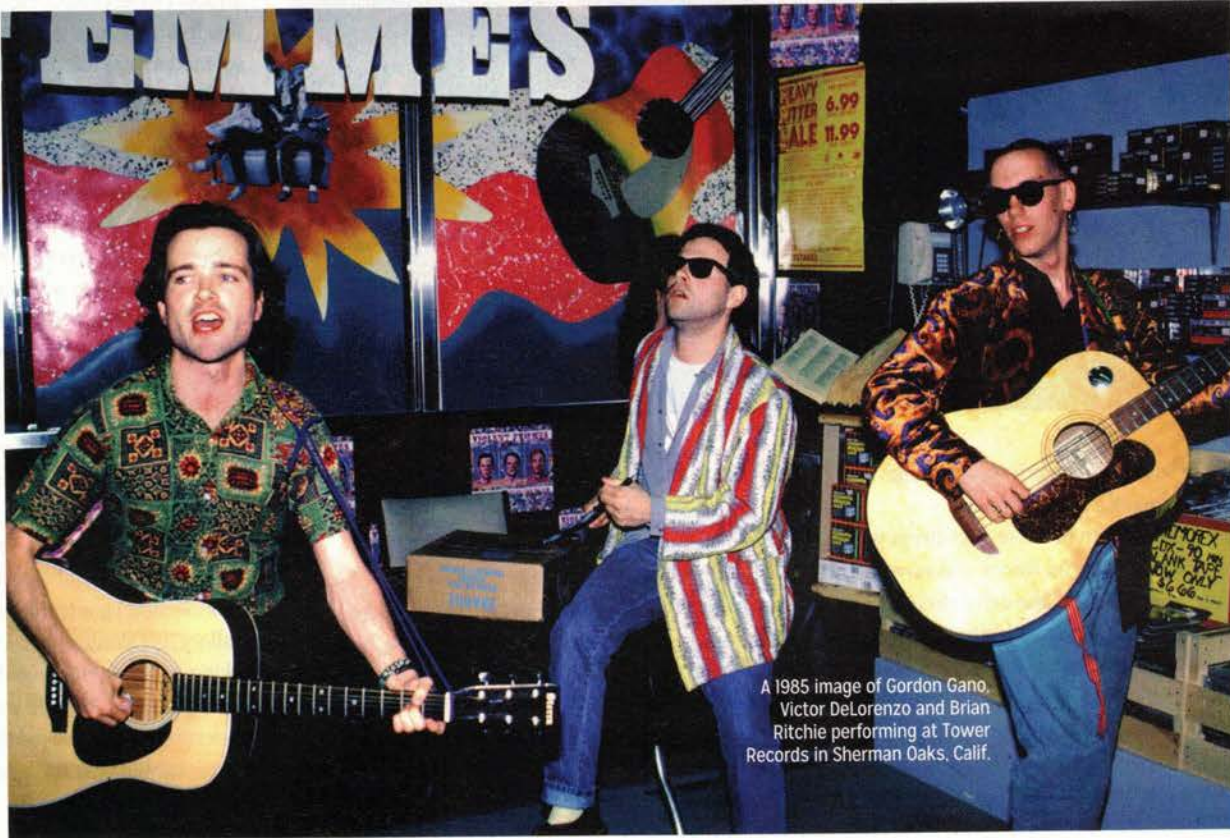


CULTURE

GAELIC FOOTBALL P. 33 ♦ SUMMER OF SHAKESPEARE P. 34 ♦ BEACH NECESSITIES P. 36



A 1985 image of Gordon Gano, Victor DeLorenzo and Brian Ritchie performing at Tower Records in Sherman Oaks, Calif.

MUSIC

Growing Pains

An oral history of the Violent Femmes' early years from those who lived it.

BY ZACH BROOKE

THE VIOLENT FEMMES ARE BACK at Summerfest on July 7 with founding members Brian Ritchie* and Gordon Gano*, and John Sparrow, a relative newcomer to the Femmes. We dig into the origins of Milwaukee's most widely known band as they tour to promote their ninth studio album, *We Can Do Anything*.

Starting in 1978:

VICTOR DELORENZO: The way I originally met Brian Ritchie was through a musician in town named Jerry Fortier. I played in Jerry's band for awhile, and Jerry introduced to me to Brian, and then Brian and I started playing together as a rhythm section.

JERRY FORTIER: I formed a group out of people that were working at Century Hall, and that was the Ruthless Acoustics. We were sort of a country punk band. We were doing a show with The Lubricants – it was a big event at

Major Players:

VICTOR DELORENZO
original drummer

ROBERT SOFFIAN
operator of the Metropole Theater (now Miramar)

JOHN TANNER
engineer of the first two Femmes albums

JERRY FORTIER
founding member of the Ruthless Acoustics

MARK VAN HECKE
producer



Femmes at Summerfest 2013. DeLorenzo, left, started a new band, Nineteen Thirteen, with cellist Janet Schiff. Nineteen Thirteen released its debut album, *Music for Time Travel*, this May.



Original band photo

the time. Brian Ritchie was just out of high school. He reviewed the bands in one of those fanzines.

ROBERT SOFFIAN: Even in those days Brian was intelligent and ambitious and his take on things was novel. I think Jerry saw Brian was talented, and he had the drive necessary to have a real career.

