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IN THE specialized realm of instrumental rock, no genre is more quintessentially Californian than surf music. The blazing guitars of Dick Dale, the Chantays, the Surfaris, and other pioneers of the early '60s approximated the velocity and momentum of monster waves, evoking and feeding the southern California beach lifestyle. Today, the unhurried tempos of the Mermen capture the suspended moment of a wipeout, rolling and tumbling at a dreamlike pace.



For the past seven years guitarist Jim Thomas, bassist Allen Whitman, and drummer Martyn Jones have fashioned a distinctly psychedelized Bay Area version of surf that owes as much to Neil Young as it does to the Ventures and outstrips any attempt to pigeon-hole the Mermen as solely surf or anything else. On their three albums — the 1993 debut *Food for Other Fish* (Kelptone); last year's *Live at the Haunted House* (Shittone); and the recent *Glorious Lethal Euphoria* (Toadophile) — the Mermen make dense, muscular, melodic music that suspends the listener in a virtual waterworld of radiant phantasmagorias.

But it is through live performance that this unique power trio has garnered its rabid following. After gigging for a long time on bills with such acts as Rancid, American Music Club, David Byrne, David Lindlev, Toots and

the Maytals, 4 Non Blondes, the Cramps, Midnight Oil, Motherhips, and even Tiny Tim, the Mermen ascended to new peaks at the end of 1994 with a sold-out show at the Great American Music Hall and exhilarating New Year's Eve performances at both the Fillmore and the Exotic Erotic Ball.

Thomas, who writes the band's original material, cites such diverse influences as Chopin, Copland, and the Sex Pistols. His intriguing musical constructions and his mighty, contorting, feedback-laden but often honey-sweet guitar tone have won unqualified endorsements from such fellow six-string masters as Dick Dale, Henry Kaiser, and Joe Satriani.

A major force in the current instrumental surf-music renaissance, the Mermen actually belong to a much broader lineage that includes Cream and the Jimi Hendrix Experience, exploring colors, textures, and dynamics through the fusion of Thomas's brilliantly nuanced solos with the supple and powerful rhythmic and harmonic underpinnings of Whitman and Jones. Guitar-driven rock is all too often a repository of male adolescent fantasies, but the Mermen's underwater raptures give new meaning to the notion of wet dreams. 🐠

Derk Richardson

cal settings. In addition to directing and performing with the San Francisco Gagaku Society, in which the zither-like koto finds a natural context in ancient Japanese court music, Masaoka has performed with the Sonocentric Ensemble, pianist-composer Jon Jang, bassist and multi-instrumentalist Mark Izú, and guitarist Henry Kaiser.

She was also tapped by jazz tenor saxophone giant Pharoah Sanders to join his band at Yoshi's last year; recruited into saxophonist Steve Coleman's Mystic Rhythm Society, which recorded in Paris this year; and included in Cecil Taylor's Creative Music Orchestra during its extensive Bay Area rehearsal sessions. In August of this year Masaoka performed in Madison Square Garden both solo and in a symphony composed by Indian violinist L. Subramaniam and featuring Trilok Gurtu, Swapan Chaudhuri, Larry Coryell, and others.

Born and raised in San Mateo, Masaoka occasionally heard traditional Japanese music at Buddhist church bazaars and funerals. She was exposed to the koto through a cousin but took up the instrument herself just nine years ago. Although she had been trained as a classical pianist, she began pursuing a musical career only after working in various political

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