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The Mermen (Jennifer Burnes, Jim Thomas and Vince Littleton) are named after a Jimi Hendrix tune.

Wild ride for the Mermen

But band's founder rejects 'surf' label

By John Moore

Denver Post Staff Writer

Jim Thomas, who grew up surfing even through frigid winters at the Jersey shore and now lives on San Francisco's Ocean Beach, is halfway to his personal Valhalla.

"I'd like to ultimately move to Hawaii, get a gig where I can play at the same place three nights a week and spend the rest of the time surfing," said Thomas, the 46-year-old creator of the lushly orchestrated surf-spined band The Mermen.

That would be a long time and distance removed from the back seat of the 1966 Chevy BelAir he lived out of for three months in the blazing heat of the 1987 New Jersey summer. Considering he was 33 then and had no money, possessions or ambitions, it's fairly remarkable he's made it this far.

"I was in a really apathetic state of mind," he said. "I didn't care about anything. I didn't want to work. I had worked about 30 different kinds of jobs and I couldn't stand anything. I climbed telephone poles. I sold cars. I made pizzas. I worked as an accountant for Nabisco. I was a truck driver. I worked at a medical clinic doing allergy testing. I was a waiter for 10 years. But I lived by the beach and I surfed. That was a great part of my life. I always liked music, but I never believed I had any talent."

Thomas drove to the dump, sold his Chevy for \$100 and let himself be dragged to California by a friend. He only returns to New Jersey for funerals and gigs — never,

Hang 10

- **What:** The Mermen with Maraca 5-0
- **When:** 8 p.m. doors Saturday.
- **Where:** Bluebird Theater, 3317 E. Colfax Ave.
- **Tickets:** \$10; \$12 day of show, through TicketWeb

as yet, at the same time. "I sort of, like, avoid the place," he said.

But Thomas is far from a typical surfer slacker. He may have been unmotivated, but he is hardly uneducated. A head-spinning 30-minute talk yields many references to men of ideas: Jesus Christ; directors Akira Kurosawa and Jim Jarmusch; poets T.S. Eliot, William Blake, Gary Snyder and Martin Buber. Musically, everyone from neoclassicist Mark O'Connor to Jimi Hendrix to Jack Nitzsche.

Thomas is a little of each: director, philosopher, poet and musician. "I definitely find what I'm doing is definitely philosophically informed by a lot of those people," he said.

Such an irony that a man of so many ideas is a guitar player in an instrumental band. He was particularly moved by Jarmusch's 1995 art-house Western "Dead Man," starring Johnny Depp as an accountant who, like Thomas, ventures into the metaphorical badlands of the frontier West.

"I've seen that movie probably 50 times," he said. "It got to the point where I could never watch it again. I almost threw up the last time. To me that movie is so much of what I am into, and what I did, moving West. I keep thinking about how Johnny Depp (starts out) real civilized, and then he goes through

these layers of civilization that are undone in the wilderness."

Thomas' first job in San Francisco was at a music store, where he fiddled with four-tracks, making music demos that, to his astonishment, people wanted to buy. Allan Whitman, who with Thomas and Martyn Jones would become the first Mermen lineup, began laying down bass lines. After a series of implausibly fortuitous breaks, 35-year-old Thomas was in his first and only band, opening for a legendary guitarist (David Lindley) at a legendary club (Slim's).

The Mermen have released six records, including the recent "Amazing California Health and Happiness Road Show." The current lineup includes Thomas on guitar, Jennifer Burnes on bass and Prairie Prince (who will not appear in Denver) on drums.

"I've always thought this is just madness," he said. "It's crazy. I tell people the story, and they just shake their head."

The Mermen have always been tagged a surf band, which they were at first, with clean guitar and reverb sounds influenced by The Astronauts, Link Ray, Dick Dale and The Ventures. But saying the Mermen's roots are in surf is akin to saying Bob Dylan's roots are in folk. It fails to take into account the sweeping evolution of the music. On The Mermen's first record, Thomas didn't even know how to create distortion. "Happiness" represents such a fully realized sound that any label seems inadequate. Thomas doesn't care about labels or the mostly negative reaction he gets from surf purists.

"My attitude about the music is, 'No mercy.' You get out there and you just pummel. Because that's what it's like going surfing."