

# Violent Femmes

by Russell Brown

## Vox Pop

Violent Femmes? Weird name.

## Vex Pop

"Someone said we sounded like the Clean. Do we?"

Not really.

## Sex Pop

"I am CONVINCED that this Gordon Gano is the sexiest dude ever to walk on the face of this earth. I may be a boy but I'm not. Gordon, I love you!! I just hope you're not gay, 'cause if you are I'll have no chance!"

Bev (Wellington)

"How did she know which one was me? Our names aren't next to our pictures on the back of the album."

It's easy Gordon. You look like your voice.

## Shox Pop

"I'm not allowed to have pictures taken with my glasses on. It ruins the image as a real rock 'n' roll, sex kind of band. Too intellectual ..."

"Actually it's really handy wearing glasses sometimes. Like, after we've played I can put them on and wander around in the audience, among people who've been staring at me only a few minutes before. I like that."

## Enough Kidding Around

Gordon Gano is 20 and plays guitar and violin and sings and writes songs for Milwaukee's Violent Femmes. He is small, unshaven and bespectacled and wears a raincoat that probably looked old and grubby when it was brand new. I shouldn't say it but he reminds me a bit of Jonathan Richman. Victor de Lorenzo plays drums and percussion, is 29 and thoughtful in manner. Brian Ritchie plays bass, is tall with a sonorous voice and is elsewhere.

## But If They Don't Sound Like the Clean, Who Do They Sound Like?

It's already become a cliché to portray the Violent Femmes as the offspring of some unholy marriage of the Velvet Underground and Jonathan Richman. Does that annoy you?

"Very, very much, yeah," says Gordon.

Is it accurate in your opinion?

"Yeah, there's a connection there but I think there's been way too much importance placed on it. I think some people would think we were trying to sound like those bands, but I don't think we sound that much like them. I think we stand on our own musical merits."

"But I try and be patient with them because when you come up against something you're not familiar with it's natural to compare it to something you know. But I think when our second album comes out all those comparisons will fade away."

Are there any other influences you can put your finger on? What were you listening to when you were 13?

"Thirteen? I'm sure I was listening to Dylan, the Grateful Dead ... well, after Dylan and the Dead there's really no point in going on ..."

Ah, so you're hippies.

"Yeah! No, not really. I think I've always listened to a wide range of music. I grew up hearing country music — Johnny Cash, Hank Williams — and Broadway show tunes, through my involvement in theatre ... and hymns. I grew up in a church, hearing hymns. I still love that music."

## Hook, Line and Thinker

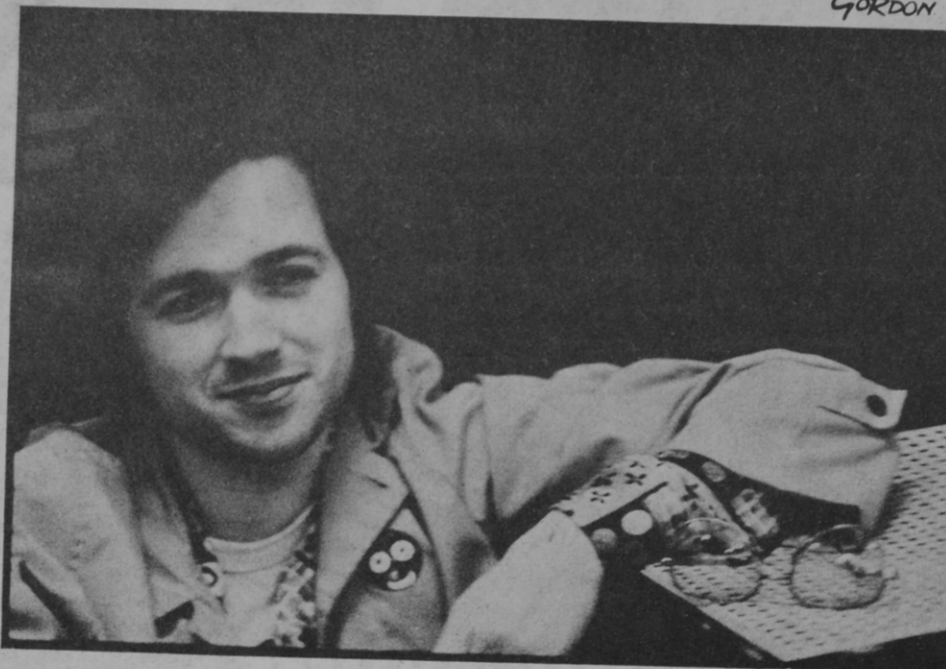
Gordon, one critic has suggested there are enough hooks in a Violent Femmes song for a whole album from another band. Do you think in terms of hooks when you write?

"I don't think in terms of hooks or anything like that. I don't even think that way. With most of the songs I've written I don't even think of melodies. Someone might say 'that's a really great melody,' but I don't think of it in those little sections, it just all comes together."

So what's the element that makes the songs catchy and appealing?

"The hooks. Slaved over ..."

"I wonder about that too," chimes in Victor.



"I think it's because the songs, in and of themselves, are very exciting. They're little complete plays. They tell little stories and also you have a very clear picture of the character who's singing the songs. I don't think Gordon is ever ambivalent towards any of his material — he always has a stance, even though it may change from night to night. But that's what makes it interesting and what keeps it fresh."

## Snatches of Songs

"Oh, Big Hands, I know you're the one."

"Vague sketch of a fantasy; Laughing at the moon like he's been up all night; Ooh, slippin' and slidin'; What a good time; But now I find a bed; That can take this weight."

