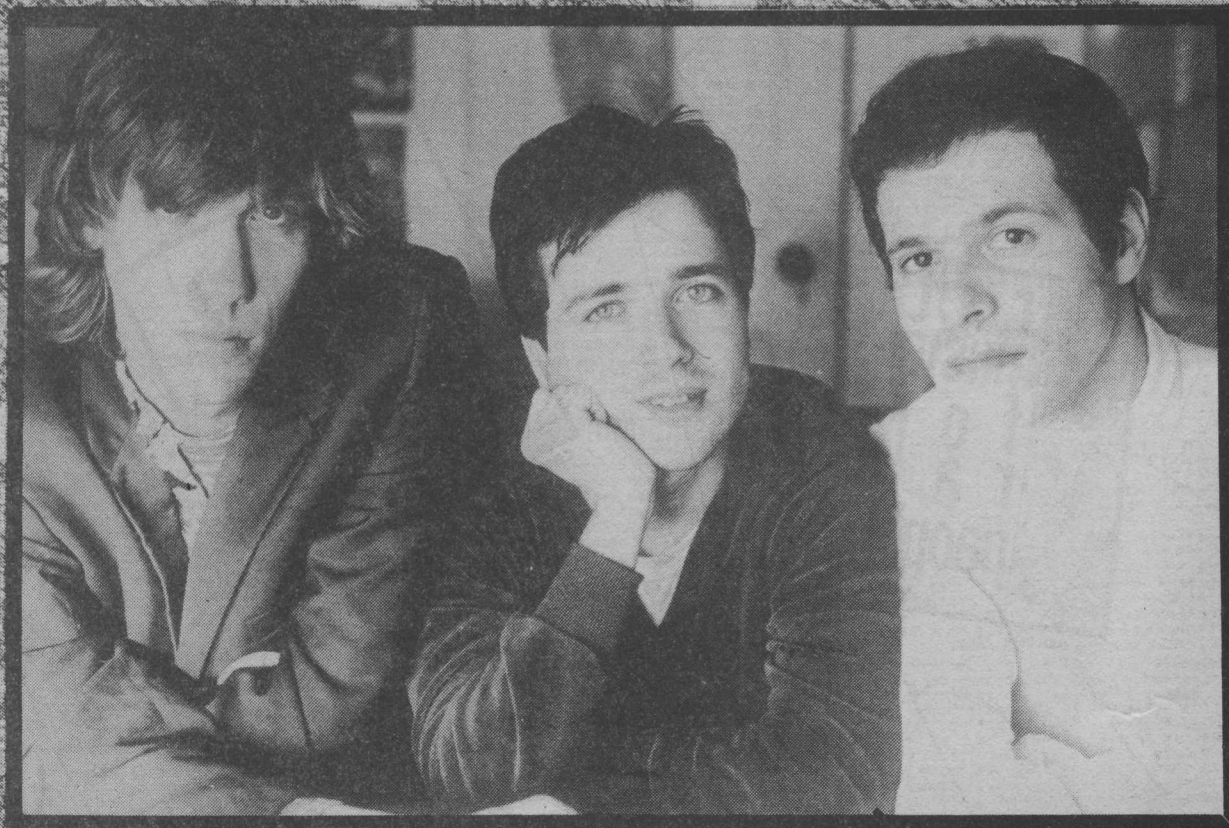


Violent Femmes

by: Toni Latino

Before reading this interview, listen to the Violent Femmes album just once. That was all it took to pique my interest in this band so far as to track down the lead singer from Wisconsin to New York and back to Wisconsin for this interview. To try to describe their music any clearer than with fuzzy generalities is just confusing. You have to listen to them yourself. What really got to me about this album and Gordon Gano is the extreme honesty with which he tells his stories. His honesty was apparent in the interview, too. If you are at all receptive to something new and can appreciate a good lyricist's wry wit and humor, you'll love this band.



