

COUNTRY MUSIC

COUNTRY DEATH SONG

SONG BACKGROUND:

Strict fans of country music will highly object to the inclusion of this song under country music. True, it doesn't have all the elements of country music; sounds more like rock or rock-folk or even, as they ended up calling it, cow-punk. Actually it's a morbid parody of country murder ballads disguised as a folk ballad, which includes elements of the blues form with the repetition of the last line of each stanza. However, the guest performance of the bluegrass banjo player, Tony Trischka, on the studio recording should help to put this piece under country music.

This child murder is based on "a true story from an 1862 news article about a man who intentionally threw his daughter into a well and then hanged himself in his barn. It was written by



Gordon Gano during his 10th grade study hall." (Anon. n.d.) Judging by the general atmosphere of the ballad, the mountain cave with a deep "bottomless" pit could be anywhere in the Appalachians or the Ozarks.

The group originated in Milwaukee, Wisconsin and, as for their name, the word "femmes" is slang for effeminate men. As an entirely acoustic trio, they were able and often liked to play for people on the street. Regarding their concerts, many fans have reported that the way they performed their repertoire was more or less different from the recorded versions. Improvisation being an integral part of their stage performance all of their concerts are distinctive in one way or another. (Haudrechy 1986)

One British folk music critic commented on Gordon Gano's lead singing – "It's a sneering, nasal tone that's a distant relative of early Dylan; the opening track, *Country Death Song* is a distant relative of Dylan's *Hollis Brown* – a disturbing tale of taking the lives of one's family, straight out of the classic American ballad tradition." (Anderson 1984) Two years later Ian Anderson had not changed his mind about this ballad, where this group "...harnessed their manic energy to American traditional forms for their finest moment, the epic *Country Death Song*." (Anderson 1986)

A French critic, in writing about this song, said – "*Les Violent Femmes jouent comme s'ils avaient fait toutes les arrière-cours du Mid West en glanant les instruments rouillés qui pouvaient traîner derrière le fumier, et en collectant un siècle de folklores américains dans leurs petits baluchons.*" (Binet 1985) [The Violent Femmes play like they've done all the back yards of the Midwest gathering up the rusty instruments that could be lying about behind the manure pile and collecting a century-worth of American folklore in their little bundles.]

And a Spanish critic remarked – "*Muy pocos poetas rock han descrito, con tal profusión de detalle y tanta identificación con el protagonista, descensos al infierno de la insanidad como el*

narrado en "Country Death Song," donde un padre mata a su hija pequeña tirándola a un pozo y acaba ahorcándose en el granero. Y lo peor del caso es que el pobre desgraciado no sabe ni por qué lo hace. Con historias como esta, estos chicos nunca serán admitidos en la Catedral del Pop. Gordon Gano se disculpa afirmando que él tampoco sabe muy bien como salió la canción: 'Solo sé que hay muchas canciones country que oí de pequeño, y que me gustan, en las que se narran largas historias sobre gente asesinada.' « (Julia 1986)

[Very few rock poets have described, with such profusion of detail and so much identification with the protagonist who falls into the hell of insanity, as narrated in "Country Death Song," where a father kills his little girl pushing her down a well and then ends up hanging himself in the barn. And the worst part is that the poor fellow doesn't know why he does it. With stories like this, these boys will never be allowed in the Cathedral of Pop. Gordon Gano apologizes, saying that he doesn't know very well how the song came out: "I just know that there are many country songs that I heard as a child, and that I like, where they tell long stories about people getting killed."]

It's interesting to tell how I found this song. I first heard it on French radio in the car during work and all I could misremember were a few garbled lines – "Take her to the cave... Take her to the cavern... Throw her down a bottomless pit." So in my next order from Roundup Records in Cambridge, Massachusetts in November 1985, I decided to give it a long shot and ask them if they knew a murder ballad with these words. Sure enough they came back with the answer – "As for the song we know that one quite well. It's the 'Country Death Song' by the Violent Femmes on the album 'Hallowed Ground.'" (Julia 1985) So I turned around, with much thanks, and special ordered the LP from them.

Of the six versions of the song listed here, five were poor-quality live recordings and of those two were recorded well before the definitive studio version for Slash Records in 1984.

