

Variations on a single orbit

TO ME it seems like there's a certain amount of arrogance you need because you have to be able to push away things in order to be yourself. You can either be really nasty about it or you can realise that . . . if you find something in yourself you wanna express or you feel you need to do that, I think it's wise to spend some time away from things. You'll probably be compelled to do it anyway, even if you don't think it's wise . . . (TOM VERLAINE).

IT WAS February 1977 when Television's "Marquee Moon" was released. The hacks went bananas. As the punks lit fires on Main Street, New York suddenly produced a group which managed to fuse raw power with imagination, formidable technique with feverish creativity. Disappointingly, Television turned out not to be a new dawn so much as a final flowering of a rock ideal. Their second album, "Adventure", appeared in March 1978, and again it was an impressive effort. But later that year the group split unexpectedly. They'd stayed just long enough to establish a distinctive sound, a complex guitar-dominated mesh of times and tones which proved that music could speak as eloquently as words even within the simple structures of rock.

Television's guiding light — Tom Verlaine — comes to town to promote his new album, "Dreamtime". Since Television's heyday, things have changed. The late-Seventies New York landscape which framed them is unrecognisable now — the Ramones have turned into a second rate Status Quo, Blondie seem to have retired, Talking Heads aren't talking to each other and God knows what happened to Patti Smith. Tom Verlaine seems much the same though. Jet-lagged and soaking up coffee like a J-Cloth, he greets the latest invading journalist-plus-lensman with heavy-lidded courtesy. He politely declines our offer of a photo-session anywhere else but in the WEA offices, so that's what we're stuck with. But despite his evident disorientation and a resulting tendency to ramble off up blind alleys, Verlaine has his finger on the trigger. A traditionalist and proud of it, he stakes no false claims but communicates a quietly steely purposefulness. He's not aiming at posterity (he says). He's an artist, he don't look back . . .

"I grew up in an area maybe like the suburbs of Manchester (Wilmington, Delaware). Actually the city was a little smaller than that, somewhat industrial. And when I went to New York for the first time, it was like . . . what's the phrase they use? A learning experience?"

He laughs a surprisingly silly laugh, stretches his feet languidly out onto the desk which is covered with bleeping digital gadgets and lights another Dunhill.

"Firstly, New York is probably one of the few cities in America that has an awareness of European art, period, whether it's painters, music, writers . . . There's

records available there, there's books available there, there's art museums etc, and where I grew up there was nothing like that, there was basically a Top 40 radio station. "So there was this whole element of awakening to people being able to express themselves, or if they couldn't express themselves, there was like some intensity involved. So maybe when I first came to New York there was this first couple of years where . . . 'cos

this album's gonna be that. It's just like, um, it's all variations on this thing and that's like another variation on it, not that far from 'Marquee Moon'. "Like a song like 'The Fire' on the second Television record or 'Breaking My Heart', it all seems like the same . . . it's like variations on like one orbit or sumpin — a series of orbits round the same thing. It's pretty abstract." Verlaine released his first

hearing some kinda other guitar going on. Maybe it's overtones, y'know, maybe things pile up when you get two guitars going and ringing, you get this other thing going that sounds real cool. "I think 'Down On The Farm', the end of that song, has maybe ten guitars going on, but the most impact is coming from two and the rest are just certain effects I heard or certain parts of the picture, y'know. They don't really crowd anything. Most of this record can be done live without hurtin'."

After a couple of years away from playing live (with the exception of one shambolic New Year's Eve gig in New York) Verlaine wants to get on the road again. He's going to start in the States and wants to come over to the UK in November. He wants to use Fred Smith on bass and Jay Dee Daugherty on drums — they both played on "Dreamtime" — and he'll add a second guitarist when the time comes. Just two guitars, bass and drums.

mindful determination to drive deeper into himself in pursuit of some as yet unrealised vision of his music that blew Television out of the water. He has an apparently unyielding set of personal rules which he's stuck by, rooted firmly in the Sixties. Personal heroes include the Byrds and Eric Clapton, though he doesn't listen to much rock music generally. "Well I do love the Byrds. This record is the first I got to use 12 string guitar on, because the other guitarist (Richie Fiegler) has this real nice 12 string and he could play it. I find them real hard to play and keep in tune."

You can hear the 12 string chiming away in the opening to "Fragile". "Right," says Tom. "That's really not so Byrdsy though, the Byrds never used a beat like that. It's got a real kinda backwards beat to it. George Harrison used to do that stuff, too. Harrison's a real underrated guitar player, you never hear anything about how great his guitar playing was."



