

Brian continued

Well, we learned some stuff from him and then I made two solo albums and both Victor and myself produced some records for other people, so we figured that we could handle the production of 3 ourselves this time, which is true. I think it sounds the best of any of our albums in terms of sound quality.

Could you tell me a little bit more about your most recent album, 3. How long did it take to record?

I think it took about 10 days or two weeks to record and another week to mix it, so that was pretty quick.

It's mainly acoustic, isn't it?

A lot of it is acoustic, but sometimes we use electric guitar and acoustic bass, or electric bass and acoustic guitar. We vary. A lot of the songs on this album, though, have acoustic bass and guitar and of course drums are always acoustic.

I understand that 75 per cent of the material on the first three albums had been written by Gordon prior to the band's formation. But this one was made up of totally new songs that you had never heard until you got to the studio. Did you play these songs in an impromptu sort of way?

Yeah, but that's easy because all you have to do is learn a song and then start thinking about what you want to play on there and that usually doesn't take too much time.

I think that a lot of people spend too much time making their records and that's why their records sound so contrived. If I listen to a lot of records, I think, wow, this band should have just gone in the studio and played instead of having all this massive production. Sometimes it's a good song and it's ruined because there's too much crap on top of it.

Could you tell me a bit about your perspective towards Gordon's approach to writing lyrics? He writes a lot about religion, death and politics. Where do you think he gets the inspiration for some of his songs?

Gordon writes a lot of songs that are autobiographical and other songs that express his opinions about the world or his opinions about religion. I think that they're all pretty straight forward songs.

How does he feel about present day religious institutions?

He's definitely a Christian, but obviously Christians don't all accept one another otherwise there wouldn't be so many different cults and sects. I think he believes in specific things and other things he rejects. I think his religious songs are pretty simple.

We only do one gospel song and a couple of other songs that refer to it (Christianity) and I've got nothing against it. It's just art. This is art that we're making and anything can be sung about, or painted, or written about, or danced, or mimed or anything. I mean, anything is fair play.

It's the world, and if it's there, you may as well sing about it. Of course, I'm just playing bass and my bass has no opinion about religion.

What about songs like "Country Death Song," songs about killing and death? Where do you think those come from?

(Laughs) Well, he told me that he wrote that "Country Death Song" when he was in school and he was in a study hall and he was really bored, so he was probably fantasizing about killing the teacher or something like that.

Gordon kind of ventured into politics on BLIND, but you didn't really get back to that on 3. Why did he decide not to?

Gordon was obsessing himself in between those two albums (1986's *Blind* and 1988's 3) and that's what these songs are about on the new one, but who knows what's going to be on the next one. Maybe it'll be all political. I don't know. I haven't heard anything from it yet.

Could you tell me about the Horns of Dilemma, the horn and keyboard section that you use on your albums and take on tour?

We take the two main Horns of Dilemma on tour, Sigmund (Snopek III) and Peter (Ballestieri). They're our friends and they play instruments that we don't. We like to have them on tour because we think we can give

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people a longer show by providing a little variety in the middle of the set with these other sounds.

Is there a lot of improvisation night to night in your act?

Well, we improvise a lot during the songs. We don't make up new songs on stage but the solos are always different. There are long sections that are different every night because we're improvising. But we do tend to play a lot of the same songs every night. Some of the songs are not improvised at all. We try to strike a balance there.

What are your individual approaches to playing in concert? Victor likes to clown around a bit while you and Gordon are more serious.

It's just our own individual personalities coming out. I have a large musical responsibility so I'm usually concentrating on my playing. Victor, coming from a theatrical background, likes to goof off and act weird. And Gordon's concentrating on remembering all the lyrics. So, we all have our own job to do, and whatever else we can do is up to us. We don't have any plan. We don't talk about it.

After THE BLIND LEADING THE NAKED, with a video for "Children of the Revolution," it looked like you were on the verge of major success. Are you looking for that kind of big success?

Well, it's out of our control. You know, in Islam, they have a saying — "It is written" — and they believe that the world is like a book that's already been written and whatever happens there's nothing you can do to change it because "It is written." So, I say "It is written," you know.

If we're gonna be famous, fine. If we're not, who cares because all we wanna do is have fun playing and make a living, which we certainly do. Success is nice, and we're already successful. The only thing that you can get from more success is more money, but I've found also that the more money you have, the more parasites are around you and the more hassle you have. I don't care one way or another as long as I can eat and play music.

Gordon continued

Well, I can't think of any kind of excitement by listening to any kind of music where there is a familiarity that develops and certain things which connect. Again, that's back to human passions being expressed. So, influences, I don't know. There's so much.

I've heard the Femmes described as an amalgamation of gospel, country and punk, sort of married together.

Well, there's all that there, definitely, very much so. We are, in a sense, an amalgamation of what could be described as American music, like country, gospel, blues, folk and jazz. Actually, I believe — and somebody could probably get angry or say I'm wrong — but I can't think of any other rock or pop band, which is where we would fit if we had to be put somewhere, that does as much total improvisation as we do. There are times during our shows where there'll be no key anymore. It's really free jazz and I believe we really are playing music and it's not just noise.

And it seems that audiences are responding to it very well. The majority of people at our concerts certainly don't listen to that music as a rule. Perhaps a lot of people have never heard anything like that before because it's just certain little select areas of the jazz community which will listen to or play that music.

Do you have a background in jazz at all?

