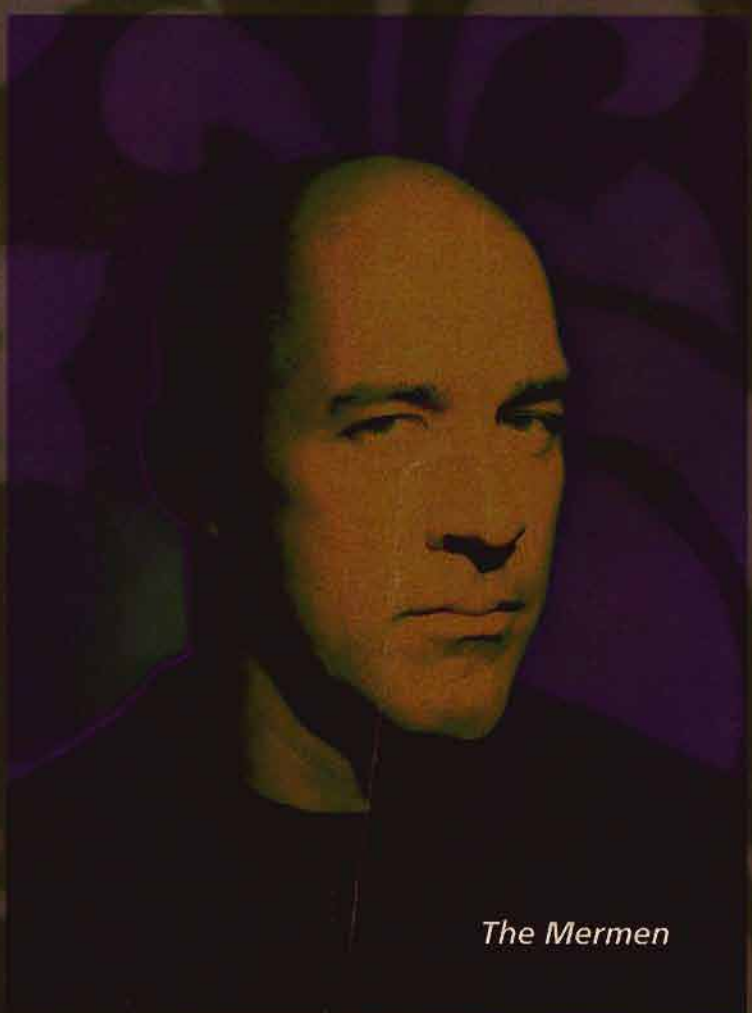


**California Sons** The New  
Wave of West Coast Surf Music  
Onstage at San Francisco's  
Transmission Theater, guitarist  
Jim Thomas of the surf-drenched  
Mermen is hunched over his red  
Stratocaster, alternating swirling,  
languid patterns with choppy  
waves of distortion. The room is  
packed with Bay Area bohemians  
wearing eyeglasses and serious  
expressions, none of whom look  
like they've ever surfed. By Eric  
Seyfarth + Photos by Miki Yasue



