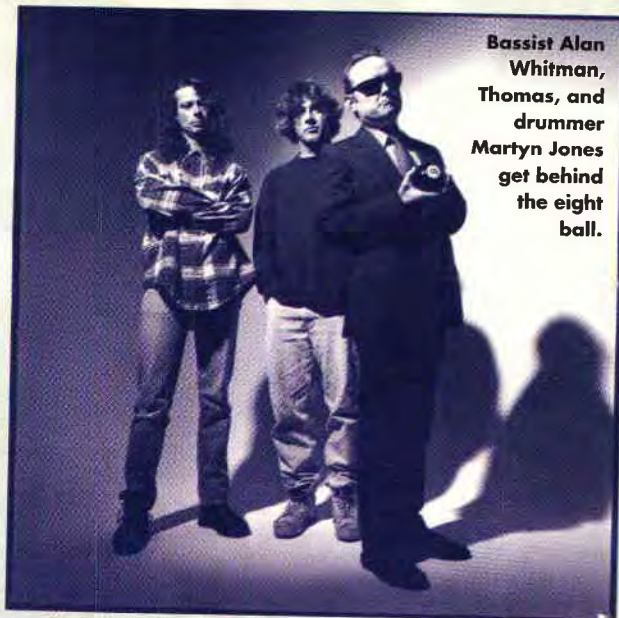


INTRO Catch A New Wave

If there's such a thing as progressive surf music, the Mermen may rule the genre. The San Francisco instrumental combo recalls traditional twang-and-twist surf bands about as much as King Crimson resembles the Ramones. Says guitarist/songwriter Jim Thomas, "I definitely went through a stage early in my career when I said, 'Ooh, I like that tube reverb sound' and 'I wanna play "Pipeline" like that,' but that wore away very quickly."

Prone to sweeping, dramatic suites and long stretches of spacey ambience, the Mermen don't evoke the gnarliness of a particular wave so much as the breadth of the ocean itself. The band's latest album, *Food For Other Fish* [Kelptone, c/o Lipp Service, 380 Dolores #10, San Francisco, CA 94110], amply showcases Thomas' expansion on the surf aesthetic. There's plenty of twangy reverberation and liquid whammy work, even the occasional tribal tattoo, but just as often Thomas' guitar growls with guttural feedback or dissipates altogether amidst the muted seascape. "I just kind of follow the sounds in my head," explains the guitarist. "I play whatever the song dictates."

Thomas' rig is as unique as his mutations of classic surf sounds. His Fender American Standard Strats are stripped of volume and tone pots; three cords wired directly to the pickups feed a trio of Fender amps (a combination of Dual Showmans and Twin Reverbs). Line-out signals from each preamp feed a splitter box that divides the signal "about a zillion ways," feeding an array of processors that eventually reunite in a Roland 24-channel mixer. Four ADA MIDI



Bassist Alan Whitman, Thomas, and drummer Martyn Jones get behind the eight ball.

pedals help control the mix.

"It's a really impossible setup," admits Thomas. But that doesn't stop him from sending his axes airborne when the mood strikes. "Man, I *throw* those guitars," he grins. "They look like they're a hundred years old, all chipped and cracked. It's not planned, but I do it every once in a while, and then always swear that I'm never gonna do it again."

—TIM KENNEALLY

THE MERMEN

Portishead

THE TRIPPY ART OF UN-GUITAR

"This is not a guitar thing, really," says Adrian Utley, producer and guitarist for Portishead, leading exponents of the "trip-hop" wave. The Bristol, England-based group combines densely layered acoustic and electric instrumentation, soulful crooning, and the studio techniques of hip hop into one of the most richly inventive sounds in modern pop. "It's about using guitar as a sound source rather than guitar for guitar's sake."

The haunting musical moods that fill Portishead's 1994 debut *Dummy* contain nary a routine guitar solo or feedback-drenched rhythm fill. The group—led by keyboardist/sampler Geoff Barrow and enchanting vocalist Beth Gibbons, with supporting members Utley and engineer Dave McDonald—recontextualizes the instrument in innovative, often disorienting ways.

From the tortured Hendrix-like riff that creeps into the chorus of "Glory Box" to the Link Wray-ish line that grinds over a sample from Lalo Schiffrin's *Mission: Impossible* theme in "Sour Times," Utley's guitar alternately bubbles in the back-

drop and pokes to the surface in raging torrents. It's less a lead instrument and more a tool for dramatic punctuation.

Plugging his favorite Gibson ES-335 into a cast of old Fender amps and pawnshop fuzzboxes ("I like the Fuzz Face and Big Muff"), many of Utley's parts were first recorded onto vinyl, then sampled into the mix as needed. This technique was used for the woozy riff that gives "Wandering Star" its fractured, eerie quality. In "Strangers," a similar strategy resulted in the scratchy, noodling guitar part that sounds like it was lifted off an old jazz 78. "That was an absolute piece-of-shit acoustic we found lying around the studio," laughs Utley. "We tuned it up, recorded it onto a dictaphone, and put it on 'Strangers.'"

For a 37-year-old jazz-trained guitarist who's led numerous British blues bands and recorded with his longtime idol Jeff Beck on *Crazy Legs*, playing in Portishead is quite a departure. "It's pretty weird stuff guitar-wise," Utley says. "But it doesn't bother me playing guitar not like a guitar. It's an adventure."

—JASON FINE