

Violent Femmes: Decades of Disorganized Music

Violent Femmes were founded in 1980 by bassist/multi-instrumentalist Brian Ritchie and drummer Victor De Lorenzo. The name is a contradiction in terms, “Violent” being self-explanatory and “Femmes” being Milwaukee slang for wimp.

The rhythm section added high school singer/songwriter Gordon Gano in 1981. Gano and Ritchie had previously performed together at Gano’s National Honor Society induction ceremony, where they caused a near riot. Gano was expelled from the Society and suspended from high school for this outrage.

One of the only stable aspects of the band is their aversion to rehearsal. Due to this they would take the music to the streets in an attempt to hone it and earn some spare change. It was on one of these occasions that they were spotted by the Pretenders. Chrissie Hynde and the gang were so amused by the Violent Femmes antics that they invited the band to open the show for them. The hometown Milwaukee audience received the Femmes with unanimous booing. However by the end of the set the Femmes had converted approximately 50% of the audience to their cause. Many years later Brian Ritchie encountered Hynde when the Femmes and Pretenders shared the bill at a radio concert. She said, “Oh, you’re still around.”

The Femmes borrowed \$10,000 from Victor De Lorenzo’s dad to record their legendary first album in 1982. Slash Records in Los Angeles was the only label to offer them a deal with the amazing advance of \$0. The band accepted the deal and started on the predictable round of world tours, recording,

more world tours, nervous breakdowns, band members quitting, solo albums, regrouping, more touring, divorces, more crackups, dropped from record deals, new deals, more touring, record company going bankrupt, lawsuits, etc. etc. etc. ad infinitum.

Fast forward to the present. Many things have changed. One thing that hasn't is the sound of the band. Their loose, improvisational, acoustic sound is timeless.

Mouthpiece Gordon Gano has been called "the elder statesman of teen angst" in the New York Times. Such Gano lyrical pearls as "Why can't I get just one [f@#k](#)?", "When I'm out walking I strut my stuff, I am so strung out", "I used too many drugs!" and "C'mon dad gimme the car, I've got a girl I wanna [f@#k](#)!" have become philosophical touchstones for generations of rock listeners. His distinctive whiny voice, derided by Rolling Stone magazine in '84 for its "ability to clear out a room faster than a methane explosion" is now one of the most influential in pop music. Those following on his path include Kurt Cobain, Billy Corgan, Ben Kweller, the Barenaked Ladies and Lou Reed to mention just a few. Gano released his first solo album in 2002.

Bassist Brian Ritchie almost single handedly created the craze for acoustic bass guitar with his revolutionary playing. The Femmes are the most bass-dominated band in rock history. Ritchie devours other instruments like a football fan devours potato chips. His most recent conquest is the shakuhachi (Japanese bamboo flute). He has attained the rank of Jun Shihan (teaching master) in the traditional system. This has earned him the professional name "Tairaku" which means "Big Music". In addition to this he can be spotted playing xylophone, didgeridoo, saxophone,

conch, etc. on stage with the Femmes. The Femmes do not use a set list. Instead Brian calls the songs on stage, adding much spontaneity to the proceedings. Ritchie has 5 solo albums to his name.

Victor De Lorenzo has returned to the fold after a lengthy hiatus. Minimalism is an overused word in rock criticism. De Lorenzo is one of the only true minimalist drummers in rock. His stage set-up consists of only snare drum, tranceophone (metal bushel basket on top of a tom) and one lonely cymbal. Nevertheless he is able to propel one of the rockiest shows on earth with this limited palette of percussion sounds. His stage philosophy is to “steal the focus” with dadaesque antics such as simulating sex with the backdrop, doing jumping jacks in the middle of sensitive ballads, putting drumsticks in his nostrils and so on. De Lorenzo fine-tuned this method during his years as a thespian on stage and screen. He is the only drummer in rock history to focus his main approach on brushes rather than the more conventional and limiting sticks. He also has four solo albums demonstrating his ability as a singer/songwriter.

Over the years Violent Femmes have racked up millions of frequent flyer miles taking their music to disparate and/or absurd places ranging from gay bars to Carnegie Hall, the North Pole (where they played the northernmost concert in rock history, schools for the retarded, the Royal Albert Hall, Woodstock '94 and so on in over 400 cities in 40 countries. They've performed in all 50 United States.

They have ten albums out. Their first album has the distinction of being the only album in the history of Billboard magazine to achieve platinum status without ever appearing in the top 200.

But perhaps the most distinctive thing about Violent Femmes is their relationship with their “fourth member” which is the audience. No other band in rock has stayed active for as long while maintaining the same demographic. The Femmes have some audience members who have grown up with the band, and even some 3 generation families of fans. But for the most part the audience remains the same high school and college kids who have always been the core of the Femmes crowd. This “Picture of Dorian Grey” effect is unique in the world of pop music. Please join the Femmes in celebrating their third decade of insanity.