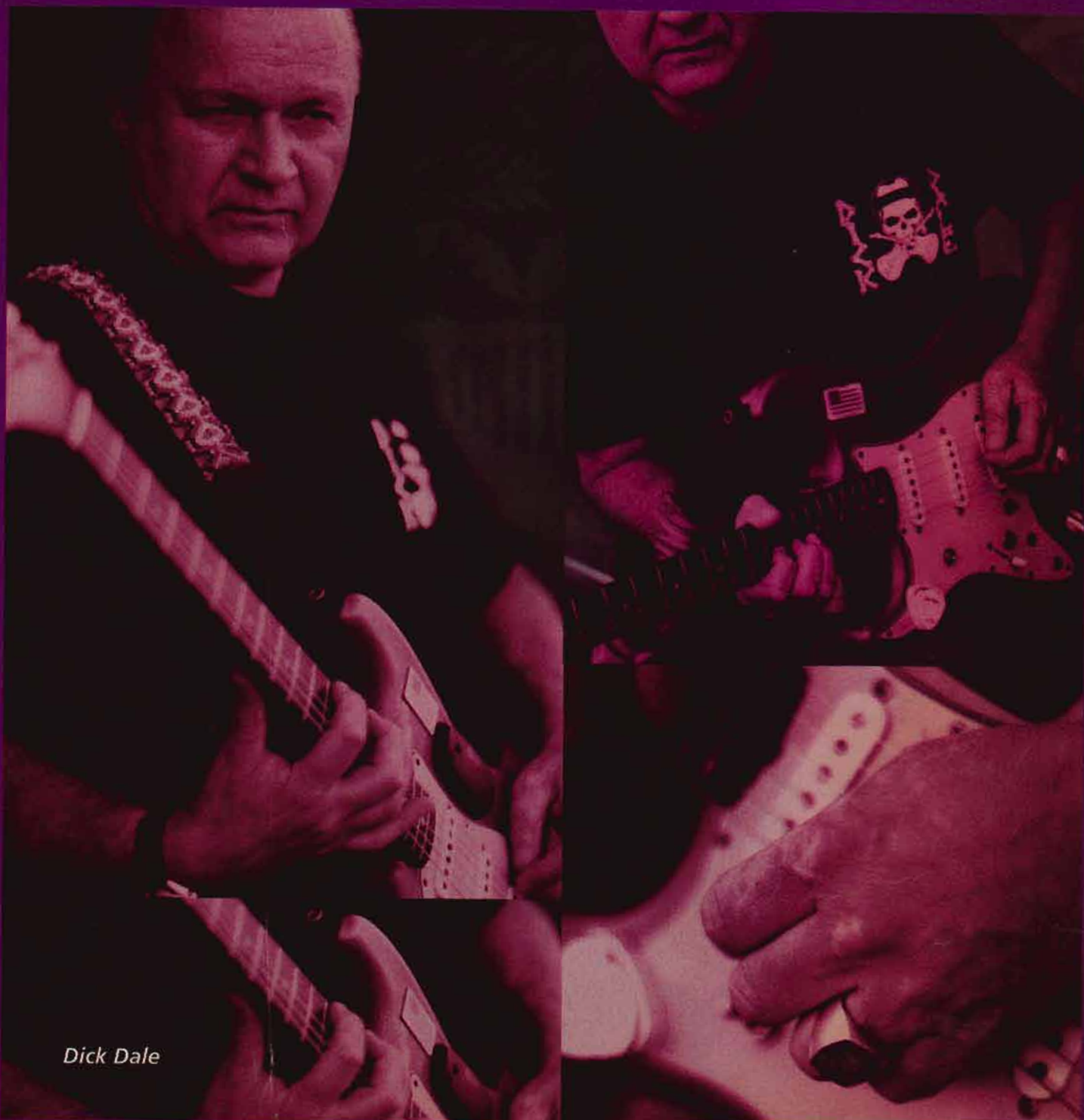
*The Mermen*

What makes the Mermen rip is noise and lots of it. Live, the San Francisco trio — Thomas, bassist Allan Whitman and drummer Martyn Jones — whips up a combo plate of surf-psychedelia, turning songs like “The Drowning Man Knows His God” and “Into the West, Be My Noir” into smoldering 15-minute jams. The hint of fun and sun is there, but the scene is covered with swollen, dark clouds. The Mermen are not so much instrumental revivalists as they are a complete retrofitting of the surf sound.

“It’s definitely rooted in what Dick Dale and the Ventures did,” says Thomas, sitting in the Transmission’s cramped upstairs office, sipping beer from a plastic cup. “But it’s rooted in a lot of other things too.”

## **“What surf sound? It’s the Dick Dale sound.”**

It may not be recognizable to longboard veterans or fans of Jan & Dean, but surf music is back. Surf bands are emerging everywhere, in places as far from the Pacific Coast as you can imagine: Untamed Youth in Missouri, the Fathoms in Boston, Man Or Astro-Man? in Alabama, Spies Who Surf in Chicago, the Boss Martins in Seattle. And it’s not just at home.



