

"Most of the 60s, up till 67, I didn't hate guitar – I just had no ear for it." The speaker is Tom Verlaine, a confirmed alternative rock guitar hero since the early 1970s debut of his group, Television, one of the original CBGB's groups. Statements like this reinforce why Verlaine, who grew up listening to classical and jazz, has never seemed like anything as straightforward as a 'godfather of punk'. When Television reformed in 1992, after breaking up in 1978 with only two albums on Elektra (*Marquee Moon* and *Adventure*) and a landmark indie 45, "Little Johnny Jewel", to their credit, the anticipation was much like that for Terrence Malick's return to film making in 1998 with *The Thin Red Line*. Malick had made two classic films in the 70s, *Badlands* and *Days Of Heaven*, which have been revered ever since for their poetic style and gorgeous cinematography, and then dropped out of sight. Verlaine's enduring mystique has somehow seemed more like that of a 70s cinematic New Wave figure like Malick than a punk rocker's. In fact, a lyric like "Chirp chirp the birds/they're giving you the words/The world is just a feeling/you undertook", from "Prove It", could easily describe Malick's enigmatic characters and his contemplative shots of nature.

Besides his guitar playing, Verlaine is revered for his lyrics, whether hard-boiled (eg the opening line of "Friction": "I knew it musta been some big set-up") or surreal (Little Johnny Jewel "wakes up dreaming... with a chest full of lights"). Indeed, considering how often dreaming is his subject matter (one song is called "The Dream's Dream"; his second solo LP was titled *Dreamtime*), much of it must derive from his subconscious. Like the rest of his work, it is self-contained in nature and does not contain easily identifiable points of reference, a trait that may mystify journalists but is appreciated by his fellow artists.

Verlaine is relatively more prolific – and nowhere near as reclusive – as Malick, but this month's two separate releases on Thrill Jockey, *Songs And Other Things* and the all-instrumental *Around*, are only his eighth and ninth solo albums since 1979, and represent his first new recordings since 1993. The oldest material on them only goes back three years or so.

"Time goes by so quick now, a year goes like a month, it kind of means nothing," laughs Verlaine as we sit down to dinner at his favourite Italian restaurant in New York's Chelsea district. "I've always got piles and piles of stuff that never gets finished." Across the two albums there are 30 new tracks in total. "There's a lot of songs, I didn't realise until I was done how many I wanted to put on there. These things are so expensive, CDs. I thought I may as well put a pile on there even if it seems too long, because they're short, and get a fair amount of contrast going on there. I definitely got in a frame of mind of wanting to make things succinct and brief on this record. I also wanted

to do a really simple, upbeat record, too, for better or worse. The instrumental record was two nights of recording. There's a lot of stuff left off that. Some of it I never mixed. Some of it I mixed and had it on there and then took it off because the album seemed to be too long." As for the simultaneous release, Verlaine comments, "I just thought it would be stupid to let one sit around for another nine months."

Verlaine had been without a label since Rykodisc issued his *Warm And Cool* album in 1992 (its UK version was on Rough Trade). His decision to go with Thrill Jockey came down to the fact that "I liked Bettina [Richards, Thrill Jockey label head]. I thought she was totally unpretentious and, as far as I could gather, always paid people. I never heard of anybody saying, 'Oh man, I had to get a lawyer just to get my \$3000'. I haven't heard any bad stories." For her part, Richards recalls that her interest was piqued by Doug McCombs (of Tortoise, Eleventh Dream Day and Brokeback), who was an enthusiastic fan of *Warm And Cool* when it was first released; its brooding twang sounds not dissimilar to his solo Brokeback project. "It blew my mind, as a fan of Television," she says. "At the time I still lived in New York, and was all about the rock... to hear him play like that was a door opener for sure."

Television still have a reputation as a legendary live unit, with a penchant for improvisation and extended guitar solos that are more likely to be compared to The John Coltrane Quartet's early 60s excursions than the endless boogie clichés they were originally an alternative to. This is well documented on bootleg releases, and many have criticised their official albums for lacking the fire of the live sets. However, the fact is that Television's 1977 debut, *Marquee Moon*, was the first and last time that Verlaine has gone into a studio to record an album of songs that had all been rehearsed and performed live over an extended period. (The follow-up, *Adventure*, only had two 'old' songs, "Careful" and "Foxhole".) If on record Verlaine's songs sometimes seem painstakingly assembled or produced, it's not the result of laborious attempts to get the right take. His solo albums have all been recorded with some minimal studio rehearsals, often using few takes, sometimes only one. He typically uses at least two different drummers and bass players on each record, although Patti Smith drummer Jay Dee Daugherty and Television bassist Fred Smith appear on just about all of them. A case in point are the new albums. "I did have one two-hour rehearsal for some of those songs, but I think the songs I rehearsed didn't get used on the records," he laughs. "Maybe one of them did. Most of it is down to the drummer. Here's the beat, here's the chorus, and if the guy's good, he remembers it and in a take or two it's done. There is a lot of one-take stuff on this record [*Songs And Other*

