

Television conveys moods clearly, confidently

The New York rock band Television didn't exactly put itself at an advantage with its first exposure to the world outside New York City, when it played with Rocket at the Picadilly Penthouse club here in mid 1975, through an arrangement by Cleveland fan, Peter Laughner, then in Rocket from the Tombs.

That job probably helped to create much of the prejudice that many Clevelanders have about New York bands. Here was one that was supposedly the finest, touted by Patti Smith and other New York based artists and writers, as a manifestation of genius in rock 'n' roll, and they were awful. The band's leader, Tom Verlaine, thoroughly agreed.

"I heard tapes of those jobs later and I couldn't believe it," he said when the band was in town recently on a stop of the Peter Gabriel tour, which they're opening, "I don't think we'd ever sounded that bad."

That turgid-sounding, lifeless job, and a dreary little privately pressed single titled "Little Johnny Jewel," did little to convince anyone here that Television deserved its reputation as the most imaginative and visionary of the wave of bands coming out of the New York C. B. G. B. club scene.

It didn't help the group much either that it began that wave, being the first rock band to hold forth at C. B. G. B., the club that later became the mecca for bands loosely clumped together as "punk rock." Verlaine totally denies that the term applies to his band and insists gently, "I think it's been a drawback to a lot of New York bands — they associate us with the Ramones, which is a mistake."

A suggestion that Television do a European club circuit with the notorious Sex Pistols (who lost a recording contract following their use of obscene language on national TV in England — a gesture Verlaine says was entirely contrived) met with Verlaine's disapproval.

Originally from the outskirts of Wilmington, Del., from a typically middle class family, Verlaine moved to Manhattan at age 17 and firmly considers New York to be his home. In his youth, he listened to

avant-garde jazz and classical music. Later, like countless others, he was energized by the directness of rock 'n' roll. (Television's music is brushed with hints of both complexity and that disarming directness.)

Verlaine, a slender, quiet man with electric-blue eyes, has acquired a mystique about him, but in person, he is less than intimidating. He largely discounts the critic-alleged loftiness of Television's musical aims.

He describes the band's origins in a way that could be those of countless bands: "We were just a bunch of friends who got together to have fun. A friend of ours had a loft and we lived and practiced in it."

"We're trying to elevate people through our music," he said. "We were originally going to call the album, 'Elevation' (title of one of the tunes), but later we thought that 'Marquee Moon' better captured the mood we were trying to establish."

Television excels in conveying moods now that they've produced this record of sufficient cleanness so that one can hear what they're doing. Odd suggestive guitar sounds and evocative lyrics with elated overtones (Venus for instance is tinged with a muted jubilation) that only occasionally swell into puffy poetry mark the music with its own particular tone.

Television also has greatly improved its live act. Compared to its Picadilly gig here two years ago, though the band had been together for a couple of years prior to that, it hadn't mastered control of its equipment and its sound. Verlaine admits that the band is still working on this area, ("We just got a sound man"), but he is fairly pleased with how the band sounds now.

Opening to Gabriel at Music Hall, the band managed to put across its music with confidence and clarity. Its chief weakness was its lack of stage presence—unlike other observers, I don't think a fixed, glassy stare indicates magnetism.

But with honing, the band may be able to put across feelings and moods via its music that no amount of jumping around could ever convey.



Television, from left, Billy Ficca (drums), Richard Lloyd (guitar), Tom Verlaine (guitar and vocals) and Fred Smith (bass).

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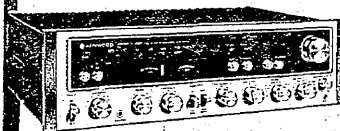
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