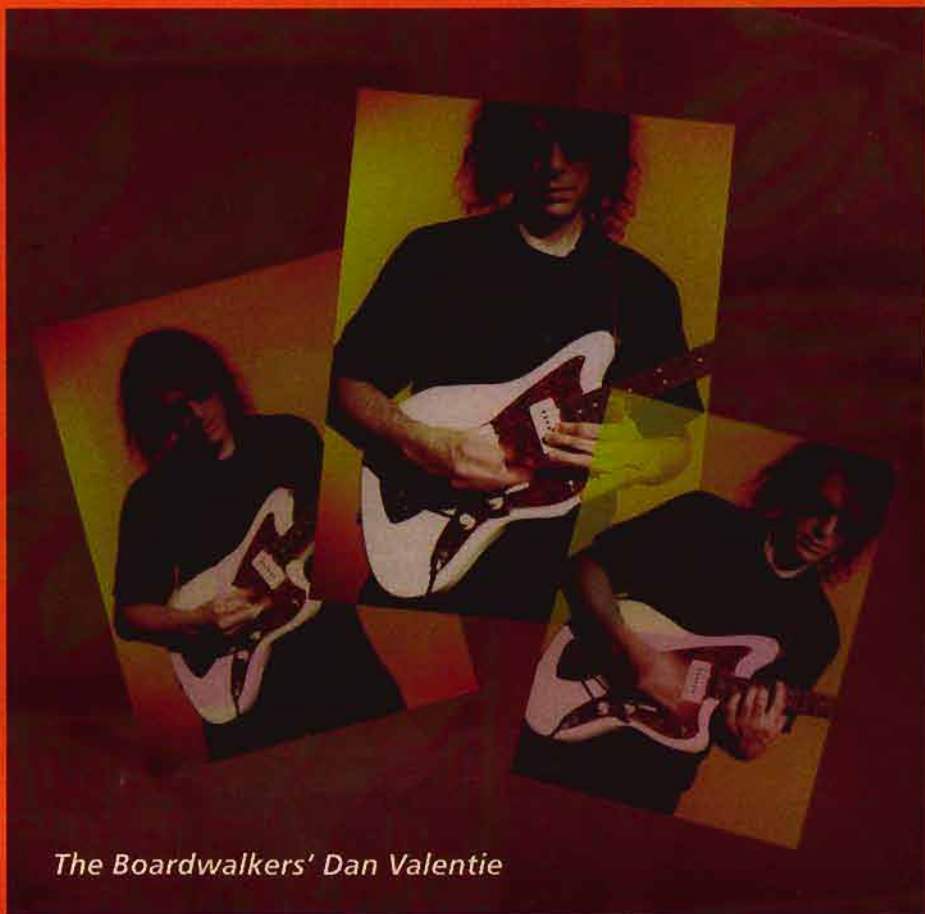
Dick Dale

International bands are drawn to the sound, too, like Japan's Jackie & the Cedrics, Finland's Laika & the Cosmonauts, Belgium's Vice Barons, Italy's Royal Nightmares and Sweden's Daytonas.

"People have rediscovered that clean guitar sound," says Robert Dalley, guitarist for revival band the Surf Raiders and author of *Surfing Guitars: Instrumental Surf Bands of the Sixties*. "Instrumental music is a universal language, and it's popular worldwide because you don't have to speak English to understand a good musical thought."

**S**URF MAY BE ALL THE RAGE in Tokyo, but its roots are still in Southern California, where dozens of bands including the Halibuts, the Eliminators, the Bomboras, the Insect Surfers, the Neptunas and the Boardwalkers make for an ever-changing scene.

Formed in 1989, the Boardwalkers are among the most true-to-form revivalists. Dan Valentie, the group's



The Boardwalkers' Dan Valentie

## "Surf is roots music for suburban kids."

40-year-old guitarist, is the first to admit his music is totally retro: he credits Black Sabbath, Deep Purple and *The Munsters* theme song as influences. "I get a lot of ideas from incidental music out of television or movies and advertising, because surf is instrumental and incidental music," he says. "As you look back at the history of surf, you're looking at the whole development of pop culture."

