

The Mermen

Jim Thomas Surfs Enigmatic Oceans

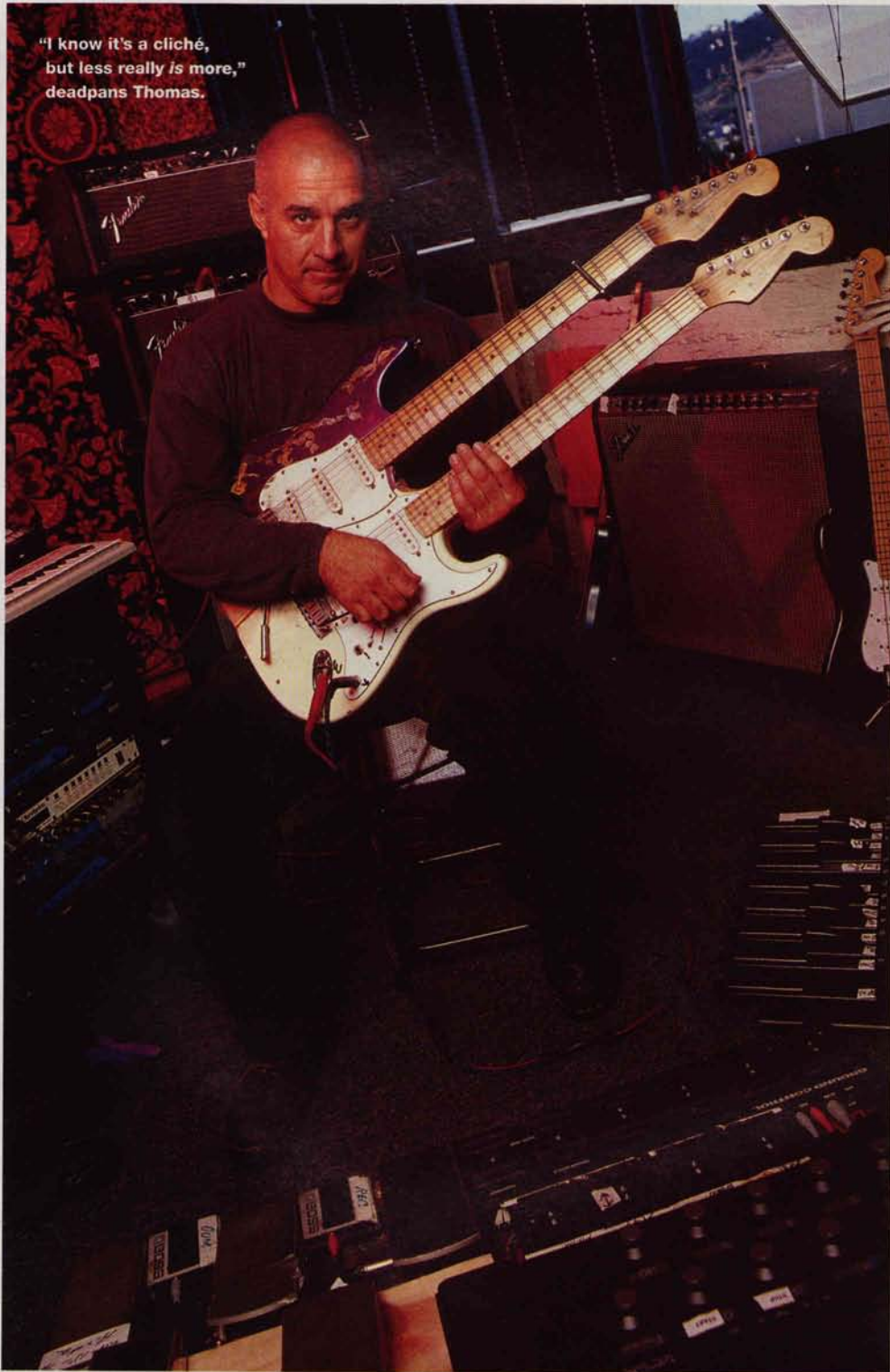
By Adam Levy

Jim Thomas—guitarist and leader of the psychedelic neo-surf trio the Mermen—embraces simplicity as a virtue. But while recording the band's latest release, Thomas found himself drawn to lush, multi-layered guitars and a melange of exotic overdubs (Indian sarod, auto-harp, ghostly vocal chants, and various samples). As a result, *The Amazing California Health and Happiness Road Show* [Mesa/ Bluemoon] certainly won't be mistaken for a Dick Dale or Ventures record.

