unworshipful in security. Which is just as well since, if Verlaine was as inflexible as he strives to be, he would be a boring Superman.

Actually, as it turned out, his performance in Texas was extraordinary. The local critics called it "magnificent". Before the show, Peter Gabriel, whose liking for Television had steadily increased, was disappointed when told the band had finally decided not to tour the UK with him.

Robert "please don't tell anyone I'm here" Frapp was directing him in their room he was piquantly dead when he observed: "Verlaine's vocal is sexy. But in relation to the melody of his songs, are his polyphonic harmonies, or, deliberate?" "Well, yes and no. That night, Verlaine was again singing through, rather than on, his note. But it did matter on Mt. Like a free-fall, rational quality to his music is breathtaking.



On stage, Television look made for each other. Billy Ficca is one of those drummers who, apart from providing a rock-hard foundation, pulls so many embellishments out of the air that it's necessary to keep your eyes glued to him for a while, just to make sure there's no percussion tape pumping out of the p.a. as well.

Fred Smith plays bass with all the sensuality you'd expect from one who's lecherously dark looks off-stage would put Valentino to shame. And Richard Lloyd? A lead guitar virtuoso supreme with an ego strong enough to take a pace back when it's Verlaine's time to let solos fly.

It's as if the band are out to push themselves to points of extreme ecstasy just short of derangement. They pitch their sound in that knife edge space between sanity and madness.

In a number like "Guiding Light" they climb steadily to peaks of oblivion, "Knocking On Heaven's Door" is dry, earthbound and blunt. Verlaine makes it sound right like that. "Friction" is fanatical live and proves just how tight Television can wrap it up when they want.

By the end of the set, what Houston wants is more. Verlaine, however, with a typical combination of diffidence and genuine shyness, didn't oblige. He had an early dinner and he was up on time the next day for our breakfast rendezvous.

How does he feel before he goes out on stage? "Well, one part of me feels excited and another part feels like it calms down. I don't know what the two parts are,

but it's like weights on an elevator or something. These weights come down and the elevator goes up. Something in that picture explains how it feels." Verlaine isn't the most forthcoming of interviewees with, I found, a particular reluctance to discuss motivation. Neither is it in his nature to tolerate even unwittingly foolish questions. It seemed wise, therefore, to deal with and dispose of the saga of his love/hate relationship with his ex-bassist Richard Hell.

The two were comrades in truancy at school, leading to the now legendary event when, until they were busted, they spent a month on the road together as errant boy scouts.

They both had artistic sensibilities which found expression in prose. And, being 20th century offspring, playing rock 'n' roll was the fantasy which loomed most frequently in their minds as they sold books or baked bread for a living when they first came to New York.

It seems probable that in the early days of their dual creative endeavours it was Hell who was the pacesetter. But as time passed and Verlaine gathered in the loose ends of his psyche, the balance of power was altered to such an extent that no joint enterprise could encompass their considerable talents and competitive egos.

They parted company on a wave of vitriolic accusations but they will be friends again when, and if, they both reach similar levels of success.

Having met them both, that they were ever in the same band together seems more amazing than the fact

that they are now apart. Hell survived with Television long enough to lay the spacy bass line on "Little Johnnie Jewel" (Ork) then he passed through Johnny Thunders' Heartbreakers and into his own band, the Voidoids, whose first album will be released this summer.

In Verlaine's own words, they parted company because: "Richard didn't play very well. He was more or less learning how to play bass. It didn't matter for a while. In the beginning I was just protecting, then I'd hear myself and I wasn't satisfied with it and I tried to learn how to sing better.

"Then we'd hear a few tapes of the band and it would sound funny. Then it just got to the point where, well, the whole group was missing a bottom. There was nothing that sank down in the sound, which is what you need in rock 'n' roll.

"On stage especially I'd start feeling that the bass wasn't going on. So when Hell left, of course I didn't want to ask him to stay."

Over dinner the night before, Verlaine told me that when he was in London six weeks ago he ducked into record stores specifically to hear examples of the UK new wave.

