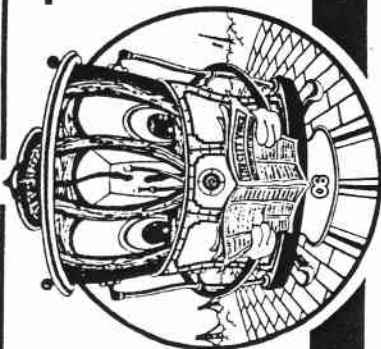


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News and Views from San Francisco's Neighborhoods



The Mermen are on a roll with new CD and U.S. tour

By Dana Perrigan
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It happens all the time.

Since forming the now critically acclaimed instrumental rock group called The Mermen six years ago, Jim Thomas, Allen Whitman and Martyn Jones have experienced more peculiar events than can be rationally explained.

Like running into a stranger who offers to finance a Japan tour. Or stepping out of the group's tour van in Arizona and seeing friends from Ireland - who had no idea the group was on tour - standing there. Or getting e-mail from another stranger who offers not only to set up a concert in his hometown, but cook for them as well.

"If I had a dollar for every synchronistic event that took place in the last six years," says Whitman, "I wouldn't have to do anything else."

Since there aren't any suckers out there dumb enough to fork out a Washington every time The Mermen experience another so-called coincidence, Whitman will continue playing bass guitar with the San Francisco combo.

From the looks of things, that should be enough.

With a new CD - "A Glorious Lethal Euphoria" (Toadophile Records, S.F.) - being released next week, sold-out local concerts and a cross-country tour to complete, the Mermen would seem to be on a roll.

Their lyrical, inventive music has also brought them some measure of critical acclaim. Joe Satriani, winner of Guitar Player's best rock guitar player poll, chose The Mermen's "Food for Other Fish" as one of his three favorite CDs. Grammy nominee Henry Kaiser picked the Mermen as his favorite local group.

The group's accomplishments have been made without the support and promotion that comes from having a contract with a major recording label.

"It's utterly grass-roots," says Jim Thomas. "We have made it on the strength of our music - affecting people who come to see our shows."

The 41-year-old Thomas, who plays guitar and writes the



Courtesy photo

The Mermen, Allen Whitman (left), Jim Thomas and Martyn Jones are touring the nation with the release of a new CD.

group's songs, objects to the Mermen being described as an instrumental surf band. Although Thomas surfs (he's the only member of the band who does so) and draws much of his inspiration from the sea, he says the group's sound has evolved into something uniquely its own.

"We're not sitting still," says Thomas. "There's always new music. Each of us has a distinct voice on our instruments. When you put it together, it's a huge, distinct voice."

In the current issue of *Guitar Player*, Tim Kenneally describes the combined voices of Thomas, Whitman and drummer Jones: "Prone to sweeping, dramatic suites and long stretches of spacey ambience, the Mermen don't evoke the gnarliness of a particular wave so much as the breadth of the ocean itself."

The music is, says Thomas, "ocean-oriented," but far different than that played by bands emulating the traditional surf-sound of Dick Dale.

When it comes to describing his own role with The Mermen, Thomas gets as slippery as a piece of seaweed wrapped around a surfboard leash. He doesn't consider himself a gui-

tarist or a musician, he says. He doesn't consider himself anything. The music, which is an expression of his own emotional experience, writes itself.

"If it weren't for other people wanting the music, I wouldn't be playing it," he says. "That's the bottom line."

He feels, he says, more like the "accidental tourist" than anything else.

"The only thing I know is that this is what I'm doing right now," he says. "And I don't know how to get out of it."

If things keep going the way they have been, he probably won't have the chance.

Following their cross-country tour, The Mermen will return to San Francisco for a May 19 concert at *The Transmission*.