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# Music unites the Mermen and cows

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If you notice your teacups rattling in their cabinets between tonight and Tuesday, blame it on The Mermen, Abstinence and Slaprocket, all of whom have gigs this week. So much noise, so little time.

The Mermen are a San Francisco-based band whose music has often been described as instrumental surf. But that's only a sliver of what The Mermen can do.



**KELLY-JANE COTTER**

**Pop Music**

Sure, there are rollicking waves in Mermen tunes, but there's also a heavy layer of dirge rock and hints of classical orchestral music. It's really kind of creepy. The Mermen will play Tuesday at the Brighton Bar in Long Branch with the local supergroup Atomic Bitch Wax and Thursday at the Mercury Lounge in Manhattan. Tuesday is also the release date for the band's new album on Mesa, "Songs of the Cows," available on CD and vinyl.

"We've been touring and I kept looking at cows," said Jim Thomas, guitarist and songwriter. "What weird creatures they are. They eat their grass. They get milked and chopped up. Then I was in Costa Rica and there was this little kid ranting about 'songs of the cows.' Shortly after that, I woke up mooring. I swear to God. I'm not one of these people who finds messages in everything, but I decided the album had to be 'Songs of the Cows.'"

"I used to live in New Jersey. I lived in Belmar, Manasquan, Seaside Heights," he said. "I was a waiter at Evelyn's in Belmar; I caught Bruce a few times at the Stone Pony. I used to have this dream that Bruce Springsteen was teaching me how to play guitar. So then eight years ago I



● The Mermen are scheduled to perform Tuesday at the Brighton Bar, Long Branch.

moved to California with a surfboard and an acoustic guitar. Now we're pretty successful in San Francisco. We're up for a Bammy against Chris Isaak and Green Day as best group in the Bay area."

Thomas called the Press while on the road in St. Petersburg, Fla. Within minutes of our conversation, he was reciting selected odes and epistles of the Greek poet Horace and analyzing the translation ("I was told that the word for 'guest' was also the word for 'stranger,' so when you say, 'though I'm caught up in the tempest, I'm borne along as its guest,' I think it's really saying 'I'm a stranger everywhere; I follow where the wind blows.'")

He then asked me which was my favorite Salvador Dali painting. I told him it was the one with the little boy peeling the skin off the ocean. "Cool," he said. "We just went to this Dali museum down here. Now I

wanna go back and see if I can find that one." "You should see the cover art for our new album," he said. "It's by Julie Newdome; she does inter-uterine art and it's called 'Plight of the Estrogen Ladies.' Inter-uterine art is all about painting what's inside, because we've already done what's outside."

The Mermen's music seems to come from inside, too — rumbling, yawning and stretching in the most curious way.

**HAS ANYONE ELSE** out there seen the wonderful documentary about Leon Theremin, inventor of the musical instrument that bears his name? He created the theremin as a way to create classical music electronically, sort of by playing with the feedback from a radio. The theremin sounds like a cross between a violin and an organ. It can sound quite lovely, though most people as-

sociate the theremin with the ooo-eee-ooo sounds of cheesy sci-fi flicks from the '50s (or with The Beach Boys' song, "Good Vibrations").

Anyway, Darryl Hell can be considered a musical descendant of Leon Theremin. The Long Branch DJ and musician is enamored of the relationship between technology and music and has spent 10 years creating electronic music with his band, Abstinence, and more recently with his label, Furnace, a sister label of Silent Records in San Francisco. Abstinence released two albums on Silent, "Revolt of the Cyberchrist" and "Theorem."

Abstinence makes a rare local appearance tonight around midnight at The Brighton Bar. If you think industrial music is Nine Inch Nails, you'd learn a lot from Professor Hell. Abstinence makes truly industrial music — using synthesizers, vocal samples and "found sounds," such as tools or metal pipes clanging together. The music is not really danceable, unless you've got some truly awesome internal rhythms of your own. But the members of Abstinence are no mere gadget geeks. Rather, it's a bit like performance art — Abstinence includes a ballet dancer to offer a soft and graceful visual counterpart to the harsh musical sounds.

"We also use TVs. It's a multimedia performance," Hell said. "It's what I like to call totally planned spontaneity. It works under the same philosophy as jazz musicians do — they know the basic structure of a song; they get together and turn it into something totally different." Hell bemoans the lack of a supportive local scene for industrial music, but thinks popular culture will help cultivate new devotees. "Everyone knows how to use a computer now," he said. "Everyone's growing up on computer games. People are getting more used to electronic sounds."

□ Kelly-Jane Cotter is the Asbury Park Press music writer. Pop Music appears Fridays.