

BAM



***SO... *Swimming with the Mermen * Pat Boone! *
*Mr. Heavy Metal Himself...***

KISSstory

**Writers,
Musicians,
and Gene
Simmons
himself try
to make
sense**

UHERE ARE THOSE WHO BELIEVE the Mermen do not play true surf music. And, if that style of sonic reverberation is solely dedicated to imitating nuances of songs from a time thirty years gone, then perhaps they are right. However, if surf music has room for exploration and expression, just as the sport of surfing allows slashing cutbacks and aerial attacks to coexist alongside classic

places like New Zealand, Tortola, and Costa Rica in search of surf. He believes the sea should be both honored and respected. He finds it at once captivating and inspirational. He dreams about the water.

"A big part of my life was spent near the ocean," he says. "And I guess even the music that came out of me was some kind of authentic response to that. It's the beach, it's the clouds, it's the wind, it's the animals, it's everything. And on that level, the ripples in that kind of experience end up being the rip-

Jill Tracy's Mysterious Way

JILL TRACY ONCE BUMPED INTO ANDY WARHOL at Tower Records. What words of wisdom did the prince of pop art endow on our pop-noir songstress? I'll let her tell it.

"I was in the classical-music section. He walked in with a boy on each arm escorting him through, and we were in the same aisle, face to face, blocking each other. When he politely said 'Excuse me,' I was kind of taken off guard and said, 'No, excuse me.' He smiled, I smiled, we made eye contact for a New York minute and that was it."

So much for a meeting of the minds.

Well, if Andy were with us today, he'd be a big Jill Tracy fan. If you haven't tripped through the stylish side of underground lately, Jill Tracy is a self-styled singer, songwriter/pianist who is truly alternative—and without the help of distortion-drenched guitars. Her music is dark yet uplifting, avant-garde yet traditional, and mesmerizingly personable.

Although mostly self-taught, Tracy employs virtuosic movements and a well-crafted technique. She demonstrates a genius in her piano playing that challenges conventional definitions of pop music, and there is a transcendent emotion in both her singing and playing.

"When I was younger I had studied voice for a time," Tracy says. "You get to where you want to undo everything you learn, so I like to throw my voice in different directions and do things that your not suppose to... When people ask me 'Where did you develop your style?' I always say it was really out of defiance."

As a girl—while other kids were listening to the latest rock group or pop sensation—Tracy found herself strangely drawn to horror movie soundtracks like *The Creature From the Black Lagoon*, *Night of the Living Dead*, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, and *Psycho*. "I'm not >

JAY BLANESBERG



The Mermen's rocky three: Allen Whitman, Martyn Jones, and Jim Thomas (from left)

nosetides and carve lines, then the Mermen's moody, turbulent tunes definitely qualify.

"Grant Washburn loves the fucking Mermen," Mermen guitarist

Jim Thomas says of the resident SF big-wave rider, who appears charging a humongous boomer at Ocean Beach on the band's 1993 debut CD, *Food For Other Fish*. "He's doing this documentary on [the legendary Half Moon Bay surf spot] Mavericks with Jeff Clark and all these people with nothing but the Mermen on the soundtrack." And to Thomas that means more than the sniveling detractions of a hundred backward-looking hodads.

Though Thomas considers himself "definitely not no hero-great-surfer," he has been riding waves since he was 14, learning to slide on the mucky brown Atlantic swells that wash up against the New Jersey coast. Now 42 years old, he has traveled to faraway

places in my music. I can't say, 'I'm playing guitar and I'm imitating the ocean and this is a wave.' But in some sneaky, backdoor way it's very related to that."

Without any words in their songs, the Mermen leave their listeners free to wander wherever the music takes them, whether it's the meandering melody of a song like "With No Definite Future and No Purpose Other than to Prevail Somehow," from last year's *A Glorious Lethal Euphoria*, or the pounding shorebreak, vibrato crescendo of a song like "My Black Bag," which appears on both *Food For Other Fish* and *Live At The Haunted House*, the album recorded on KFJC surf guru Phil Dirt's radio show. About the only vocals to be heard at a Mermen gig is the crazy jabber that stickman Martyn Jones occasionally shouts into his drum mics between songs, like the night Doctor Suess died and he named every song after a different story: "This one is called 'The Lorax';" "This next tune is 'Green Eggs And Ham';" "This song is named 'One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish...'"

Since January of this year, the Mermen have spent six months on the road, bringing their wave-formed sonatas to the surf-starved heartland >

ROGER PORTER



the Mermen

and winning over a whole new geography of fans. The accolades have come in solid and steady, with write-ups in *Option*, *Guitar Player*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *Rolling Stone* and even *Guitar Shop*, which printed a whole schematic of the electronics in Thomas' axe. Locally, the Mermen have won a Bammy, a Wammy, a Goldie, and were just voted Best Local Band in *The Bay Guardian's* Readers' Poll.