Ref: Anon. 2013, Hallowed Ground (Violent Femmes Album), [Wikipedia](#)

Anderson, Ian A. 1984, Reviews, *The Southern Rag*, n. 22, v. 5, n. 2, Oct. 1 to Dec. 31, 1984, p. 31

Anderson, Ian A. 1986, And the Rest, *Folk Roots*, n. 34, (v.7, n.10), April 1986, Farnham, Surrey, UK, p. 61

Bastien, Nicolas; Lake, Steve; & Blanc, Alex 1985, Violent Femmes, *Trills*, n. 5, (French fanzine), Neuville-les-Dieppe, p. 3-5

Brison, David 1985, Letter to Roundup Records, Dated Nov. 6, 1985

Binet, Benoît 1985, Femmes, on vous aime, *Nineteen Magazine*, n. 2, Mai 1985, Toulouse, p. 15-17

Gordon Gano, Biography, [Wikipedia](#)

Haudrechy, Pascale 1986, *Strange Skies*, Special Violent Femmes, (French fanzine), 18p.

Julia 1985, Roundup Records Credit Form No. 1165, Dated Nov. 25

Julia, Ignacio 1986, Violent Femmes superstición, *Ruta 66*, Mayo 1986, Barcelona, p. 20-23

Spencer, Renée & Whatshisname, C. 1986, Violent Femmes (Interview in French), *Les Inrockuptibles*, n. 2, Juin/ Été 1986, Versailles, p. 10-12

Tony Trischka, Biography, [Wikipedia](#)

Violent Femmes, Country Death Song, Lyrics, [wikia](#)

VARIOUS VERSIONS OF COUNTRY DEATH SONG

In chronological order by recording date

CY-CDS1 United States 1983

COUNTRY DEATH SONG (Live)

Country – Rock – Cow-Punk – Ballad – Vocal

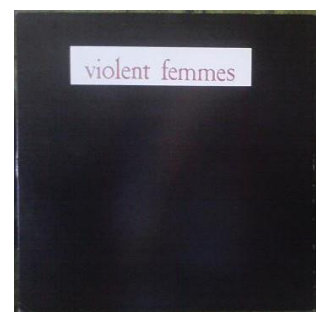
Comp: Gordon GANO ([LY-CY6](#))

Rts: Gorno Music (ASCAP)

Perf: **VIOLENT FEMMES**

Gordon Gano (lead vocal & guitar)

Brian Ritchie (vocal & bass)



Victor DeLorenzo (vocal & drums)

Prod. Co: (?)

Rec. Loc: Tupelo's Tavern; New Orleans, LA

Rec. Date: 1983

Time:

Bootleg **LP:** VIOLENCE IN THE STREETS

(No label) MTM 003 (Two different covers)

12" 33rpm (Sd 1 – Bd 5)

Notes: Recorded live in 1983 less than a year before the first official commercial recording of the song that was released on Slash Records, this typically poor quality bootleg recording had to be listed first here. However, this pitiful recording should be totally ignored and it in no way supersedes the definitive Slash version.

Everything sounds like the microphone was in the second row of the audience. Gordon Gano briefly introduces the ballad, "A song called, 'The Country Death Song' ." At times the vocal is almost completely muffled and the live crowd noises are more present than the instruments, people in the audience can be heard talking nearby. In stanza 5, following the word "seven" the two others in the band do a quick marching count. After this stanza, you hear the vulgar chuckles of someone nearby.

There are at least two different cover sleeves for this bootleg: one in black cardboard and the other white cardboard, both with cut-out pasted-on labels for the band name and the song selections.

Ref: Violent Femmes, Violence in the Streets Bootleg LP, [Discogs](#)

Violent Femmes, Violence in the Streets Bootleg LP, [violentfemmesrecords](#)

CY-CDS2 United States 1984

COUNTRY DEATH SONG

Country – Rock – Cow-Punk – Ballad – Vocal & Instrumental

Comp: Gordon GANO ([LY-CY6](#))

Rts: (US) Gorno Music (ASCAP)

(UK) Rough Trade Music Ltd.

