

'We don't represent N.Y. or anything'

Television: don't touch that dial

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By Charles M. Young

NEW YORK — Watch Tom Verlaine's angular, half-starved body poking out of a tattered T-shirt onstage as he vibrates and croaks his voice around some line like, "If I ever catch that ventriloquist/ I'll squeeze his head right into my fist," and you think, "Wow, this guy must eat ptomaine out of a can." Which isn't far from the truth as we chew greasy burgers in a greasier cafe a couple of blocks north of Times Square.

"The first song that made me want to pick up a guitar was '19th Nervous Breakdown,'" says the lyricist/guitarist/vocalist of Television, a four-man band (Verlaine plus guitarist Richard Lloyd, bassist Fred Smith and drummer Billy Ficca) whose first album, *Marquee Moon*, has elevated them from the Lower East Side's CBGB rock club to nigh-orgasmic critical acclaim. "Ravel and Albert Ayler were also big influences. Ayler was the first musician in the Sixties who everyone said was total noise. He played a screaming, honking saxophone with kindergarten melodies occasionally thrown in. It was pure feeling."

These influences add up to an accurate description of Television's music: intricate guitar work, less intricate rhythm work, accessible melodies and less accessible words that convey moods more than statements—all with a strong undercurrent of chaos. As one of the first rock groups to play CBGB in February of 1974 and draw a following of intellectuals and punks, Television is in many ways the quintessential New York band. True to this tradition, they do not like to be thought of as a New York band.

"We don't represent New York or anything else specifically," says Verlaine, pouring a large puddle of ketchup on his plate. "We're certainly not punks, though we've been associated with that movement in the press. I've only seen the Ramones once. Dee Dee Ramone auditioned on bass for us a long time ago. We said, 'This song has six chord changes. It starts with a C.' He hit about eight different frets before he found C and then said, 'I told you I knew where it was.'"

Before coming to New York, Verlaine had a checkered academic career, to say the least. He ran away from his Wilmington, Delaware, high school (only to return when police found him building a fire in an Alabama pine grove one night) and lasted three days at Erskine College in South Carolina because the football team tried to cut off his hair. He fared little better at Penn Morton College in Pennsylvania: "I went to class the first day," he says, "and the English text was the same one I had in the tenth

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grade. So I spent all my book money playing pinball for two solid months."

Then, to his great surprise, one of his roomies was busted in a drug raid and Verlaine was called before the dean on suspicion of dealing. He found this an excellent reason to drop out for good and split for New York, where he's lived in cockroach-infested dumps, usually without hot water and telephone, ever since. "I haven't made \$5000 in a year since I came here in 1968," he says. "I didn't even have a stereo until a year and a half ago. I have to play it with the bass off because

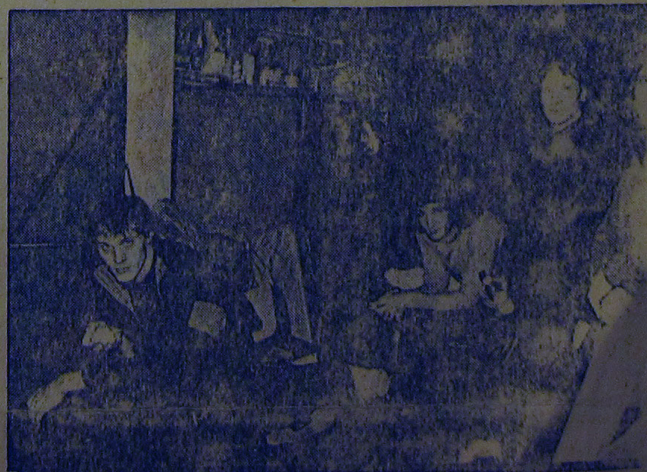
it sounds like a pipe organ."

Verlaine founded Television three years ago, but the band really didn't "jell," in his words until a year ago. They recorded one single, "Johnny Jewel," on the tiny Ork label which sold 6000 copies, mostly in New York. After talking with several companies, Television signed with Elektra because "they had the warmest people." *Marquee Moon* was recorded in 20 businesslike days with ten days of mixing. His first time in the studio, Verlaine coproduced the album. "Anyone with a head on their shoulders can tell when a take is good," he says. "All you need is someone to show you how to do things technically."

Television is probably the only CBGB band to make a strong claim on technical competence. The Ramones and the Patti Smith Group make up in energy what they lack in playing ability. But Verlaine strikes a balance between energy and cool that is possible only because the skilled instrumentals compensate for the absence of theatrics. Even so, he remains modest about his accomplishments. "I make so many mistakes when I play—it's just that people don't pick up on them," he says. "There are any number of ways to get from one place to another on the neck of the guitar that I don't know about."

Our burgers consumed, we head outside and hail a cab. I ask how he avoided the draft during all those years of poverty at the peak of the Vietnam war. "Well, I worked in a sheet metal factory once and scarred my wrist from the cuts," he says. "I found a sympathetic psychiatrist who told the draft board I was insane. We used the scars as proof of a suicide attempt." As we reach my stop and I hop out the door, Verlaine sticks his head out the window. "Be sure to check with a lawyer that I can't get hurt by that draft stuff," he calls. "Nobody fucks with the government and lives."

Television in fuzzy contrast (l to r): Tom Verlaine, Billy Ficca, Fred Smith, Richard Lloyd



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