

RICHARD HELL

NINA ANTONIA TRAVELS TO HELL AND BACK WITH THE PROTO-PUNK TURNED AUTHOR



case. A pre-eminent figure on the early '70s New York scene, he is widely regarded as the man who 'invented' the punk look — chewed-off hair, ripped T-shirt, drainpipe jeans, speed-freak stare. The image was inspired by photos of French poets Rimbaud and Artaud, and the teenage character in Francois Truffaut's 1959 film, *The 400 Blows*.

Forming the Neon Boys in 1973 with his old schoolfriend, Tom Verlaine, Hell went on to play in early line-ups of both Television (again with Verlaine) and the Heartbreakers (with Johnny Thunders), before purifying his musical vision with his own group, the Voidoids. By late 1976, Britain had its own punk scene, and the Voidoids' first single, "Blank Generation", perfectly captured the new wave's mood of vacant nihilism. Fragile at the best of times, Hell quickly found the pressures of the music

business too much, and after the critically acclaimed "Destiny Street" album in 1983, the Voidoids fizzled out. It was to be nine years before he recorded again.

Born Richard Meyers in Kentucky, Hell was the product of an unhappy middle-class upbringing. He quit his boarding school in Delaware at the age of 16 to pursue a Bohemian life as a poet, arriving in New York in 1967.

A couple of years later, he was joined by his former high-school friend Tom Miller, an aspiring musician. Miller metamorphosed into Verlaine and, after the success of Meyer's poetry fanzine, *Genesis: Grasp* (which ran to four issues), the two intellectual renegades collaborated on a collection of verse called *Wanna Go Out?*, published under the guise of Theresa Stern.

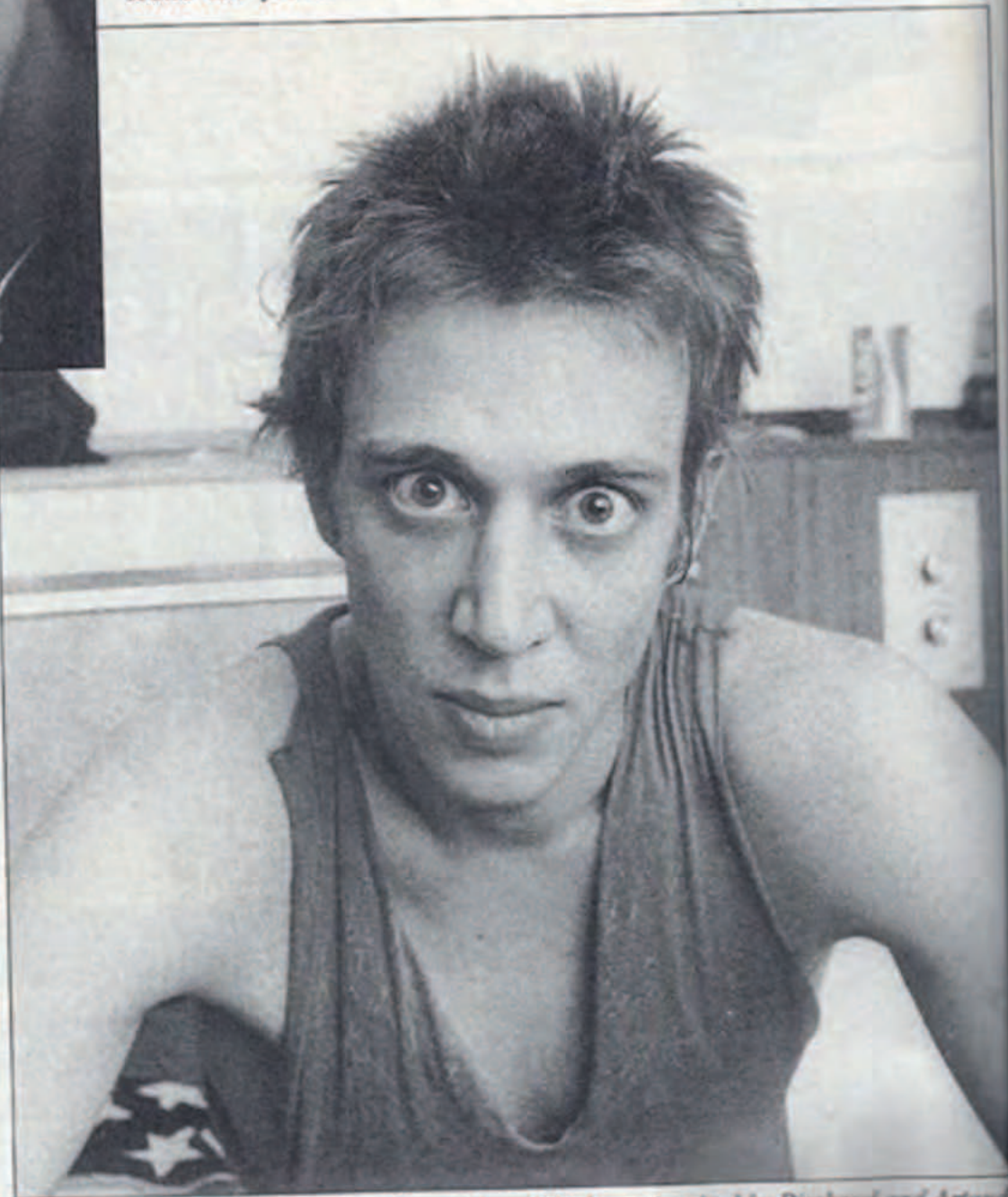
"Out of boredom and for kicks", he explains, "me and Tom would hang out all the time. We were almost our only

