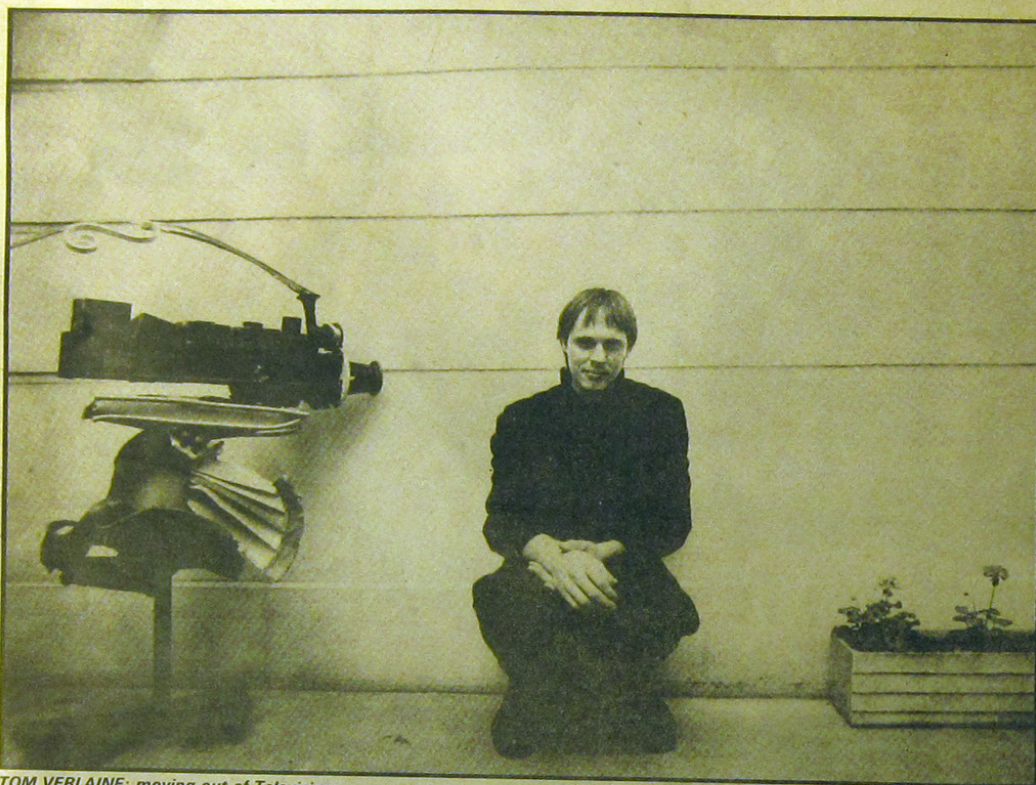


EX-TELEVISION PERSONALITY IS CONFRONTED BY YOUNG FAN, BURBLING BILL BLACK

tommy boy



TOM VERLAINE: moving out of Television

THIS MAN'S name goes before him.

Or if not *his*, then certainly that of the band he once led, Television.

Whether held up as a totem of excellence or hoisted like a flag of convenience to sate influence-hungry hacks, the bulk of today's young guitar bands (and even some who don't boast a Fender Jazzmaster in their line up) agree that Television and in particular its mainman Tom Verlaine are the bee's knees.

Why, I've even interviewed a band so besotted with this short-lived but ridiculously influential American group that they based their first video on Robert Mapplethorpe's inner sleeve photo of the band that accompanies Television's classic debut album 'Marquee Moon'.

"Boy, that's bizarre!" For the first time in a long conversation Tom Verlaine looks genuinely surprised by something I've said, before plunging into a shoulder-shrugging reflection.

"But the records are still much better known over here than they are in the States, and that goes for me too."

"Why? More imaginative listeners I guess. You're definitely more receptive to the whole sound over here."

