

Interview with Gordon Gano from The Violent Femmes



The Violent Femmes is one of the most influential acts in music today. Folk tinged rhythms, genuine lyrics and strange senses of pop have always been part of their repertoire. Many bands have tried to imitate it, but The Violent Femmes' style can't be duplicated. It's always a treat to see them live because they bring a unique presence to the stage. They'll be bringing that and more to the Newport Folk Festival this weekend.

Ahead of the big bash, I had a chat with frontman and principal songwriter Gordon Gano about finding a balance between religion and music, The Violent Femmes' first album in 16 years, *We Can Do Anything*, straying away from the rest of the music world, the rise of the independent label and what the future holds.

Rob Duguay: You're a devout Baptist. Do you ever find yourself conflicted when it comes to your beliefs and your music or do you find a middle ground between the two?

Gordon Gano: Well, given the choice definitely the second one. I don't feel any conflict between my music and anything else.

RD: You grew up in a religious household but you were also listening to music from The Velvet Underground, Lou Reed, Patti Smith and The B-52's. What was it like being in a religious environment while listening to music that was considered pretty maverick at the time?

GG: My experience growing up is that it's different than what you might be imagining. There were the aspects that you could imagine and then the other parts were that my mother and father were very involved in the arts. They were both involved in theater and my father had a guitar that he'd play old country songs, not just religious songs. My father is a Baptist minister, but I would say that we would have been considered very liberal Baptists. There was always a lot of openness to all kinds of the arts and all kinds of different expressions. I have older brothers and sisters that had been into all kinds of rock music and then my introduction to punk music came through one of my older brothers. There were a lot of family connections that involved a lot of stuff other than church.

RD: It sounds like it was both a unique and awesome way to grow up.

GG: Yeah I like that! Yes it was awesome! (laughs)

RD: This past March, The Violent Femmes released their first album in 16 years called *We Can Do Anything*. What was it like going back into the studio after such a long time? Did you feel a tad rusty at first or did you feel excited to start recording stuff that you'd been working on for a while?

GG: Nothing about being rusty because we'd been playing live together and doing a lot of shows at the time. We also hadn't been in the studio as The Violent Femmes, but both Brian Ritchie and myself had been doing other projects over these years, just not the sort of thing that most people would find out about. We've been in recording studios and doing things over all these years so there wasn't any kind of feeling of not being familiar with things. Also most of the songs we recorded in the same way we did during our first album and our second album. It's an approach that works very well for us where we're mostly playing live and singing the lead vocals live.

We're not purists about it, we can still make an adjustment or add a little something, but it's mostly a live recording. Some of them were completely live but that's the way we had always played or mostly did recordings and we're playing live all the time. There wasn't any feeling of being rusty and it was just very focused on the work, trying to see how we could best capture these songs and have an energy to them, which is the kind of thing we're always going for. In *The Violent Femmes* we seem incapable of a long attention span, something will appear quickly or it doesn't and it might not ever come back again. We kind of work fast like that.

RD: When *The Violent Femmes* were first starting out, the band served as an antithesis to the extravagance of rock music. You guys put an acoustic, stripped down spin on punk when no one else was doing it. What made the band stray off from what everyone else was doing at the time?

GG: That's a good question. There were circumstances that really put us in that direction, which I'm grateful for. Two things come to mind but they go together. One is that we had done some rehearsing with electric bass, electric guitar, drum set and we couldn't get any place that would let us play. We tried, we tried and we tried but no place would let us play. Nobody would give us a gig or let us have a gig. Our bass player Brian Ritchie and our original drummer Victor DeLorenzo had met someone who was a traveling hobo guy who had a guitar. I didn't know him, I'm not even sure if I ever met him but I heard of him. I think his name was Doorway Dave or that's what he went by.

He'd play on the street and then they started playing with him a little bit and that gave them the idea that since we couldn't get any place to play, why don't we go out on the street and start just playing anywhere? To do that, we just bought acoustic instruments and a snare drum with brushes. Brian had obtained a big acoustic bass guitar, then I took an acoustic guitar and that started to shape a lot of how we played and how we presented our songs. I guess it might have worked out differently if some club owner heard us play and thought that we were great and we would have started going the more normal route. It's really worked out great that it didn't go that way. We realized quite quickly that with the acoustic you could hear the words of the songs, a lot of punk bands have great lyrics but you can't really hear them unless you already know them because you already studied them in a live context.

When we would play acoustically we'd let the songs come through, the lyrics come through and we also started playing with more dynamics by trying to play more of the louds and softs through our techniques where you'd have to shift and change certain things. It helps bring out certain things in the music if you're willing to go there. Also I think that was the idea too because everyone was just playing louder and louder so in the sense of being punk being a contrary thing we were punk even in the world of punk because we were going contrary to what everyone was accepting and trying to outdo each

other.

RD: You've released music on both major and independent labels, it seems these days that indie labels are popping up on a daily basis thanks to the internet. Do you think that it's a good thing that it gives a lot of different artists a voice and it gives the listener more accessibility to someone's music or do you think that it floods the market full of crap?

GG: (laughs) I think that it's more of a good thing than not. Definitely, I think that it's more good than not. I'll go for the good category there, I think it's more good than not.

RD: After the Newport Folk Festival this weekend, what do The Violent Femmes have planned for the rest of the year?

GG: We have some touring that'll come up after Newport. We're just talking now about different things in the fall, but nothing is set yet for me to start giving out any dates or places. We're going to take a mid-summer into early fall break and then we'll see. It's being looked at and talked about now so I really don't know.

Get all the details for this weekend's Newport Folk Festival here: newportfolk.org; The Violent Femmes' Website: vfemmes.com