

It's the obvious tidbit to drop to pique the interest of a musician in a psychedelic surf band possessing a sonic attack of lobe-expanding proportions, but it had to be done. Proudly I announce that St. Petersburg, the point from which this interviewer is calling, is home to the world's largest collection of the work of *surrealist magnifique* Salvador Dali. Allen Whitman, bassist for the San Francisco-based Mermen, like so many others before him, is rather surprised to learn this. "You're kidding," he deadpans, adding, "Why?" Sadly, no tangible explanation for it can be offered (except for the vague notion that St. Pete's waterside appointment is reminiscent of Dali's native Cadaques) — we locals tend not to question this blessing, we just thank the gods. Allen pauses to whip up a cheer from his sisters, who are visiting at his end of the line, for St. Pete and its Dali collection (again, no tangible explanation).

A lack of easily defined tangibles could also apply to the Mermen's music. Tagged as a "surf band" almost by default, the trio (which also includes drummer Martyn Jones and guitarist Jim Thomas) have spent the better part of the last decade pushing the sonic surf sound into the next millenium. It's not boring ol' rock-crit fauning that makes me say that the Mermen represent the future of the style pioneered by the likes of the Ventures and Dick Dale. One listen (and one glance at the title of "With No Definite Future and No Purpose other than to Prevail Somehow...") from their

Mesa release of 1995, *A Glorious Lethal Euphoria*, shows that these lads have more than "Wipeout" and, uh, woodies on their minds.

It actually takes a while to get around to talking about the band's music; first we talk about astrology (just had a Saturn return meself), then it's time for a round of IBM-bashing. "I worked with a bookkeeper briefly and what made me realize I was only going to work with her briefly was that she was going *Well, I don't understand why anybody would want to use a Macintosh — it just doesn't make any sense to me!* And I was going, *Doh!*" Allen Homer-esquely relates. "Gotta go! We're gonna take a laptop on the road with us."

Finally, we work our way around to the purpose of the call — the music of the Mermen. To paraphrase Julie Andrews, let's start at the beginning, as it's a very good place to start.

Alan and Jim met in '88, working side by side in a retail music store. Their initial friction gave no hint as to what the future would hold. "We didn't get along *at all*," Allen recalls. "We stole each others' deals and generally hated each other." Jim had keys to the store and, as a result, would go in early and record music; Alan listened to the tapes and asked to put on a bass line. Eventually, it was decided to record in a real studio with a real drummer. "Jim placed an ad in a local musical magazine," Allen relates. "All the ad said was *surfing bongos*. Martyn called. He had a fuzzy pink drum set and a primer gray Oldsmobile

hearse. So he was in the band *right away*."

How has the sound changed in the seven years you've been together? "Almost completely," Allen relates. "The first album is called *Krill Flippin'*, released on cassette only, and we only made a hundred copies." That's what the industry euphemistically refers to as a *collector's item*. "Yeah ... we finally released it on CD last year." Our chat is briefly interrupted by the sounds of an overly enthusiastic vegetable juicer, necessitating Allen's relocation to another part of his house. (Damn but that health crap can be annoying.) Once the background noise subsides, Allen reveals that in May, Mesa will be re-releasing the back catalog of Mermen goodies so curious people like myself can see just how much the 'Men's approach has evolved.

"We improvise more now, on stage; sometimes we play for two-and-a-half hours," he says. "Each show is different. We have five albums worth of material — it's ridiculous. We *never* play a song the same way."

The band's music certainly rocks out, yet retains an almost ambient quality — is film music an influence? "The influence is not *necessarily* movie soundtracks," the 39-year-old allows, "but we're just waiting for somebody who's making a cool movie like *Repo Man* or *El Mariachi* to listen to the music and go *I just gotta have that!* We don't care if the movie makes it — just as long as some director wants it or just *has* to have it.

"Jim does all the song writing. We help with arranging, but 95% of it is by Jim," Allen confides. "He surfs full-time and listens to a lot of classical music, but a lot of modern music as well — he likes to say *Chopin to the Sex Pistols*." Allen also relates that Jim is heavily influenced by country-rock progenitor Clarence White, but says that his emulation, thankfully, does not extend to hanging out in parking lots, waiting to get hit by a drunk driver. Incredibly, the Mermen is Jim's first band and Allen at-

The MERMEN

glorious, lethal and euphoric by Dave Korman & Mark Warren



Live at The Fillmore, New Year's Eve, 1995

"Many, many times, people don't respond positively until you're dead. There's a certain familiarity involved with a person when they're alive. *Oh, you're alive, I'm alive, we're both alive.* And familiarity breeds contempt. Once a person is dead, they've entered into another realm — they've gone somewhere else that, for anybody still alive, is a *secret sphere*. Once you're there, you're worthy of respect because you've *crossed over*. And at that point, a credibility is lent to your work."