He shuddered and gave the sound a zero "sub-Ramones" rating. Coming from the man who found (literally) played it, and put that punk academy, CBGB's, on the map, this was surprising.

Using the terms punk and new wave, in their loosest sense, as necessary words to mark the last 18 months' flood of energy into rock, didn't he feel a part of what is happening?

"No," he replied. "Television is more a part of a tradition than anything new or out of the blue. I like the energy of so-called punk music but I don't like the sound of it. To me it's really boring. I mean, the lyrics are amusing for a while, but for the most part they become boring very quickly.

"The thing is, you don't hear the level of talent in these English bands that you hear in the English bands between '63 and '68. And not to mention the talent in the New York bands that there was in the San Francisco bands in '67. I don't hear it anyway. It just isn't there. You have to admit."

Verlaine obviously hasn't heard the early live Beatles tapes, nor do I admit to his assessment of the state of musicianship in the new bands.

However, his desire to dissociate himself from the new wave (and I'd hate this to put any new wave fan off him) is no less vehement than his reluctance to credit any Sixties superstar for influencing his music in any way. To me, his vocal style owes something to Mick Jagger and a lot to Lou Reed.

"JAGGER! Lou!" Verlaine exclaims, biting his head back and laughing at the suggestion. "The thing is I never, until recently, saw myself as a singer at all, so I didn't ever really listen to anybody's vocal style. It was just a matter of learning how to hit words myself.

"When I did start to get interested in vocal styles I used to buy those old Sun records — English-imports in fact, records of that rockabil-

ly stuff. I can never remember their names but I listened to them a lot — the lesser Elvises of the Fifties. And I listened to the New Orleans singers. Those guys were much better than most of the rock singers now."

And the supergroups of the Seventies? Had he been inspired by any of them?

"Definitely not. I don't think any of those vocalists are worth emulating at all. Of course, I don't think anything's worth emulating really. But the point is, I never had the patience to try to sing or project like anyone.

"The way I sing partially comes about from never being able to hear myself. On the stages we used to play, the monitor systems were so bad I couldn't hear anything and it was just a matter of putting it out and hoping for the best."

He also denied Patti Smith's style has influenced him.

"I don't hear a big similarity between me and Patti. If there is, then it could only be because she couldn't hear herself sing either.

"Plus we are both from the same part of the country — from the Philadelphia area — and people from similar geographic areas do tend to sound the same. Todd Rundgren is another guy who has a voice like me and Patti, because he's from Philly too."

A musical influence or not, Patti Smith was one of the first people to recognise Verlaine's talent. They became very close friends and it was Patti who bought

him his first half-decent guitar, presumably he's learned a lot from her. "Patti was real helpful in the sense that she'd been around many different groups over the last ten years, she had thousands of hours in the record industry, she was real helpful about the rock 'n' roll way of life and about how to relate to certain people in the business."

No reason other than idle curiosity, and perhaps Patti in mind, impelled me to ask him next why he didn't have a woman in his band.

"Ugh! A woman? Is that what you're asking me?" he gasps, nearly choking on his fried egg. "You ask all male rock groups that? Why are you asking me that? That's ridiculous. Would I have a WOMAN in our band? What kind of a crazy, real naive question is that? Why didn't the Rolling Stones have one? Why don't five million groups world-wide have one? It seems like what you're asking me to find out if I'm a male chauvinist or something."

He calms down: "I guess rock 'n' roll is physically very hard for women. I mean, look where Patti is now — or where Janis Joplin is now. It's completely exhausting. Performing is like working at your peak physically and psychically, you're concentrating to the nth degree.

"Agreed that women in ballet companies tour all the time, but they start when they're 12 or 14. They're trained for. People in rock 'n' roll learn guitar for a while and then they end up travelling day and night. There's no real training for it."

So what prepared Verlaine any better than a woman for going on the road?

"Well, we're not prepared in a sense. But as for me, I mean, you're never really prepared for it unless you're the type. I mean, I'm not that strong and it's a good thing — see, I guess that we've had days like

Verlaine is a very cool customer who can sound a little arrogant but because he is entirely without self-pity, it is a stimulating facet of his character rather than a flaw. Had he ever needed anyone to turn to for assurance when he was young?