Perf: **VIOLENT FEMMES**

Gordon Gano (lead vocal & guitar)

Tony Trischka (banjo)

Brian Ritchie (mariachi bass)

Victor DeLorenzo (drums)

Prod: Mark Van Hecke

Prod. Co: Slash Records; Los Angeles, CA

Rec. Co: Secret Sound Studio; New York, NY

Rec. Date: Jan. 1984

Time: 5:02

A. American Releases:

1. **LP:** HALLOWED GROUND

Slash SLAP 1 (stereo)

2. **CD:** HALLOWED GROUND

Slash 9 25094-2 (Tk 1)

3. Reissue **LP:** Slash 1-25094 (1990)

4. Reissue **CD:** Slash/ Rhino R2 79950 (Tk 1) (2000)

B. Canadian **LP:** HALLOWED GROUND

Slash 92 50941

C. British **LP:** HALLOWED GROUND

1. Slash SLAP 1 (stereo)

2. London 820 093-1

3. Slash 92 50941

4. Compilation **CD:** ADD IT UP (1981-1993) (1993)

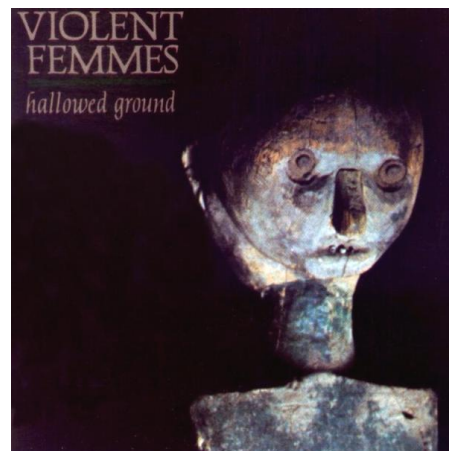
Reprise/ Slash 45403 (Tk 7)

5. Reissue Compilation **CD:** ADD IT UP (1981-1993) (1999)

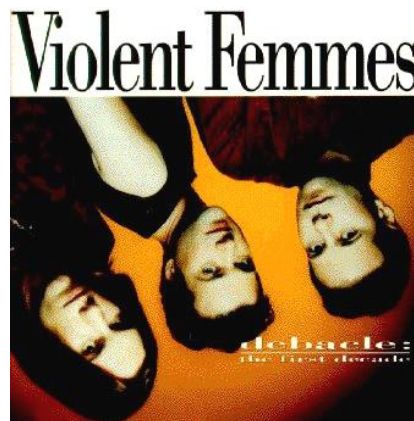
Warner Brothers 3984282582 (Tk 7)



Photo by George Lange



6. Compilation **CDs**: ROUGH TRADE SHOPS – COUNTRY 1 (2003)
Mute CD STUMM 226 & Mute 59505923 (2XCDs) (Disc 1 – Tk 3)
- D. French **LP**: HALLOWED GROUND
Polydor 820 093-1
- E. Dutch **LP**: HALLOWED GROUND
Slash/ London 802 093-1
- F. West German **LP**: HALLOWED GROUND
1. Slash SLAP 1
 2. **CD**: Metronome 820 093-2 (Tk 1) (1984)
- G. Spanish **LP**: HALLOWED GROUND
PolyGram Iberica 9 56022-1
- H. Greek **LP**: HALLOWED GROUND
London DL13058
- I. Australian **LP**: HALLOWED GROUND
1. Liberation TCLIB 5115
 2. Big Time BT 7029
 3. Reissue **CD**: Liberation D19436 (1990)
 4. Compilation **CD**: DEBACLE: THE FIRST DECADE (1990)
Liberation D24515 (Tk 11)
- J. New Zealand **LP**: HALLOWED GROUND
Slash/ Big Time BT 7029



Spec: (All except CDs) 12" 33rpm (Sd 1 – Bd 1)

Notes: The original studio version of the now famous song.

The British folk music critic, Ian Anderson had this to say – “This... record has already managed an almost unheard-of thing – on U.K. release, it achieved unanimous praise from all the music press (N.M.E. [New Music Express] and M. M. [Melody Maker] usually automatically disagree on everything), the music critics of many of the heavyweight dallies, the London listings magazines and just about everyone else.” (Anderson 1984)

Gano's whiny singing voice gets across the agony and emotional intensity in the lyrics. His pseudo-hillbilly vocabulary (without the accent) is in the spirit of the ballad, but, in some places, the text itself conveys a certain sarcastic mockery of poor mountain folk. Gano drags out the last word of the third verse in each stanza, the key words – "drink," "mind," "explore," "caves," "seven," "pit," "Hell," and "pain." Ritchie plays an acoustic mariachi-band bass and Trischka's banjo comes in on stanza 3.

