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April 1994

Psychedelic Surfers



Photo: Chris Lorman

The Mermen (l to r) Jim Thomas, Martyn Jones and Allen Whitman brought their psychedelic instrumental sound to the Paradise Lounge March 19.

By Phil Reser

"Projections of illuminated giant mollusk fossils against the wall, the dance floor sways in aquatic pulses, the drums rip and roll as melodic and sharp as the Pacific crests pounding on blond beaches. The

guitar howls like a formation of amplified seagulls diving down on a school of perch, the bass rides like a phosphorescent tide. Get your gills wet, the Mermen are in town." - D.L. Honsson

To guitarist and songwriter Jim Thomas, the late rock 'n' roll legend Jimi Hendrix's

1968 song, "A Merman I Shall Turn To Be," is the electric underwater symphony that redefined music and that is why he named his band "The Mermen."

Thomas has spent 20 years of his life

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Matrix Crackdown Drives More Homeless into Sunset

By Michael Steinberg

The Inner Sunset District's homeless population has been growing since the Matrix crackdown began in the Haight Ashbury in March. Store owners are finding more people sleeping in their doorways, and the numbers of people asking for money in the Ninth Avenue and Irving Street area is increasing.

Craig Dawson, of the Inner Sunset Merchants Association, said he has seen a dramatic increase in the area's numbers of homeless people following SF Mayor Frank Jordan's high-profile press conference on Haight Street in early March announcing a concentration of police there to enforce the Matrix Program.

"I see them now every morning sleeping in doorways along Irving Street," Dawson observed. "It wasn't like that before." Asked if he thought this was a result of Matrix in the Haight, Dawson answered, "Absolutely."

Sarah Kim, owner of the Coffee Merchant on Ninth Avenue, a half block from Golden Gate Park, also has noted an increase. "It started about two weeks ago," she said March 26.

Sunset District Middle Schools to be Restructured

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Mermen Mix Jazz, Thrash and New Age

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surfing. Raised near the ocean, he ordered his first surfboard by mail before he was 10 years old, and is proud of his collection of surfer magazines that date back to 25 years ago.

He and bass player, Allen Whitman, another refugee from the East Coast, met several years ago while both were employed by Spitzer's Sound Stage in the City. They soon joined forces with Martyn Jones, a British drummer who had worked with John Lee Hooker and The Mermen were born.

Thomas and Whitman live on Vicente Street a few blocks from Ocean Beach. The living room is covered with promotional packets, musical instruments, surf boards and colorful posters by local artist Ron Donovan, a.k.a. the Duke of Haight Street, who creates original posters for the Mermen.

Both agree that the success of the band was an accident. "I had been playing in bands for a long time," says Whitman. "Ones that were real serious about what they were doing. Well, the Mermen were never really serious. We just enjoyed playing - and suddenly everyone started paying attention to us."

They are excited about how fast things are happening to them.

In March, they played the Bottom of the Hill in Potrero Hill, which was sold out, with people being turned away at the door. This is the way it is for these guys now a days. Their brand new CD "Food for Other Fish" with Kelptone Records is selling well.

Thomas says, "Bay Area guitarist Henry Kaiser got a hold of a demo tape of The Mermen and passed it on to San Francisco's New Albion Records, who handle new, avant-garde musicians.

"New Albion put the money up for the studio time, artwork, and manufacturing of the CD." (It's now available at shows or in the Sunset, at Wise Surf Boards, where a couple of hundred have been sold.)

Over the last few years, The Mermen have performed with a wide variety of musicians such as The American Music Club, Sister Double Happiness, Pearl Harbor, Grammy nominee David Lindley, and even Tiny Tim.

All over the club road map, from the Great American Music Hall, to the Esalen Institute, to Slim's, and even a place called The Crocodile Club in Tokyo, Japan.

Japanese promoters chose the band after scouting London, New York and San Francisco for a group that would introduce some



Photo Chris Lasso

Sunset District-based The Mermen (l to r) Jim Thomas, Martyn Jones and Allen Whitman are getting attention with their psychedelic instrumentals.

new and innovative American music to the Japanese.

Several years ago, they did a post-competition event at the DNA Lounge during the U.S. Surfing Championships which also featured John Blakely, composer of the Endless Summer soundtrack, in a set featuring instrumentals from that movie.

In the tradition of great San Francisco bands, they have contributed to many community and environmental causes. At Ocean Beach they played for the 1990 Earth Day Celebration.

They have done five annual benefit concerts for the local Sunset District's Surfrider Foundation; last year's event gave them the opportunity to perform with Australia's Midnight Oil.

In 1992 they won the San

Middle School Restructuring

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diverse student body, which is made up of many cultures."

One committee is examining new possibilities for class scheduling and student-to-teacher ratios. Monsef's daughter, who attends Giannini, is one of several students who serves on the Master Schedule Committee.

Saying she was excited by such an endeavor, Monsef said, "This has not been done before, and we are looking forward to making positive changes."

Like Monsef, fellow PTA member Susan Suval said she feels hopeful.

"The middle school years are difficult for parent involvement because, at this age, kids often break away, and it is not the same as in the elementary school years," she said.

"Attendance at PTA meetings have been low, even when we did all that parents at previous meetings had suggested," Suval added. "Traditionally, the parents get involved with the PTA and

Francisco Alternative Music Awards (Wammies), for best retro band. Their television gigs include CNN's Surfer Magazine, Thrasher Video Magazine, Viacom Cablevision's Art Attack and the nationally broadcast television show, California Music.

Thomas's compositions are influenced by his love for the ocean and surfing but he says, "we don't think of our music as surf music, that's a 60's cliché-ridden sound that's very one-dimensional. Our songs are really long and go through a lot of different keys with jazz, thrash and new age in it.

"We have no lyrics so people are confronted with an image moving around in a mysterious way. Our audience gets deeply involved with guessing what it's all about."

such activities in the early school years, but during the middle school years, parents often just disappear."

Suval said the restructuring program is extremely important and she feels that with the School Site Council now in place, parents will become more involved.

Elected councilmember Joan Rice shares this hope. "I think once the restructuring has met its goals, parent involvement and the PTA will become stronger."

The School Site Council has been meeting every Friday morning in the Library on the Giannini campus.

Meanwhile Herbert Hoover Middle School is approaching the need for change by implementing new programs such as the California Leadership Program and the Teacher Retraining Program, among others.

How these changes will effect the City's middle schools, especially those in the Sunset District, remains to be seen.

TAX RETURNS