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by Kim Taylor

Even though The Mermen possess reverb-drenched roots, the closest they come to surf music is when one of their wordless songs allows you to succumb to the mystical power and vastness of the ocean. What guitarist Jim Thomas, bassist Allen Whitman and drummer Martyn Jones conjure up is a loud, psychedelic, purely instrumental healing power containing ingredients from thrash to melody. Each is an exceptionally skilled musician in their own right. Like the Butthole Surfers, the Mermen are not a band--they are a phenomenon. Some record label will realize categorizing them as surf music is a travesty, as in a recent front page Billboard magazine. They will bottle them properly and eventually cash in on the proceedings. Two years ago, a Japanese group of club owners, artists and musicians searched London, New York, and San Francisco looking for innovative musicians to bring to Japan. They chose The Mermen who performed five live dates in Tokyo and Yokohama.

Last week, alone, The Mermen were probably the most-played band on KUSF--their new CD, Food For Other Fish (Kelptone records) ranked number five on the hipster college radio station's play list, while just above it was DJ Germ's Choice '94, a compilation of local bands, which includes a cut from The Mermen. "People say you can put (Food For Other Fish) on in the background but it also bears closer listening," explains Allen. A lot of people must agree, because forty-five copies sold out in less than an hour during a recent noon time set on UC Berkeley's campus. It was the same day the Dalai Lama spoke. Synchronicity and kinetic energy is what the three Mermen are all about. The same moment I first called Jim, who I had never met, he was reading a quote I wrote in last issue's AMP about Henry Rollins. Trippy. It seemed fitting to drive to The Mermen headquarters, at none other than Ocean Beach to interview them after their Dalai Lama afternoon. I found Jim heavily into classical music, offering me books, recordings and articles on musicians from Vaughn Williams to Fredric Chopin to prodigy Sarah Chang. "That's all I listen to now," explains Jim.

Allen just returned from New York where he was working on music for a play at The Whitney Museum. His dream as a boy was to be in the Vienna Boys Choir. I was pleasantly surprised to find both Jim and Allen fun, hilarious and articulate.

AMP: What do you guys want from this band, or are you happy where you are?

Jim: We want what everybody else wants--a lot of money.

Allen: Not a lot, just enough. I'd like to be able to play around the world and make an honest living at it, more or less. We have really good support; we have people that really care about the music. We had like several people come to the show today who are friends of the band. One or two of them are actually hired but others just want to come and help. It's really cool! It's a great blessing. But it's like if we had enough money to be able to afford more records...get a van. We have no industry support. Everything we've done in the last five years has come without industry support.

Jim: That's not true. New Albion Records financed our CD. I call that industry support.

AMP: Really? They financed it?

Allen: They're an avant-garde classical label. We're not actually signed to them, but on the strength of some people he (executive producer Foster Reed) works with--on their recommendation--he financed the project. We recorded direct-to-dat, no over dubs. It was recorded in three five-hour sessions including set-up time.

Jim: It's a pretty unique label. He's got some pretty weird shit on there.

Allen: Weird is right.

Jim: He's the first guy who had the nerve to pay for a recording for us, manufacture it and everything else. It's really coming out of left field because there are people like, and recordings from John Cage, Rova Saxophone Quartet, Virgil Thompson...a lot of modern composers.

AMP: You guys, I don't really like surf music.

Jim: Neither do we! Did you read the Billboard article? Did you hear what we said about there being no expression in the music?

Allen: It's like muzak to me, same thing.

Jim: There are certain elements to it that are good but it's a genre of music that's resurging itself and there are all these bands doing a really traditional form of it--The Phantom Surfers, The Woodies, Dick Dale, The Ultras. I said to Chris Morris, who did the article, "You know, Dick Dale's doin' the same shit he did thirty years ago and he did it better thirty years ago." And he said, "Oh, I don't know about that, man!" We played four sold out shows with Dick Dale and finally he got really mad at us for smoking pot in the dressing room and we never played with him again.