Adam Sweeting stares out TOM VERLAINE. Pix: Tom Sheehan

I had a little band in Delaware for a while, but it wasn't anything like Television was or anything like that. There was some period in there where somethin' got turned round, I guess."

HE STOPS, smiles, gazes out of the window. His long face and slow rural-ish drawl don't seem to belong in the same universe as the frayed and frantic voice which navigated the swirling mirages of "Marquee Moon". And is this really the guy in charge of that restless, insatiable guitar? "I been sayin' this to everybody, it's too bad . . . I look at all my work as one big thing, you know, it's not like this album's gonna be this and

solo album two years ago. Listening to "Dreamtime", there's no mistaking its author despite the time-lapse. From the vaulting riffery of "Penetration" through the cement-cracking raunch of "Down On The Farm" to the subdued whimsy of "Mary Marie", all the traditional Verlaineisms are there in the voice and the guitar. Maybe too much so. "Yeah, it's basically the same stuff. I don't feel compelled to change anything. There might come a point when I wanna do a record with one guitar, sax, bass and conga drums, I mean, y'know, who knows? But the form I tend to like the sound of is two guitars, bass and drums. "I like the sound of two guitars. Even with Hendrix, and Hendrix was a great guitar player, but I really miss not

If you stick to that format forever, aren't you going to run out of options one day? "Oh no, not at all. In fact there's a whole lotta stuff I've never gotten on record that involves two guitars but requires more rehearsal time than some of these new songs needed. "It also requires a guitarist that has a real good sense of timing. It's not like it's funky or something, but 'Marquee Moon' is a song that requires really good timing, 'cos of the way those parts happen." He also cites "Penetration" and "There's A Reason" from the new album as being tricky to play, as well as "Mr Blur" — "That's a prime example of timing between two guitars, y'know." It was Verlaine's single-

DIGGING further back to a time when Tom Verlaine was still Tom Miller and living out in Delaware, you unearth other inputs — a lot of jazz, mainly. "When I was 15, 14, 13 that's all I listened to — tenor sax players, basically. So all of that stuff may have something to do with the way I play — I never sat down and figured it out or anything like that. It could be that if you have an ear for that stuff it's gonna translate somehow." Verlaine's strong streak of perfectionism probably owes a

continued on p29

Tom Verlaine

from page 9

lot to this early immersion in the rigorous disciplines of jazz. He admits to being a firm believer in craftsmanship. He reckons there's a depressing lack of it about these days, in rock at least.

"There's not a whole lotta instrumentalists coming up," he protests. "I mean Clapton in, what, '66 was like 19. Is there a 19-year-old guitarist that can even play Clapton lines in England today?"

"Well, I doubt if anyone would want to."

"Well it's not the wanting to... Where's the interest in capability, you know what I mean? There doesn't seem to be any interest in capability even for its own sake."

"I've never been interested in it for its own sake - Clapton definitely was. Clapton had heard 100 American blues guitarists and fell in love with the sound. There haven't been any instrumentalists coming out of anywhere in the last ten years that I've heard."

I ask if he's heard the Scars, because I reckon there's a bit of Verlaine in guitarist Paul Research's playing. Verlaine hasn't, but he writes the name down.

Inevitably, he has no time for the funk fixation sweeping across New York and all points east and west. He's particularly scornful of Talking Heads. "Talking Heads is your little eclectic band that listens to Nigerian guitar music and decides to get, y'know, somebody from Funkadelic on their record. It's just not my cuppa tea." He suppresses a wince.

"I don't know if David Byrne's looking for something that's international, you know

what I mean? To me you're more international playing it from yourself with the greatest depth you can, 'cos that's how you're gonna reach somebody in their own depth. Ornette Coleman may go to Algeria or Morocco and play with local musicians, but he still plays Ornette Coleman. Or Dizzy Gillespie may go to Africa but he still plays Dizzy Gillespie.

"I don't know if it's a valid criteria, that band. Basically my ears tell me something, my ears don't care for their sound."

STILL, there are some similarities between your singing and David Byrne's. Wouldn't you agree? Verlaine tries not to choke on his coffee.

"Oh no no no... that's the wrong thing to say to me." He lets out a slow gurgle of laughter and changes the subject.

"I noticed after hearing this record that my voice had changed somewhat. I noticed while I was singing these songs that it seemed to be doing things that it didn't do before or sumpin, like different kinds phrasing on words and stuff."

