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The Little Mermen

Surf music and beyond with California's most animated instrumental rock band:

By Michael Roberts

As Jim Thomas, string-shredder for the guitar-crazy California trio called the Mermen, is being fetched to the phone for an interview, Mermen bassist Allen Whitman grabs the receiver. "Jim has been very abusive to me lately," he says in a deadpan voice. "Could you please call the police?"

Upon being told of Whitman's accusations, Thomas is unapologetic. "I am very abusive to everybody in the band," he claims. "And I think they deserve it. They're really all very self-important individuals. They all think they know more than they really know. It's hard to travel around in a van with, like, five people who all think they are total experts on human life but are really just spewing bullshit through my brain. I try to defend myself against all that, but it's not always possible. So then I become violent and start throwing stuff."

With that, Thomas dissolves in laughter, as does Whitman and everyone else in the room. To them, the insinuation that their group is a three-membered, six-legged musical psychodrama is hysterical—the best kind of gag. That's because actually the Mermen (also featuring drummer Martyn Jones) present an extremely united and compatible front. These three may not concur on everything, but they agree that it's a lot more interesting to go out on creative limbs than to keep your feet on the ground and your arms wrapped around the trunk. And that's one of the primary reasons why Mermen make some of the most enjoyable and astonishing instrumental music being produced today.

In the main, most observers label the fruit of the Mermen's labors "surf music," but that's far too narrow for so expansive a sound. On releases such as last year's staggering *A Glorious Lethal Euphoria* and the new EP, *Songs of the Cows* (both issued by Mesa/Bluemoon Recordings), Thomas, Whitman and Jones frequently venture into surf territory. But rather than simply reproducing a style codified in the early Sixties, the three

viewing director David Lean's film version of Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*. "I really like that movie," he says, "because Dr. Zhivago is a poet and he's a medical doctor caught up in the Russian revolution, which destroyed so much human life—and yet he maintains his sense of humor in the midst of it. Well, there's this place where he goes with Lara called Varykino, and at one point he's writing poetry in the middle of the night and there's snow everywhere and the wolves are howling in the background. It's a real nightmare kind of thing, and I was trying to capture the spirit of it."

Just as unsurflike is "Brain Wash," a four-song suite of gentle musical fragments that Thomas dubs "little ambient things that I run through without really being conscious about them. Allen was always saying to me, 'Man, you've got to put that stuff on a record,' so we decided to do it. The first one was something I wrote, but the other three are spontaneous, right on the spot—no thought about it or anything."

According to Thomas, who's in his early forties, the same can be said about his musical career. He's a New Jersey native who worked typical odd jobs—waiter, TV repairman, telephone lineman—in order to support a considerable surfing jones. The hobby runs in the family. "I'm at my brother's place in New Jersey right now," he reveals, "and there are six surfboards in the living room."

His love of the surfing lifestyle extends to its artifacts. As a youth, for example, he fell in love with the soundtrack to the film *Endless Summer*, composed by John Blakely, who's now a Thomas intimate. "Things like that hovered over me in a really romantic way," he allows. "I started developing all these notions about California that I carried with me for a long time."

By the mid-Eighties, these fantasies had become too much for him: He moved to the San Francisco area and started working in a music store. While there, he immersed himself in surf music, going so far as to use the covers of classic surf LPs to decorate the interior of the shop. To him, Dick Dale, a surf innovator currently enjoying a professional upswing, was the big kahuna.

"He was the epitome of my feelings about the surfing thing," Thomas says. "He's in some of those old beach movies with Annette Funicello and Frankie Avalon, and the image he represents is just amazing. He looks like an Olympic athlete, he's got a big earring through his ear and he's playing the guitar. He's like the tribal music leader. So getting turned on to his music was definitely a big inspiration."

In contrast with Thomas, Whitman was no surf-music junkie, but he was captivated enough by the guitarist to become his partner. The first release by the newly dubbed Mermen—named for a Jimi Hendrix song, "1983 (A Merman I Shall Turn to Be)"—was 1989's cassette-only *Krill Slippin'*, a fairly straightforward surf excursion. But as the players

grew together, their approach changed. "Seven years ago we were playing a lot of surf tunes, but it evolved into this Mermen thing," Thomas explains. "It's really grown up to the point where I'm not buying into a genre-specific thing. I'm just doing what I'm doing—what I've really got no choice to do. To me, I look at it as just making music. And when I write a song, fortunately I have a good bass player and a good drummer to play it with—and we say something together."



Catch a wave: Allen Whitman, Jim Thomas and Martyn Jones are the Mermen.

The Mermen's more adventurous side came to the fore on their next album, 1994's *Food for Other Fish*. But it was *Euphoria*, the act's first platter for Mesa/Bluemoon, that captured their maturation. Although the surf mood permeates cuts such as "Pulpin' Line" and "Scalp Salad," other tracks float off into unexpected waters. "Brahms 3rd Movement 3rd Symphony" is a generally faithful rendition of this snippet from a classical master, while "Quo me cunque rapit tempestas, deflor hospes" is a feedback orgy guaranteed to enthrall guitar-school types.

Thomas, whose occasional pretensions are mitigated by his charming hey-dude personality, took the title of the latter from *The Oxford Book of the Sea*, which translated it from Latin as "Though I'm caught up in the storm, I shape my way." Over the course of the next several months, he heard several different translations of the line, which was written by the Roman poet Horace, and was ultimately given a copy of the poem whence it sprang. He carries the stanzas with him everywhere he goes now and recites them aloud at the slightest provocation, adding commentary at key moments. For example: "So time flows slow and worthless—I identify with this a lot—if it keeps me from understanding what I need, what I want—I really like this next one a lot—'To understand keeps me from knowledge'—I thought that was so fucking cool."

As his newfound love for Horace implies, Thomas is not among those instrumentalists who believe in the

vocal music, and I listen to it all the time," he says. "From Willie Nelson to Bob Dylan—the more oblique the words, the better. But for me, instrumental music is a challenge that forces you to try and write music that communicates with people—music that's acute enough and emotional enough to get through to them. For me that can happen with word or without words."

Still, don't expect the next Mermen full length (in the planning stages right now) to feature Thomas and his fellow know-it-all espousing their various theories in song. He's more interested in taking his playing even further out—and he doesn't have much patience for those who criticize him for doing so. "There's so many people who think there's limited amounts of the musical pie in the universe," he gripes. "And they feel like people are taking parts of their pie—which is the stupidest fucking attitude."

"I think it's good for certain people to not like our music, though. Because I've definitely found from my experience that the people who like our music are the ones who are a little more thoughtful, and who don't need everything to be readily digestible. And that's the way it is with this band. It would be great if everything we did was totally digestible, but it's not. And it's not going to be."

There he goes with the abusive talk again. But the police can't do anything about it. The Mermen, with Space Team Electra and ElectroLux, 8 p.m. Friday, March 8, Bluebird Theater, 3317 East Colfax, SE, 322.2308.

"I'm just doing what I'm doing—what I've really got no choice to do."

some expand upon it, stretching the genre into often unrecognizable shapes. In particular, Thomas's guitar-playing pulls together noise-band skronk, art-rock flash and jazz-rock flourishes into an original whole.

Likewise, Thomas's songs often are based upon themes that have nothing to do with hanging ten. *Cows* may kick off with "Curve," a driving ditty that suggests Link Wray on crank, but it's quickly followed by "Kiss Kiss Snow," which Thomas wrote after