"Surf is roots music for suburban kids," Valentie adds. "But I try to take it further than a 15-year-old in the early '60s might have."

While Southern California spawned the music in the early '60s, San Francisco has turned it into art. The city is at the leading edge of a surf revival that includes everything from copycat bands playing every lick in perfect homage to the masters of 30 years ago, to ensembles like the Aqua Velvets, the Phantom Surfers, the Ultras and the Mermen that stretch the boundaries of the form.

With his shaved head, thick neck and massive shoulders, the Mermen's Jim Thomas, 42, looks more like a fullback than a guitarist for a post-modern surf band. And he's the first to admit he hardly fits the profile of a typical California surfer.

"When I'm playing my music, I don't know what the fuck I'm doing," says Thomas. "It blows me away that people actually like it."

"Before I came out here, I was homeless in New Jersey," he

adds. "I was living in my car. I had a surfboard on the roof and a guitar that someone gave me. At that point, I didn't care if I lived or if I died. A friend dragged me out to California. I sold my car to the junkyard, and I kept my surfboard and my guitar."

Thomas found work in a music store where he met bassist Whitman and formed the Mermen eight years ago. The band's two most recent albums — *A Glorious Lethal Euphoria* and a new EP *Songs For the Cows* (Mesa/Bluemoon) — combine the innocence of early-'60s Southern California instrumental surf music with layers of disturbing, manic guitar noise, earning the group a following among old-school surf fans and listeners more in tune with the experimental guitar-rock of bands like Sonic Youth.

"Traditional surf bands get really upset that our sound gets called surf," Thomas shrugs, jamming his hands inside the legs of his worn jeans. "We don't call ourselves a surf band. The majority of our audience doesn't surf. The people who have supported us are part of the alternative crowd. The music is just whatever it is."

**S**OUTHERN CALIFORNIA was changing fast in the early 1960s, with its beachside boom-towns and mushrooming middle class. The American Dream finally found its legs there, giddy with hopped-up cars and drive-ins, swimming pools, backyard barbecues and surfing.

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Kids growing up around the beaches of Southern California went looking for their own soundtrack, and they found it in the stripped-down instrumental music of early surf idols like the Ventures and the Fireballs. Dick Dale & His Del-Tones produced the first surf hit with "Let's Go Trippin'" in 1961. Around the same time, Leo Fender perfected the portable reverb unit, which Dale and other bands began to use. Surfers said the shimmering, liquid sound reminded them of water and waves, and an entire subculture was born.

"In the summer of 1961, there was a sense that anything could happen," says Paul Johnson. "All of a sudden you had all these young people getting stoked on surfing, and it became a new cultural movement, a new optimism."

At 50, Johnson is old enough to be the father of most of the young hodads bending their Fenders these days. But Johnson was young once, too, and the early '60s were a ripe time for Johnson and his band, the Belairs. Their instrumental "Mr. Moto" became a seminal surf hit in '61, and the Belairs set up for a long ride. In 1962, Dale came out with the Middle Eastern-tinged "Misirlou," followed by the Tornadoes' "Bustin' Surfboards." Surf crested by late 1962 with the Surfari's "Wipeout" and the Chantays' "Pipeline," both nationwide hits as much for their unique sound as for their popularization of California beach culture. But the wave of popularity broke fast and early, and surf wiped out by the mid-'60s. That's when Johnson packed up his amp and reverb kit, and figured he would never play surf music again.

Though surf was all but forgotten by the Summer of Love, the music never completely disappeared. Yet it wasn't until the 1990s that the music came back full force. The return was given a big boost by the soundtrack to *Pulp Fiction*, which mixed vintage surf hits with long-lost tracks. Soon television commercials advertising everything from Taco Bell to Toyota featured bent-string, reverb-soaked background music. Vintage reissues and compilations are also piling up in record store bins, with releases like *Pulp Surfin'* (Del-Fi), the *Rare Surf* series on AVI, *Revenge of the Surf Instrumentals* (MCA) and Rhino's four-disc box set *Cowabunga*. But the event that was both an emblem and a catalyst for the current movement was the release of Dick Dale's 1993 album, *Tribal Thunder* (Hightone), after an almost three-decade silence from the major-domo of surf.