FEMMES

...at your broken down kitchen at the top of the stairs can i mix in with your affairs share a smoke make a joke grasp and reach for a leg of hope words to memorize words hypnotize words make my mouth exercise words all fail the magic prize nothing i can say when i'm in your thighs.

Gordon Gano



TL How long have you been playing guitar?
GG Um, since... I can figure it out by grades. I started playing probably sometime, I started strumming one or two very simple chords in maybe 6th grade and then playing three or four very simple chords in 7th grade, now I play five or six simple chords. There will never be more new chords.

TL Do you play the violin too? That is you playing on "Good Feelings", how long have you been playing?

GG Right, right, it's funny, I'm surprised I'm not asked more about that because I think that's fairly unusual. Nobody ever asks me about it. Everyone always, as far as instruments on the album, they always talk about the xylophone on "Gone Daddy Gone", which is cool as far as something different but the violin, I think it's more of a surprise than a xylophone, but anyway, I've been playing that since the summer right before the 6th grade although I was playing that alot more. I studied that, I had lessons all through school, I was in the junior high orchestra, high school orchestra, and having lessons once a week for all that time, it was a school type of thing. I didn't have any of the Japanese, uh, what is it called, a suzuki?

TL Isn't that a motorcycle?

GG I think it's called a suzuki. Anyhow, I've been playing the violin I guess as long as I've been playing guitar although it's a very different kind of thing, as the violin is very much tied up with the school and guitar is always what I did after school, you know, just myself.

TL Will you keep playing the violin on the records?

GG I haven't played for quite a little while now, probably one of the longest stretches of time that I haven't played it, although I feel at some point, who knows, several years, I'll sort of start actively playing it again and kind of get back to enjoying myself on that instrument again. I would think that it might show up again sometime, maybe it might not get a little featured solo like it did on the first album.

TL How long has the band been together?

GG The band has been together for about two years now, a little more than two years.

TL I've heard you described as "folk punk". Do you agree with that, or how would you describe your music?

GG When we talk about it or how the three of us think of it, we really just think of it as music, that's how we feel about it, as music, we don't put a label on it. Sometimes for interviews we try to say something cute, you know, something clever as far as describing something about the music, but no labels, we really don't identify. "Folk punk" has probably been used most often, that certainly a whole lot better than "new wave". I feel in some ways it does describe the music, it's not completely accurate in that it doesn't mention anything about any of the jazz aspects or anything like that so, that way, what are we going to call it, "folk punk jazz"? We also think of ourselves as a rock band basically, it gets silly. I think our band is a little bit hard to peg down as far as what kind of music it exactly is. "Folk punk" is certainly better than "new wave" and gives us more of a description than just calling us a rock band. I don't have any bad feelings about "folk punk". I don't feel limited by it at all, you know, and I don't identify with it really.

TL Who are your musical influences, who do you like?

GG Well, I really listen to a whole lot of the Marvin Gaye "Sexual Healing" album, I like that, but some people think that I don't sound like Marvin Gaye. That album has so much synthesizer and so much overdub. That's not what we're into but you have to appreciate music like that too. I listen to, I like old country music. I love hymns, I love singing hymns.

TL Does that influence come from your father being a Reverend?

GG Yes, it comes from, I'm sure it has to do with that, definitely, as far as some of my earliest memories of music are church hymns although the church my father had I wouldn't really describe as gospel though I really love gospel music. Probably what I love the

most is old standard Baptist hymns which I remember hearing since I was a baby and then sung in a gospel way with a little more soul to it. I listen to lots of good things. The band has lots of, Brian Ritchie particularly, a real great collection of ethnic music. Our influences are coming from different diversions. That's probably why there's intricacies, people can listen to our music and pick up on all different kinds

of things because the three of us have such diverse musical backgrounds and listen to such different music.

TL Do you find any similarities between yourselves and the Gun Club?

GG Well, we played the same night at the Peppermint Lounge and that night I had some personal things going on and they were going on right after us. They were pretty important things, I don't think I would have stayed to see anybody, including the Violent Femmes, but I had to see them.