It's all part of Verlaine's personal quest - but for what? He's kept that distinctive sound, sharpened it and tightened it, and he still writes some great songs. Most of all there's his guitar, declaiming, describing, asking questions... maybe the guitar says it all.

"Well yeah," he says, "I think it's a voice, like a guitar is a voice and it ought not to just mutter away to itself... like a guitar is struggling to be a human being in a way."

from page 11

Wishbone Ash, the Kinks, Greg Lake. This place is supposed to have a long echo, but surely it doesn't go back that far.

The Stereotypes attempt to make a bargain with the crowd - "you dance and pretend to enjoy yourself and we'll... hurry up." It goes down no better. There's a tight bunch of ardent fans up front but they can't carry the day.

By all rights the Enid shouldn't even exist, let alone get an entire festival on its feet screaming and shouting for more, but they did it. What can you say to "Land Of Hope And Glory" with a glob of metallic axmanship dumped in the middle? And there's Robert Godfrey - fat, bald, bearded - whose first words to this seething mass of potential can-launchers are: "What an absolutely splendid lot you really are. Isn't it a wonderful day."

I never have figured out whether people laugh with him or at him, but laugh they did. And here's the Enid turning out gloomy classical bits like "Judgement" that wouldn't be out of place in the soundtrack of a BBC2 arty-crafty play and they're getting applause. Makes no sense.

It'll be a long time before I forget seeing Robert Godfrey bouncing like an overfilled brandy glass and singing "Wild Thing". I will try, though.

Time for a wander round the estate, past the military clothing bus at the end, a brief glance at the tattoo artist who's set up shop in the back of a Serrpa van and a check over the messages board.

"Thank you whoever got my girlfriend out of the crowd after she was canned last night", runs one hastily sketched note. Pity he spoils the atmosphere by demanding the return of his leather jacket which he must have wrapped round her in a misplaced moment of tenderness. "It's really important". True love without a doubt.

Punters are still drifting in and swirling the overheated pitch into a dust bowl. Reading must be unique in that you have to queue to get out. If you want re-admission it means collecting one of those plastic wrist straps they splice round turkeys in supermarkets.

The toilets are filling up nicely, or not so nicely, but the price of beer is coming down. Who needs to buy it if you're standing up close to 38 Special? The best thing they did during the entire set was hurl a half-filled bottle of whisky into the audience and if the music was anything to go by, that was probably watered down as well.

What that crowd can have in common with bland Southern States boogie will remain as unfathomable as what is currently being put in the middle of a roll and called a hot dog.

The Desperadoes finally solve the problem of cans. They have fields. On the first salvo a bruiser at the side of the stage marks out the pitcher in the audience, wades through to him, smacks him one then climbs back on stage



GREG LAKE dreams of the good old days.

Reading fest

to tumults of applause. No more cans.

It can't be easy to upstage a 40 piece steel drum band all in matching scarlet track suits, but someone managed it by clambering onto the corrugated roof of the stage next door and flinging any available lumps of metal at pursuing security men. The Desperadoes plugged on with plinking versions of standards old and new but the audience recognised a good fight when they saw one and kept their eyes on the human fly eventually swatted by a massed security raid from all four corners of the roof.

In fact that was the only serious breach of defences within the festival confines. On Friday night 18-year-old Stewart Woolcott was stabbed, on Saturday night a girl was raped after accepting a lift, but both took place beyond the perimeter and away from Reading security (the organisers were quick to point out).

During the three days police made 143 arrests and the site's hospital treated 1,000 cases, 100 up on last year and most of them cuts from flying cans. The average individual's knowledge of anatomy hasn't improved much - "ere, should one ankle be bigger than the other" was one of the more informed enquiries the staff dealt with - though

someone who had a finger sewn back in 1979 did drop in to wiggle it at them and prove it was still working.

Wishbone Ash are also still working. Dutiful and business-like as ever, they slipped into the familiar twin guitar strut, as much an institution as Reading itself. Can't help feeling sad for a band that may inwardly strive to move forward but is unable to get away from the earliest songs, in this case "Phoenix", "Jailbait" and "Blowin' Free".

On the other hand there was no compunction at all for Greg Lake who, without sign of conscience, plundered his own songs and those of almost every band he's belonged to. "Fanfare For the Common Man", "Court Of The Crimson King", "21st Century Schizoid Man", "Lucky Man"... ang on, don't a lot of his songs have the word "man" in them!

