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Vegas De Milo

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PARADISE LOUNGE


Wednesday, October 9th
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SALOON

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SPECIAL EVENTS - RAFFLES - POOL TABLES
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Andrew Tosh
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Wailers

DOORS 6PM
SHOWTIME 7PM

October 19th, 1996
ey Community Theater
601 6314 or 510 762 BASS

WILIGHT ZONE

CLASSIEST HEAD SHOP IN TOWN

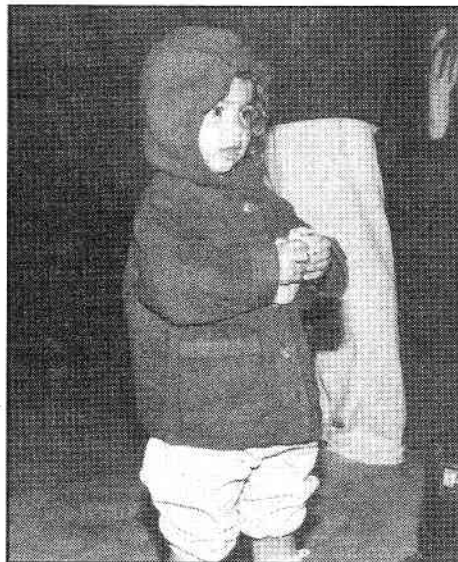
Night Crawler

Friday, as the sun slips into the tranquil sea, the plush, velvety darkness of the tropics enfolds the Presidio. There are no street lights, no stop lights, no headlights in the area to dilute its blackness; the air is warm, almost corporeal, with only a token breeze blowing in off the water. Nature has acquiesced the comforter-weather of the previous night and given **Ranger John Cantwell** a perfect night for his annual end-of-summer beach party. Good thing — it would be hard as hell to miss the season premiere of the *The X-Files* to spend a bone-chilling night on the shores of the San Francisco Bay.

Driving through the Presidio after nightfall feels a bit like covert spy activity. The federal land is deserted and quiet; the buildings stand blank and vacant. Alone, you can smoke cigarettes in a sinister fashion and easily imagine that you are making a top-secret rendezvous. Traveling in a car caravan is even better — all those headlights slicing through the night, unified by one clandestine purpose. When your vehicle actually stops before a large gate and a cryptic sign which reads: **Mermen NPS**, the mind simply reels.

Just past the gate the vast car lot bustles with activity. Most of those gathered are National Park Service employees or Mermen followers who have heard about the happening through word-of-mouth. Giant floodlights illuminate the area as people stream between their cars, several rows of portable toilets, and a second gate at the far end of the tract. A woman carrying a package wrapped in aluminum foil carefully weaves her way through some of the heavy machinery parked on the premises. She is stopped at the gate by a man who regards her container skeptically.

"I brought the beast," she states calmly.



The Mermen's youngest fan.

"Yes, good," he responds, escorting her through the second gate to a nearby barbecue. Already several hundred people are gathered at the water's edge. Entire families

"The horns were made in the '20s. Aren't you on the mailing list?"

Along the beach, a line stretches towards a small illuminated tent. Inside, bowls of licorice and lollipops await wee, sandy hands while the barbecues and several vegetable platters offer adult fare. A colorful poster by **Frank Kozik** commemorates the evening: Yogi Bear passed out after a hard night's drinking with the Jellystone ranger looking peeved; above the scene, it reads "Mermen"; below, "A Ranger John Production."

"Oh yeah, John organizes the whole thing every year," explains a fellow park employee who is volunteering in the tent. "Anyone is welcome, but it's his way of thanking [park



Seaweed Sniffer: Jim Thomas at the NPS shindig.

employees] for all their hard work during the summer." John, a tall man with a quick smile, long, blond hair, and a white buccaneer shirt speeds past with an electrician, talking seriously about power sources for the stage.

People spread out on blankets, uncorking bottles of wine, surround a tremendous bonfire while numerous children and dogs, intoxicated by the warm night air, circle and dig furiously in the sand. The disembodied music of **Morphine** supplies the appropriate mood for the glowing visage of the Golden Gate Bridge.