"My parents were always telling me to go to college and to forget about music or keep it as a hobby. I didn't get much reassurance. But I don't think I needed it that much either. Nor was I looking for approval. It didn't occur to me to go out and get that from anyone. I don't think anybody who starts to do something does. You just do it because you want to do it real bad."

Had he always been so confident? Had he always seen himself as different from others?

"No, I didn't really think I was any different, and yet I never feel that I fit in anywhere so it's not something that has ever worried me. It has always been just a matter of 'so what'."

"I was never the kind of kid who moped around, saying 'I don't fit into this' and thinking 'this isn't any fun'. That kind of thing."

VERLAINE is another American who is cagey about his background, perhaps because there is nothing very romantic or fancy about it. He is of a family typical of millions in the faceless society of America's Silent Majority. "My father has an oil-heating company. I don't want to talk about that because they're just average parents. I just don't think they're interesting. And I've got a few other parents because they all seem the same. They don't seem like

individuals to me. And they're actually mildly oppressive. Doesn't his childhood, however, have a considerable bearing on the kind of musician he is now? Isn't a child cushioned by a degree of wealth and a private, rather than a state, education more likely than, say, Mick Jones of the Clash, to write quasi-literary, introspective songs?

"No. Origins don't make any difference to me. I don't care. I don't care. I wasn't articulate when I arrived in New York. I had to become articulate in New York because everyone else was and I was always being frustrated for not saying things the right way. It was a good training."

Did he turn to writing rock 'n' roll songs because, in his estimation, his poems weren't strong enough on their own?

"No, that wasn't the case with me at all. I mean, I didn't even start playing rock 'n' roll until I had some degree of thinking that I might be good at it or that it might have some quality. And I always thought of my writing as words to music rather than poems. It was always songwriting, and actually I played guitar more than I wrote."

Television went through a lengthy gestation period to get where they are now. Verlaine spent years looking for the right musicians to work with before he finally formed the band four years ago. They did an album of demo tapes for Island with Eno producing, but Verlaine hated the sound.

Alan Lanier produced more tracks for Arista, but that deal, says Verlaine, "was too production-oriented and conditional." Meanwhile, the independent single "Little Johnnie Jewel" was selling by the thousand.

"The sound on that single is a sophisticated version of what we used to sound like in the early days," says Verlaine. "You should have heard the tapes of my first five jobs. They were much more primitive than 'Little Johnnie Jewel.'"

Indeed, the music on "Marquee Moon" (Elektra) is richer, more complex, not to mention longer, than ever before. They are reaching a stage of flawless technique — or an ability to extemporize very fluidly which, given that this guitar solo is central to their work, could become dangerously self-indulgent.

"I hesitate to call anyone who plays a good solo 'indulgent,'" says Tom. "I know some indulgent performers. An indulgent performer is someone who can and will do ANYTHING on stage. But I don't feel that I can get up there and do ANYTHING."

"There is still a lot I can hear in my head that I can't do on the guitar. I really don't have the patience to do scales and all those things that you're supposed to do so that you can play anything that you can hear. But I don't hear scales anyway!"

"And some of our songs are long because my concept of time was bad. If someone had asked me how long they were I would have said three or four minutes. When we timed them in the studio I was amazed to hear that they turned out to be seven minutes long or something. I mean, 'Marquee Moon' was about 12 minutes long. We had to fade it early to get it on the record."

"But some rock 'n' roll I've heard at that length isn't indulgent. I wouldn't call Cream indulgent. They would go on for 20 minutes and I thought they were really exciting. Maybe in the last year when they were bored with each other and their chemistry wasn't right anymore, they were. But at the beginning there was never any letup in the excitement



of those long songs. "I don't think my technique is ever going to improve enough for me to become indulgent. I hear tapes of the band and I'm always dissatisfied with them. You've got to be very self-satisfied and bored with your own playing to be indulgent."

"We will always try to extend ourselves. But I can understand how a rock musician becomes jaded. It has a lot to do with performing live — doing the same thing every night. It just becomes this insane repetition."

