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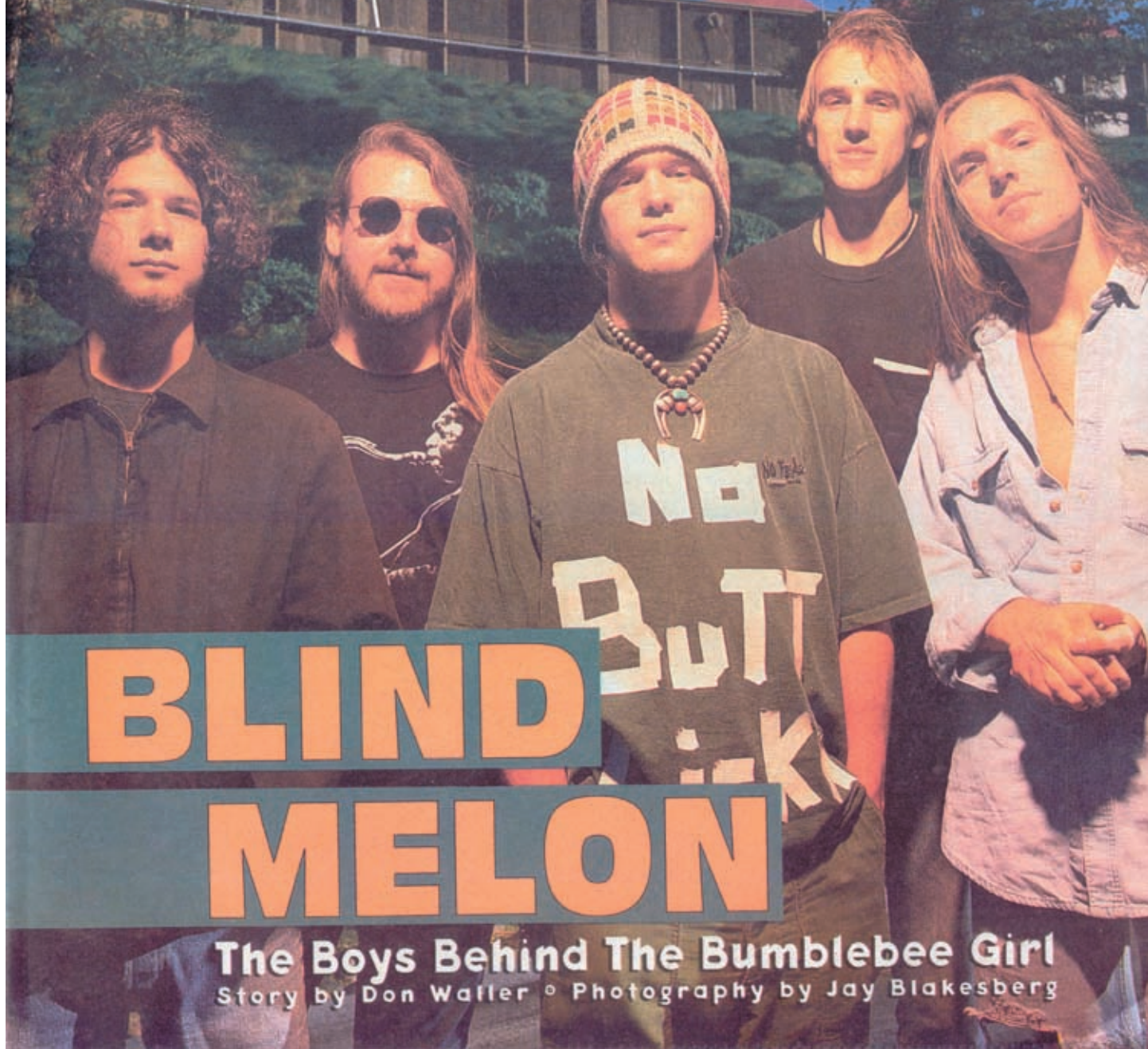
BAM

