

DANIEL WOLGELERENTER

INTERVIEWED

Violent Femmes



Could you tell me a little about the history of the band? How did you get together?

Prior to becoming a professional musician, Victor (DeLorenzo, drummer) was an actor in a company called Theatre X. He replaced Willem Dafoe in that company. And, I caused an impetus for him to leave acting and start to become a musician, although he was always a musician but not professionally.

And Gordon is a guy that I met who had no musical experience. He was never in a band before but he was writing some songs that I enjoyed. So, we basically just got together to play. We started playing live. We never rehearsed. I would look at Gordon's hands and see what chords he was playing and go with that. It was very spontaneous.

What kind of background do you have in music, and could you tell me a little about yourself?

I've played in every kind of band. The first band I was in that recorded was Plastic Land, a psychedelic band pretty famous internationally. Since then I've done a lot of other things too. I'm just your average musician. I've played blues, jazz, funk, all kinds of different rock, psychedelic, folk, Irish folk and anything else.

Where did the band first play?

We used to play on the streets in Milwaukee rather than rehearse because we thought the fresh air was nice for us and it wouldn't help our complexion.

Is that where you were discovered by Chrissie Hynde of the Pretenders?

Well, we were playing on the street and she asked us to open for the Pretenders, but that was it, there was nothing beyond that.

How did you get your first contract with Slash Records?

We just sent them a tape and they, well... we told them that this is what we wanted to put out, so they bought it from us and that was about it. The next thing they knew, they had a gold record on their hands. I'm sure that they weren't prepared for that.

How did you come up with the name Violent Femmes?

It's been so long, we don't remember.

How would you define your sound? A lot of people have described you in different ways.

We basically play whatever we want. We call it music, we don't believe in titles. If other people have that need, then it's their challenge to define us. But we just play what we want and don't think about it one way or another.

Who are some of the Femmes' influences?

We were influenced a lot by '50s and '60s rock and roll, blues, jazz, improvisation, some ethnic music—like Indian and African music. All we really want to do is make a bunch of noise.

Your last album was recorded in '86 and the latest was recorded in '88. Why the long layoff?

To work on other projects. I put out two solo albums. The first one is called *The Blind*, and the second one is called *Sonic Temple and Court of Babylon*. Gordon was working with another band called the Mercy Seat—which is a gospel band that he's not playing with anymore. They put out an album. And that's the reason we took so long between albums this time.

I understand that after the last album the band was considering never playing together again. Is that true?

Yeah, that's true, but it's irrelevant because now here we are. Obviously we changed our minds about that.

How many different bass guitars do you use in concert?

Well, there's the acoustic bass. And there's the four-string electric bass, which is the main electric bass that I use. I switch to a five-string bass with an extra low string so I can play even lower. I use an eight-string bass which has extra strings on it that are high pitched and I use that to play slide.

Your slide bass is considered totally innovative?

No, it's not innovative. It just shows a lack of imagination of other bass players. It's an instrument and you can do whatever you want. There's strings on there and they make sounds and any sound that you want to make I think is fair play. I just happen to think of doing things with the bass that other guys don't do, but that's their problem. I'm playing the instrument the way it's supposed to be played. These other people are too conservative.

Would you call yourself the main instrument behind the band?

Yeah, I'm probably the main instrument... probably the loudest instrument in the band, and that's unusual for a bass player, but that's the way the band started.

When Gordon was with us at first, he didn't even know how to play a guitar solo and Victor was playing a very spare drum set. He was just playing a snare and another thing called a tranceophone.

So I had to fill up the sound a lot with my bass playing. That's the reason that I've developed such a flamboyant style. But, that's fine with me because I just want to be the wildest and the strangest bass player that anyone ever saw and do things that nobody has thought of doing on the bass before. At least that's what I try to do in the Violent Femmes, to take the bass farther than anyone has ever done.

Why are you guys playing so little from your third album (1986's *BLIND LEADING THE NAKED*) on your current tour?

Probably because that's what we focused on the last time we toured (in 1987) because it was the new album at that point and I suppose we got sick of it. There are some songs on there that we used to like that we don't like anymore.