His name was mud. Billy Mud. A smacked-out New York rock'n'roller on a last journey across America in a flame-coloured vintage De Soto. So begins Richard Hell's novel *Go Now*, a poetic odyssey that can only conclude with the main protagonist's demise or his redemption through self-knowledge. Mud obviously represents a burned-up fragment of the author's own history, circa 1980, when his seminal New York punk group the Voidoids were stuttering towards artistic dissolution.

But that was then. Today, it's a disarmingly healthy-looking Hell who's in town to promote his new book. Billy Mud's skin may have been as white as the pages his adventures were recorded on, but his creator/alter ego has matured into a bookish 40-something, far more interested in writing novels and poetry than resurrecting the ghost of the "Blank Generation".

"I totally love writing," he says, "I don't like getting out on the stage. I don't really think I'm a performer. I know performers, the kind who are driven to dazzle you all the time and are most alive when they are on stage. The only real relationship they have is with the audience. I'm not like that; I have no real relationships whatsoever."

To say that Hell is something of a minor musical legend isn't, for once, overstating the



Richard Hell in the late 70s. His influential punk look was inspired by Rimbaud and Artaud.

friends. We'd stay up all night drinking beer and coffee and what we ended up doing was taking a typewriter and talking it between us. I'd type a few lines, they'd type a couple. These collaborations just got crazier and crazier. The poems didn't sound like either one of us, they sounded like a third person. Tom said, 'Why don't we make it a woman?', so I made up a name for her, Theresa Stern, and a biography. I had a friend come over, put make-up on us and take a head shot each of me and Tom, then I imposed the negatives. We came up with the picture of Theresa Stern from a composite of me and Tom. I published *Wanna Go Out?* on this little piece of paper at home".

After *Wanna Go Out?*, Hell set to work on his first piece of sustained prose, an expressionistic novel called *The Voidoids*. It was privately pressed in an edition of around 300; Codex Books released it in 1996.) Between the typed lines, Richard and Tom Verlaine endeavoured to get their feet under the Neon Boys, off the ground. "I had a drummer who he liked, Eric Drew, who he used to play with in DeLauro. We were looking for another guitar player while we wrote songs and we couldn't find anybody who was right. After a few months it got really frustrating".

