

The Invisible Man: Tom Verlaine, 1949-2023

'I like thinking of myself as invisible. I find it a very advantageous way to live.'
- Tom Verlaine

'Lord, lord, not that we pray, are sure of the question,
But why are our finest always dead?'
- Louis Zukofsky, 'Poem beginning "The"'

Tom Verlaine was the antidote to the likes of Eric Clapped-Out, Ritchie Blackmore and all the other 60s and 70s guitar heroes who strutted around either murdering the blues or showing off their musical prowess at full volume and top speed. As part of Television and as a solo artist, not to mention guest appearances with/for the likes of Patti Smith and Luna, he was a subtle, ingenious guitarist, able to add shade, colour and texture to music, as well as riff, rock-out and improvise with the best of them.

From 1974 onwards Television worked hard in Manhattan, playing with Patti Smith, Blondie, the New York Dolls, Talking Heads and other now forgotten bands, mostly at Max's Kansas City and CBGBs, a dirty, rundown bar near the Bowery, whose owner they persuaded to let them gig at. Soon there was a 'punk' scene happening, though it was a million miles from the recycled pub rock, slumming rich boys, and shock tactics of bands in London branded with the same label.

In February 1977, Elektra released Television's debut album, *Marquee Moon*, prompting an effusive *NME* review from Nick Kent, who said that the album was 'a 24 carat inspired work of pure genius' where '[e]ach song is timelessly conceived and arranged for maximum impact'. After deconstructing each and every track, Kent reiterated the word genius, and went into overdrive for an ecstatic finale:

'This music is passionate, full-blooded, dazzlingly well crafted, brilliantly conceived and totally accessible to anyone who, (like myself,) has been yearning for a band with the vision to break on through into new dimensions of sonic overdrive and the sheer ability to back it up.

Tom Verlaine and Television are out there hanging fire and cruising like meteors above all the three chord wonder boys.

[...]

They are one band in a million, the songs are some of the greatest ever.'

At the end of May that year Television played the Hammersmith Odeon supported by Blondie, who were fun but not a patch on the main act. Television played on a big empty stage in cold light, with only their amps, monitors and microphones for company. They were riveting to see and hear, as twin guitars wove around their songs in dialogue, extending and exploring themes and motifs, the lyrics gently snarled through the musical interplay. In interviews, Verlaine spoke about his love of poetry and jazz saxophone, and it's not difficult

to hear the influences of both in his music and lyrics, although Verlaine claimed that he 'always hated jazz guitar. I loved jazz saxophone but I hated jazz guitar.'

If I had to stretch for comparisons I'd most likely have to resort to mentioning people like Pat Metheny and Bill Frisell, guitarists pretty much outside of rock; perhaps more to the point is what Rob Tannenbaum in his *Los Angeles Times* obituary highlights, that 'Verlaine was passionate about harmonically complex music, especially jazz saxophonists John Coltrane and Albert Ayler, classical composers Henryk Gorecki and Krzysztof Penderecki and film composers Bernard Herrmann and Henry Mancini.' Kent hit it on the head when he said 'Verlaine's solos are sublime, they are in short, a potential total redefinition of the electric guitar. As it is, Verlaine's solo constructions/coltraneisms are always unconventional, forever delving into new areas, never satisfied with referring back to formulas, simply he can solo without ever losing the point.'

Such critical acclaim – which was never reflected in sales, only in cult status for the band – was part of the reason that Television's second album, *Adventure*, released in April 1978, never got the attention it deserved. With hindsight it is as innovative and engaging as the debut album, although only the end track, 'The Dream's Dream', contains any kind of prolonged instrumental. But all the tracks are carefully arranged, recorded and sequenced, with the album having an interesting and varied dynamic: very much of the studio and very different to the band live.

My bootleg recording of Television's Hammersmith gig in April 1978 is a rough audience one, but the hiss and lack of sonic clarity can't hide the energetic interpretations of music from both their albums, as well as extended workouts of their first single 'Little Johnny Jewel', Dylan's 'Knocking on Heaven's Door' and the Stones' 'Satisfaction'. In 1982 ROIR cassettes released *The Blow Up*, a similar live recording from March 1978, which is rough and ready but shows the band on top form, whilst Television themselves eventually released *Live at the Old Waldorf, San Francisco*, which was recorded in June 1978, in 2003. This remains the only official live document from the band's first period, as they broke up in July 1978.

After that, Verlaine made several solo albums, each more quieter and considered than the one before, some – such as 1992's *Warm and Cool* and 2006's *Around* (his most recent) – entirely instrumental.* David Bowie covered a Verlaine song on *Scary Monsters*, and Verlaine would sometimes gig with a backing band, but mostly he lived a normal life in New York City, with fans occasionally spotting him at the Strand bookstore or guesting with other groups or musicians. There was a Television reunion and a new, eponymous, album in 1992, and since then, until Verlaine's death, the band had never officially split up, would surface every so often for a brief flurry of gigs, a short tour or one-off performances such as the 2005 Meltdown festival in London or 2007's NY Summerstage.

Verlaine may have liked to think of himself as invisible, but he wasn't; and he knew it. Whilst Richard Cook, editor of *NME* and *Wire*, claimed decades ago that 'Tom Verlaine is one of the last great rock musicians to come out of America', and

Marquee Moon still appears regularly in best albums of all time lists, it is perhaps through influence and inspiration that Verlaine remains most visible. *Billboard* noted in 2003 that *Marquee Moon* had 'been a clear influence on such artists as Pavement, Sonic Youth, the Strokes and Jeff Buckley', whilst Inreet Kaur in *i* states that 'Blondie, R.E.M, the Red Hot Chili Peppers and Simply Red all credited the musician's influence'. *Uncut's* Rob Hughes reckoned that Verlaine's 'cult status was enriched by the likes of REM, Echo & The Bunnymen, the Banshees and Rain Parade, all of whom covered Verlaine songs during the '80s.'

That's not a bad legacy to have, let alone five band albums, nine solo, plus a double CD anthology – *The Miller's Tale* – curated by Clinton Heylin. Verlaine claimed to not 'have that much interest in stardom', to 'not care less' about '[t]he whole reputation of being a rockstar' (*Stereo Review*) and to be disdainful of the notion of a career, answering a question on that subject in *Musician* with 'Honestly, I never think about the word "career." I've had managers, the minute they say it to me, they look at me and just roll their eyes.' But he did care about his music, and people cared about both that music and him. Patti Smith perhaps says it best: 'Tom Verlaine and Television were for me the most inspiring: They were not glamorous, they were human.'

Rupert Loydell

* My friend Chris, when I showed him a draft of this article, said I should write more about the solo albums, but I didn't want to turn this into a record review. Verlaine's albums are good but they aren't, in the main, as great as the Television albums, and it takes a while for them to take root when you listen to them. *Tom Verlaine*, *Dreamtime* and *Words from the Front* are in some ways a continuation of *Adventure* (*Dreamtime* is my favourite), and were released in quick succession, but 1984's *Cover*, recorded in London is a standout, as is 1990's *The Wonder*. The instrumental albums are brilliant quiet collections, and it's intriguing that he ended up on the hip experimental label Thrill Jockey, but Verlaine was aware of his own musical achievement and continued to play those classic Television songs live whenever he did a concert.

Television: Marquee Moon

embed <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7yv0thMdWBY>

Tom Verlaine: Cold Irons Bound (Bob Dylan)

embed <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CNSdrzmcWJg>

(1400 words)