Partner Gary Moore wrestled with "Parisienne Walkways" and as usual turned in a guitar solo ten times larger than life. It's tempting to say that Greg Lake's chubby chops share a similar proportion, but that would be unkind. On the strength of past victories they got a stirring reception, but on the basis of latter day contributions they deserved a sizeable raspber.

Thank the Lord for Nine Below Zero who were the

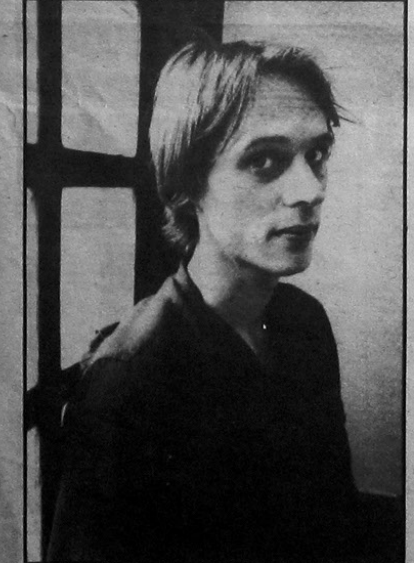
day's single chance to dance and rapidly converted the field into a ten-acre ballroom. Night-time, a sudden chill wind and the resulting scattered bonfires had already dressed it up as an Olympic style barbecue.

Obviously the best way to keep warm was to jump up and down, a practice that tracks like "Rockin' Robin" and "You Can't Please All the People" could only assist. Uppity as a tom cat with your foot on its tail, they strutted out a fierce 50 minutes of R & B, harmonicas squawking in the wind.

The Kinks have an altogether tougher relationship with their audience. They'll give them what they want, but only after they ask nicely. Out on two platforms running into the audience, brothers Ray and Dave jumped and teased before they eventually came out with the favourites - "Lola", "You Really Got Me" and finally "All Day And All Of The Night".

It's possible to forget how good a rock band the Kinks are. When at last they hit those songs they could have been written yesterday.

I don't know how they managed it, but after taking the boards as one of the oldest and longest established bands to play Reading that day, they left sounding the freshest. All that and a sultan too. - PAUL COLBERT



