

VIOLENT FEMMES
HOTEL LAST RESORT
bio

Gordon Gano: lead vocal, guitar

Brian Ritchie: acoustic bass guitar, baritone guitar, vocal, percussion

John Sparrow: BBQ, snare, tom, percussion, vocal

Blaise Garza: baritone, contrabass and soprano saxophones, vocal, piano, harmonium, theremin, percussion

Violent Femmes 10th studio album, ***HOTEL LAST RESORT***, resides among the groundbreaking band's finest work, simultaneously refining and redefining their one-of-a-kind take on American music, mingling front porch folk, post punk, spiritual jazz, country blues, avant garde minimalism and golden age rock 'n' roll into something still altogether their own. Founded and fronted of course by singer/guitarist Gordon Gano and acoustic bass guitarist Brian Ritchie, the Milwaukee-born combo remains as warm, wise and weird as ever before, with such new favorites as "Another Chorus" and "Everlasting You" continuing to mine the vast range of ideas, melodic complexity and organic sonic craftsmanship that has characterized the band's body of work since their landmark self-titled 1983 debut.

"I think it's probably the best [album] we've made since *HALLOWED GROUND*," Ritchie says. "We didn't really know that we had something to say, but it turns out that the songs are really good and we were able to sink our teeth into them and come up with something which is just as good as anything we've ever done. I'm even a little bit surprised myself."

Violent Femmes are undeniably one of the most inventive and original bands of this or any other era, constantly pushing forward with their singular blend of folk and punk, sarcasm and spirituality. Founded in 1981, the originally Milwaukee-based band's remarkable three-decade-plus career has produced a series of truly iconic singles - among them such classics as "American Music," "Gone Daddy Gone," "Nightmares," "Add It Up" and of course, "Blister In The Sun" - along with cumulative worldwide album sales in excess of 10 million, with 1983's *VIOLENT FEMMES* awarded RIAA platinum eight years after its initial release.

The turn of the millennium saw Gano and Ritchie - who are based in the United States and Tasmania respectively - take a much-needed hiatus from Violent Femmes, returning to live action in 2013 with a wide-ranging tour that included both headline dates and ecstatically-received festival sets around the world. Femmes have been recording prolifically of late. 2015's *HAPPY NEW YEAR* EP was followed by the band's acclaimed ninth studio album and first full-length collection in nearly two decades, 2016's *WE CAN DO ANYTHING*. Next was *2 MICS & THE TRUTH: UNPLUGGED & UNHINGED IN AMERICA*, a 2-LP collection of the Femmes reinventing their catalog with all-new live interpretations recorded in-studio at radio stations around the country.

Nearly non-stop touring coincided with these releases, augmented by percussionist John Sparrow and multi-instrumentalist Blaise Garza, both longtime members of The Horns of Dilemma, the band's ever-evolving cabal of multi-instrumentalist backing musicians. Having spent much of 2018 on the road, Violent Femmes decided to hit the studio in November before returning to their respective homes for the holidays.

"We just kind of felt like [making a record]," Ritchie says. "That's the main reason to do it nowadays. The record industry as we knew it has kind of collapsed, so the main reason to [record] is for fun."

"There've always been songs," Gano says. "More often, making a record is just about schedules. We live on opposite sides of the planet. Sides? It's round! I don't know, but we live far away from each other."

Five November days were booked at Denver, CO's Mighty Fine Productions with GRAMMY® Award-winning producer Ted Hutt (The Gaslight Anthem, Old Crow Medicine Show) and GRAMMY® Award-winning engineer Ryan Mall behind the board. Working with such a skilled production team allowed

Violent Femmes to be their idiosyncratic selves while still taking full advantage of the studio's potential.

"Ted is a musician himself," Ritchie says, "and he understands the Femmes' sound. He had no interest in trying to recreate us into something else. He wanted to bring out the best of what the band is already good at."

"Ted did a great job working with us," Gano says. "It's all us, but [the album's] also as good as it is because of his involvement, for sure."