"It's like our *Sgt. Pepper*," says Thomas, only half joking. "Originally, I wanted to make a performance-oriented trio record—really straight-ahead. But I also wanted to have more control over the recording process—and to be able to work at my own pace—so I decided to build a studio in my rehearsal space and record the entire album there. After we cut the basic tracks live, I dumped them into Pro Tools and began to shape the music. And that's when the *fun* started."

Thomas admits his studio learning curve was pretty steep, and that the vast possibilities of hard-disk recording kept him tweaking the music until it finally felt finished. "There were so many obstacles I didn't foresee

"I know it's a cliché,
but less really *is* more,"
deadpans Thomas.



Mermen

until I came face to face with them," he says. "When we recorded 'White Trash Raga,' for example, I said, 'I don't care what the tone sounds like, I'm just playing.' But when I went to mix the song—months later—I found the tone was *awful*, and that became problematic. I tried to re-record the track with a better tone, but I couldn't match the spirit of my original performance. Ultimately, we had to do a lot of messing with EQ to make the original track work. Lesson learned—it's easier to spend a few minutes dialing in a good tone at the onset than it is to fix it later."

Thomas recorded the disc using his live rig—three Fender Dual Showman heads feeding one Fender 2x12 cab and two Fender 2x15 cabs. His effects—which are mixed with a Mackie 1202-VLZ Pro mixer and routed via the amps' effects loops—include a Lexicon LXP-15 (for reverb), a t.c. electronic 2290 digital delay, an Oberheim Echoplex (for loops), two Boss TR-2 tremolo pedals, and a Roland SP-202 Dr. Sample (for sample playback—including 30 five- to ten-second feedback howls).

Thomas' main axes—a handful of Fender American Standard Strats—have all been hot-rodded with a unique wiring scheme. The guitars have no pots (he uses a volume pedal to

control dynamics), and each has two output jacks. One jack services a 3-position pickup switch that offers neck/mute/bridge settings, and the other is for Thomas' middle pickup—which he uses solely for feedback. The "feedback" output is routed to a second volume pedal and a Tubeworks 901 Real Tube Overdrive.

Coaxing feedback at will is such a component of Thomas' sound that he even has a few double-neck Strats (pairs of Strats that were sawed in two and glued together) that duplicate the wiring scheme and let him get *two* overdriven middle pickups howling at once—like some crazed catfight. As heard on "Sponge Cookie" and "Emmylou Rides Clarence West and Then South," the effect is striking.

While Thomas says his elaborate rig lets him pursue creativity to the extreme, he admits his main concern is playing in a personal, visceral way. "A friend of mine has a huge collection of Hendrix bootlegs," he says, "and he played me some soloed guitar tracks taken from master tapes. When you hear Hendrix like that, you can really tune into his peculiar presence and urgency—the way he held his guitar and the pressure on each string. I think that's why so many people respond to his playing. Now, I may never get to that level, but it's my goal." ■

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Heavy Petting

Thomas' wall-shaking amp rig is responsible for much of his hefty tone, but the *real* story centers on his stout strings (.013-.060). "That's where the tone starts," he asserts. "And because bending is not an element of my style, I can get away with putting a .013 set on a Strat. I've tried even heavier gauges, but I found that above .013s, the tone doesn't get significantly better." While the fatties are a mainstay of his live setup, Thomas uses slightly lighter strings for recording because "they're better suited for the details and finesse you want to hear on studio tracks."

—AL