

Up from the Deep with the Mermen

by Che' Albert

What keeps the crowds away from Ocean Beach more than anything else – more than the cold, the currents, the size of the surf – is the sheer difficulty of paddling out, of getting from the shore to the waves.

On bigger days, when you're looking out from the water's edge across a stepladder of six or seven walls of cold, growling, onrushing white water, the idea of paddling out actually carries with it a whiff of lunacy. The project looks impossible, like trying to swim up a waterfall. It takes a literal leap of faith to start. You throw yourself into the icy torrent and start plowing seaward. The waves, as they approach, sound like howling balls rumbling down a lane, and then like the crashing of pins as they slam into and roll over your bowed head and shoulders, producing instant ice-cream headache. Long, strain-filled minutes pass, little or no progress is made, and the frisky, punishing waves come on and on. Your breathing turns to gasping, then rasping, and your mind begins to play even-shorter loops, turning over the same half-nonsensical questions: Is virtue rewarded? Is it even recorded?

- William Finnegan

Aug. 24, 1992, The New Yorker

(Simply the best surfing article I've ever read.)

Maybe I'm reading too much into the fact that the songwriter and lead guitarist for the Mermen, Jim Thomas, has battled the unpredictable waves of San Francisco's Ocean Beach. But I don't think so. The sounds of this critically acclaimed band seem to have been created by someone who knows what it means to be punished by the sea. The sea is an unpredictable changing thing. At moments it is inviting, carefree and soothing. Without warning it can become angry, sublime and dangerous. In a genre known for its loose and driving style, the Bay Area's Mermen are leading a new wave of bands that are challenging all of the definitions of surf music. Yet, they are doing so while remaining true to the reverb sound that is essential to any great surf. There have been lots of attempts to describe the sound of the Mermen. The jacket cover of the Mermen's 1995 release CD, "A Glorious Lethal Euphoria" calls it "Dick Dale meets Sonic Youth." Rick Escobar, lead guitarist of the now-defunct Bay Area surf band, The Woodies, likens it to Pink Floyd. Music critic Ira Robbins says the Mermen ride the wild surf "as if Jimi Hendrix had come back to be a rodeo star." They are, Robbins said, "to surfing what Cream is to rock."

I won't try to compare the Mermen to another sound, because none come to mind. What does come to mind when I crank up their music are images and emotions. Sometimes they are soothing feelings, like those that come out of a tune like "Between I and Thou." Other emotions are more sublime. Like the ocean, you wonder and worry about what is beneath the surface of a song like "With No Definite Future and No Purpose other than to Prevail Somehow..." Of course, surf music is known for its driving sound that just moves across your brain, and the Mermen are worthy ambassadors of the surf guitar. But they are clearly taking it to new levels.

The Mermen are a trio of Jim Thomas on guitar, Allen Whitman on bass and Martyn Jones on drums. The band has been around for nigh a decade, producing five albums. In August, the band will release its latest album "The Amazing California Health and Happiness Roadshow." In recent years the band has toured nationally, but this year the schedule is limited mostly to the Bay Area. "We've toured a fair amount," said Whitman in a recent e-mail interview, "especially in 1996, but not recently. Touring is expensive and the Mermen are a cult/niche band. It's hard to hit the road without monetary support and we're too old and tired to do it ourselves!" It's easy to see that the Mermen are decidedly different than other surf bands playing today. It's just not easy to define what makes them different. The reverb is there. The drive is there. And clearly, they are a surf band. Don't take my word for it. Phil Dirt, the grand poobah of all things surf calls the Mermen simply his favorite surf band. Their sound may be different, but other traditionalists like it. Rick Escobar, whose band, The Woodies, played in a style that was true to the traditional sounds of surf agreed, the Mermen are different. But it's definitely surf music. "I like The

Mermen a lot," he said. "A very cool band with their own defining sound." While everyone else debates the complexities and the significance of their work, Whitman doesn't seem too interested in exploring those depths. When asked what goals the band had coming into this venture and to what level they hoped to take their music:

"No goal at all..." Whitman wrote. "Just some guys playing tunes! As to levels: We just played the way that seemed appropriate." Well, OK. An difficult interview, perhaps, but it's hard to hold a grudge. At least he gave me the name of a good Mexican food restaurant: "TacoMorrella on East 14th street In Oakland past Fruitvale. Excellent!" I've about overdosed on surf music in the past month, listening to the old stuff and the new – including the other bands that now claim to be pushing the edge of surf music to new boundaries. But the Mermen are just in another category. And while the easy way out is to compare them to other artists, it's undeniable that there are Bay Area influences swimming around in this surf. There is a hazy psychedelic feel to some of this music that's hard to deny – especially on some of their newest stuff like "Curve" from "Songs of the Cow." So, if we're going to compare to other artists, I'd guess it would kind of like if someone dosed Dick Dale's punch with some acid. It's surf, but it's surf from behind the haze. But, just when one label seems fitting, they'll turn around and play a song that's just downright beautiful like "Brain Wash – What Am I Always Waiting For?" So, we'll all just keep comparing them to whomever we can think of, but I think the bottom line is these are three very talented artists having a very good time keeping us all sort of confused. Which is just fine by me as long as they keep the confusion coming. The Mermen produce some of the most original and challenging music I've had the pleasure of enjoying in quite some time. And for anyone who would like to pigeon hole surf music as a relic sound that hasn't changed since its inception – just duct tape them into a chair and shove some earphones onto their head and let loose with some "Pulpin' Line."

The Mermen make me want to drop acid and paddle out naked into the shorebreak on a bleak winter day.

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