I had these Monday night open mics. And if I liked them, I would hire them. This little kid came in, he might have been 16 or 17. Gordon [Gano] was good. He had that pliant voice and a snide maturity that stood out. And he was adorable, because he was short and little. I said, "OK, you can play next week." I told Brian after I saw Gordon that first evening. They hit it off.

FORTIER: Brian had moved out on his own. He was living for the first time away from home and he was spending most of his money on Pernod, that anise liqueur. He didn't have much money. So he got me to give him a ride to his mom's house so he could take cereal because he didn't have money for food. While we were in his house, he was mentioning that he had a brother that still lived at home. I said, "What does your brother do?" And he said, "Well, my brother is really cool, he has a band called the Violent Femmes." He was telling a lie about his brother being cool, when really his brother was not cool at all. He made up the story but later used the name because he'd made up a good name on the spur of the moment.

DELORENZO: Brian and I planned on going to Minneapolis to play with some friends of mine, and possibly form a band [in the] fall.

Grand Debut

TWENTY-TWO DAYS after MTV launched, on Aug. 23, 1981, I stood in a darkened Oriental Theatre waiting for The Pretenders show to begin. Instead, three young men walked onto the stage carrying an acoustic guitar, acoustic bass, and wire drum brushes. Minutes later, the Violent Femmes began playing their opening song. And the crowd responded with solid booing. Nonetheless, the Femmes smirked at each other and tore into their second song, which, this time, was met with stunned silence from the crowd. People began to listen. Once they finished their third and final song, the majority of the audience leapt to their feet for a standing ovation. This music was good stuff. But just like that, their set was complete. - **ROBERT DWYER**

But that summer we started playing with Gordon and it seemed like a good fit and we decided to carry on.

FORTIER: [Gano, Ritchie and DeLorenzo] are all completely different personalities. Victor projects confidence and stage presence. At the beginning, Gordon seemed almost embarrassed. He was this fresh teenage guy that seemed a little uncomfortable in the spotlight, so that gave him a certain authenticity.

You felt he was really going through all of the angst that was in his songs. And Brian was sort of a little bit punky, a little bit cynical. He's still the least kind of friendly guy.

They all added something different people could identify with.

DELORENZO: We first started appearing on a regular basis via a connection I got at the Jazz Gallery on Center Street. I was taking money at the door there and my soon-to-be wife was a cocktail waitress. We did that for probably a year and a half.

In what is now the stuff of legend, the Femmes opened for The Pretenders at the Oriental Theatre on Aug. 23, 1981. They began recording their self-titled debut album the next summer.

MARK VAN HECKE: Victor was interested in my work and he kept asking me to hear his latest band. He got together with Brian Ritchie, but they were below any standard I would have wanted to deal with on a professional level.



BY THE NUMBERS

2
Founding members remain

Lawsuits about a Wendy's advertisement:
ONE

9
Studio albums



1
Breakup (plus one hiatus)

Top photo by John Schulze; button band photo by George Lange, courtesy of Victor DeLorenzo; current band photo by Ebru Yildiz

Finally they got together with Gordon Gano, and Gordon had these really cool songs. They were very theatrical. They asked me if I would I would do a demo, and so I took them into my own personal project studio and I recorded a demo. Three songs. I traveled to L.A. and to New York to shop my scores and the records I produced. It got a lot of rejections, naturally. Like 24, probably. A lot of people thought I was nuts and this was shit. I knew it wasn't. That was my work and I was proud of it. I just liked it.

DELORENZO: At that point, being that I was the oldest in the group and also the one with a lot of responsibility to make the business happen for us, I considered asking a few people for the money, but I figured the best person would be my father, and he was kind and gracious enough to lend us the \$10,000.

JOHN TANNER: At that time there was great recording studio in Lake Geneva. I started freelancing there. [Mark Van Hecke] was the source of getting them known to the public. You can have a great product, but it means nothing if doesn't get out there. He formulated their material into solid songs.

VAN HECKE: [The studio was] in a state of collapse. You'd go into the studio and there would be this equipment, and the next day you go in there's a piece missing because it got repossessed. I would do a lot of takes. I had to. I wanted a classic, Sun Sessions quality sound.

TANNER: The way that it was recorded, it was a big mess. They flailed around and they played that stuff and it's

awesome, and all that energy. It wasn't like that in the mixing – it was meticulous craftsmanship, guided by Mark, knowing exactly what he wanted.

In spring 1983, they release their debut album on Slash Records.

FORTIER: I did the photos on the [self-titled] album, their portraits on the back. I remember taking pictures of Gordon, and then right away I walked over to the dark room at UWM. This is pre-digital. He came along with me to see how the photos turned out. He was telling me how we were going to give it one year and not go to college and see what happened with the Femmes.

DELORENZO: The Violent Femmes were really into it for the long haul from the beginning. We wanted to write our own original material and be known for that.

I guess we were successful in that regard. ♦

**Via their record label, both Gano and Ritchie declined to comment. These interviews have been edited and condensed.*

"A LOT OF PEOPLE THOUGHT I WAS NUTS AND THIS WAS SHIT. I KNEW IT WASN'T."

- MARK VAN HECKE



1

Gnarls Barkley
cover

Total members
throughout
the years:

SIX

2

Times DeLorenzo
has left the band