If Dale, 59, is still the King of Surf Guitar, he's looking more like Buddha these days, with his long, graying hair pulled back under a black headband and a full belly creeping out over his baggy shorts. Performing at Slim's in San Francisco recently, Dale's beat-to-shit Strat rolls out waves of descending sixteenth notes that crash against the club's back wall, and the sound rumbles back like a good six-footer. Dale rips through the standards, still holding the guitar upside down and backward (that's the way he learned to play), grinding down his picks and chucking them into the audience.

Dale has always resisted the surf music label, and his position hasn't mellowed with the years. "What surf sound? It's the Dick Dale sound," he insists. "I was surfing at the time, so they called it surf music."

These days, Dale lives far from the beach in a Mojave Desert compound near Twentynine Palms. "I broke the barrier with that fat, thick sound. That's what changed the course of rock'n'roll," he says. "All of these new bands with surf names are great. It's the highest form of flattery. But there is a difference between the man who invented the sound and the wannabe musicians."

**F**REAKY PSYCHEDELIC posters of Big Brother & the Holding Company, the Turtles, the Byrds and the Association line the walls of Michael Lindner's home studio. The decor pegs the 48-year-old Aqua Velvets bassist to an earlier San Francisco era. Perched on a hill, Lindner's house is tucked among pastel-colored row houses on the tidy, winding streets of the city's Noe Valley neighborhood. And like the retro-but-eclectic mix of stuff on the walls, the Aqua Velvets specialty is a varied sound that mixes rockabilly, tiki, reggae, tango, Tex-Mex, spaghetti western and garage rock. It's mood music for a bunch of different moods.

"Nobody is telling us what to play, or what our music should sound like," Lindner says. "The environment in San Francisco gives us a lot more freedom, and we have a lot of space because of the mix of clubs. We can speak a lot of different languages musically."

The Aqua Velvets self-titled debut on Heyday features guitar overdubs recorded in the back of a Volkswagen van — a tribute to the do-it-yourself ethic of garage music and the simplicity of surf. A similar

vibe runs through their second album, *Surfmania* (Mesa/Bluemoon), and a third, *Nomads*, is due out in July on Milan.

"When we play in clubs, a lot of people still expect us to have a vocalist," he says. "But people seem to be able to create their own ideas and take the music where they want to go with it. Most of the time, at least, people seem to get it."

If the Aqua Velvets draw an older, arty crowd, cross-town revivalists the Phantom Surfers appeal to a new generation of surf fans. "It's hard to pinpoint why we appeal to the punkers," says the band's 31-year-old guitarist Johnny Bartlett. "Maybe it's because we try to stay true to the early '60s sound." The five-piece Phantom Surfers are one of the most authentic of the revival bands currently working the scene. They perform with matching suits and masks, never stray from the home-grown sound of the original masters, and playfully parody the early surf instrumental bands.