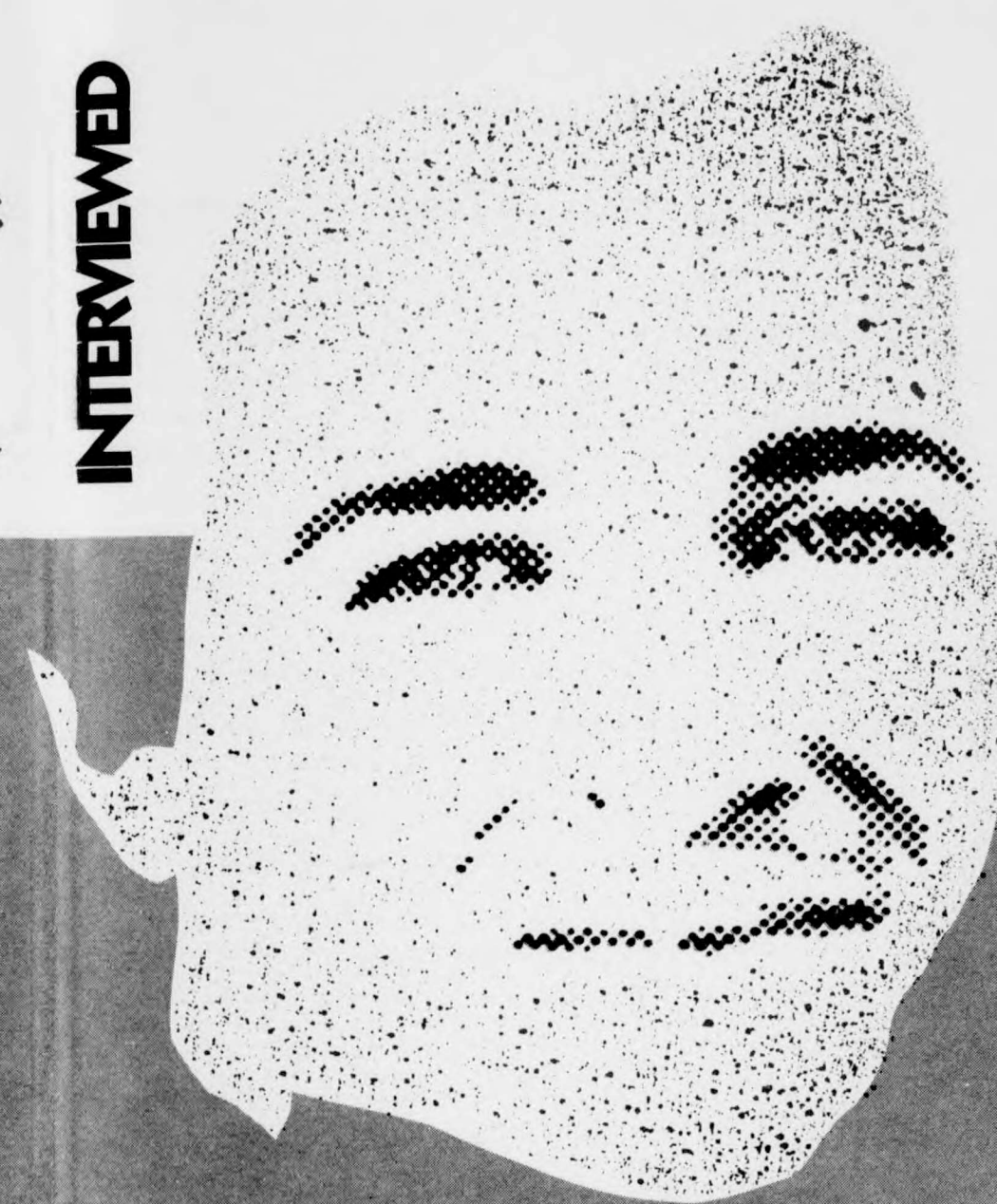
Like what?

"I Held Her in My Arms." I don't like it, but I think that Gordon still likes it. There are certain songs that we just don't want to play. When we got back together we decided that we were just going to play the ones we really wanted to. A lot of the songs that we don't want to play, for one reason or another, were on *Blind Leading the Naked*. Obviously we shouldn't be playing "Old Mother Reagan"—he's not even the president anymore.

How long did it take to record *BLIND*?

I think it took about eight weeks. The album had a lot of overdubbing on it and that takes time. It's painstaking labour and I enjoy it, but that's not what we wanted to do this time.

I'm wondering why you only had Jerry Harrison (Talking Heads) as producer for that one album (*BLIND*)?



Could you tell me your version of how you met and came together with Brian and Victor?

I was playing around a little bit, solo, and with someone accompanying me—one of my brothers when he wasn't away at school in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. That would have been around the end of 1980, early '81. Somewhere along there I met Brian. He had known Victor, they had played together previously or maybe they had been playing together at the time. I'm not sure but anyway, they had worked together and I invited Brian and Victor to come and sit in when I played a little coffeehouse and they did.

That was the first time that Violent Femmes played together because we were playing my songs. Brian heard some of the songs before. Victor, I'm not sure if he had. So, a lot of the songs they had never heard before, but they were playing them the first time they heard them. It really seemed that there was something very spontaneous and really exciting about it. The fact that we were able to do that was really amazing to me. And some of the songs we played that night were on our first three albums.