*Things*]. The stuff with that drummer Graham Hawthorne, those were one-takes. That one song "Documentary", I was almost afraid to play it for Graham because he didn't know it at all, he's just stumbling all over the place, but I don't know... I just listened to the drums on it, I liked it so much. I thought it somehow suits the way that song is."

Both of Verlaine's new albums are full of surprises. *Around* features plenty of Indian or Middle Eastern-sounding playing from Verlaine, and little drumming. At least half the album consists of brief, drony meditations, with Verlaine even utilising slide guitar to conjure Eastern microtonality on "The Sun's Gliding". "That's stuff I've always played but never recorded. On some tracks I just erased the drums; they seemed to sound nicer without 'em. Had real freestyle drums actually, but seemed to be... too much of a racket somehow." Songs, his first vocal album since the Television reunion LP in 1992, begins with "Parade In Littleton", a funk instrumental intended to be "like an introduction". When I mention that Neil Young began his first solo album in a similar fashion, he responds, "That's really funny, when I was out having a smoke I was thinking about him. Every journalist in the 80s would ask me about Neil Young. I remember in the early 70s being in an apartment and 'Down By The River' was on and I totally hated this song. I said, 'What is this crap?' The guy goes, 'Oh, you don't like this? This is great.' I said, 'God, no, this is such a sludgy, crap beat'. I really hated this thing... I never would ever listen to Neil Young. And then Fred had a copy of *Zuma*, and he said, 'This is really pretty good, check this out.' He played 'Cortez The Killer' and I said, 'This is great, now I see why people like this guy.' Songs also ends with an instrumental, a brief two guitar track called "Peace Piece" that stands as one of the most haunting things he's done – but also makes an interesting transition if you play both albums back to back.

Only "The Earth Is In The Sky", "From Her Fingers" and "All Weirded Out" bring to mind the 'classic' Television/Verlaine sound, although the interlocking guitar style has receded as the multitracked guitars float around each other in a kind of whirlpool. The other songs are typical only in their elusiveness ("Lovebird Asylum Seeker", the waltz "Blue Light", and the chorus of "Orbit", which twists every which way to avoid easy assimilation) and indifference to current musical trends. But in other ways, both albums do show a continuation of Verlaine's previous material. On *Songs*, "A Stroll" starts with Verlaine leaving a voice message: "Hi baby, it's just me, I'll call you later," almost like a voiceover, part of a little-noticed pattern of including spoken word in his songs that includes older solo tracks like "Swim", "At 4am", "Sixteen

Tulips" and the obscure Television cut "The Revolution". "It goes back to 'Little Johnny Jewel' in a way," Verlaine says. "To have something where you're not really worried about a melody. I keep a lot of notebooks with a lot of little ideas in them. I had the idea to try to write a film script about 83, so I've always kept notebooks for this insane film [laughs]. I start imagining people and things they say, or you hear people on buses or airports saying weird things, I tend to write it down and maybe exaggerate it, make it into something else. Some of this ends up in song lyrics, even the wacky song "Lovebird Asylum Seeker" starts with this crazy person talking about something, but then veering into something else – you don't quite know what the hell they're talking about, but you sort of do. At the same time of trying to play guitar every day or work on things; there's a lot of writing that goes on that has nothing to do with the songs – sometimes it ends up in the songs, sometimes it doesn't. There's something vaguely cinematic about it."

