Dreamtime

Tom Verlaine on Warner Brothers Records.

I don't know what they put in the water in 1977, but it sure worked. It was, if nothing else, a landmark year in musical releases—in reviewing Tom Verlaine's new album, Dreamtime, the whole frame of reference is NYC in 1977, the year when the underground first offered up its product. Blondie was shipping out "Rip Her to Shreds," the New York Dolls camped through "Back in the Jungle," and Tom Verlaine was part of Television, sobbing his way through Marquee Moon, Television's first album. With guitarist Richard Lloyd, Television and Verlaine started a good thing, but there's no copyright on musical direction and his imitators—or rather, those who expanded on his notion—did it better.

A strange problem for Verlaine is that his ability as a song-writer and musician, Television's music was support enough for Verlaine's slashing images and choked, high-strung delivery. Here, however, on Dreamtime, the instrumentation is often weak; Verlaine compensates by pulling the vocal tracks down, resulting in a hazy mush that's more boring than it is dreamy. It seems, too, that Verlaine has lost some of his decisiveness, that he no longer revels in his patronized, David Byrne-style encasulations. His music has a new romanticism that his voice strives—inaudibly—to match; this balance is the album's most notable defect and the thing against which Verlaine most struggles. A song like "Penetration" has lyrics of rare quality: 'The stars are out/they're writing, on my brow/Your names, your qualities I could drink them/Deepe Deepep poooting/Deep Deepep Penetration') and the song itself is far too thin to carry such rich imagery. On the other hand, "The Blue Robe" has no lyrics (except for "Hi-Fi," repeated a few times) and the music is freed from Verlaine's lyrical demands. It's a slow, shadowy, (almost) instrumental that can be appreciated on its own merits.

"Always" and "Mr. Blur" re-work television's tension-formula most successfully—sharp, jangling guitar lines counterpoint indulgent sparkling crescendos. "Mary Marie" has this same up-tempo texture and shrill frustrated vocals that result in a sad, nostalgic feel like the best Television. But, it's not Television and that's the bottom line. It's unfortunate that all of Verlaine's work should have to be compared to his earlier band's efforts, but even he seems content on recapitulating that very in-dividual sound.

Verlaine appears this Wednesday at the Paradise for the curious.

Sheena

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