As is their wont, Violent Femmes did little if any pre-production, preferring to track together live whenever possible. The band's goal, as ever, was to get as close to the moment of creation as possible, while also capturing the natural sound of natural instruments.

"Our usual way of going about things was very much get in, start doing it, and figure things out as we go," says Gano. "See what sticks, see what's the situation we're in, and then decisions are made in the moment."

"We go in with an open mind" Ritchie says, "and just try to suspend any kind of judgment and do what's best for the material."

HOTEL LAST RESORT comprises "a mix of new songs and songs that really go back quite a ways," says Gano, with some dating back almost three decades, and others written in the weeks before recording. Songs like "Not Ok" and "Another Chorus" bear all the marks of the Femmes canon - "I'm sure it doesn't sound like this to anybody else, but to me in my head it sounds like A Tribe Called Quest," says Gano of the latter - while others, like "Everlasting You" and "Adam Was A Man," represent significant stylistic departures, adding new sonic elements and heretofore untapped flavors to the Violent Femmes' musical palette.

"To me, it's about the song," Gano says. "Absolutely and completely. And now that I've said that, it's also about us doing the song. There are certain things that are a part of our sound that we gravitate towards because that's what this thing called "Violent Femmes" has done from the beginning. It includes an acoustic bass guitar; it includes brushes on a non-traditional percussion and drums setup, and, a lot of acoustic guitar. These are things that we've always had and it's nice to continue with them."

"The Femmes have a couple of trademark sounds," Ritchie says. "Gordon's voice, of course, and the acoustic bass guitar. Since we came back out of retirement I've only used the acoustic bass guitar on our recordings because I realized that's what people associate with us. It's like when they hear Mick Jagger's voice, they want to hear Keith Richards' guitar. And when they hear Gordon's voice, they want to hear my acoustic bass guitar."

That seemingly simple core has long been the foundation for adventurous arrangements and unique rhythmic approaches. Sparrow's novel use of a Weber Grill as a rhythm instrument, along with the extreme tones of Garza's central instrument - the massive contrabass saxophone - bring a stunning depth to the Femmes' famous sound, imbuing songs like the moving "Paris To Sleep" with a striking richness and imaginative edge.

"We've put a lot of energy into mentoring [Sparrow and Garza]," Ritchie says. "We probably steer them in the wrong direction sometimes. It's a bit counterintuitive to encourage people to play a barbecue, or saxophones that are too big to even lift, but it has helped them find their own unique sound."

Violent Femmes' enduring interest in collaboration and community continues on *HOTEL LAST RESORT* in the form of a pair of special guests, first and foremost being iconic Television co-founder Tom Verlaine, who lends his immediately identifiable guitar to the LP's powerful title track.

“One of the greatest thrills of a long recording career is getting Tom Verlaine to play on one of our songs,” Gano says. “It’s just amazing to hear that sound.”

The only true studio construct on the album, “Hotel Last Resort” began with just Gano and a drum machine, though this being Violent Femmes, it was “a weird drum machine from the 40s or 50s” that Ritchie found in the hidden recesses of the studio. Bass, drums, sax and vocals were all put down, but it was clear to all some space remained in the arrangement.

“Originally I thought about putting a keyboard or maybe some flute on there,” Ritchie says, “something flowing, something legato...but then it started to come into my mind- we need some Tom Verlaine-style guitar on here. I thought we might just, you know, *imitate* Tom but then wisely decided to ask him to do it.”

Ritchie - who first met Verlaine as a young rock journalist during Television’s final tour in 1978 - reached out and received an affirmative e-mail literally within minutes.

“We didn’t really give him much instruction,” Ritchie says, “but he did exactly what we hoped he’d do. He clearly has an affinity for the song. He must’ve really clued in on the lyrics and he really interpreted them with a guitar.”