SHORT CAREER

Hell and Verlaine trawled the local scene for a second guitarist with little success. (Amongst the possible contenders was one Douglas Colvin, later to find recognition as Dee Dee Ramone.) The lights went out on the Neon Boys' short career in the spring of 1973, but not before they had recorded some material.

"We thought we should at least have a document of the trouble we spent," declared Richard. "The idea was that Tom would play both guitar parts on the multi-track, recorded through a local music paper for a couple and found a cheap four-track in some guy's basement out in Brooklyn or Queens. We went there for a day or two and did three of my songs and three of Tom's."

The Hell tracks, "That's All I Know", "Love Comes In Spurts" and "High School Whore" were eventually released on *Shine Through* in 1980, with a Voidoids track on the B-side. This material was reissued on *CBGB's Overground* in 1991. Verlain's "Dope", "Hot Dog" and "Poor Circumstances" were unreleased.

Following the demise of the Neon Boys, Hell and Verlaine changed tack. During the day, they earned a crust working in a second-hand book shop called *Cinematheque* where Tom Smith worked, though they didn't work at the time, while they figured out their next move. They made an aesthetically attractive music with their tattered clothes and grungy hair.

Despite these efforts to make their mark on the local music scene, they weren't reaching their main targets. But then, everything changed. The catalyst for the Voidoids was a mutual friend, the owner of *Cinematheque*, Terry Ork, who teamed them up with Robert Lloyd. Verlaine's glacial, meandering, drawn-out perfectly matched Lloyd's more conventional style. Billy Ficca was recalled. He and his bass and Television were born. They made their live debut at the Townhouse Theatre on 2nd March 1974, against a backdrop of television sets. Television began to turn on New York, but as their career progressed, it got increasingly turned off. When it was that first gig, he had left the scene.



The original U.S. edition of Hell's "Blank Generation" on Ork is worth around £20.

"Tom became more and more determined to take this very personal direction," he explains. "When we started Television, we were about equally. The idea was that both of us would contribute the same amount of songs and we would sing the songs that we wrote. But as it developed, he kept insisting on dropping my songs. It just got untenable. I didn't want to be just a bass player."

"My bass playing was crude, it didn't interest me to become a virtuoso bass player. I just wanted to write and sing songs. I knew I'd have to go elsewhere." In the same week that Hell quit Television, guitarist Johnny Thunders and drummer Jerry Nolan left the New York Dolls, who were by then being managed by Malcolm McLaren. Thunders was eager to set a new vehicle in motion, so he and Hell set about creating a new musical vehicle. The Heartbreakers had similar democratic intentions to early Television. Inevitably, this led to the same conflicts, as the result of different temperaments and talents.

SONGS

"The reason Johnny wanted me in the Heartbreakers was because he liked my songs and he liked the way I looked on stage," Hell explains. "We essentially had the same agreement as Television, but I came into the Heartbreakers with many more songs than Johnny. As I bought with me all the songs I had written in Television. Occasionally, he would bring songs in, but some of them were really clichéd, like 'Goin' Steady'. I loved Johnny's guitar playing and he used to come out with these driving, raw tunes."

He also had a feel for where to put a backing vocal and he knew what a good hook was. But a songwriter? The lyrics were my specialty, but Johnny liked being the singer, the frontman. Some of his stuff kind of interested me and I thought, well, if I'm going to have a band that I'm completely happy with, I'm going to have to be the leader and make all the decisions."

The fusion of Hell's art rock with Thunders and Nolan's street swagger was bound to be an explosive mix. But in circumstances subsequent of the Television debacle, Hell departed from the Heartbreakers after just a year, taking "You Gotta Lose", "Love Comes In Spurts" and "Blank Generation" with him.

Hell left Thunders with "Chinese Rocks", which he had co-written with Dee Dee Ramone. He then formed the Voidoids, a group anchored by the choppy guitar interplay between Robert Quine and Ivan Julian and by Hell's substantial drumming. The



The EP also came out in the U.K. on Stiff, initially in a limited edition of 5,000 copies.