Their latest release, the short-length CD *Songs Of The Cows*, proves that after almost eight years of playing together, this super-power trio still has a lot left to give. Bassist Allen Whitman provides poetic bass lines with chordal overtones and throbbing low-octave sound effects. Drummer Martyn Jones keeps the beat with rolling jungle tom-toms and an ever-hypnotic sense of time. Meanwhile, Jim Thomas has no shortage of chops and accents to contribute to the band's heavy, water wall of sound. Lately he's been experimenting with oddball tunings and buying equipment for his own studio so he can eventually set 'em up and knock 'em down at will.

Besides just bashing out the jams, the Mermen can also get downright philosophical. At first consideration, "A Glorious Lethal Euphoria" might seem like some veiled reference to surfers who continue riding swells in an ocean of increasingly polluted water, but, as Thomas explains, the meaning goes deeper than that: "The title of that album came from a Jewish philosopher named Martin Buber, who

started Hassidism. The statement about a 'glorious lethal euphoria' is there's so many people who have a really insubstantial, cheap state of happiness, as opposed to a state of happiness that is not easy to be in—being a responsible person."

Where Thomas put a lot of open-ended meaning and intentions into the album *A Glorious Lethal Euphoria*—including a haunting 9-minute 46-second requiem for Kurt Cobain entitled "And The Flowers They'll Bloom"—on this year's *Songs Of The Cows*, he says the creative process took him in a different direction: "With *Songs of the Cows* it was real intuitive, like I don't know what this all means, but maybe somebody will come along and tell me what it means to them. A lot of times that's the great part. I learn more and more about my music from what other people tell me."

On the song "Third Stone From The Sun," Jimi Hendrix said we would never hear surf music again, and his prediction might ring true when viewing such gross cultural exploitations as the ill-rendered portrayals of surfing on California lottery billboards, the "Get Met" signs with Snoopy shooting the curl, and hearing such linguistic bastardizations as "surfing the Internet" or "channel surfing" between TV shows. Yet in spite of the false idols propped up by a society that would destroy and subvert the beauty of the sea, the Mermen continue to play and perform, doing their part to keep this sounding board of flowing forms vital and vibrant 30 years down the line. ★

JILL TRACY

sure what obsession Bernard H especially certain fre soundtracks could cause certain moe human reactions. It was like magic. Others have not always believed "When I started out, club bookers d make of me or who to book me with entire evening based on the concept evening evolved into Tracy's occasio ganza "The Mysteria."

The Mysteria blends Tracy's m vaudeville acts, featuring everything skinned flame-swallowing girls to s to talking skeleton emcees who wear "In the beginning it was simply a wa have an entire evening of diverse tak lot of people tell you that you can't have to do it that way," she says, "b ever done is not listen to what other

Judging by her rabid following, debut album *Quinessentially Unreal* stores—well, most stores: the sales told me he can't keep it in stock (He tice?). Her second release is due out and be on the lookout for the Myster

Let's Trance!

FROM THE WHIRLING DERVISH RITES OF THE SUFI MEVLEVI SECT TO HEALING CEREMONIES BY THE GNAWA M'ALLEM OF MARRAKECH, TRANCE TR The modern Euro-American equivalent of the ecstatic trance experience is the incessant synthetic beats of all-night raves. However, tec of electronics preclude an interactive human element. The Bay Area alternative is Trance Mission.

The quartet stands apart from the hordes of so-called "ambient" explorers in a number of ways. Foremost, the band's combined influences

nary range: Beth Custer taps Middle Eastern modes clarinets; Stephen Kent not only invokes the Austral axe, the didgeridoo, but he's just added the Morocca repertoire; John Loose digs into deep grooves on Afri sion; Kenneth Newby plays the Indonesian suling an and electronic instruments. Although each bandmat er/improviser—with numerous side projects, from L computer games to Custer's scores for Joe Goode's s tive effort of Trance Mission achieves a one-world s sum of its parts.

Surprisingly, occasional samples and atmosph enhance rather than dilute the music's acoustic infr this ancient-future union as involving the "spirit" o ongoing "process," which essentially resolves the ty acoustic vs. synthetic. Living the music as consciou the moment," the British-born didgeridoist explai nizes the place that 'synthesized' sounds have in our

On *Head Light*, the group's third album for the the digital aura remarkably marries the indigenou rare naturalness. Kent submits, "It's the first Tranc actually lives up to the band's name in its entirety."

ANNE HAMERSKY



the band's exciting debut struggled to establish a singular voice, and the follow-up drifted off into soporific New Age-y danger zones, the multi-rhythmic hypnosis of *Head Light* resonates with the full flame of world-derived trance power. Loose neatly sums up the vibe: "We constantly invite the listener to come along." ★