

MUSIC

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Times

Mermen able to keep afloat despite conflicts

By TOM SCANLON
TIMES CORRESPONDENT

"Every person is a prison," Friedrich Nietzsche once wrote.

The Mermen can relate. The neo-surf rockers have become one of the most critically acclaimed and popular bands in the Bay Area. Some will tell you this is *the* Bay Area band, a thought supported by the Mermen's two consecutive Bammie awards (for the albums "Songs of the Cows" and "A Glorious Lethal Euphoria").

The Mermen play San Francisco's Maritime Hall tonight, but whether the band will survive to record its sixth album is not certain. At times, members say, the eight years they have spent together has felt like a Nietzschean sentence in San Quentin.

Three personalities

That's because for all the seeming simplicity of the music — guitar-bass-drums, instruments-only (Nietzsche: "We really ought to free ourselves from the seduction of words") — the band is a tangled web of conflicting personalities.

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Even their backgrounds are in conflict. Take Allen Whitman, the Bammie-nominated bass player. Doesn't even surf. "Never have — never tried it." And probably never will. He lives in Oakland, on the shores of waveless Lake Merritt.

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ALLEN WHITMAN, left, Jim Thomas and Martyn Jones are the Mermen — neo-surf rockers often in conflict.

BAND PROFILE

Who: The Mermen, performing with Zero

When: 8 tonight

structure and brings his ideas to the band — and tries to get us to express the original idea he had in his head, realizes he can't do it, and settles for what he gets."

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FROM PAGE 23

2. "When I Close My Eyes"
Kenny Chesney
3. "On the Verge"
Collin Raye
4. "Rumor Has It"
Clay Walker
5. "Another You"
David Kersh

Country Albums

1. "Unchained Melody/The Early Years"
LeAnn Rimes
2. "Blue"
LeAnn Rimes
3. "Did I Shave My Legs For This?"
Deana Carter
4. "Rumor Has It"
Clay Walker
5. "So Long So Wrong"
Alison Krauss & Union Station

R&B Singles

1. "Hypnotize"
The Notorious B.I.G.
2. "For You I Will"
Monica
3. "My Baby Daddy"
B-Rock & the Bizz
4. "Cupid"
112
5. "Big Daddy"
Heavy D

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5/9 the GUESS WHO

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6/8 RIGHTEOUS BROS.

6/20 SMOKIN ARMADILLOS

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Even their backgrounds are in conflict. Take Allen Whitman, the Bammie-nominated bass player. Doesn't even surf. "Never have — never tried it." And probably never will. He lives in Oakland, on the shores of waveless Lake Merritt.

Compare the tall, lanky Whitman, who has been in dozens of bands, to the muscular Thomas, a rugged, intense individualist who has never played in any other band. Thomas' San Francisco apartment has a view of the choppy, tumultuous Pacific Ocean, and the boards in his hallway and surfing magazines on his kitchen table are evidence of his passion for wave running.

Playing with Whitman and drummer Martyn Jones has been the most challenging wave for Thomas. At times, particularly during a concert when everything clicks just right, the musical ride has been a mad rush of in-the-tube exhilaration. At other times, as in heated rehearsals, it feels like the Mermen are speeding headlong for a bloody meeting with the rocks.

Feeling the tension

In separate interviews, Thomas and Whitman volunteer that their working relationship is tense, at best.

"I don't know if it's artistic tension — it's playing tension, you know what I mean?" says Thomas, eating his lunch of rice and mushrooms straight out of the frying pan. His apartment is a riot of literature and music, poetry books and music equipment.

"My playing is very introverted. I'm not an entertainer, I have no de-



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BAND PROFILE

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When: 8 tonight

Where: Maritime Hall, 450
Harison St., San Francisco

How much: \$15 to \$18

Call: 1-415-974-0634

sire to identify with anything, you know what I mean? Both Martyn and Allen, on the other hand, they enjoy the limelight of a rock 'n' roll band. Especially Allen . . .

"I'm like this really physical, dock-worker type. Allen's very neural, into his computers and la-di-da. And Martyn's a very passive character.

Whitman sometimes wonders if the music is worth enduring the tension.

"It's hard, emotionally — not quite knowing how to approach what we want to do," Whitman muses, sitting in the dunes of San Francisco's Ocean Beach, pondering the future of the band on a serene day.

"We've even come to fistfights . . . Stupid (stuff), allowing all the little things to add up."

Nietzsche often writes about a "will to power," and that phrase sums up Thomas. The poetry reader becomes passionate to the point of violence about trying to get his bandmates to re-create what he hears in his head.

Whitman explains it: "Jim writes the original melodic and chordal

structure and brings his ideas to the band — and tries to get us to express the original idea he had in his head, realizes he can't do it, and settles for what he gets."

Thomas does not hesitate to criticize Whitman and Jones, be it in the studio, or at a show.

"You have to bust your (guts) at a live show — and sometimes bust other people's (guts)," Thomas says with a wicked smile. "I'll go up to Allen or Martyn and say, 'You're playing like a (expletive) pantywaist!' Or, 'What's wrong with you, are you retarded?' And a little bit of anger makes them play better."

Even so, it is hardly the kind of management style that is conducive to longevity.

Ready to record

Clearly, Thomas' will-to-power has taken its toll on Whitman. "I will no longer subjugate my personal, emotional life to anything," Whitman proclaims. "Including the Mermen."

As for Thomas, he has written enough material for another album and is ready to start the often-contentious recording process.

"With the Mermen," Thomas says, "it's not a question of if we'll go on, the question is if we'll finish this record. It could be the last Mermen record."

Again, Nietzsche seems relevant: "One should not dodge one's tests, though they may be the most dangerous game one can play."

5. "Cupid" Heavy D

5. "Big Daddy" Heavy D

R&B Albums

1. "Life After Death" The Notorious B.I.G.

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3. "Still Serious" Big Mike

4. "The Untouchable" Scarface

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2. "My Baby Daddy" B-Rock & the Bizz

3. "Can't Nobody Hold Me Down" Puff Daddy (featuring Mase)

4. "I'll Be" Foxy Brown (featuring Jay-Z)

5. "Big Daddy" Heavy D

Dance Music

1. "Havana" Kenny G

2. "To Step Aside" Pet Shop Boys

3. "That Sound" Pump Friction

4. "Call Me" Le Click

5. "Star People" George Michael

Latin Singles

1. "Ya Me Voy Para Siempre" Los Temerarios

2. "Enamorado Por Primera Vez" Enrique Iglesias

3. "Mi Sangre Prisionera" Los Tigres Del Norte

4. "O Soy O Fui" Marco Antonio Solis

5. "Secuestro De Amor" Los Tucanes De Tijuana

Latin Albums

1. "Vivir" Enrique Iglesias

2. "Dreaming of You" Selena

3. "Siempre Selena" Selena

4. "Tango" Julio Iglesias

5. "Pies Descalzados" Shakira