



Violent Femmes

Hallowed Ground

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On *Hallowed Ground* by Violent Femmes

Steve Goldberg

The fall of 1983, my junior year of high-school, I finally shed my heavy metal skin; I shaved my wispy mustache, flipped my shaggy mullet into a new-wavy long-in-front/short-in-back, took out my David Lee Roth gold hoop earrings and tried on Robert Smith eyeliner and lipstick.

Sure, this all (mostly) began because of a girl. A girl who loved Culture Club and more specifically Boy George, to the point of single-minded obsession. "You look AMAZING!" I remember Julie saying to me as I sat perched on the edge of her black bedspread, as she held the small pencil up to my eye, her thin index finger gently pulling the skin beneath the lid down. "Don't move." I didn't, but that didn't stop another part of my hormone-ravaged body from moving around and I started to fantasize about Julie and me conjoining our deep red and black lipsticks.

Alas, my role would remain a willing, shy boy mannequin, and when my seasonal allergies acted up—running nose, itchy, watery eyes—it would put the kibosh on my newly sculpted goth persona. And send Julie slinking off to find another eager lad to dress up.

But the makeover had begun. I craved new music that pushed boundaries—anything that represented the polar opposite of my old Van Halen and Iron Maiden records. I rode my bike to Tempo Records on Reseda Boulevard and approached the clerk—who looked like the singer of A Flock of Seagulls—and asked him who the most daring new bands out there were. "Have you heard of Violent Femmes?" I shook my head no. He rolled his eyes. "Have you heard of Hoodoo Gurus?" Again, I shook my head.

I left the store a proud new owner of the sophomore albums of both bands, *Hallowed Ground* and *Mars Needs Guitars*.

I certainly enjoyed the fun, twangy, garage-rock of Hoodoo Gurus, but "Hayride to Hell" didn't pack the same devilish punch of the Femmes' cowboy-noir opening track, "Country Death Song." Gordon Gano's nasally and dramatic delivery sounded unlike any lead vocalist I'd ever heard before. He sang of *fathers' throwing their lovely daughters in wells*; of *digging black girls, oh so much more than white girls*; of *digging white boys oh so much more than the black boys*. My suburban San Fernando Valley-boy mind was being blown. Lyrically, *Hallowed Ground* would cover the gamut of taboo subject matter: religion, race, bisexuality, infanticide, drug use, and other topics my sheltered teenage self could not possibly fathom.

And it wasn't just the lyrical content that shook me to my musical core. The instrumentation—snare drum, vibraphone, stand-up bass, jew's-harp, marimba, clarinet, saxophone, acoustic guitar—it wasn't new wave, it wasn't punk rock, it wasn't folk. I couldn't find a label for it and this both scared and exhilarated me. Brian Ritchie's nimble bass often played the role that lead guitar usually held. The epic third track, "Never Tell", is a veritable showcase for Ritchie's fantastic four-stringed fretwork. And Victor De Lorenzo's frenetic percussion, often using only a snare, hi-hat and bass drum, forced me to consider the prospect that less can be more. I'd been raised on John Bonham and Neil

Peart, so for me to be so impressed by a drummer playing in such a stripped-down style really altered my whole world as to what defined a great drummer.

I was a middle-class Jewish kid, so a lot of the Christian imagery that soaks *Hallowed Ground* like so much holy water, may have gone over my head. But it was abundantly clear, even to me, that Gordon Gano was working through some conflicted feelings regarding his religion. That Gano, even at 19 or 20 years old could offer views both critical ("Hallowed Ground") and celebratory ("Jesus Walking on the Water"), is a testament to the creative and spiritual fire that fed such auspicious songwriting. Jesus was a Jew, so I suppose it's not so strange that this album would stand out for me as a musical marker.

I had never heard Violent Femmes' self-titled debut album before purchasing *Hallowed Ground*. "Kiss Off," "Blister in the Sun," "Add it Up," "Gone Daddy Gone" — it's no secret that the Femmes' first was their most successful release and arguably one of the most important albums of the '80s. Even the 20-somethings of today know at least one of those classic tunes. But we don't always access our favorite archronologically. I had been a metal-head in 1983, and so didn't discover Violent Femmes until their second album's release.

So much is about timing. If *Hallowed Ground* had come out a year earlier, or if that clerk at Tempo hadn't recommended the album to me, it may never have rooted its place in my musical garden. If Julie hadn't tried to turn me into her personal Boy George, I may still be rocking a mullet. And writing about how Scorpions' *Blackout* changed my life.