

The Mermen riding a wave to success

By James Wright

Staff Writer

With a Ford van jam-packed full of sound equipment, the Mermen will come rolling into town tomorrow night, bringing with them an act that is gaining steam as it criss-crosses the country.

"It's a job, man," said Jim Thomas, guitarist for the ground-breaking trio from San Francisco. "I mean, I'm not punching time cards, but I could be doing something else."

Thomas took a little time off from his cross-country tour, which is currently in New York City. He chatted for a bit, with his view of the Empire State Building and a half hour to spare.

"I've met so many cool people on this tour. Last night in Philadelphia, this Indian couple sat through our entire show and afterwards told me that they loved it. I ended up talking to them for about an hour and a half."

The Mermen, who hail from the city by the bay, are riding a fat wave to fame and critical acclaim for their alternative "surf" music that blends hypnotizing rhythms with driving, distorted, reverb-soaked wailing guitar sounds. This music, which Thomas describes as "very physical," has given his band a well-recognized name in the bay-city music scene, as well as all across the country.

Thomas doesn't exactly buy that "surf music" label altogether. Even though his influences include Dick Dale and the Ventures who sparked the whole surf thing in the 60s, this New Jersey boy feels that the music should speak for itself.

"When the music is the music that moves people for whatever reason, that's when it's real. The labels come more from those who write about the music than those who play it. The best reviews we get are from those who say 'it's surf music, but...'"

Thomas, who just happens to be a die-hard surfer, carries his board with him wherever the band goes, just in case the waves are calling his name.

"Our music is more related to the reality of the ocean and my own experiences rather than buying into the whole idea of surf," added Thomas.

Their first studio album, "A Glorious Lethal Euphoria," has garnered praise from several publications, including spots on the "Best of '95" lists in both Guitar Player and Guitar World magazines. Guitar World had this to say about the Mermen: "Post-Hendrix psychedelia meets rampaging, balls-to-the-wall surf guitar on this thinking man's shred album."

The band's name, as you might have guessed, derives from a Jimi Hendrix song called "1983, A Merman I Shall Turn To Be." It seems a fitting tribute to the man whose music has inspired Thomas' playing the most. The screaming feedback you'll hear on "Lethal's" first track, "Pulpin' Line," is reflective of Hendrix tunes like "Third Stone From The Sun."

The Mermen, who have been playing together for seven years, are constantly changing what they do. "We're very growth oriented, we're always playing new music," said Thomas. This is clearly evident at the rate that they have been cranking out the tunes. Their 1994 release "Food For Other Fish" became a top-seller in the bay area. In 1995 they released "A Glorious Lethal Euphoria," and have just recently released a six-song EP titled "Songs Of the Cows."

The Mermen were also recently honored for outstanding artistic achievement in music at the San Francisco Bay Guardian's 1995 Goldies Awards. "A Glorious Lethal Euphoria" was the #1 album of the year on San Francisco college radio station KUSF-FM.

"It was really rewarding to be honored



The Mermen, Allen Whitman, Martyn Jones and Jim Thomas bring their instrumental act to the Oronoka Saturday night. (Courtesy Photo.)

from such a gnarly radio station, one of the top college stations around," said Thomas.

The Mermen, who will stop for a show at the Oronoka on Saturday night, are in the midst of a national tour that started Jan. 16 and will go straight through March 20. Thomas said the grueling, three month endeavor has been "fun." The tour has brought them to such exotic places as Hollywood, New Orleans, Miami, Philadelphia, New York City and Orono.

The Mermen aren't exactly strangers to our lovely home in the ice. They played during last year's rain-soaked Bumstock

festival. When asked if he was disappointed about the turnout at last year's show, he realized that the poor weather had nothing to do with the overall crowd's attitude. On the Bumstock '95 CD, you can hear Thomas yell "I've never seen anything like this! We're coming back!"

They are men of their word. Saturday night should be a good introduction for those unfamiliar with The Mermen's instrumental groove. Said Thomas, "You play where people want you to play. People who like things that go down pretty smooth probably won't like our band."

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