The Men of Mer (left to right): Allen Whitman, Martyn Jones and Jim Thomas

tributes his bandmate's unique voice on the guitar to exactly that fact. "For electric guitar, which has been done *to death*, he has an original voice. His is also distinctly American." Jim's style has some of the same soaring sonorities of Eric Johnson, but without the mincing, fuss-budget attitude. "No, he's not that way at all," Allen chuckles. "And you won't hear many blues progressions in the Mermen, if any."

The cinema may or may not have made its impression on the Mermen's collective psyche, but works of literature have certainly made their presence known. The title of *A Lullaby for Lethal Euphoria* comes from *I Am Thou*, by the German author Martin Buber. "It's an incredibly heavy, philosophical book. It makes Ayn and look like Danielle Steel," Allen hyperbolizes. A tome by John Muir tops Allen's current reading list. "Anybody that really loves understand what it's like to be in the wilderness ... He's the naturalist responsible for setting up America's park system," he enthuses.

The pressures of art and how it relates to commerce are little cause for concern in the Mermen camp, it seems. "Jim likes to say *Van Gogh didn't sell a single painting in his lifetime*. So what're you gonna do? Many, many times, people don't respond positively until you're dead," Allen states pragmatically. What is the logic involved in that? "Well, I don't think there's a logic — I think it's human nature. There's a certain familiarity involved with a person when they're alive. *Oh, you're alive, I'm alive, we're both alive.* And familiarity breeds contempt. And once a person is dead, they've entered into another realm — they've gone somewhere else that, for anybody still alive, is a *secret sphere*. I don't think that there's very many people on this planet that don't harbor a secret fear of death. Once you're there, you're worthy of respect because you've *crossed over*. And at that point, a cred-

ibility is lent to your work. It's interesting and I've seen it happen time and time again."

A certain Zen-like approach seems to tint the Mermen's mode of operation, a kind of like a variation on *that which passes, passes like clouds*. "Everything since the beginning has been a slow, gradual, inexorable rise in awareness and the power of the music and the scope of the music," Allen says. "What's that old saying? You bust your ass for 15 years and then, when you finally make it, you're an overnight sensation."

Just judging from the band's press clippings, there's a lotta love out there directed towards them. Is it surprising? "It's gratifying (and) I never take it for granted," Allen replies. "Once you make a piece of music and you send it out there, people can do with it what they want. Some people are like (*adopts an anal-retentive nasal tone*) *I just love that surf music!* Then others are like *Wait a second ...* Brian Eno, in talking about his ambient music experiments, says 'It rewards closer listening.'" The same can certainly be said about the Mermen's grand, yet not grandiose, soundscapes.

Pundits and tastemakers delight in announcing the periodic resurgence of (*insert musical style here*); however, as Allen tells it, there is actual evidence of a surge in the popularity of the surf-derived (or as the band likes to put it "ocean-oriented") sound, and offers this example. "Five years ago, we went down to Malibu to meet Dick Dale — we just wanted to meet him," Alan relates. "We met him and said how we'd like to get him up to play in San Francisco. And he said *All right, you kids are cool,*

that sounds pretty good. He had never played in San Francisco *in his entire life*. So we went back, taking with us the information about what it would take to book the Dick Dale Band. We approached a bunch of clubs and they all turned it down flat. *We're not interested — that guy'll never sell any tickets!* Two years later, he headlines four times and we open for him each time. So we had a feeling it was gonna happen." Computer-savvy folks can keep up with things by visiting the Mermen's Web site, which can be found under the apropos heading of *mermen.com* via your local Net provider. *The Revolution will be digitalized ...*

"Synchronicity plays a huge part in this band," Allen allows. "If it wasn't for serendipitous events and the support of the people that listen to the music, call us up and e-mail us, saying *I really like what you're doing, we wouldn't have continued doing it*. We're not going to write music to specifically please a certain segment of people, but the fact that people like what we're doing keeps us going and deepening the expression of it."

Those who've turned on to the Mermen's sound haven't got long to wait to have their hunger for new recorded material satiated -- the band has a new EP scheduled for release in mid-February called *Songs of the Cow*, a 35-minute collection with five new tunes as well as some ambient stuff. This band is great and I highly — I did say *highly* — recommend them for anyone. *Sonic wave water music* is what I call it; see you at the Rubb on Jan. 31 and we'll compare notes.