

music

Surf and turf

By Jeff Stratton

Jim Thomas rarely opens his mouth when performing with his band the Mermen, but off-stage he'll talk about anything. Just because guitarist Thomas, drummer Martyn Jones and bassist Allen Whitman are an instrumental unit pro-

ducing a hi-octane swirl of psycho surf music, it doesn't mean Thomas is content to let the music speak for itself.

For instance, he doesn't hold back when questioned about the recent resurgence of instrumental surf and the new scene in his home of San Francisco that's teeming with bands making music not unlike the Mermen. Does Thomas take any credit for that?

"I don't give the Mermen any credit for anything," he says from his apartment overlooking Ocean Beach. "I like to give other people credit for inspiring me, but I don't give us credit for anything but playing music." But 30 seconds later he exults about a night on the town where he stumbled upon a trio of new surf bands — the Neptunas, the Tikitones and Huevos Rancheros. "They were amazing. I was so blown away by the music. I really felt there was something futuristic there that was rooted in the past."

Yet that's a common response heard from first-time inductees into the Mermen's style of music — certainly owing something to the surf message of Dick Dale or the Ventures — yet played with a balls-to-the-wall energy that has translated into a healthy amount of respect and admiration for the band, and not only in San Francisco. April brings the trio back to the Boulder/Denver area for the second time in a month. The band's last performance at the Bluebird Theatre resulted in a completely packed house of overwhelmed attendees. It seems listeners want to give these guys credit for something.

"Our audience has just gradually built up over seven years," Thomas relates. "Each time we play a place there's more people there. We've played every single club in San Francisco over and over and over and over. But now," he says proudly, "we're at the point where we're headlining our first show at the Fillmore — one of the nicest places to play anywhere — on a Friday night."



The Mermen are going to help us forget that we're a landlocked people when their sea foam washes up next week.

Ending up at the posh and palatial ballroom must be comforting to the trio, who've had troubles when it comes to touring because promoters often don't know what to do with an instrumental band as single-minded as the Mermen.

Thomas

remembers two mismatched pairings in Boulder with the Freddi Henchi band and Skankin' Pickle that he "didn't think were appropriate." Playing in front of an audience unfamiliar with the music makes him uneasy, he says, and causes him to show restraint.

"We play this psychedelic surf thing that in its most extreme form gets really kinda noisy," he says. "So when I see those kind of crowds my instinct is to hold back. The best audiences for me are the ones who know what the Mermen do and like it and want it and ask for it. Then we'll be able to make it bigger and crazier."

The Mermen's last two CD releases are both big and crazy: *A Glorious Lethal Euphoria* and *Songs of the Cows* (both on Mesa-Bluemoon) exhibit an enormous sound captained by Thomas' gigantic guitar swells and the sweeping cinematic scope of the arrangements. There's no need for lyrics in the context of music this complex and huge, but Thomas' need to throw wild-sounding titles on them helps define each one. He's serious about them, too: a journalist recently pegged Thomas as "pretentious" and took him to task for a Latin name of a track on *Glorious*, a line from a poem by Horace that Thomas loved. "That writer was projecting what he thought onto my reality," he says indignantly.

The reality is that, Latin names or not, the Mermen have carved out a surreal surfcore with a near ecclesiastical appeal and a vibe that could only have come from the City by the Bay. **M**

The Mermen are back for two shows in the area. On Wednesday, April 24, they'll be with the Mudsharks and Stanford Prison Experiment at the Fox Theatre, 1135 13th St., Boulder, at 8 p.m. Tickets are \$5.25. Call 447-0095. Then on Friday, April 26, you can see them at the Bluebird Theatre, 3317 E. Cofax, Denver, at 8 p.m. Tickets are \$7; call 322-2308. Men's Club opens and a special screening of Luc Besson's underwater classic *Atlantis* will take place during the Mermen's set.