No, I don't. I got a lot of introduction into that from Brian and Victor. Victor used to work the door at a place called the Jazz Gallery in Milwaukee, which was a wonderful place. It's actually the first club in Milwaukee that we started playing at regularly and we were the first act to play there on a regular basis that was in the rock and roll field, which was ironic and really quite nice.

They would have all these jazz legends that would come thorough and so I got to hear a lot of jazz music. Live, also, not just on record. There are many kinds of music that speak to me stronger live. Certain kinds of music can speak equally strong on a record. I suppose you can make an argument saying that if it's being done well, then it's always best live. There seems to me to be a big difference, for some reason, with jazz in a live context.

Gospel is also very much like that. I always have an idea of it as a worship thing, though I suppose that for many people it's just a style of music and they enjoy it for that sake. For me it always connects with a church idea or an idea of people coming together. And speaking of live, many times I've had people say, "I like your records. Your records are good and I enjoy them but the thing I really love is you playing live."

I understand from Brian that when you joined the band you could hardly even play a solo.

That's true, that really is true. (laughs) There's a lot that he says that isn't true but that one is very quotable. Yeah, I was a goner. I was just lost. I didn't know what to do with taking a solo.

Did Brian just teach you as you went?

He never really taught me. Nobody really taught me and any attempts at teaching me were a hopeless failure. I just ended up doing it enough and having enough desire. And I still don't know, on guitar, scales or anything. When I jump up on the neck and take a solo, I don't know what notes I'm playing. Not at all. And the best moments are when I am just as surprised as anyone about what I just played or what I just did. There's something very exciting about that.

It took me a long time to find a certain style that works for me which is not based on knowing the scales or where I am, but just desire and plain experience. One thing Brian did that really helped (laughs) was he gave me a little fuzz box, as if to say if he can't play a solo, well then maybe that will give him a little more, uh... you know... balls. I guess. It's like, here I am and now I've got this mean, big fuzz sound, so maybe I'll feel inspired to hit another note. That was a help for a while, and we did that, and I still now will always use a little pedal to crank up the volume and give a little edge, but it's not like what we used to do.

Could you tell me a little bit about your lyrics? Some of them have been described as morbid or bizarre. Where does the inspira-

tion for songs like "Kiss Off," which is about teen suicide (from 1983's VIOLENT FEMMES), come from, and how do you turn around and write a kind of gospel song or spiritual song like "Jesus Walking on the Water" (from 1984's HALLOWED GROUND)?

Well, all I can say, at the risk of sounding too cliché, is that I believe that's all a part of life. I don't think I'm the only one that feels the spectrum and the different experiences of life. Maybe I feel it to a greater degree than some people. I guess I don't even know how to answer that question, because it seems so natural.

I guess I feel the need to express all the different parts of my responding to, or reacting to, life and that will come out in the songs. Maybe part of it is that I don't censor, you know, I don't think that this can't go with this or I can't play this song for some people. What some people might do is they won't even want to write a song. I don't know really what's right or wrong about that. I just know that I haven't censored anything. I've always expressed whatever was troubling me or whatever I was happy about.

So a song like "Kiss Off" is autobiographical?

Well, they all are, to a greater or lesser degree, and usually to a greater degree. Yet at the same time, they're not permanently bound to that. Now, when I do a song like "Kiss Off," I do it with an awareness of some of the sense and feeling of where it came from and how I write it, but also very much where it is right now.

If I'm singing the line "I need someone, a person to talk to," which is the line that starts off the song, and I'm doing that every night then I'm thinking, "Okay, I hope there's a lot of kids out there, and if they feel the way I used to feel then maybe they might like to hear this." Of course, I still don't need a person to talk to, but doing the song is not nostalgia. I can still sing that line and mean it when I sing it.

Where does the impetus for your more political songs come from, like "Hallowed Ground" (from 1984's HALLOWED GROUND)? Actually, I guess I'm assuming that the song is a political song.

Well, it depends on how you define political. That has been described as just a religious song. There are parts of it that are right from scriptures. But then it's also related to world events, so it can be taken as political, too. It's the same thing, it's just writing about whatever I feel inclined to write about, whatever I feel the need to write about.

What led to the layoff between THE BLIND LEADING THE NAKED (1986) and the current album, 3? I heard that there were problems between the band on the last tour.

Not really just on the tour, but in general with all kinds of different things. We had reached a burnout point about anything that you would care to discuss, which of course I wouldn't care to discuss. Let's just say that we were at a burnout level all across the board.

It ended up being a great thing, to cut it right there and everyone go on with their lives and whatever they wanted to do. Everyone was much happier for it, and I believe the record that we made (3) wouldn't have been possible if we hadn't just come to a total stop.

How long did it take to record the album compared to BLIND?

Oh, much quicker. *Blind Leading the Naked* dragged on and I don't even know what it came in at. I really don't know. Two months? Three months? I don't know. And the new one was three weeks. It was especially quick considering that Brian and Victor hadn't even heard the songs before they entered the studio. We just learned the songs right in the studio. I played the song for them, we learned it, and we rolled the tape. Yeah, so it was done very quickly.

Your latest album has been described as going back to the original Violent Femmes sound. Is that what you were consciously aiming for?

Going into the album, we all felt that we wanted to get back to the roots of the group, which is live playing, the three of us spontaneously playing off each other like we did when we first played together. At this time, I feel that that's what we do best. Maybe on another record we'll be trying something else again. I don't know.