TL How'd the Violent Femmes do at the Peppermint?

GG Oh, the Violent Femmes did really well, the place was sold out and I think most people were there to see the Femmes. The place was packed, we had a good time, it was a really good show. I believe they're (Gun Club) booked by the same booking agent we have, but I really don't know them.

TL Where did you get the idea of the album cover? Were you involved in it at all?

GG It was really a collaboration between us and the record company. Our manager Mark Van Hecke was out in L.A. mastering the album and he was looking through photograph books and he saw this one of a girl pressing her face against the glass and thought it had a feeling of the band, and they went out to recreate that one. The girl who's on the cover is a model for her and her mother's line of kids fashion clothes.

TL I understand that you recorded the album first and then Mark (Van Hecke) shopped it around for a label. How did the band and Mark know each other?

GG He knew Victor (DeLorenzo), they were both involved with theatre, Victor is a professional actor and Mark was and is a professional composer and arranger and he was composing at the Milwaukee Repertory Company Theatre. So anyway, that's how they met, a professional friendship from that and so since he got involved with the band, and then we got together and did a demo tape with Mark. See, then Mark shopped around the demo. There was a series of events that we originally decided that we finance it ourselves and just do the record. All for one and one for all kind of thing, something like that, so we just got the money and got incredibly in debt and Mark produced it, then we had this master tape that we wanted

to turn into the record and then thankfully, and I think Slash would be thankful, we sent them the tape. It was a good arrangement for both of us that they took the tape as it was. We were told by other record companies that were interested, you know, that they would want to record things, do different songs and it would have probably been another year before we got the record out and it probably would have been half different, just changes around, you know.

TL Do you plan on doing another album soon?

GG You want us to do another one? We'll do another one. If you say so we'll do it.

TL Have you thought about recording it in Florida?

GG We wouldn't want to make any enemies so we'll just say that we'll consider it just like we'd consider anything else.

TL Do you think that on this next album there will be more record company influence considering you're signed now?

GG They'll influence us hopefully by giving us a budget instead of us having to go in debt. They're gonna help a bit on the financial end. Slash, and I really respect them, they really let their artists be artists. I'm sure they're going to be very interested but it's not going to be the kind, how it happens to be arranged or what instruments we put on it and this or that, you know, they're not that way.

TL I'm glad to hear that because then it would sound overproduced and lose the raw sound.

GG If anybody decided to be that way, we wouldn't put up with it, although, some people might hear our record and think "Oh, they sold out, they changed it" because we're not into being a fashion, you know, to be able, well, with the first album we're trying as much as possible not to overdub, and on another album we might feel very free about overdubbing something and not feel that it was "wrong", but I just don't think that that's going to be the case because we all feel that strongly about the artist part. That's the "punk" part, the attitude, our minds (all of this was said with sort of tongue in cheek).

TL How do you think your music will go over in England, do you feel they'll be receptive to it, there's alot of hard core and punk there? (The Violent Femmes were about to do a small tour of England and France with the Gun Club when we spoke)

GG And theres alot of synthesizer bands. I hear some people are getting real sick of all these synthesizer bands and you know we certainly are a good remedy for that because we're very different you know and also as far as like in sections of our music where its really free jazz all of a sudden. In Europe, that is such a strange thing, Victor



has been over there a few times and I've been told from other people too that they're much more hip to the jazz element and that it isn't such a weird thing. In Europe it's a more sophisticated artist as far as music goes, that's what I've heard, and I think in some ways, it's funny, our music, as primitive and not sophisticated at all on another end it is sophisticated. I don't know, I'm optimistic although I'm not expecting anyone to go crazy, like they do here in the States (kidding). But I'm all optimistic and excited about it. Our video just started being shown on MTV so I'm hoping for that.

TL Really, what song did you do? I haven't seen it.

GG "Gone Daddy Gone". Slash has just sent out "Gone Daddy Gone" as a single trying to get it some airplay.

