

Watch Television

BY RICHARD MORTIFOGLIO

As I viewed Television at a recent C.B.G.B. weekender, I was struck by the paradox that the more leader Tom Verlaine put out, the muter his effect became. He was unusually explosive, as if sensitive to the criticism that his band is listless and self-absorbed. But though the spittle and sweat flew off his mouth as he screamed, he couldn't overcome the reticence that in the long run is his most affecting and engaging quality.

Verlaine's conceptual ambitions reveal a strain of genius, both for business purposes and poetic effect. He fuses an attractive symbolist disordering-of-all-the-senses aesthetic with a rich musicality and austere personal style. Pallid and gaunt, he projects a graceful self-

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Riffs

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facement even amidst the pettimal seizures of his jazzy guitar runs, which make him look as if electrodes were attached to his brain from the pickups. The most savage electronic assaults do not dispel the rural aura of this rock and roll Gary Cooper manchild, stunned into an electric metaphor by the shock of

city life. He strives to create the impression of ecstatic insanity; he is like a village idiot visited by tongues, suddenly become articulate enough to communicate exactly how it is up there.

This sensibility serves as the basis for an elegant and charming collection of story songs. Verlaine's best work is a finely honed evocation of a very disoriented state of mind. When he works with a

stately and studied Queen Jané Approximately backup, rich and fluid rhythms topped by lovely embellishments and harmonics, he conveys a suggestive thoughtfulness that suits his lilting, nasal intonations perfectly. He is less successful attempting to overwhelm through a more overtly violent rock and roll. This band does not really hit you in the gut although it is obviously expected to.

Verlaine himself, though, is cap-

able of some considerable violence. At this performance, about five minutes after some problems with his tuning machines, he ripped all the strings off his guitar—and then methodically knocked his amp around a bit. But this strangely quiet violence was anticlimactic. Verlaine lacks the brashness to carry a heavy-metal move to its logical conclusion. It is this limitation that makes his other work so vital. He drives best when proceeding cautiously.

This seems a contradiction given the ecstatic sources of his content and form. But Verlaine's expressiveness rests on a very fragile dynamic between the ethereal quality of his poetic imagination and the sturdy craftsmanship of his lyric structure. When this dynamic is disrupted, as in some of the louder, heavier numbers, the bottom falls out both musically and conceptually. This seems more the band's fault than Verlaine's. Spiritually and physically, drummer Billy Ficca seems very far away and his louder poundings have an annoying garbage-can clatter. Lead guitarist Richard Lloyd always has something to offer, whether it is one of those pretty constructs Verlaine told him to play or his own angular, raga-like inventions. But his indifferent presence can be a distraction and at times hurts the show.

Verlaine's original co-leader was Richard Hell, a strong personality but a weak bassist, who almost invariably undermined Verlaine musically. But his wide-eyed loony tunes were a welcome contrast to Verlaine's mystifications and it was good to watch Hell's devilish bad boy and Verlaine's shy dreamer up there



Television's Tom Verlaine: Gary Cooper manchild

together. The new bassist slips and slurs expertly, giving the music a cushiony undercurrent previously supplied only by Verlaine's graceful fingertip rhythm. But a conceptual void glares openly; Verlaine seems lonely, as if making an earnest solo bid with some sidemen who just learned the material an hour before.

Despite his allegiances with punk rock, Verlaine stands heads above the local contenders; his eloquent original material avoids the stupidity ploys that plague most image-conscious New York bands. His accomplishment speaks to a more intelligent heart and passionate mind, like an organic, less academic Lou Reed. One only has to see and hear him, chanting "Trudy said" as he begins a second verse with his head bowed on the side, to perceive that a genuine auteur has sprung up in the precious soil between the cracks in the concrete. □