"Why can't I get Just One Fuck?"

"I ain't no Kid Chicago; I ain't no Al Capone."

"I feel so lonely; Feel like I'm gonna hack it apart; I'm gonna HACKHACKHACK it apaaaart ..."

"I hope you realise; This will go down on your personal record; Oh yeah?"

## It's Ironic That We Get Paid These Sums of Money to Make Mistakes

Victor, particularly in terms of the lyrical content, Gordon's songs are very much youth music, teen music even. As someone nine years older, how do you feel about that?

"Well, I'd have to say that Gordon fools a lot

of people by his age, because the words he chooses to use, how he tells his stories, can't really be described as the ways a 19 or 20-year-old would express himself. It's very mature music and, as an instrumentalist, playing with Gordon is a pleasure because I consider what I do best is give support to people and if I can play behind lyrics like Gordon's and the way he performs them then it's very easy. I'm behind him 100 per cent because I'm all for truth and trying to communicate some kind of emotion to an audience."

"I'm not the kind of performer who likes to do things by rote because that's when I really start to suspect myself. If I start to feel too safe then I know I'm probably not doing a good job."

"As a band we really take risks when we play," Gordon joins in. "For better or for worse, we actively try and stay open as much as possible and not plan our 'spontaneous' things for the night. And sometimes it doesn't work, because if it's a real risk it's not 100 per cent foolproof. Something can bomb and it's like tryin' to ... it's like you've been shot and you're bleeding to death and you've got to get up again. If it works, though, and the audience can sense the danger in it, then it gets exciting."

"It's ironic that we get paid these sums of money to make mistakes ..." muses Victor.

"Of course, some of our best shows are when everything is going wrong, just one mistake after

Victor: "... went out with them."

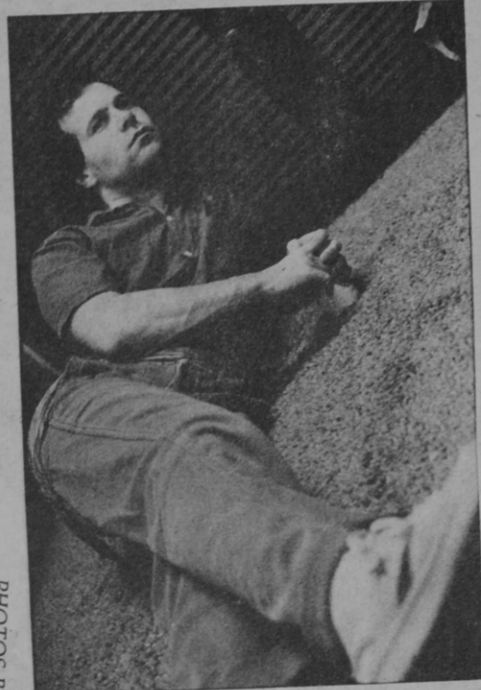
## Violent Femmes The Album

You seem an unusual band to be on Slash Records. You're not from LA and you're not a punk band for a start ...

"Yeah, we were virtually the first band they signed which wasn't their friends," agrees Victor.

"Right," Gordon chimes in. "It's really an LA type of thing and we're not at all ... we don't like LA much. I mean, there's some nice people there, I'm sure ..."

"What originally happened was that we sent them a demo recorded in the little home studio



PHOTOS BY ALEXANDRA WRIGHT



another," Gordon points out.

Does this carry through into recording?

"Naturally," says Victor. "On our new album there's a certain vocal that Gordon was doing and for all intents and purposes it was a mistake. He was going with something I'd given him to try and express the lyric and he messed up but there was a quality about the mistake that was perfect for the song. If we had been very pristine and clinical we'd have switched off the tape machine."

## Electricity Is Invisible

After a year of touring the States you're playing bigger venues now — do you find it hard to keep the acoustic element in the music?

Victor: "Well, I think the way we think of the acoustic element is more in terms of rhythm, of volume and of the different personalities of the three of us interacting when we play. We go from a whisper to a roar very easily."

Gordon: "When we played on the street it was acoustic, although before that we played in clubs, electric. Regarding what Victor said about dynamics, we would sometimes play a night with only electric guitars and people would come back afterwards and say 'That's great acoustic rock. I love it!'"

That's exactly the feel I mean. I don't know if you're familiar with the Go-Betweens ...

Victor: "Yes! We know the Go-Betweens actually. When we were in England we ..."

Gordon: "Slept with them."

that Mark (van Hecke, the album's producer) has and a couple of A&R people liked it but the boss didn't. Then we sent them a tape which was the album," Victor explains.

"We just went out there and financed it ourselves. Everything had fallen through on us — people said 'yeah, we're gonna do this record' and just kept stringing us along," Gordon continues.

"We'd booked time with someone and at the last moment this person pulled the money out," says Victor. "So we thought the hell with it, we'll keep to the schedule, we'll get the money. We recorded it and mixed it ourselves and sent it to Slash."

"Our new album is the same way," Gordon says. "Except this time there was a lot more fighting over it. The relationship between a band and a record company is a real business one and the two parties don't always see eye to eye."

## The New Album — A Nightmare

Gordon: "Well, it's so different. You might hate it."

Victor: "Well, you won't but your readers might ..."

Gordon: "That's right. You'll be one of the few who'll be so intelligent and so sensitive that you'll appreciate it for what it's worth."

Okay, guys ...

"Something really struck me the other day when I was listening to a tape of it," ventures

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# VAN 'THE MAN'

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VAN MORRISON  
Live At The Grand Opera House Belfast

