

# The Violent Femmes shun cliches, breed emotion, dynamics with style

By Chris McCubbin  
Staff Reporter

I really, really wanted to write a story on the Violent Femmes without once using the words "unique," "original," or "eclectic."

It can't be done. The central, inescapable fact about the Femmes' music, even more important than their hauntingly-bouncy pop hooks or their brilliantly satiric, agonizingly honest lyrics is the way the Femmes manage to avoid ever sounding like anybody, even and especially, the Violent Femmes.

The Violent Femmes will play at Peony Park in Omaha, Thursday at 8 p.m. Last week I talked to Femmes drummer Victor DeLorenzo about the band and its music.

DeLorenzo came across as friendly and articulate, despite the fact that I was his fifth phone interview that day, and that many faceless journalistic interrogations in one afternoon are enough to send even the most stable man into screaming paranoid delusions.

DeLorenzo seemed to have a firm grip on both his sanity and his patience as he amiably, if wearily recounted the Femmes' personal Cinderella story for what must have been the thousandth time since his last day off.

The Femmes began in Milwaukee, DeLorenzo said, where he and bass-player Brian Ritchie would play on street corners bucking for change.

Ritchie met a precocious recent high-school graduate named Gordon Gano who wrote songs and played the

guitar. Brian and Victor were planning on playing with Gano only a few weeks until moving to Minnesota to join some friends in a band there, but with Gano as frontman the band quickly developed a small local cult following, and the big move to Minnesota never happened.

DeLorenzo recounts the story of how the Pretenders heard their act in front of the Oriental Theatre in Milwaukee, and invited them to open for them that same night, giving the Femmes their first major concert gig. DeLorenzo is quick to point out that the next day the Femmes were back on the corner. A record deal and national attention were still a long way off and, in short, the Pretenders connection, while historically interesting, was not all it's been cracked up to be since.

When I ask DeLorenzo how the band has changed since the street corner days, he says they haven't changed at all. DeLorenzo says the band has always maintained an ideal of indulging themselves and staying on their own terms. He said that the essential idea behind the Femmes was and remains getting away from loud, showy rock cliches and rediscovering emotions and dynamics.

I ask about the change of subject matter in their songs, from the personal confessions of their first album, to the broader metaphysical concerns of "Hallowed Ground," to the openly political nature of their newest album "The Blind Leading The Naked."

DeLorenzo said that there was a conscious decision in the band to move in a political direction and address

broader world problems. He points to the new album's most didactic cut, "Old Mother Reagan," saying its message is simply, "Killing is wrong."

Since most of the band's media attention centers around the person of Gordon Gano, I asked DeLorenzo how he and Ritchie feel about the popular conception of the Femmes as "Gordon Gano's band."

DeLorenzo acknowledges that "It's easy to pin the leader button on Gordon's lapel," but he feels that the Femmes music is a group effort. He said Gano brings in lyrics, melody and chord changes, but what finally gets on the record is a product of the whole band. DeLorenzo points out that the Femmes were originally he and Ritchie. Gano provides the artistic inspiration, but he and Ritchie keep the band running, he said.

The Femmes are on the last two weeks of their five-month "Blind Leading The Naked" tour. After the tour, DeLorenzo said the band will take a break for the summer to work on individual projects. Gano, the son of a Baptist minister and a professed Christian, will be working with his gospel group, Mercy Seat, recording and possibly touring. DeLorenzo said Gano's plans were still up in the air, but a Mercy Seat concert in the Nebraska area was not out of the question.

DeLorenzo said that he would return to his first love, acting, until the band reconvenes late next fall to start planning the next Violent Femmes project.

Tickets for the Peony Park concert are \$12 plus \$1 park admission.

# Stallone's 'Cobra', bad but not ugly

By Chris McCubbin  
Staff Reporter

There are three types of shoot-'em-up adventure films. I call them the good, the bad, and the ugly. The good are decent, professional cinema that gets your pulse racing and your imagination working without insulting your intelligence or grossing you out. The good are films like "The Road Warrior," "The Terminator," and most of Clint Eastwood's movies.

It's often difficult to tell the bad from the ugly. The ugly are blatant, boring, bloody and banal. True, worthless trash. The ugly ranges from the unenlightened hate-propoganda of "Rambo" and "Red Dawn" to the violent pornography of most slasher flicks.

The bad are aimed at the same audience as the ugly, but the most offensive elements are replaced with a charming, naive idealism, and a comically earnest commitment to their own amateurishness. Most of my favorite adventure films are bad: Tarzan movies, early Chuck Norris, "Kill or Be Killed."

Sylvester Stallone's new movie, "Cobra," has been targeted for almost universal contempt from the critics. "Cobra" does not deserve the vile things said about it. Cobra is certainly bad, but it's not at all ugly.

"Cobra" is the story of a cop who blows away about a million psychos. I could add a few more details, but who cares?

Stallone is a formidable screen presence. He's the most formidable when he's standing still and saying nothing. During the action scenes Stallone's mugging, grandstanding, and jerky macho moves range from the comical to the painful.