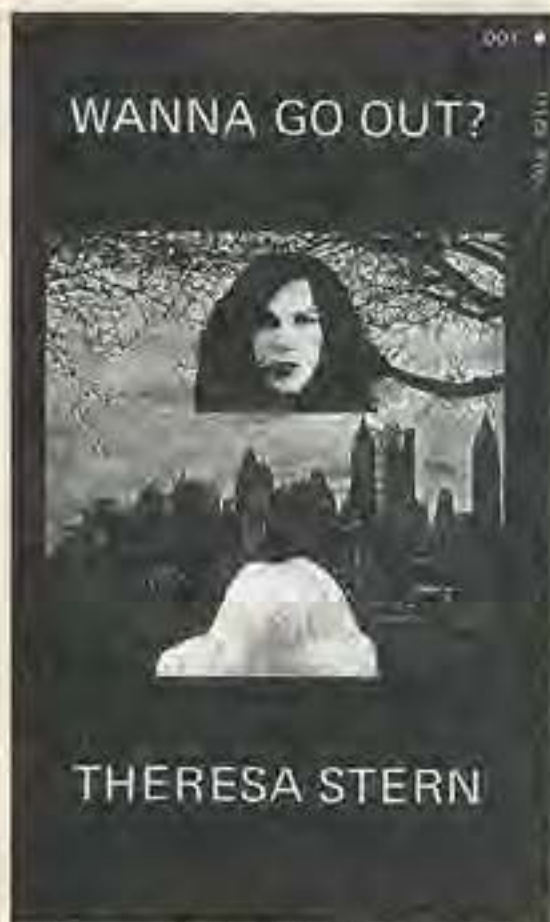
"The Kid With the Replaceable Head", the follow-up issued on Radar in 1978.

Voidoids recorded a three-track demo in July 1976, which was released that November on Ork (Terry Ork's label) as "The Blank Generation", released simultaneously on Stiff and later re-recorded for Sire in 1977. The record featured the title track plus "You Gotta Lose" and "(I Could Live With You) (In) Another World".

Ironically, Hell was an eloquent spokesman for the Blank Generation, his disturbing lyrics leaping across the Voidoid's angular soundscape, and occasionally getting snagged on Quine's jagged licks. The EP established the band's reputation, but their career, like their music, progressed in jumpy fits and starts. Just before Christmas 1976, the band demoed two more tracks, "Betrayal Takes Two" and "I'm Your Man", and made their debut at New York's CBGBs.

DEAL

The new year sparkled with snow and fresh promise: Sire offered them a deal, and "The Blank Generation" album was recorded in just under three weeks at Electric Lady Studios. Unfortunately, Sire were in the process of negotiating a distribution deal with Warner Brothers, and the Voidoids' platter was put on hold. Trapped in a legal limbo, Hell and the band began to tinker around with the tracks. The feel of the original studio sessions was lost, and it was decided to re-record some of the album from scratch. Hell was by this time getting weary, and when the album finally came out he was just about ready to abandon rock'n'roll. A gruelling U.K. tour supporting the Clash on their autumn 1977 'Get Out In



'Wanna Go Out?', Richard Hell and Tom Verlaine's rare poetry book from 1973.



The Neon Boys' 'Love Comes in Spurts', recorded in 1973 but not released until 1980.

Control' tour confirmed his nihilistic tendencies. Bruised by the beer cans thrown at him by British punks, and crushed by the rigours of a full-on heroin habit, Hell returned to the States and severed the Voidoids' ties with Sire.

The group came close to splitting. Marc Bell joined the Ramones and Hell stopped playing bass to concentrate on his vocals. The Voidoids' front man also began to take an interest in acting, and featured as a disaffected rock star in *Blank Generation*, a half-realised film by Ulli Lommel. He would later perfect the part in Susan Seidelman's *Smithereens* and also played lead in the 1978 film *A Place To Begin*. He also recorded a single with Nick Lowe for Radar Records, "The Kid With The Replaceable Head".