HOTEL LAST RESORT also includes a featured appearance from pro skateboarder Stefan Janoski, a lifelong Femmes fan who lends vocals to a rambunctious new rendition of the band’s classic “I’m Nothing.” A polymath athlete, artist, and musician in his own right, Janoski reached out to the band to discuss collaborating on a Violent Femmes skate shoe for his Nike SB product line. The words “I’m Nothing” in Janoski’s handwriting will be screen printed on the tongue of the shoe, while his artwork will be included on the custom sockliner. Chain stitched on the left shoe will be the word “VIOLENT” and on the right shoe, the word “FEMMES,” with a vulc tape mirror applique in Tour Yellow.

Delighted by his passion, especially for “I’m Nothing,” Violent Femmes decided to re-record the song with a few new lyrics and their new friend on guest vocals.

“We’re kind of like jazz musicians or folk musicians,” Ritchie says. “We don’t really see the harm in revisiting a song or doing a new version. So here’s Stefan, coming from the outside and having such enthusiasm for ‘I’m Nothing,’ we thought it was a good time to revisit it and invited him to help out on the vocals. He was so enthusiastic about it, it was like he was floating on clouds while he was in the studio.”

Along with Gano’s ever-original original songbook, *HOTEL LAST RESORT* is marked by a pair of truly stunning interpretations, including “I’m Not Gonna Cry,” originally performed by Greek rock superstars Pyx Lax as “Δεν θα δακρύσω πια για σενα” and now adapted and translated from the original Greek by Gano himself. Violent Femmes have enjoyed a long friendship with Pyx Lax founders Filippas Pliatsikas and the late Manos Xydous, with Gano even joining them on record for “Χαρούμενοι (Happiness),” a Greek version of the Femmes’ “Used To Be” (from 1991’s *WHY DO BIRDS SING?*). Violent Femmes returned the favor, performing “Δεν θα δακρύσω πια για σενα” whenever they toured through Greece, or sharing stages with Pyx Lax whenever the opportunity arose. A lifelong language buff, Gano’s fondness for both the song and its creators prompted him to attempt an English translation.

“I just felt compelled to do it,” Gano says. “It’s very close to a literal translation. There’s just a slight change, just to have a little bit of a flow in English. I’m very gratified because I’ve been told that the translation is very good, and so that just means the world to me.”

“Some of that early Greek folk music, like rembetika, is quite similar to the American music of the same era,” Ritchie says. “It’s almost like the blues or backwoods music of Greece. So we have an affinity for that. We’ve dabbled with bouzouki and baglamas on some of our earlier recordings, but this time we just went for doing a Greek song.”

HOTEL LAST RESORT concludes with Gano’s decidedly non-ironic new arrangement of Irving Berlin’s “God Bless America.” He first conceived the stark interpretation soon after 9/11, recording an acoustic

guitar and vocal version for *KRISTY'S SMILE*, a benefit album produced by his friend and longtime collaborator Brendan Ryan (The Bogmen, Gordon Gano & The Ryans), whose wife was killed in the attacks.

"There's an aspect of mournfulness but also a great love," Gano says. "The song is completely sincere. Other times in our career we've recorded things that people thought were sarcastic which were not. I'm thinking particularly of gospel songs that for me are completely sincere but people thought we were making fun of the words and the genre itself."

Remarkably, Gano's heartfelt solo performance somehow flows into an extraordinary ad hoc coda, a full-throttle swirl of rustic primitivism and cosmic jazz exploration that serves as an ideal encapsulation of both the American spirit and Violent Femmes' own remarkable contributions to the country's musical canon.

"Brian had the idea, let's just do free improvisation," Gano says. "I said, well I don't know, what does this have to do with this song exactly? He just said, America is a place where we can play this kind of music, it's where this music we play came from. And I thought, that's beautiful, let's do a take!"

With *HOTEL LAST RESORT* Violent Femmes have crafted something particularly true to the progressive heritage of American folk music, linking past and present while synthesizing elements of myriad traditions into something that speaks clearly to our own contemporary time.

"That's the thing," Gano says. "American music is international. It comes from all over the world. That's what created it and that's what still continues to keep influencing it. And influencing us."

"To me, America is kind of losing its soul because it's losing its musical soul," Ritchie says. "We stand for traditional American music... just done in a very quirky and strange way."

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