Allen: He had his infant child down there. He said, "You can't smoke that shit in here, man, I got a baby over there." And we thought to ourselves, what is he doing having a baby at 1 a.m. in a night club?"

Jim: He's a dork. Oh, it gets worse. You would have really heard shit but Martyn couldn't make it.

Allen: We just play what we play.

Jim: One song we play is a cover song, "Casbah." It's a cover song and you'd never know it. We put it in a blender and spit it out backwards...a lot of feedback.

Allen: It's unrecognizable from the original version. It has an area where we go off into this weird Pink Floyd part, then there's another area that's real high pressure, then another where there's no meter at all--it's just noise--and another area where we go into a piece from Leonard Bernstein and it's all part of one song.

Jim: And anybody can take the lead at any moment. We like that.

AMP: Do you play your songs differently for each live set?

Allen: There are places where we get to improvise but the arrangements will pretty much stay set.

Jim: Unless I drink too much. Then they really change! (Laughs)

Allen: The problem is, Jim, your rhythm section is soooo seamless that we make you look good regardless of how fucked up you are. It's remarkable. We've been playing together for over five years and you just get connected.

Jim: Allen knows a lot of gnarly stuff about me, that's all.

Allen: You know a lot of gnarly stuff about me. We're not even friends. I have a lot of respect for Jim but if we weren't in the band together, we would not be friends because we come from this area of the world where people don't mix. He comes from North Jersey and I come from Philadelphia and there's this thing. So it's an unlikely pairing.

Jim: We fight all the time. The worst fight we ever got into...

Allen: The worst fight of my life!

Jim: Was that the worst fight?

Allen: Absolutely.

AMP: What was it about?

Allen: He wanted to use my computer late at night and I wanted to get to sleep. (laughs)

Jim: Eric from Hey Dey Records was in the car, we're arguing...

Allen: Eric and I are talking about a mutual friend of ours who lives back in Brooklyn. Jim will not shut up and let us have a conversation and he's waving something in his hands, oh, it's our bio-- he wants to change something on it. I rip it out of his hands and I tear it to shreds. And he grabs the keys out of my hands at 16th and Valencia and hurls them kitty corner to the other side of the intersection.

Jim: So all the traffic is stopped and Allen's sittin' there going, "I'm not going to get them!" And I say, "Guess what? Neither am I!" And Eric's sitting there like we're fuckin nuts. That's not the end of the story...this homeless guy goin' by with his shopping cart, looks on the ground, picks up the keys. So Allen jumps out of the car and runs after him and he's got to negotiate for the keys back.

Allen: I had to give him my gloves.

Jim: I was going to punch the guy.

Allen: Nah. Then we continued on and just got in this yell fest.

Jim: I have this theory that if you don't handle whatever it is you gotta handle in your family, then you form another family and you keep forming them until you get it right.

AMP: And The Mermen?

Allen: This is my dysfunctional family.

Jim: It's not dysfunctional!

Allen: OK, it's a family. Sometimes it's fucked-up, sometimes it's awesome.

Jim: Stop being so negatron.

AMP: What's the third member of the family like?

Allen: Martyn was born in Liverpool. His family was transplanted to Palo Alto. They're these kind of quiet British folks who would (switches to posh British accent) never make any trouble at all. So Martyn is this strange amalgam of British, suburban San Mateo, arrogant middle class kind of sheltered prick.

Jim: Yep. (laughs)

Allen: He's also extremely intelligent. He's very talented. He's an artist--he drew the cover of Food For Other Fish with colored pencils. His attention to detail is astonishing.

AMP: Allen, will you describe Jim?

Allen: He has ethics, but no morals. He's honest to a fault, possibly the most honest person I've ever worked with. What did you say today? "Allen, if I lied like you, we'd be signed by now."

AMP: Ok, Jim, it's your turn, describe Allen.

Jim: He's a man trapped in an anorexic woman's body.