Around's instrumental finesse makes it a sequel of sorts to *Warm And Cool* (which Thrill Jockey reissued in 2005). Verlaine had wanted to do an instrumental album since 1981, but was never able to interest Warner Brothers or any of the other labels he worked with. (When I ask what an instrumental LP from him in 1981 would have sounded like, he replies with a chuckle, "Probably what you got now – not much different.") Some of Around's one-chord ruminations take their cues from *Warm And Cool*'s "Spiritual", but with the same core line-up of Billy Ficca and bassist Patrick Derivaz, it's more of a group record than Around, sporting more specific tunes and a few extended solos on tracks like "Ore" and "Lore" that suggest Albert Ayler as an inspiration. As it happens, in the mid-60s he had discovered the ESP-Disk label. "The way I found out about those was *Down Beat* magazine, watching these LeRoi Jones reviews in there, and that to me is still the most exciting writing about music. I haven't read anybody since then writing about music that I would say is as great," he remembers. "I begged my folks for Christmas to get me this [the first nine records released by the label] as a present, send them a cheque to send me these records, that was amazing, they actually did that. I remember playing them on Christmas Day and they were like yelling at me saying, 'Oh God, that's horrible, it's noise, turn it down, close the door.' And I was completely ecstatic about this stuff, I don't know why, it was like finding a long lost family of musicians, just a kinship with the sounds these guys were doing. There was a Giuseppe Logan, The New York Art Quartet with the LeRoi Jones narration, Byron Allen... I still have every one of those records."

That wasn't the only unconventional music he was exposed to in his youth. "When I was a kid I went to

All Mart, it was like the 99 cent shop of Delaware, and for 99 cents each they had the *Time* modern music series, remember those? Morton Feldman, the flute one by this guy [Severino] Gazzelloni, and there was an electronic one as well... this is probably 1961 or 62. I just looked at the covers and for five dollars I got five of these and I went home and played them and I didn't know what to make of them. I played them over and over, thinking, 'What's gonna happen here?' Nothing ever occurs in the usual fashion on any of these records. I can't possibly call it an influence, but it did something in terms of space, maybe."

The fact that Verlaine has a background in such music helps to explain his occasional fondness for making instrumental albums as a logical progression from the kind of long, wordless interludes he inserted in Television epics like "Marquee Moon" and "Little Johnny Jewel", or the solo "Days On The Mountain" (from 1982's *Words From The Front*). He's always loath to acknowledge particular influences, and when asked about something his music or playing might be reminiscent of (Richard Thompson, for one), Verlaine has either never heard them or heard them only after people kept telling him he sounded like them. Aside from the occasional reference ("Yonki Time" on his first solo album takes its beat from an old Chris Kenner tune; he's also chalked up Television's dramatic stop-start arrangement of Dylan's "Knockin' On Heaven's Door" to listening to soul artists like James Brown or Sam And Dave), his music never seems to really pay tribute to anyone or anything except his own imagination. He'll still buy records that look interesting in thrift stores, as opposed to following the latest hype, either popular or collector-oriented, in a record store; he looks for weird sounds in seemingly random or anonymous discs. Despite his occasional use of "cheesy guitar sounds, and reverb and all that fun stuff in the studio that you have seen but don't know quite what it does" that might resemble something on a bargain store find (as on Songs' "Documentary", *Warm And Cool*'s "Boulevard" or even the ondioline/knife-slide guitar duet on *Adventure*'s "The Fire") the real influence is not the records themselves, but the discovery of something overlooked in them. This is also evident in his early choice of the once-unfashionable Fender Jazzmaster guitars, which he's always maintained was due to the fact that they were the cheapest decent guitars you could get in the 70s; likewise, using "ten-dollar Korean guitars through old amps, odd obsolete echo boxes, etc, for working on sort of less traditional guitar sounds" comes from this junk shop appeal (an aesthetic not lost on Sonic Youth, who have always claimed Television as an influence) as opposed to a quest to be experimental with a capital E. Not only did *Warm And Cool* satisfy those who had

always loved Verlaine's guitar playing, its moody, noirish atmospheres led the way to film work that seemed to occupy him for the rest of the 90s. The Kronos Quartet's version of "Spiritual" appeared in the film *Big Bad Love* (they also recorded a version of "Marquee Moon" in 1990), and in 1994 he scored CM Talkington's *Love And A .45*. According to Verlaine, the director "liked *Warm And Cool* and hired me to do some guitar stuff for that. He said, 'Do anything you want', so I just tried figure out a bunch of little cues for the thing. He used about half of them. I feel sorry for him because that film came out the same week as the big Tarantino film [*Pulp Fiction*] and just got buried right away, but it was coincidentally similar in style to this thing in terms of using a lot of little quotes, visual quotes of other films. A kind of mishmash of zany, violent comedy, weird comedy."