A second U.K. tour, with Elvis Costello in January 1979, saw the Voidoids' fragmentation continue. Hell found himself unable to secure a record deal, despite some cutting new material like "Don't Die", "Time" and "Ignore That Door". Released independently (on Line Records in Europe and Red Star in the U.S.),

1983's "Destiny Street" album was to be the last chord from the Void — by then, only Robert Quine remained from the original line-up.

Since the demise of the Voidoids, Hell's involvement with rock'n'roll has been sporadic, but his interest in writing has endured. He became the editor of *Cuz*, an inventive magazine covering new authors, poetry and fiction. It ran for only three issues, but he remains proud of the accomplishment.

Hell briefly picked up his bass again, when Sonic Youth's Thurston Moore requested his presence on the Dim Stars project. Through 1993 to 1995, Richard then settled down to write *Go Now*, the wistful title of which alludes not to the Moody Blues' 1964 hit, but to Bessie Banks'

original, devastating rendition. As usual, Hell's literary leanings were entwined with his love of music. "The supreme version of 'Go Now' is the Bessie Banks one," he argues. "The song has a mood which works well for the book, but a lot of people don't even make the connection. There are a bunch of associations — go now, as in leave now, or there's go now, like I wish that the present would be gone. Also there's an obscure, tenuous reference to the very first beat novel, *Go* by John Cellon Holmes. As with any title, you like the ones that are as rich as possible. It's not just the songs".

Richard Hell, he's a real gone cat.

Thanks to John Esplen at Overground, Steve Rippon, Tom Crossley and David L. Clark.