TL Is it your goal to be a commercial success or do you want to just appeal to a limited audience?

GG O.K., about being a commercial success, I almost felt like I didn't have to hear the rest of that question because I'll let you know what it feels like to be a commercial success when I feel that I am one because, you know, I'll just come right out and tell you, a commercial success, I figure that has something to do with money. We've been getting by and we're not having to have other jobs, but a lot of what we're doing, about financing the whole first record ourselves, we're still paying the interest on that loan, we haven't even tried to pay that loan off because we just haven't had money. Things get all tied up when the record is sold, but the day when they sell the record, we don't get the money the next day either. If some day I get a check in the mail, I can call you up and let you know what it feels like to be a commercial success.

TL Well, I'm talking about turning on the radio and changing the stations and hearing yourselves like TLN at Work or such.

GG Well, that hasn't happened to me probably because I don't listen to the radio that much.

TL Do you want that kind of success or do you want to appeal to a diversified but select following?

GG No, I think we really feel that we would like to have as large of an audience as people you know, like us and it's funny, as we've been told, it would seem that we're completely uncommercial, we also are commercial in that when people see us they seem to really like us...alot. And that's people who are 15 years old and people who are 50 years old. That's a real span of people and experience and to have that kind of reaction, different sorts of reactions, but also just as enthusiastic, in people, like I say, between a 15 year old and a 50 year old, they have different types of reactions but just as enthusiastic for both, and have that not be a rare thing, to have that be almost something we can do all the time. In Milwaukee we're definitely the most popular because you know, we've been playing around here for such a long time and the last show we did had a couple thousand people, it was outdoors, and in Milwaukee I feel we've really expanded it to where we don't have a very select audience. My brother was in a bar and the bar lady, I don't know what he was saying, but he wasn't getting any attention so he said "Do you know the Violent Femmes?" and she said yeah, so he said "You know Gordon Gano, the lead singer? Well, he's my brother," and she gave him a free drink! It's funny to be in a bar and have something like that happen. I feel like in Milwaukee we really don't have a select following anymore, I don't feel that at all. And that doesn't mean that it's just because of us, any other band. I don't think that if you get a large audience it necessarily means that they sold out. People have said that we've sold out, people from Milwaukee don't like the Violent Femmes, say we've sold out and all that stuff, and I really haven't changed at all, and our personalities haven't changed. As a matter of fact, in some ways, we don't brag as much as we might have, you know, when nobody knew us. I

don't know, there's gonna be people that say we've sold out and...I'm done with that questions, so I'm gonna end it right there. A little glimpse of truth and we'll just save the rest for later.

TL OK, one more question before you go, where did you get the name?

GG Brian Ritchie thought of that, it just came out of his mouth one day on a real spur of the moment thing. Femme or femmes where we grew up in the northwest side of Milwaukee, that's what you call a sissy or wimp, someone who couldn't play sports or anything, you'd call him a femme, and violent is a complete contradiction. So he said Violent Femme and he liked it so they were calling themselves the Violent Femmes Rhythym Section cause they were playing alot of freelance, bass player and drums, and then when they first played with me the first few times we were called Gordon Gano and the Violent Femmes because when we first played together even the first couple of months it was definitely going to be very temporary, we were going to be performing with other bands, I was really unknown and didn't know the music scene at all around Milwaukee and that was getting my name known so I'd be able to form a band after they left so the first couple of months it was Gordon Gano and the Violent Femmes and then when things worked out and it looked like we'd be staying together we thought we really liked the music we were making, and there was alot of possibilities then we decided to form a band, we wanted a band name and we couldn't think of anything better than Violent Femmes, so...I've just been told that there may be only one or two blueberry pancakes left and I've got to go running to get them. Is there anything else you'd like to know?

TL Just how old you are.

GG I'm 20, Brian is 22 and Victor is either 27 or 28.

TL OK, well, thanks alot and good luck in Europe.

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