

The Violent Femmes Get Older, But Not Very Much Better

CONCERTS

The Violent Femmes

At the Commodore Ballroom
on Saturday, February 18

• BY LANE HARTWELL

Back in 1983, I saw the Violent Femmes for the first time. I was young and just getting into the alternative-music scene in my hometown of Seattle. I'd been a dedicated fan of '70s mega-concert rock for almost a decade, but the Femmes were the kind of band that made me want to cut my hair—three guys playing an energetic, minimalist blend of funky, folksy pop. They were fresh, they were sassy, and their records had great cover art. I knew that I could never go back to preening rock gods, flash pots, and power chords.

A decade later and the Violent Femmes are still around, playing their distinct brand of music to a faithful following—a surprisingly young following, from the looks of the crowd that gathered in front of the stage at the Commodore on Saturday night. Though the audience was hyped, its energy was not reciprocated by the band until around the fifth song of the evening. For the next two hours the Femmes played tight, well-crafted selections from their past five recordings, as well as tracks from their latest release, *New Times*. The crowd-pleasers were definitely the early hits, such as "Add It Up" and "Gone Daddy Gone", with "Blister in the Sun" making me think that on one night like this the Commodore dance floor will become a nightmare of bodies and shattered floorboards.

Though longtime drummer Victor DeLorenzo is sadly missed, new stick man Guy Hoffman was officially introduced to the Commodore crowd and gave the most spirited front-of-stage performance. Lead



Violent Femmes singer-guitarist Gordon Gano. Kevin Statham photo.

singer and guitarist Gordon Gano shared his nasal tones and grinned devilishly throughout the mockingly futuristic (Laurie Anderson meets the Kids in the Hall) encore piece, complete with strobes and smoke. Retro-clad in beads and multi-coloured wide-striped flares, bassist Brian Ritchie showed off his varied musical talents on instruments as bizarre as a conch shell and a didgeridoo. His imaginative bass solos provided a welcome alternative to the standard guitar wanking.

On the downside, ageing musicians singing about whether or not they can get the car tonight are more than faintly ridiculous, and a song about the death of "Milwaukee anticelibrity" serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer does not show astute political thinking. For some, the Femmes have become just another set of longtime alternative rockers who never made it really big, never sold

out, and keep on plugging along in the same old style, even though it might be limiting at times. Their performance was solid but uninspired, and bore no resemblance to the energetic show I witnessed so many years ago. It's obvious that their familiarity with the material and years of touring have taken their toll. Despite this, the dance-floor crowd of sweaty young boys and girls throbbed in their own Femme heaven, oblivious to the fact that it was merely a good show and not a great one.

Opener Possum Dixon showed a youthful love of music, with the lead singer giving a rousing lizard-king performance of the Dream Syndicate's "Days of Wine and Roses". Lastly, kudos to the bouncers up front, who regularly watered thirsty mouths, showing more human kindness than is usually attributed to their ilk. ■

The NOW Orchestra

At the Glass Slipper on Friday, February 17

• BY ALEXANDER VARTY

Without having seen the rest of the New Orchestra Workshop Society's spring mini-festival, it's hard for me to say whether Friday's big-band blowout at the Glass Slipper was Hear It NOW's high point. But it was almost certainly the four-night event's *loud* point: the massed brass blare of the NOW Orchestra's horns, especially when augmented by René Lussier's electric guitar and Pierre Tanguay's drums, rivalled any hard-rock show for sheer sonic intensity. Anyone who might still think big-band jazz is a music of the past should audition this unit for a reality check.

In fact, both halves of this two-part concert attempted to project an image of what the big band might be like in the future, although featured composers Lussier and Paul Plimley

have very different visions of how it might sound.

The evening began with the 13-member NOW group (minus Québécois guests Lussier and Tanguay) playing two of Plimley's charts, "Dwelling in the House of the Spirits" and "The Joy of Chemistry". These works were, at times, astonishing, irritating, hilarious, and flawed. And I'm afraid the most powerful emotion they provoked in me was a sense of longing: specifically, longing for the octet that Plimley led in the mid-to-late 1980s. That group achieved an almost transcendental balance of weight and delicacy; in comparison, this larger unit was unnecessarily raucous and cluttered.

Still, Plimley is a masterful composer, and at times clouds of luminous beauty wafted from the ensemble. Although the pianist takes much of his inspiration from jazz visionaries Cecil Taylor and Duke Ellington, he was also profoundly inspired by the psychedelic movement, and one of the characteristics of his writing is its ability to wring mind-bending sonorities out of acoustic instruments. Morphing is not an effect limited to the digital world.

Less pleasing were his attempts at bringing a theatrical edge to the proceedings. Plimley's solo and small-group performances are often as visually compelling as they are musically impressive, but in attempting to transfer his own eccentric style onto the orchestra—through contrapuntal laughter or the fragmented reading of philosophical texts—he runs the risk of coming off as both forced and pretentious. Better, I think, for him to serve as the sole shamanic figure subverting a more rigorously organized musical whole than to have a whole stageful of faux Tricksters clamouring—some more convincingly than others—for a share of the spotlight.

Clutter also dimmed the impact of some of Lussier's charts in the second half of the program, although in this case I think the miscues were the result of inadequate rehearsal time. With 10, rather than five, days of preparation, Lussier's loose suite, commissioned by NOW for the event, would have been magnificent.

As it was, it was still rather grand. Lussier grabbed our attention right off the bat with a Mancini-on-speed riff that set inhuman standards of pace and precision, relenting only long enough for Bruce Freedman to play a spiralling, lyrical solo on soprano saxophone. After that came a big, resonant blues—a close cousin of Screamin' Jay Hawkins's "I Put a Spell on You", perhaps—that kept collapsing in on itself, some inspired collective improvisations, and a stately theme (worthy of Edward Elgar, I thought, although I don't know what Lussier would make of that) that eventually disembowelled itself on some thorny sonic prickles. Guitarists Lussier and Ron Samworth contributed the most abstract moments (although singer Kate Hammett-Vaughan was not far behind them in terms of extended technique); saxophonist Saul Berson and cellist Peggy Lee took the most beautiful solos.

As a composer, Lussier has a talent for subversion, which is a much more intimate act than mockery. Anyone can mock a musical form: that's just standing outside and throwing stones. Lussier manages to get *inside* whatever it is he wants to twist, be it blues, mariachi music, or some sort of film-soundtrack grandiosity, and from that vantage point he usually finds a way to show us its entrails.

Reading those entrails, we predict that, free from the excess adrenaline of the concert situation, the recording NOW intends to make of Lussier's pieces will be even more impressive than their onstage debut. ■

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