"This is one of the greatest things ever," says a young man with feverish eyes, flames from the bonfire flickering across his face. "We are lucky to be here," he says. It is glorious — the warm weather, the kindness of the folks, the way the city glitters from Fort Point Pier, the smell of the ocean, the distant barking of sea lions.

By the time the Mermen hit the stage, well over 500 people have found their way to the bayside, with a constant stream of headlights in the distance promising still more. Guitarist **Jim Thomas** smiles and encourages everyone to take a sniff of the ground under the stage. "It smells like one of my favorite things," he promises as the band launches into an energetic, psychedelic seaside tune. Four lasers mounted on top of the stage skim light across the crowd and catch billows of smoke rising off the bonfire. The crowd applauds heartily and two young men in Mermen T-shirts race down the beach with their tongue-lolling dogs in tow.

"During the sound check all the seals came in to listen," deadpans a sound engineer. "Jim said he had to go swim with them. He stripped off his clothes and dove in."

The Mermen are indeed in their natural habitat — outdoors, near the ocean, under the Golden Gate. Even the elements seem to concur. During each manic, wave-inspired

Photographs by Silke Tador


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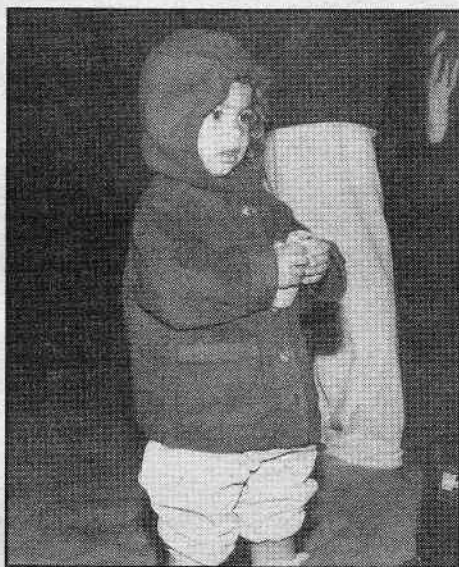
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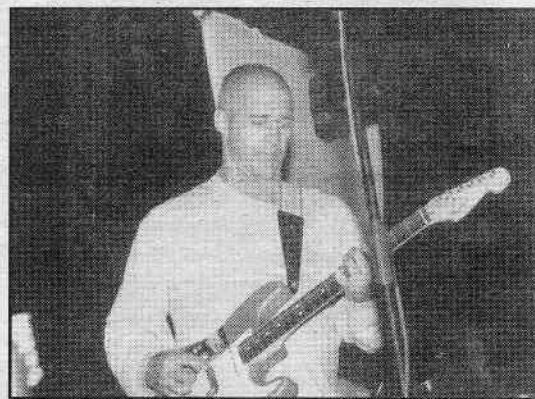
The Mermen's youngest fan.

"Yes, good," he responds, escorting her through the second gate to a nearby barbecue. Already several hundred people are gathered at the water's edge. Entire families stand with their shoes buried in the sand drinking from plastic cups as waves gently lick the shore. A warm wind rustles their hair and a series of low, rumbling foghorn blasts echoes across the water.

"That would be **The Fogmaster**," says a neighborly man in a baseball cap. The dark, lonely tones come from everywhere and nowhere, creeping through the atmosphere with a musical stealth remarkable for a foghorn. "Solid brass, that's why," clarifies the man.

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The Mermen are indeed in their natural habitat — outdoors, near the ocean, under the Golden Gate. Even the elements seem to concur. During each manic, wave-inspired crescendo the wind springs into action, stirring the fire to heights of 10 feet or more. Even periodic power outages — blamed, appropriately, on the *X-Files* — can do little to dampen the alchemy. As the crew puts it, it's just another "only-in-San Francisco event."

Next time, just plug in the VCR and tape it.

Send comments, quips, and tips to crawler@sfsweekly.com.

By Silke Tudor