Ref: Anderson, Ian A. 1984, Reviews, The Southern Rag, n. 22, v. 5, n. 2, Oct. 1 to Dec. 31, 1984, p. 31

Rough Trade Shops – Country 1, Compilation CDs, [Allmusic](#) & [Discogs](#)

Violent Femmes, Add It Up (1981-1993) CD, [Discogs](#)

Violent Femmes, Country Death Song, Lyrics, [wikia](#)

Violent Femmes, Country Death Song (5:05), [YouTube](#) (◀COMPLETE AUDIO SAMPLE)

Violent Femmes, Debacle: The First Decade CD, [violentfemmesrecords](#)

Violent Femmes, Hallowed Ground LP, Stanza 2, [Allmusic](#) (◀AUDIO SAMPLE)

Violent Femmes, Hallowed Ground, Various Releases, [Discogs](#)

CY-CDS3 Germany 1993

COUNTRY DEATH SONG (Live)

Country – Rock – Cow-Punk – Ballad – Vocal

Comp: Gordon GANO ([LY-CY6](#))

Rts: (GEMA)

Perf: **VIOLENT FEMMES**

Gordon Gano (lead vocal & guitar)

Brian Ritchie (bass)

Victor DeLorenzo (drums)

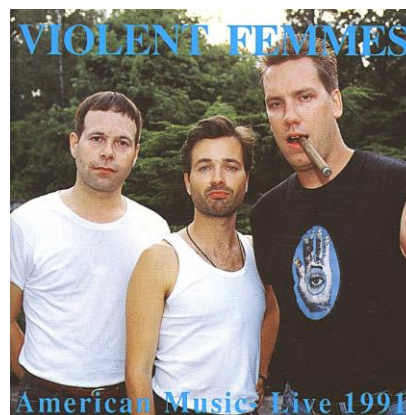
Prod. Co: RealLive

Rec. Loc: Park West; Chicago

Rec. Date: July 1991

Time: 4:57

CD: AMERICAN MUSIC – LIVE 1991



ReaLive RL CD 23 (Tk 5)

Notes: A professional live record and mix. This time, in stanza 5, following the word "seven" we hear some scratching sounds. The instrumental break is a long, screaming guitar solo that climbs the scales but doesn't equal the intensity of the original version where they had the help of Trischka's banjo.

Ref: Violent Femmes, American Music – Live 1991 CD, [Discogs](#)

CY-CDS4 United States 1999

COUNTRY DEATH SONG (Live)

Country – Rock – Cow-Punk – Ballad – Vocal

Comp: Gordon GANO ([LY-CY6](#))

Rts: Gorno Music (ASCAP)

Perf: **VIOLENT FEMMES**

Gordon Gano (lead vocal & guitar)

Brian Ritchie (bass)

Guy Hoffman (drums)

Prod: David Vartanian

Prod. Co: Beyond Music

Rec. Date: Oct. 25-31, 1998

Time: 4:50

A. 1. **CD:** VIVA WISCONSIN

Beyond 63985-78024-2 (Tk 3)

2. Compilation **CD:** PERMANENT RECORD: THE VERY BEST OF VIOLENT FEMMES (2005)

Rhino Entertainment R2 78427

B. German Compilation **CD:** PERMANENT RECORD: THE VERY BEST OF VIOLENT FEMMES (2005)

Slash/ Rhino 8122 78472-2 (Tk 15)

Notes: In October 1998 the band did an acoustic tour of their home state of Wisconsin. Here with the live audience screaming and shouting after the last song, track 3 starts, by cutting into this applause, but also cuts off the first few notes of the intro to this song. In stanza 5, following the word "seven" we again hear some scratching sounds and in stanza 6, after "pit," there is a dribbling, descending run of electronic notes. The Slash/ Rhino compilation notes that the version of this song included on this CD is a live version from 1998, so it is assumed that this is the same take but this was not verified.

