

# Records

## Violent Femmes The Blind Leading the Naked

WEA  
There was little room for polish or embellishment on the basic three-piece sound of those great first two Femmes LPs — minimalism was it. The influence of country was developing on *Hallowed Ground*, but the diversification really takes off here on *The Blind Leading the Naked*, with the Femmes being joined by the 12 members of the "Horns of Dilemma" and playing everything from almost-hardcore to gospel blues, country, Arabic music and an amphetamine nursery rhyme.

Fellow Milwaukee-boy, Talking Head Jerry Harrison produces and helps to fill out the Femmes' sound, polishing but not masking their musical enthusiasm. 'Old Mother Reagan', 28 seconds of high speed anti-Gipper nursery rhyme immediately slows Gordon Gano's new lyrical concerns. Along with his infamous lingering teen-angst, *The Blind Leading the Naked* mixes Gano's forthright Christian convictions with his political ones — also evident in 'No Killing' and 'Faith', the latter a wonderful straight Chicago blues declaration of "I don't believe in no car ... General Motors ... Reagan ... or the League of Women Voters / I got my faith baby, in the Lord."

Vocally, Gano's love songs are desperate messages. 'Special' matches a Dave Thomas shriek with a manic thrash of genuine Ubu-esque proportions, while the mellow 'Good Friend' and 'Two

People' appear very much in the style of (never!) Lou Reed ...

Brian Ritchie's Arabic music interests are to the fore in 'Candlelight Song', and Ritchie sings 'Love and Me Make Three', dirty-ass rock'n'roll with a piano pushin' it hard.

Horns go wild in 'I Held Her In My Arms' (a live highlight) and Bolan's 'Children of the Revolution' gets a big *baad* treatment that the old, sparse Femmes would never have imagined being within their capabilities.

In fact, there's a lot here that is way beyond the old Femmes. It's not an LP for those at His Majesty's who cried, "You're not the Violent Femmes" at any song not off the first album. Gano's lyrics are not going to appeal to the narrow-minded, and musically they've developed light years away from 'Blister in the Sun' (great tho' it is ...). And good for them — *The Blind Leading the Naked* is a joyous and wonderfully crafted album. It should be loved.

**Paul McKessar**  
**Suzanne Vega**  
A&M

The advert in last month's *Rip It Up* for this debut album compared Suzanne Vega to Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell, Rickie Lee Jones and Laurie Anderson. Some large scale expectations there. Pretty unfair too. For starters Vega has little in common with Dylan apart from the fact that she belongs to the tradition of contemporary folk-song he pioneered in the early 60s.

Secondly, she has almost nothing in common with Laurie Anderson. Ms Anderson may well play about with conventional song forms but so do lots of people. Searching for such similarities with Vega's style of songwriting or



Suzanne Vega

performance is misleading.

Ditto for Rickie Lee Jones. Vega's intense, introverted romanticism is a far cry from the sassy West Coast beatnik persona cultivated on 1979's *Rickie Lee Jones*. The backdrop one imagines to Vega's songs is invariably Greenwich Village, Manhattan. Moreover the huge success of Ms Jones's debut centred on her instantly infectious hit single, and upon sober examination her album soon reduced to a mere three or four worthwhile songs. Not so here. *Suzanne Vega* contains no likely hit single — she's not that kind of musician — but then nor does it contain anything that's disposable. Every one of these 10 tracks contains such precise craft that its full riches are revealed only gradually. It is an album that continues to grow even after several hearings.

The record company's comparison of Vega with Joni Mitchell is, while again somewhat misleading when describing a new and original talent, at least partly understandable. *Suzanne Vega* contains the same consciously poetic in-

tropection and cryptic emotionalism that characterised Mitchell's 1968 debut. (There's even one or two of those romantic folk parables Mitchell used to love writing. Check 'The Queen and the Soldier').

Vega is very much a confessional balladeer of the kind that flourished in the 60s and then, with few notable exceptions, drowned in their own neuroses during the 70s. Of course it is possible she could go this way too, but the overall strength of her recording debut holds out the promise of much more.

Considerable praise must also be given to the superb accompaniment these songs receive. While all arrangements centre on her own acoustic guitar, the addition of electric guitar, keyboards, rhythm section, is always deft, entirely complementary and never overbearing, no matter what the dynamics. Try the funk & roll on 'Neighbourhood Girls' or the marvellous synth and violin interplay on 'Some Journey'. In fact try the whole album.

**Peter Thomson**

## The Fabulous Thunderbirds Tuff Enuff

CBS  
This is the T-Birds third LP to be released down here, and their finest yet. One of the hottest bands to emerge from Texas, with the mean guitar of Mr Jimmy Vaughan slippin' and a slidin' through some classic rhythms.

The earlier blues sound has given way to something similar to the Blasters and the Le Roi Brothers; American music rooted in all the grand traditions — the white soul of country music and black rhythms of R&B.

Just one listen to the title cut should convince you that these

boys are more than 'tuff enuff', the rhythm section of Fran Christina on drums and new bass player Preston Hubbard really cook. Just love the drums on 'Look at That, Look at That': rock steady and a monster tom sound courtesy of Dave Edmunds at the control board.

All 10 tracks are absolute gems, with the cool vocals on 'Two Time My Lovin'' and the harp on 'I Don't Care' being standouts. I just wish there were more than just 10 tracks. The T-Birds are touring soon with Jimmy's brother Stevie Ray and it's gonna be a real killer.

**Kerry Buchanan**  
**Pete Townshend**  
**White City: A Novel**  
Atco

A little note on the album sleeve says: "A film written by Pete Townshend, directed and adapted for longform video by Richard Lowenstein and based on this record ... It stars Frances Barber, Andrew Wilde and Pete Townshend. The videogram contains music not featured on this record and vice versa." So where's the "novel" bit come in? Well the main sleeve note, written by Townshend, is a sort of fictionalised background to the film and could qualify as a short story. This story does include the pub gig rave-up episode that we've recently seen promoting 'Face to Face' on television. But that 'Face to Face' is a slightly different version from the one on this album. Oh, and the record sleeve photo is an illustration for the short story (and probably film too). Is that multi-media enough for you? (Obviously Mr Townshend's recent authorial debut via the esteemed Faber & Faber publishing house has further

stimulated his interests in the literary and visual arts.)

But for the moment let's separate *White City* from any attendant film soundtrack or literary narrative functions and just treat it as a bunch of songs. As such, side one is all good, solid stuff. Nothing of classic proportions mind you, but certainly well crafted. There's both the trad-Townshend dependability to satisfy old Who die-hards and also enough original spark not to seriously let down after those fine solo album precedents, *Empty Glass* and *Chinese Eyes*.

Side two opens with the continued strength of side one, but after 'Crashing by Design' the spark almost disappears. The remaining three tracks are no more than workmanlike (whereas on side one even the shop-worn boogie of 'Face to Face' is executed with cunning flair). On 'I Am Secure' for example, two minutes of repetitious synth introduction gives way to a maudlin melody and bathetically self-conscious lyric. In fact it's only on these final three tracks that Townshend's typical wordiness really becomes apparent. Elsewhere the music is sturdy enough to successfully integrate the lyrics.

But all told, six good tracks out of nine ain't bad. With Chris Thomas again producing and much the same group of musicians who've played so well now on all his solo sets, Pete Townshend is still musically secure enough to keep any literary aspirations as a strictly secondary career.

**Peter Thomson**

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