A longer-lived project was accompaniment for a series of experimental silent films in the late 90s. The Rohauer Collection film foundation in Columbus, Ohio offered Verlaine the chance to present live original music for films from the collection. Verlaine chose several films, including Man Ray's *Étoile De Mer*, Dreyer's *They Caught The Ferry*, Watson & Webber's *Fall Of The House Of Usher* and Léger's *Ballet Mécanique*, and worked up a score for two guitars with Jimmy Ripp, who recorded and toured extensively with Verlaine in the 80s. They did a fantastic job at the 1999 performance I witnessed in Brooklyn, matching the imaginative imagery with bouncy and perfectly synched sounds. "The strangest thing that happened with that is we did it in a theatre in Portland, Oregon, two nights, and after the second night I went back to the hotel and I put the TV on, and I see one of our films on this cable channel, but it was some other band improvising to it. I called up Ripp in his room and said, 'Put on channel 78', and he goes, 'This is hilarious, look, there are shadows moving. There must have been somebody at the show last night with a camcorder, filmed our show and then took it to his rehearsal room, had the band play to it.' It wasn't one of the well known films, it's not something you could go out and buy a DVD of. It had a rehearsal room sound, sounded like one mic hanging up, one guy's playing some feedback, clattering drums..."

The duo did a few mostly instrumental club gigs around that time; a review of a show in Boston notes "a 20 minute set-closing tune called, perhaps, 'The Ballad Of Johnny Cash'." Not a tribute, not a parody, but a journey into the belly of the weird. Verlaine sounded slurry, feigning that he was all pilled up and unfocused. He said, "Hi, my name is Johnny Cash" several times, and he and Ripp recontextualised Cash's "I Walk The Line" by setting it to a Velvet Underground-like "Heroin" motif. His "Cash" talked about writing biographies. The first was "Man In Black", the second



"Man In White", a third was too apocalyptic and rejected by even the Christian far-right publishers. Then he'd remind us and himself with 'Hi, my name is Johnny Cash'. It was a spooky Cash deconstruction." The 90s also saw him reconnect with another veteran of the CBGB's first wave, Patti Smith. He first toured with Patti in 1995, including seven dates opening for Bob Dylan. (I remember Verlaine having to play sitting in a chair onstage with an injured leg at New York's Beacon Theatre.) Their musical association goes back to the summer of 1974, when he overdubbed a lead guitar part on Smith's first record, "Hey Joe (Version)". Pumping a fusillade of guitar notes behind keyboardist Richard Sohl's dirge-like essaying of the folk/garage classic's chords, Verlaine's debut announces a new take on post-psychedelic rock guitar devoid of feedback, distortion or other effects. The song choice is apt, not only as a vehicle for Smith's rhapsodic mind-meld with gun-toting heiress Patti Hearst but, because Verlaine didn't start "liking guitar until maybe late 66, with '19th Nervous Breakdown' and The Yardbirds, even the Mike Bloomfield playing on *Highway 61 Revisited*, that's when I first started to think electric guitar was pretty cool. I heard *East/West*, yeah, because I wondered who Bloomfield was and got ahold of those Butterfield Blues Band records. I thought that was a really good record, actually." The Byrds, one of many groups who covered "Hey Joe", provided another link to the jazz he'd been exploring. "I remember standing in a drugstore reading a pop magazine that had an interview with McGuinn talking about modal music. I thought, 'What's that?' and then he related it to Coltrane and I thought, 'Oh, I think I know what that is [laughs]'. In retrospect it's a good term. I do like modal music."

Verlaine is particularly enthusiastic about a performance he did with Smith at the Flanders Film Festival in Ghent last October. "She did a poetry reading and I played behind her with a cello player [Catherine McRae] and a violinist from Brooklyn [Beckie Foon]," he recalls. "It was all modal, you might say [laughs]. I wouldn't know the name of the mode, I'd say 'this is the key of C but use the E as the root note'. That was also kind of minimal." Verlaine has been frequently touring in her group, and also participated in last year's concerts of the *Horses* album, Smith's 1975 debut. On the original LP he only played on the song "Break It Up", which he co-wrote with Smith, but played on every song live, not to mention contributing some exotic leads to the encore version of Hendrix's "Are You Experienced". "It's fun [to play in Patti's group] because for me it's so easy. The main thing is just not to overplay. I ended up playing bass on about a quarter of her set on the last tour. She would have Tony [Shanahan] play piano, so I would play bass on "Because The Night", which was really funny because I managed to screw it up at least every other night. I'm very bad at learning

songs that have that many chords. I just never seem to memorise them right."