Ref: Violent Femmes, Permanent Record – The Very Best of Violent Femmes CD, [Discogs](#)

Violent Femmes, Viva Wisconsin CD, Stanza 2, [Allmusic](#) (◀**AUDIO SAMPLE**)

Violent Femmes, Viva Wisconsin CD, [Wikipedia](#)



CY-CDS5 United States 2002

COUNTRY DEATH SONG (Live)

Country – Rock – Cow-Punk – Ballad – Vocal

Comp: Gordon GANO ([LY-CY6](#))

Rts: Gorno Music (ASCAP)

Perf: **VIOLENT FEMMES**

Gordon Gano (lead vocal & guitar)

Brian Ritchie (bass)

Victor DeLorenzo (drums)

Prod: Victor De Lorenzo & Brian Ritchie

Prod. Co: Slash Records & Rhino Entertainment
Co.; Los Angeles, CA

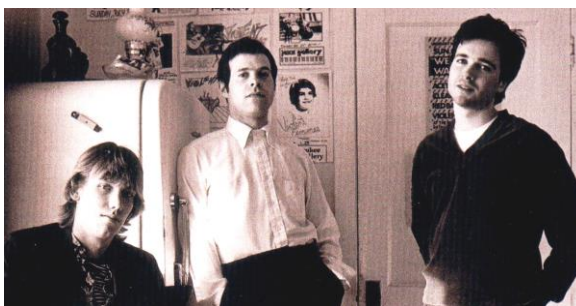
Rec. Loc: Beneath-It-All Café; Milwaukee, WI

Rec. Date: Sept. 12, 1981

Liner Notes: (28-page booklet) Marc Salata, Michael Azerrad, & the band

Time: 5:24

Compilation **CD:** VIOLENT FEMMES



Ritchie

DeLorenzo

Gano

Photo by George Lange

Slash/Rhino 8122-78242-2 (Disc 2 -Tk 2)

Notes: The earliest known recorded version of the song (2½ years prior to its first official release on LP), but it was released until 21 years later on CD.

This is a poor quality live recording where Gano's voice is somewhat stifled. In the spoken intro, Gano says – "It's a country song. I wrote it." Another band member says, "It's called ['sonic' ?]" and Gano continues, as the bass and brushes begin – "I let him set the beat 'cause then later I can tell him if it's too fast or too slow. I'll give you something different." In stanza 5, after the word "seven," DeLorenzo taps out beats with the brushes on the snare.

In several places, the audience proves to have a fairly bizarre sense of humor. There are giggles during stanza 2 and sick, superior laughs during stanza 6 when Gano sings, "I never heard her hit." Then at the end, someone says sarcastically, "That's some sad stuff." A band member says with fake indignity, "I fail to see the humor of that last number," while Gano is saying, "We're getting so many people outside, ya all, try to squeeze them in here."

Ref: Violent Femmes, Violent Femmes, 2 CDs Compilation, [Discogs](#)
Violent Femmes (Deluxe Edition) CDs, [Amazon.co.uk](#)

CY-CDS6 United Kingdom 2005

COUNTRY DEATH SONG (Live)

Country – Rock – Cow-Punk – Ballad – Vocal

Comp: Gordon GANO ([LY-CY6](#))

Perf: **VIOLENT FEMMES**

Gordon Gano (lead vocal & guitar)

Brian Ritchie (bass)

Victor DeLorenzo (drums)

Prod. Co: Hux Records

Rec. Loc: The Town & Country Club; London

Rec. Date: July 20, 1991

Liner Notes: (12-page booklet)

Time: 5:11

CD: BBC LIVE

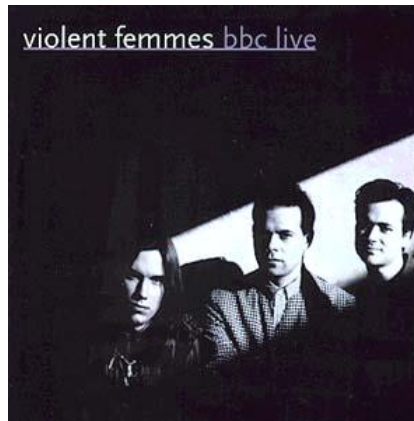
Hux HUX 065 (Tk 4)

Notes: Recorded live at The Town & Country Club, London for the BBC Radio 1 'In Concert' series.

Nothing further is known about this live version.

Ref: Violent Femmes, BBC Live CD, Stanza 2, [Allmusic](#) (◀ **AUDIO SAMPLE**)

Violent Femmes, BBC Live CD, [Discogs](#)



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