datelines

NOVEMBER 2 PRESTON Guildhall: Thin Lizzy (£3.50, £3)	NOVEMBER 3 BRISTOL Colston Hall: John Martyn (£3.50, £2.00, £2.50) SHEFFIELD City Hall: Thin Lizzy (£3.50, £3)	NOVEMBER 4 LIVERPOOL Empire: Thin Lizzy (£3.50, £2.00, £2.50) OXFORD New Theatre: John Martyn (£3.50, £3.00, £2.50)	NOVEMBER 5 SOUTHAMPTON Gaumont: Thin Lizzy (£3.50, £3)	NOVEMBER 6 GLASGOW Apollo: Chris De Burgh MANCHESTER Apollo: Judas Priest (£4, £3.50, £3)	NOVEMBER 7 CARDIFF Sophia Gardens: Thin Lizzy EDINBURGH Usher Hall: Chris De Burgh LEICESTER De Montfort Hall: Judas Priest (£4)	NOVEMBER 8 BRISTOL Colston Hall: Judas Priest (£4, £3.50, £3) LEICESTER De Montfort Hall: Thin Lizzy NEWCASTLE City Hall: Chris De Burgh	NOVEMBER 9 CARDIFF Sophia Gardens: Judas Priest (£4.50) NEWCASTLE City Hall: Chris De Burgh	NOVEMBER 10 BRISTOL Colston Hall: Judas Priest (£4, £3.50, £3) LEICESTER De Montfort Hall: Thin Lizzy NEWCASTLE City Hall: Chris De Burgh	NOVEMBER 11 CARDIFF Sophia Gardens: Judas Priest (£4.50) NEWCASTLE City Hall: Chris De Burgh	NOVEMBER 12 BRISTOL Colston Hall: Judas Priest (£4, £3.50, £3) BRISTOL Colston Hall: Thin Lizzy	NOVEMBER 13 BRISTOL Colston Hall: Judas Priest (£4, £3.50, £3) POOLE Arts Centre: Thin Lizzy	NOVEMBER 14 BIRMINGHAM Odeon: Chris De Burgh BRIGHTON Centre: Thin Lizzy NORWICH University of East Anglia: Stranglers	NOVEMBER 15 BIRMINGHAM Odeon: Stranglers CROYDON Fairfield Hall: Chris De Burgh GLASGOW Apollo: Judas Priest (£4, £3.50, £3)	NOVEMBER 16 CARDIFF Sophia Gardens: Stranglers CROYDON Fairfield Hall: Peter Skellern MANCHESTER Apollo: Thin Lizzy NEWCASTLE City Hall: Judas Priest (£4, £3.50, £3) SOUTHAMPTON Gaumont: Stranglers	NOVEMBER 17 BRIGHTON Dome: Peter Skellern BRISTOL Colston Hall: Chris De Burgh LEICESTER De Montfort Hall: Shakin' Stevens LONDON Hammersmith Odeon: Stranglers MANCHESTER Apollo: Thin Lizzy NEWCASTLE City Hall: Judas Priest (£4, £3.50, £3)	NOVEMBER 18 LONDON Hammersmith Odeon: Chris De Burgh MANCHESTER Apollo: Shakin' Stevens OXFORD New Theatre: Peter Skellern SHEFFIELD City Hall: Judas Priest (£4, £3.50, £3)	NOVEMBER 19 BIRMINGHAM Odeon: Peter Skellern LEEDS Queens Hall: Thin Lizzy NEWCASTLE City Hall: Shakin' Stevens SHEFFIELD City Hall: Shakin' Stevens (£4, £3.50, £3) SOUTHAMPTON Gaumont: Stranglers	NOVEMBER 20 BIRMINGHAM Odeon: Thin Lizzy CRAWLEY Leisure Centre: Judas Priest EDINBURGH Playhouse: Shakin' Stevens NOTTINGHAM Rock City: Stranglers SOUTHAMPTON Gaumont: Peter Skellern	NOVEMBER 21 BIRMINGHAM Odeon: Thin Lizzy GLASGOW Apollo: Shakin' Stevens LONDON Hammersmith Odeon: Judas Priest (£4, £3.50, £3)	NOVEMBER 22 EDINBURGH Free Trade Hall: Peter Skellern EDINBURGH Playhouse: Stranglers LONDON Hammersmith Odeon: Judas Priest (£4, £3.50, £3)	NOVEMBER 23 GLASGOW Apollo: Stranglers MANCHESTER Free Trade Hall: Peter Skellern SHEFFIELD City Hall: Shakin' Stevens	NOVEMBER 24 NEWCASTLE City Hall: Stranglers PORTSMOUTH Guildhall: Shakin' Stevens	NOVEMBER 25 LONDON Hammersmith Odeon: Thin Lizzy LONDON Dominion: Peter Skellern MANCHESTER Apollo: Stranglers SOUTHAMPTON Gaumont: Shakin' Stevens	NOVEMBER 26 LONDON Hammersmith Odeon: Thin Lizzy LIVERPOOL Royal Court Theatre: Stranglers	NOVEMBER 27 ST AUSTELL Cornish Coliseum: Shakin' Stevens	NOVEMBER 29 BRISTOL Colston Hall: Oazy Osbourne (£3.00, £4.50) CROYDON Fairfield Hall: Shakin' Stevens	NOVEMBER 30 LONDON Hammersmith Odeon: Shakin' Stevens	DECEMBER 1 LEICESTER De Montfort Hall: Oazy Osbourne (£3.00, £4.50)	DECEMBER 2 CARDIFF Sophia Gardens: Shakin' Stevens LIVERPOOL Royal Court: Oazy Osbourne (£3.00, £4.50)	DECEMBER 3 BIRMINGHAM Odeon: Shakin' Stevens	DECEMBER 4 EDINBURGH Playhouse: Oazy Osbourne (£3.00, £4.50) LIVERPOOL Empire Theatre: Shakin' Stevens	DECEMBER 5 GLASGOW Apollo: Oazy Osbourne (£3.00, £4.50)	DECEMBER 6 NEWCASTLE City Hall: Oazy Osbourne (£3.00, £4.50)	DECEMBER 7 NEWCASTLE City Hall: Oazy Osbourne (£3.00, £4.50)	DECEMBER 18 MANCHESTER Apollo: Oazy Osbourne (£3.00, £4.50)	DECEMBER 19 LEEDS Queens Hall: Oazy Osbourne (£3.00, £4.50)	DECEMBER 22 STAFFORD Bingley Hall: Oazy Osbourne (£3.00, £4.50)	DECEMBER 24 LONDON Hammersmith Odeon: Oazy Osbourne (£3.00, £4.50)	DECEMBER 26 LONDON Hammersmith Odeon: Oazy Osbourne (£3.00, £4.50)
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