THOUGH LOOKING plumper than past album sleeves have suggested, it's not difficult to imagine this fellow in the heavy overcoat, black trousers and black boots sat opposite me in a trendy tea shop off London's Portobello Road as the deft and deliberate hand behind two Television albums and three (soon to be four) of his own solo records. His speech may be lazy, his tone weary, but beneath the berating candour that characterises his carefully considered answers lies a real passion for his — and very few others' — music.

"Most of the records I hear seem like a hit single or maybe two good songs with the rest sounding like someone's said to the band 'get this thing finished'. Take the Big Country album, I've listened to that a few times and there's just nothing on it I can remember except for maybe two songs. The

rest sounds like the record company forced the band to get it finished and get it out."

"But I've never felt that kind of pressure. If a label came to me and said 'get this out' I'd say 'forget it'."

And I can vouch for that. When I started hassling for an interview a year ago, his UK record company (and his most important, reckons Verlaine) Virgin told me all sorts of tales that suggested the man was in no hurry to follow up his last album, 1982's 'Words From The Front'.

Like the anxious requests for advance tapes that were met with either a conspiratorial silence or mysterious messages to meet a plane at Heathrow that bore no fruit of Verlaine's costly time in the studio. For his part, the artist offers no excuses.

"I could have rushed like a maniac and got this record out last August but it didn't feel right. It didn't seem right to put out another record so soon. Besides, I knew I wanted to try something a bit different and I knew I wanted to come over here to mix it and organising that took time."

And the new album *does* sound different. Compared with his earlier, more florid recordings (Verlaine prefers the word 'dense'), 'Cover' displays a startling sparseness and a degree of unfettered melodicism (his first love and trademark) that points to a 'solo' effort in every sense of the word.

But far from working alone with guitars, Casio and drum machine as I had suspected, Verlaine has again called upon the services of, among others, guitarist Jimmy Ripp and Television bass player Fred Smith. In addition, the founding father of New York's avant funk scene Bill Laswell gets a credit. So can the sharpened rhythms and the reliance for one or two songs on a Lindrum be attributed to the influence of NY's dance fixation?

"It's just something I fell into. At one point I found myself in California working with a guy called Dave Jordan who mixed my last record and is now doing some work with Material (Laswell's band). I know the guy who manages Herbie Hancock (whose electro album 'Future Shock' Laswell produced — small world!) and Hancock had this Lindrum he wasn't using so he lent it to me for a couple of weeks. I wanted to experiment with rhythm so I recorded seven or eight things and maybe three of them made it onto the album."

"But I'm not into this funk scene at all. Basically, rhythmically-orientated music

doesn't interest me at all. I don't know anybody who buys this electro stuff and I personally don't know anybody who even likes it. As for the Laswell connection, he's just a workaholic guy who played on three tracks for me. I erased two of them!"

AND THE sparseness. Deliberate? "Sure, I wanted a record that was real simple; where the sounds were real good and enunciated. It's not as dense as before because I guess I like holes. There's a lot more holes on this album."

There's also a whole new emphasis (pun not intended).

"I've used a lot more keyboards, just going for a different kinda wash rather than a straight forward 'guitars' sound."

"Every track is real different. It ain't the kind of record that has one single and eight B sides on it, it's a group of songs that were done at different times in different places and each has a different mood and a different approach. When I heard the record I couldn't figure what it was like. It isn't an avant garde record or anything but it's not a pop record either. Definitely not in this day and age!"

The sneering afterthought leads onto a discussion of Verlaine's current standing. Rebuffing the suggestion that post-Television days have seen him adopt an increasingly low profile with the dismissive "I'm not a career-minded person", he nevertheless admits that a bit of promotion on the part of his record labels would not go amiss.

"It's not a question of avoiding the limelight so much as what's made available to you. If I was promoted properly I'd have a larger following but promotion is something I've just never had (excepting the critical attention paid to Television of course). Virgin did a bit for 'Words From The Front' but only in London. Besides, everybody at the company was telling me that I could forget having a hit with a record that had guitars on it that year because it was the height of the synth pop boom."

