

Mermen go their own way, swimmingly

By **LISA MARIE CROUCH**
Staff Writer

The Mermen are riding a wave. The obvious pun intended, the San Francisco-based trio is riding high on the swell of popularity surrounding its second independent album, "A Glorious Lethal Euphoria." The collection carried the group onto the Best of '95 lists of numerous music magazines, including Rolling Stone and Guitar Player, and garnered the trio a 1995 BMMIE (Bay Area Music Award) for "outstanding independent album or EP." It also provided the springboard to a contract with Mesa/Bluemoon Recordings. A new EP, "Songs of the Cows," was recently released.

The surf movement, with its heady reverb and lighthearted sound, peaked in 1963, before being just about finished off by British music invasion and the advent of psychedelia. But the sound didn't die: It went underground.

Light-years removed from the traditional surf sounds fathered

MUSIC PREVIEW

THE MERMEN: 11:15 tonight (doors open at 10). Maxwell's, 1039 Washington St., Hoboken. \$7. 798-4064.

by Dick Dale and the Ventures, the Mermen have revived the best of the genre and made it their own — blending psychedelic overtones, grunge, and enough melodic interweaving to make a tapestry artist writhe with envy.

Guitarist-songwriter Jim Thomas said that, as a learning experience, the band began by playing tunes by every garage surf band, no matter how obscure.

"There are a lot of people today who think of the surf genre as saying something of itself, you know?" said Thomas, on the phone from Chicago, where The Mermen recently played. "I don't really get into that, I think that the music that we're doing is ... emotionally expressive music. A lot of



The Mermen, from left: Allen Whitman, Jim Thomas, and Martyn Jones.

kitschy, fun, retro-type surf music is seen as clever and cool and — it's like lounge, 'hey baby ...' stuff. We're not sticking to the 'dah dah dada dah' surf beat thing ..."

The success of "A Glorious Lethal Explosion" is astonishing, as the 42-year-old Thomas — performing in his first and only band — picked up a guitar for the first time in his mid-30s. The North Arlington native

and avowed surfer had been working as a car salesman in Seaside Heights when he decided he needed a change of scenery. Reflecting on his late-Eighties exodus to California, the self-taught guitarist said: "I ended up leaving New Jersey because I felt really depressed and felt that it was no longer home for me and I was no longer motivated. So I left in an awful state of mind and very indecisive

about going, too. I said, 'I'll either end up here and I'll kill myself or I'll just have to give everything up and go to California and try to do something.'"

Trying to do something resulted in getting a job in a San Francisco music store, where he learned his instrument — and once he did, he didn't look back. Co-worker and bassist Allen Whitman was impressed with Thomas' songs and joined up. They were soon rounded out by Martyn Jones on drums and The Mermen were born.

Taking their name from the Jimi Hendrix song, "1983 ... (A Merman I Shall Turn to Be)," the Mermen have received numerous accolades. Their song "Honeybomb" was included on the Rhino Records release "Cowabunga! The Surf Box (1960-1995)." (See story, Page 10.)

Thomas said the band is thrilled to be included, but it's more focused on transcending the surf label and creating a sound all its own.

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