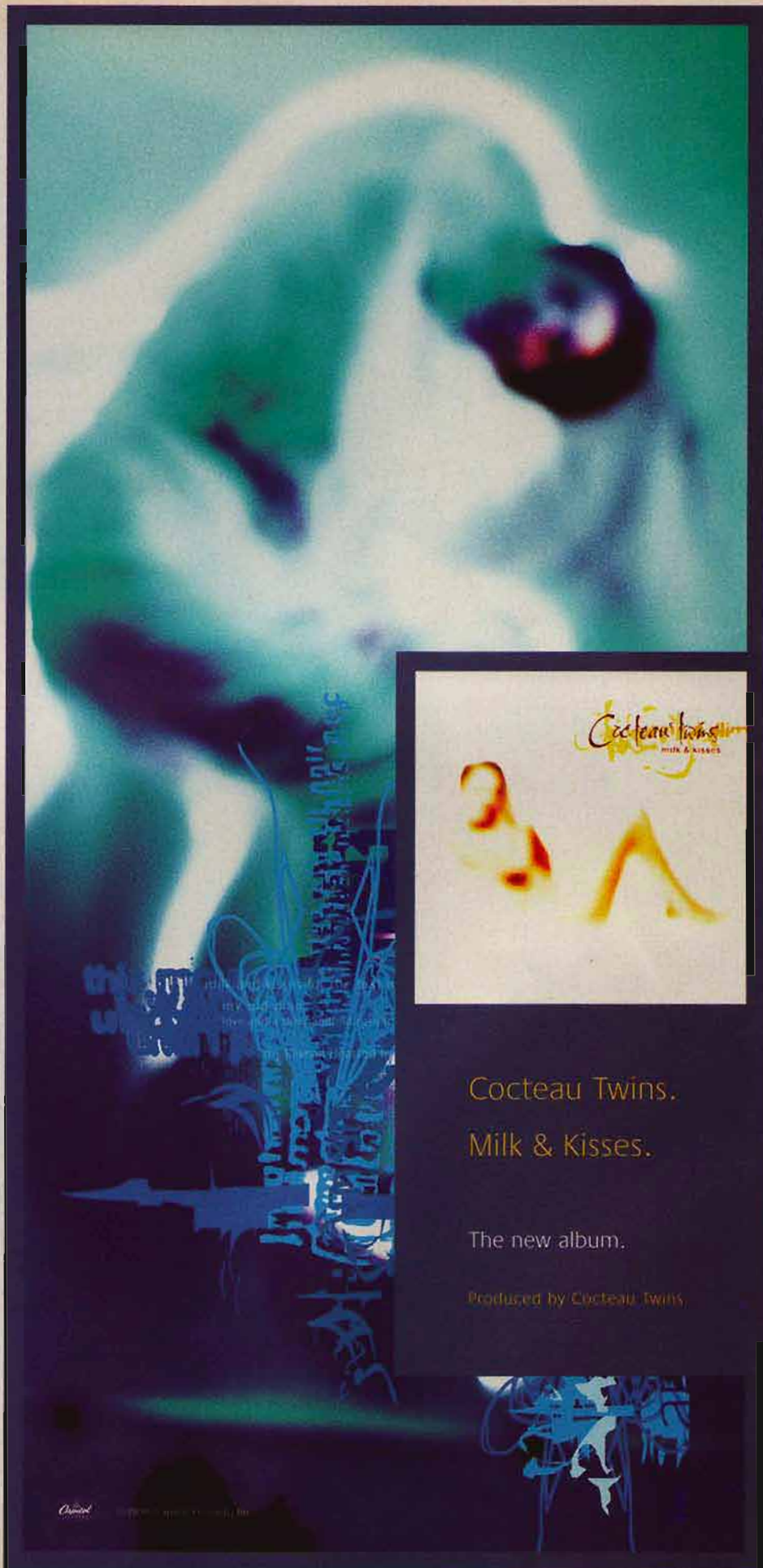
Their approach is a little hokey, but that's the point. Surf, if anything, has always been music for a good time. "Back when we started the Phantom Surfers in 1988, I was listening to surf revival bands like the Surf Raiders and Johnny & the Nightriders, just because we liked the music," Bartlett says. "We didn't decide to jump on the bandwagon, because at the time there wasn't one."

But as garage, punk and surf sounds became strange mates in the late '70s and early '80s, the surf movement picked up steam. At the dawn of the last decade, the Belairs' Paul Johnson decided to jump back in. He formed the Packards, recorded two indie albums (1980's *Pray For Surf* and 1986's *Guitar Heaven*), and hit the road again.

"When I play in clubs now, I no longer have to overcome the barrier of people not knowing what I'm playing," Johnson says. "People now recognize what it is and accept it on its own terms."

These days, Johnson plays straight-ahead surf, but his sound incorporates 30 years of new influences. And because he's an old-timer, Johnson has a well-developed perspective on the music he loves. "If the branches are going to grow out and develop new sprouts, you have to have a root system," he says. "The music has to continue to have its roots in order for it to grow."

*Eric Seyfarth is a contributing editor at San Francisco Focus and EcoTraveler.*



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