"It doesn't happen in painting or in classical music. If you're a classical composer you're lucky to have your music performed in your own lifetime. It's always a struggle just to get something you've composed heard. But with rock, once you have a recording contract, it's a struggle not to go out and play every night. The company wants you to do it. Your manager wants you to do it. They'd be happy if you were playing 300 nights a year and spent the other 60 nights in the studio making albums."

"It's really destructive to do that. You defeat the whole purpose. And we've made it clear that we're not going to do it."

Surely rock musicians tour extensively in order to promote the albums that make them rich?

"I suppose so. But then I'm not out to make a million dollars. Nor am I out to get laid every night — which is another reason why

a lot of musicians are in rock 'n' roll. A lot of musicians are in it for the side life — the drugs and girls and money. That stuff doesn't make me sick but it's not what I want, so to speak."

Verlaine "always thought the coolest people were jazz people" like Eric Dolphy and Albert Ayler. Does he see himself closer to jazzers than rockers?

"Not really. Jazz musicians tend, as far as I can see, to become very bitter. Until recently, when some of them have gotten wise to economics, they were manipulated and cheated and everything. I'm not bitter."

"And no, I don't think our music is likely to move in a jazz direction. The rock idiom to me means a very strong and basic beat and that's what I want. Most of that semi-electric jazz-rock stuff doesn't turn me on at all."

"In jazz-rock the beat is insanely broken up. The Mahavishnu Orchestra is the prime example of that. They play three beats then eight and then seven and then two of silence. It's just real uncomfortable and that kind of music doesn't interest me at all."

"I can't see myself getting away from rhythm. In jazz the time is more implied than stated. In rock the time is stated and that's what I go for."

Here we digressed for a while on the subject of the Stones and the Rolling Stones and the unlikelyhood of any other bands in our lifetime attaining their mythic stature and popularity. Verlaine believes it is the sexual impact of these

bands, as much as their music, which made them so successful. Did he consider Television to be a "sexy band"?

"I suppose we are. And that was definitely conscious. I did think that if I was going to be in a band they'd have to look a certain way. There's no sense in putting a band together, otherwise. That is part of it. It has to be."

"And the interesting thing is, people tend to look the way they play. When we were holding auditions there were certain people who'd come and we'd look at them and say, 'this guy isn't going to work out' and in ten minutes there'd be no communication at all and they'd leave. There's a lot you can tell by looks."

The Television line-up is very appealing in a way which is miles removed from the old-fashioned macho, crotch-sexual hard-sell usually associated with rock stars. Was this conscious too?

"Well, we don't like, er, strut. The English bands were the ones who started all that strutting around with their clothes off, waving the mike around like some phallus. I always thought that was very funny."

"But for a person to think about how attractive they are while reaching a dead end. Which is why I try to forget about it. Some things you have to thrust away from yourself as well as, like, drawing others to you. You draw things to you from within and you push away things from without. That's the only way to survive."

Off the road, Verlaine is essentially very private. He lives quite frugally in a

spartan flat which is barely furnished. His wardrobe of dime-store clothes, like the black slacks and plain blue jersey he is wearing, is thin and unimpressive. He has never run around much and if he goes to the occasional party then he totally avoids clubs.

"I think it's very important to be private, even if you don't want to be," he explains. "It's a way of maintaining your own spirit. Otherwise you just spread yourself too thin."

DAYS of endless privacy, however, are a thing of the past for an ascending rock star — a problem for an introspective artist like Verlaine. He had almost a decade to write the songs on his debut album and it obviously contains the best of what you could call an adolescent anthology. Did he think he could come up with as good material under pressure?

"Unless you choose to wait two years before you record a second album then there's bound to be more pressure," he says. "But I don't mind pressure at all. I think it's often very good."

"But I really don't know how the second album's going to work out. There are a few songs we have in mind but by next month we might decide to do something completely different. We might just have two numbers on the whole record, or something. I'd rather that than use songs which didn't make it onto the first album."

"Elevation" and "Guiding Light" are the newest songs on the album and "Friction" is one of the first songs I ever wrote. "Venus" is about four

years old. It was one of the songs I used to do by myself before the band was formed.