Has being the son of a baptist preacher influenced your songwriting?

I feel that who and what I am has a lot to do with my parents and my upbringing and environment. Much more so, I think my home environment and family influenced me rather than that I lived in this city and that city, because we moved around a bit. I think my father did have a great influence. But he's more than a little cut-out figure that you can put a stamp on saying "baptist preacher." There's a human being there with many facets.

Both my parents have been involved, along with the ministry, in professional theatre and have been in some movies, so there's always been an artistic and creative environment ever since I can remember. That's had so much to do with how I think about things and how I do things.

I should add that my father was the first person I had ever heard playing guitar. He played a lot of old country songs on guitar, and he had a lot of old country albums. So, I'm sure that somewhere my sense of what a guitar is relates to him.

How does your father feel about the way you treat Christianity in your songs?

He's very... he's... well... It would be better to ask him, but I've heard him say and it seems that he's very proud... he's... well... that says enough, I guess.

Brian told me that you guys can't remember how you came up with the name Violent Femmes. I read in a *ROLLING STONE* write-up in 1983 that it had to do with a high school locker room joke. Where did you get the name?

Well, that's sort of typical journalists taking something and twisting it around. It's close, but not quite it. I never really heard the word in high school. It goes back to grade school, really young, where it was a word that would be used for calling someone a wimp or a sissy. It'd be like if you were someone who wasn't good at playing sports or whatever. There is always going to be some kid that is going to be picked on and they would be called a femme.

One day Brian was just sitting around and the idea of a Violent Femme just popped into his head. It was supposedly a contradiction because a femme would be the meekest kid in a whole group. I think I've gotten my share of being thought of as a weirdo, but I have never really been called a femme. And the same goes for Brian and Victor. We always liked sports and played them (laughs). It doesn't relate to our own personal history, and it certainly wasn't from a high school locker room, so there you go.

You mention how a lot of people thought of you as weird. A lot of

people think your voice sounds weird on your albums. What kind of vocal style do you aim for in your singing? Do you consciously make your voice sound the way it does?

Well, what I try to do is best express the song and just have the feeling there. I like having a human quality in a voice. I think that's one thing that I do. I'm not an operatic singer, but one thing I think that I can do, and hopefully keep getting better at, is having something of a human element in a very strong way.

How do you feel about comparisons to guys like Lou Reed or Jonathan Richman?

Well, I had gotten very tired of that because I'd heard it a lot. I almost never hear that now because I've been around enough and have done enough things where people see that "Gano" is discussed in terms of "Gano" instead of in terms of other people. I like both those people very much. I guess if I try to get objective enough, I can certainly see where there are some similarities and other ways where there are absolute distinctions and differences. I don't want to be lumping us as a package deal: "Reed, Richman, and Gano."

I think to anybody who is familiar with any of us, there is no doubt that you can hear someone's a line, or you could play a few seconds from a song and even if you haven't heard the song before, I believe you will know who it was singing. I think we all have an element of more of a "talking" in our singing, but of course a lot of people do that, notably Dylan. And even he didn't start it, so I don't know.

How would you define the Violent Femmes sound?

I don't and we really don't. Amongst ourselves, we just think of what we do as music. If we try and start playing those games of analyzing it, we could come up with some things. I suppose, I really wouldn't know how to analyze our sound. I feel like we play a variety of different things and we have done a variety of things that have sounded different, yet there is also a cohesion because it's us playing the instruments and probably there's the orientation in a certain direction.

I don't know if you can discuss sound in terms of directness and simplicity, but I think that's there, whether we're playing on electric or acoustic instruments. It has roots in folk music, not just American folk music but folk music of the world.

There's also little glitches or mistakes here and there which is just the human being playing the instrument and that has something to do with our sound. (laughs)

I think somebody once said there are so many squeaks of the strings and things that that is absolutely a part of the whole sound, because if it wasn't there it would sound so different. It's funny, I hadn't even thought about it but I think that is probably a strong element of our sound—just the hearing of the human being playing the instrument and also in my case the singing. I don't sound like a professional singer. There's a very human directness to our music.

Who would you count among your major influences when you write for the Femmes?

Well, first off, I don't write music specifically for the Femmes. I write songs that end up being played by Violent Femmes. I'll just write songs, and some end up as Femmes songs.

And major influences, I never know how to answer that question because there are so many. There's just so many wonderful things and so many different kinds of wonderful music that I listen to. I think it's a real variety.

I mentioned that I don't have an operatic voice, but my appreciation for opera has grown over the years. Listening to a beautiful aria from some opera can be just incredible. The kind of excitement the someone might think is only a part of the best rock'n'

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