RICHARD HELL DISCOGRAPHY

Cat. No.	Title	Current Mint Value
THE NEON BOYS EP		
Shake SHK 101	DON'T DIE/TIME/LOVE COMES IN SPURTS (73)/THAT'S ALL I KNOW (RIGHT NOW) (U.S. 7" EP, p/s; 1st issue with large centre hole & credited to the 'Void Olds'; later with small hole & 'Voidoids', 2/80)	£20/£18
Overground OVER 11	TIME EP (U.K. 7", 2,000 only, purple vinyl; reissue of Shake EP; 2/90)	£8
Overground OVER 19	THAT'S ALL I KNOW (RIGHT NOW)/LOVE COMES IN SPURTS/HIGH HEELED WHEELS/DON'T DIE/TIME (U.K. 12", 2,000 only, clear vinyl, 4/91; last 2 tracks credited to Richard Hell & Voidoids [Part III])	£8
Overground OVER 19	THAT'S ALL I KNOW (RIGHT NOW)/LOVE COMES IN SPURTS/HIGH HEELED WHEELS/DON'T DIE (U.K. 12", black vinyl 1st pressing, 20 only, 4/91)	£15
Overground OVER 19CD	THAT'S ALL I KNOW (RIGHT NOW)/LOVE COMES IN SPURTS/HIGH HEELED WHEELS/DON'T DIE/TIME (U.K. CD, 2,000 only, 4/91; last 2 tracks credited to Richard Hell & Voidoids [Part III])	£7
THE HEARTBREAKERS (with Richard Hell)		
Fan Club FC 95 CD	THE HEARTBREAKERS LIVE AT MOTHERS (French CD, 1991)	£10
Bomp 4039	WHAT GOES AROUND (U.S. CD, 1994)	£10
RICHARD HELL & THE VOIDOIDS SINGLES		
Ork 81976	ANOTHER WORLD/BLANK GENERATION/YOU GOTTA LOSE (U.S. 7", 11/76)	£20
Stiff BUY 7	ANOTHER WORLD/BLANK GENERATION/YOU GOTTA LOSE (U.K. EP, 5,000 only, p/s, numbered; later repressed for inclusion in "The Stiff Box Set" & numbered '001', 11/76)	£10/£5
Sire SRE 1003	BLANK GENERATION/LOVE COMES IN SPURTS (U.S. 7", p/s, 9/77)	£20
Sire 6078 608	BLANK GENERATION/LOVE COMES IN SPURTS (U.K. 7", no p/s, 9/77)	£10
Sire 6078 608	BLANK GENERATION/LIARS BEWARE/WHO SAYS? (U.K. 12", p/s, 9/77)	£10
Radar ADA 30	THE KID WITH THE REPLACEABLE HEAD/YM YOUR MAN (U.K. 7", p/s, 11/78)	£5
Radar 17346	THE KID WITH THE REPLACEABLE HEAD/YM YOUR MAN (German 7", p/s, 11/78)	£8
RICHARD HELL & THE VOIDOIDS ALBUMS		
Sire SR 6037	BLANK GENERATION (LP, initially with inner sleeve, 1977)	£15/£10
LD. NOSE 2	DESTINY STREET (LP, 6/83)	£12
R.O.I.R.	R.I.P. (U.S., cassette, incl. rare Hell/Heartbreakers studio material & demos, '84)	£10
Danceteria DAN CD 040	R.I.P. (CD, reissue, 5/90)	£10
Sire 7598 26137-2	BLANK GENERATION (CD, reissue with bonus tracks, 1990)	£10
Danceteria	FUNHUNT (LP, also on CD, 7/92)	£10
RICHARD HELL SINGLES		
Overground OVER 24	3 NEW SONGS EP: The Night Is Coming On/Baby Huey (Baby Do You Want To Dance)/Frank Sinatra (U.K. 7", 3/92; 134 yellow vinyl, 2,800 black)	£6/£3
Overground OVER 24CD	3 NEW SONGS EP: The Night Is Coming On/Baby Huey (Baby Do You Want To Dance)/Frank Sinatra (U.K. CD, 3,000 only, 3/92)	£8
Overground OVER 36	ANOTHER WORLD/BLANK GENERATION/LOVE COMES IN SPURTS (U.K. 7", reissue, 2,000 only, 6/94)	£4
Overground OVER 36CD	ANOTHER WORLD/BLANK GENERATION/LOVE COMES IN SPURTS (U.K. CD, reissue, 1,500 only, 6/94)	£4
Tim Kerr TK 9410 080	GO NOW (U.S. 10" picture disc, readings from his novel, 10/96)	£8
Tim Kerr TK 9410 080CD	GO NOW (U.S. CD, 10/96)	£5
Codex CODE3	GO NOW (U.K. CD, 1,000 only, 10/96)	£8
Codex CODE 3X	GO NOW (U.K. 10", 1,000 only, yellow vinyl etched, 10/96)	£5
VIDEOS		
Merlin M 333D	SMITHEREENS (1983)	£10
Hendring HEN 2343	BLANK GENERATION (10/91)	£10
BOOKS		
Dot 11173	WANNA GO OUT? (poems, 500 only, credited to 'Theresa Stern', 1973)	£50
privately printed	THE VOIDOID (novel, 300 copies only, some xeroxed, 1973)	£30
Hanuman	ARTIFACT (notes from 1974-80, published 1990)	£10
So Yo	ACROSS THE YEARS (CD & poem book in wooden box, 1991)	£45
Fourth Estate	GO NOW (novel, 1996)	£8
Codex	THE VOIDOID (novel, 1996)	£8
MISCELLANEOUS		
Paperhouse PAPLP 014	DIM STARS (LP/CD, by Dim Stars, includes Hell on "You Gotta Lose", 4/92)	£8/£10
Paperhouse	THE PLUG (12"/CD single, by Dim Stars, includes Hell on different version of "You Gotta Lose", 2/92)	each £4
PAPER 015T/CD	THE HEADS (CD, by the Heads, includes Hell on "Never Mind", 1997)	£10
MCA CD 11504		

N.B.: Go Now and The Voidoid are still available from Turnaround Distribution, while some of the Overground and Codex releases can still be ordered via Shellshock Distribution or direct from Overground (tel: 0181-232 6700).