"Yes, I guess it is a love song and I suppose I could relate it to a specific person but there wasn't anyone specific in mind when I wrote it. I know the statue and that phrase 'fell into the arms of Venus' generates a certain feeling for me which is what the song is about. It's just a feeling that I felt at a given moment — which is all any of my songs are about really. A certain feeling."

"Marquee Moon" was written about three years ago and actually it had 20 verses to it. It's a song I used to do on acoustic guitar. The melody is still the same, but the tempo has changed slightly and then, when the band got ready to do it, I realised I couldn't use all four pages of verses so I just picked three of them."

In what frame of mind does he write best?

"Every song I've written comes out of a different mood. But I don't think you can really work if you're depressed. You can work if you're troubled by something but what it's going to say is that you're troubled — that's going to be the basic statement of the song. But that's OK. Trouble is partially what rock 'n' roll's about. I can't work at all when I'm down. You just don't get anything out of depression."

Does he have a special way of dealing with depression?

"Well, it just sort of passes away. When I'm over-let depressed, I only usually feel it around a whole lot of people. Then I start to get depressed and I just have to get away and sleep. You just have to get away — especially in rock 'n' roll because there are so many lunatics around."

There're so many people who are, like, out of their minds — just crazy. Especially

at CBGB's. Maybe we got the worst. But people will walk up to you, totally cracked, and then, like, spit on their hands and rub it in their faces. I mean CRACKED totally cracked!"

Those who have watched Television develop over the years are impressed by Verlaine's increasing guitar skill. He plays wild, diamond-hard melody lines distinguished by an all-embracing epic sound. He achieves a fever-pitch of excitement (like his solo on "Torn Curtain") with a minimum of fussy embellishment, and yet he never sounds precious or cold.

Quite the reverse. The guitar sound created by him and Richard Lloyd takes the players know how to be richly emotional without being excessive. They use restraint like a wall to kick against. In future they are likely to play some of the most astounding music of our time.

Had there been a conflict of interest, or had it been easy to work out who takes a solo and when?

"Richard and I have an understanding," says Verlaine. "On some songs he's going to get it and on some songs I am. Usually, if a song is more difficult to sing, than another, he'll play the lead because I have to concentrate so much on the singing. I used to do the leads on "Knocking On Heaven's Door" but I was really botching up the singing, so he does them now. If a song is easier to sing, then I'll do them."

And the solo on "Marquee Moon" — "I always wanted a solo where I didn't have to worry about the structure to it and 'Marquee Moon' is the best that we did. We did it in one take."

When he has played a particularly good solo in the studio, does he try to reproduce it again on stage?

"There are certain little notes which might be repeated, but most of the time I couldn't reproduce it again even if I wanted to. When I'm playing a solo I don't even know what I'm doing. Afterwards, when I listen to the lines, I can't hook up the notes to what my hands were doing."

There are people who can sit and listen to a record and play it immediately. I've never been able to do that. What I can do is with something really basic like blues but I couldn't do it with a solo or anything."

Does he have a special affinity for any one track on the album — one that sounds closest to how he imagined it would be before it was recorded?

"None of it is ever perfect enough for me. If someone gave me the time and the money I'd take that whole album and record it again in a different studio."

"I don't think it sounds bad and nor am I sure what I'd like to see different. Every studio has a different sound and the sound on 'Marquee Moon' has an early Sixties quality about it. The Studio, A & R in New York, was built in '59. Paul Simon gets a great drum sound there but the board has all sorts of quirks and bad connections."

It's noon and time for the band to move on to the next gig — the one on the West Coast scheduled with told Damned, who were then told mistake Verlaine for a punk, to hop it. No, you wouldn't be. I believe his band is another fine facet to the new wave.

Like all truly romantic people, Verlaine manages to say a lot without revealing very much about himself. He is a loner, but probably the kind of person who is always in love.

"Oh yeah, I'd say that," he laughs. "I guess some people would deny it, but it's true for me to believe that those people know what they're talking about. They're not looking deep enough into what they're doing. I mean, if you abandon your desire for love then you end up living a dead end."