The rest of the cast is competent. The zombied-out psychos are particularly engaging.

What saved the film for me was the fact that Stallone gave "Cobra" a sense of humor. Not a great sense of humor. Low-key is a rather charitable description for exchanges like:

Police Commissioner: "Cobretti, do you know you have an attitude problem?"

Cobra: "Yeah, but just a little one."

But even this is enough to save the film from the almost catatonic seriousness that characterizes most of Stallone's recent, execrable work.

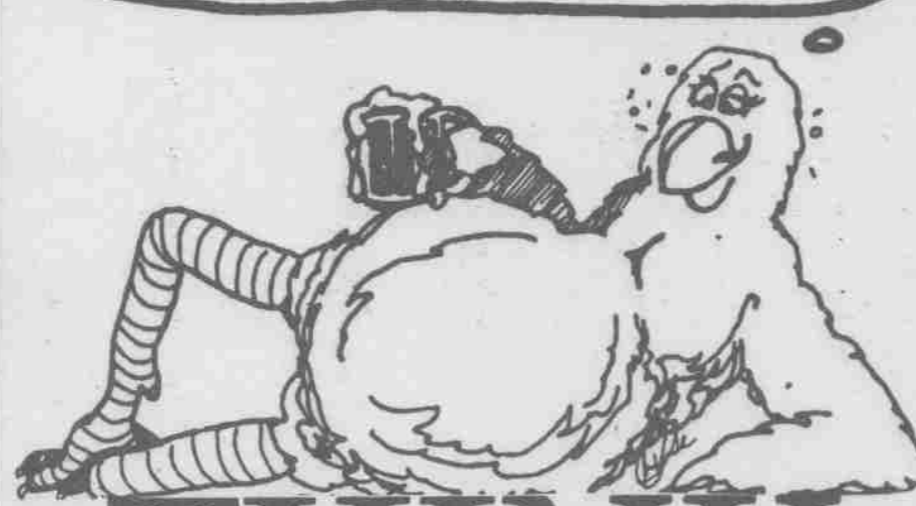
If you've got the four bucks, you might as well see Cobra. It's good for a couple laughs, and you probably won't feel guilty in the morning.

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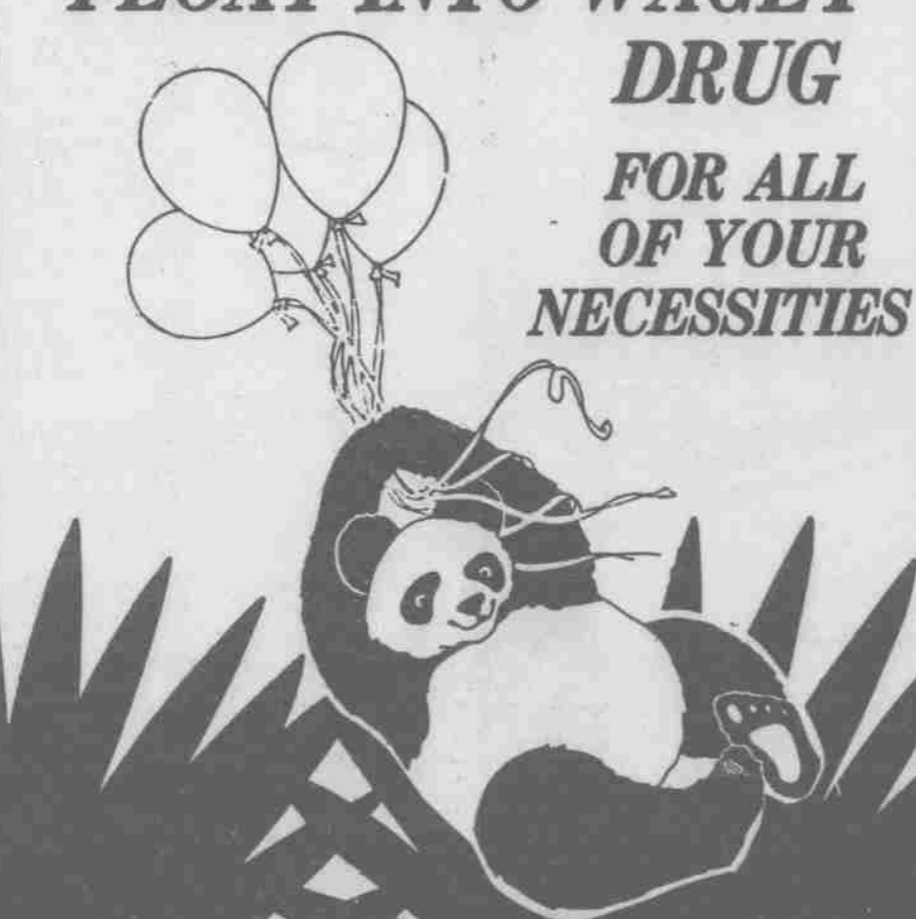
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