But times change and we again find ourselves in the middle of an onslaught of guitars (with the honourable exception of Bronski Beat) and a revived interest in bands such as the Byrds, the Velvet and Television. All of which should serve Verlaine's career very well — except that he refuses to play up to his past.

"Hey, Television was ten years ago, know what I mean? It's not something I ever think

about. I've seen the other guys maybe once in the last five years except for Fred 'cos he's played on my albums so it's just a whole area of my life I never give a thought to."

"But sure, people come up to me and say 'hey, aren't you Tom Verlaine?' or 'those albums were the greatest blah blah' and that's kinda nice. But there's no way it happens as much as you seem to think it should."

Can he hear the influence the *sound* of those records has had. I can hear people playing their guitars the same way, giving them a similar tone, and I can hear them going for the same little things. But I can also hear the influence bands like the Velvet and the Doors have had.

"I went to see Simple Minds and that guy singing is outrageously like Jim Morrison, right?"

VENTURE that few try to ape his singing style. Pitched too high?

"Maybe, but it's much lower on this album. Before, I wanted to play guitar and singing was just kinda there, but now I want to SING!"

"Y'see, I love melody. That's what I really want to hear on a record and I just don't most of the time. That's why I go back to listening to Velvet, not to imitate but to remind myself how good they are. I think great records *preserve* something. The Velvet's do, so do the Doors' and the Byrds'. I think Television records do too. What it is, is that you can hear when a group has played live for a while, developed something and then documented it on record. That's what we don't have anymore. We don't have bands that go out and play live these days. Most of the time, a band does two dates, 20 record company guys descend on them and they get thrown into a studio with a producer before they've come up with something of their own."

"But a band like REM have developed a rapport live and their records benefit from that."

I throw him a few more names to chew on.

"I don't like X, I don't like their sound at all."

Does he admire the 'American and proud of it' stance the LA band adopts in the face of the Brit invasion of America?

"That's neither here nor there, they just don't *sound* very good. I can't understand a word that girl is singing. The Dream Syndicate are too mannered for me. They're also too derivative although I've heard their new album doesn't sound so much like the Velvet Underground as the last one did. But they're smart guys, the singer's a real sharp kid."

I've been working with a band from California called True West. They need some work on their lyrics but their sound — two guitars, bass and drums — I like and they've got a good, distinctive lead singer. Not particularly original maybe, but they've got a lot of potential."

Which brings us to the news that Verlaine has made a temporary home of England and is currently looking out for bands to produce. "It's annoying because it's something that's so easy for me to do, only I can't hear anything I want to do. I've been offered a couple of things since I've been here but nothing that excites me, that's the only condition."

No it wouldn't have to be a guitar band, just something distinctive, something that comes from music rather than fashion, although I'd even do that if the tune was good enough."

In addition to producing, Verlaine hopes to complete a screenplay.

"I've been working on it on and off for a couple of years but I'm not rushing. The normal time for a script to be turned into a film is six years."

It's very cinematic in the same way that Orson Welles was cinematic. It's written for a specific medium so it's only going to work in that medium. It won't work as a stage play or something. It deals with the way cinema works but it definitely hangs around a storyline, which happens to be a person's life."

Not surprisingly (if you know his lyrics) that person just happens to be a woman.

"All my friends over the last few years have — probably to my detriment — been women. I find it much easier to communicate with them than I do with men but it's a definite advantage to have male friends, they get you further in the world. Look at Lennon and McCartney or Keith and Mick, those are relationships that back each other up. I've never had that."

"But women have helped me a lot too. For example, I wouldn't have a record deal without women because it's always been women in the A&R departments who've signed me. And that's because women are more responsive to music. Go to any concert and as long as it isn't Heavy Metal or shit like that, I guarantee you there'll be more women present than men. They have a much better feeling for *real* music."

Judge for yourself the wisdom of these words when Tom Verlaine brings his band over to Britain for a nationwide tour in the autumn.