And of course there's Television, who have toured for a couple of weeks every year ever since their initial reunion in 1992. The self-titled album from that first reunion does not enjoy the classic status of the first two, but "1889 Or So" and "Call Mr Lee" still get an enthusiastic response in their current live sets. I've seen reports that a new album is due later in the year, a notion that Verlaine contradicts. "We're very... extremely... slowly working on a bunch of new stuff. We have at least six songs that are 80 per cent done, probably another six that we may or may not even finish, and then a couple of other ideas. We've been rehearsing a bit now and then, but there's no big plan there at all, how to go about it or anything like that. I've done a little bit at Fred's apartment, has become a big plus in making records now. It's so money-saving, and it's so much fun to be able to just mess around and then go make a coffee or something, listen to something else. So I think if we record we'll try to find someplace to get some drums and things done, and then dump it on our computer and be able to record at people's houses. I really like that. You go to Fred's house at eight at night and maybe record until four in the morning, or maybe at ten o'clock we go eat dinner and stop and that's it, the casualness of it is really great. I'm still not completely used to computer sound, though. I have a lot of trouble being able to really make out things on it."

In a way, it's full circle back to his first efforts at recording, at least in terms of technique. "My first recording was with this friend of mine, we both used to play saxophones. I think we were in eighth grade, and his older brother had a Varese record that had *Poème Électronique*, and we were both amazed that this thing was a ham gear guy with a basement full of electronics, and he gave him a tape recorder, so we immediately started making electronic music in his basement. I plastic comb on a microphone, and taking our voices and speeding them up and slowing them down. I know we layered it. I don't remember if we bounced back and forth from one track to another; it was mono. I remember that... We'd make these sounds and we'd be really laughing our heads off. We also recorded me and him playing saxophone, and a third guy, named Ted, would be playing acoustic guitar and he would stop in the middle all the time and say, 'No, no, you're not playing to the chords' and we'd say, 'Oh no, just play, just play'. I had a soprano sax, and he had an alto sax of which he had sawed off the bell to try to

make a manzello like Roland Kirk. He cut a spittoon in half, and duct-taped this spittoon in place of the bell of the alto. The last I heard these tapes still exist, sooner or later I'd sorta like to hear them. I'd imagine they're pretty funny."

Verlaine reminisces further about his teenage jazz-listening, sax-playing years. "There was a jazz station in Philadelphia that I used to listen to on a little radio I had, and they didn't play much free jazz but they did play 'Lonely Woman' by Ornette Coleman, and I said, 'God, what's this, this is so weird, y'know... So I would take the bus into town, and there was a jazz record shop in the fish market area in the black neighbourhood. I went in there and the guy who worked there looked at me and he locked the door behind me right away, and he goes, 'What are you doing in here?' I said, 'Oh, you have jazz records', and he said, 'Yeah, what do you want with jazz records?' [laughs], and he was looking out the window... I wasn't frightened or anything. I didn't really know what he was acting so weird about. And the guy goes, 'You're kinda young to be coming to this neighbourhood', but he would kind of educate me. I'd say I heard this thing on the radio and he'd say, 'Yeah, we got that, if you like that you might like this', but I'd only usually have enough for one record a week. I would rake people's leaves, in Delaware, to make money to buy records. I think a mono [LP] was \$2.99 and a stereo was \$3.99 – it was a lot of lawns to rake to get a record. Actually, I got *Ornette On Tenor*, that might have been the first one, then I got *Free Jazz*, with the Jackson Pollock cover. Then there was that Ron Carter record, *Where?* with Dolphy on it, it had this thing called "Bass Duet", do you know that? And Mingus's *Oh Yeah* and *The Clown*. The thing about a lot of these records was Scott LaFaro, I didn't think anybody could play bass that fast, plus the sound, he had a beautiful sound. Coltrane actually didn't figure that big... I think I had *My Favorite Things*."

I can't help wondering how working with Television feels to him now compared to the heavily mythologised old days of CBGB and Max's Kansas City. Verlaine weighs in somewhere between matter of fact and philosophical. "I don't know," sighs Verlaine. "Shows are shows. Some nights you like playing 'Prove It', other nights you just wing it through. We would go to countries we'd never been to; in those places the fact that nobody's ever heard the stuff live leads you to play it with more enthusiasm I guess. Their excitement for hearing something they like the first time live kinda gives you an extra little bit of spunk. There's nights when you play what you think is the worst show and people come up to you three years later and say it was the greatest show you ever did, you kinda end up shrugging about the whole thing." □ Songs And Other Things And Around are released this month on Thrill Jockey