

Riding the next wave of surf music's comeback

EVEN before last year, when the "Pulp Fiction" soundtrack became an unexpected hit among the unwaxed masses, the Bay Area was gaining recognition as the hub of what has been called the surf-music renaissance.

Bands such as the **Trashwomen**, the **Woodies**, the **Ultras** and the **Aqua Velvets** (whom you can catch Sunday at the **Elbow Room** and Monday at **Great American Music Hall**) have shifted attention away from the goofy Gidget glamour of Southern California, surf music's traditional stronghold.

Perhaps no band has had more influence — or is more original — in this instrumental realm than the **Mermen**, a San Francisco power trio who on Thursday opened (for the second time) for another power trio, **Morphine**.

The band, which over its seven years has several albums to its credit, just released "A Glorious Lethal Euphoria" on Mesa/Blue Moon records.

"Surf-music (stylists) are very popular right now," says Mermen guitarist and writer **Jim Thomas**, from his home overlooking Ocean Beach, where he surfs his 10-foot Phil Edwards Hobie. Yet, he says, "Ninety-nine percent of our audience is non-surfers. I don't really identify with (surf music)."

Don't expect to hear the Mermen — who take their name from the **Jimi Hendrix** song "1983 . . . (A Merman I Shall Turn to Be)" — doing covers of **Ventures** and **Surfaris** tunes. "Most people who like surf music don't like us," says Thomas, who gloats at the thrashing they took at the hands of a music writer in Longboard magazine. In fact, he says, the Mermen have had the plug pulled more than once. "I think some people are expecting a 'nice' surf band," he says. "They want everything to be within their realm of understanding."

Thomas prefers to call the Mermen's sonic seascapes, which can be dense with contorted feedback or delicately melodic, "ocean music rather than surf music."

Which isn't to say Thomas

doesn't cop the familiar surf-guitar picking and tremolos. But the Mermen's in-your-face, psychedelic, goth-prog-rock-surf tunes pay homage as much to **Pink Floyd** as to **Dick Dale**.

"We do a 15-minute medley of Dick Dale tunes," says Thomas, a New Jersey transplant who'd never played in a band before moving to San Francisco and meeting up with bassist **Allen Whitman** and drummer **Martyn Jones**. "But all of his chords are within a certain realm of expression. My guitar amps are never the same. I have a very complicated rig, while his stays pretty much the same."

Thomas means no disrespect to the King of Surf Guitar, with whom the Merman have shared the stage many times. "When I first heard him, I went 'Wow,'" says Thomas. "But he's just one of hundreds of influences."

All of those influences contribute to a sound that's "very chameleonlike," says Thomas, as evidenced by the di-

verse acts they've opened for: **Midnight Oil**, **Rancid**, **David Lindley**, **David Byrne**, the **Cramps**, **Sausage**, **American Music Club** and . . . **Nancy Sinatra** ("That was really stupid").

It's been the band's live performances that have won it a strong local following. Its 1994 CD, "Food for Other Fish," was KUSF radio's third-most-played record that year. "And not one of those people (at the station) surfs," says Thomas. "That's a high compliment." More recently, the Bay Guardian awarded the Mermen outstanding-achievement honors at this year's Goldies Awards.

"In San Francisco, in this competitive market, I see hundreds of bands," says Thomas. "But if your music doesn't communicate with people, you'll be swept out the door without a nod or a wink."

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