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA'S MUSIC MAGAZINE

PRO-AUDIO &
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ELECTRIC BOOTY MOB
The Gang That
Couldn't Funk Straight
...in Peavey Local Music Focus



BLIND MELON

The Boys Behind The Bumblebee Girl

Story by Don Waller • Photography by Jay Blakesberg

Southern-Fried Grunge



By Don Waller

LA Blues

"When I first got to LA, I immediately went into a deep depression for about two years," says Blind Melon guitarist Christopher Thorn, shaking his head at the memories. "It was miserable for me. Culture shock just threw me on my ass. Coming from Dover (Pennsylvania), which is just a little farm town—population just a few thousand—you try to make friends and you find out you're a serious geek compared to them. At least that's how they make you feel. You feel really outcast."

"Well, there's a lot of cool people in LA," draws drummer Glen Graham.

Christopher cracks up. "There's a lotta cool people in LA, and I wasn't even cool. I was so uncool. And I remember all those people, too."

And I bet they've all been calling your hotel room, asking for passes to tonight's post-concert party as well.

For it is but a mere five



years after young Christopher's arrival in Los Angeles that Blind Melon will be picking up its first platinum record award backstage at the Sports

Arena. "It's fun comin' back now, though," admits Christopher. "And as miserable as it was, I look back on those times as romantic now."

"Cause you can look back," Glen interjects.

"Yeah. And we get to leave," Christopher smiles. "I went on so many auditions that were just discouraging," he muses. "I stopped playing guitar for the first two years I was out here, 'cause I was disgusted with what was going on."

Hair bands? "Yeah. Disgusting. That's why I went into the folk thing, 'cause I wanted to be as far away from that as possible. That's how I met Brad [Smith]. I put out an ad, lookin' for a bass player for this folk project that never really got off the ground. Brad had that thick accent and I thought, 'This guy's for real.' We jammed a few times, became friends, and kept in touch. He called me a few months later, and said they needed a guitar player, so I went over there, and jammed, and joined their band."

Which—with the inclusion of vocalist Shannon Hoon, himself transplanted from Lafayette, Indiana—became Blind Melon. That was after West Point, Mississippi, natives Smith and guitarist Roger Stevens had to call all the way back down to nearby Columbus, Mississippi, to find a drummer who could lay down an appropriately groovealicious backbeat.

Enter Glen Graham, who knew of but had never actually played in a band with Smith and Stevens before. "I was in one band—Cafe Des Moines, like a play on the Cafe Du Monde coffee shop down in New Orleans—and they were in another band called Concrete Jungle."

"Glen was in a really cool band, and they weren't," laughs Christopher. "But hey, I was in a really cheesy band

as well. In Pennsylvania, I was in a band called R.O.T.—not 'rot,' but R.O.T.—which was like this heavy, obnoxious sort of band."

"What did the initials

stand for?" asks Glen.

"It stood for different things all the time."

"I was in a cover band in high school called Dura Mater, which is supposed to be Latin for hard rock," Glen explains. "Then I was in a band called the Delta Toasters..."

"Great name," offers Christopher.

Speaking of such, doesn't the *nom de rock*, Blind Melon, stem from a seedy Cheech & Chong routine about just one such fictional but legendary bluesman, which was—not coincidentally—an anagram for Blind Lemon (Jefferson) of "Black Snake Moan" and "See That My Grave Is Kept Clean" fame?

"Sure," deadpans Glen. "Brad's dad and his friends used to refer to each other as Blind Melon. You know, 'What's happenin', Blind Melon?' That sort of thing."

"And Brad said it at band practice one day. And we needed a band name—and Brown Cow wasn't gonna fly—so..." Christopher shrugs. "Everybody wants such a cute little story with the band name. It's just a dumb, goofy name."

Axl Grease

About this time (1991), Blind Melon signed with Capitol Records, largely on the strength of a four-song demo tape, seeing as how the band had yet to play a single LA gig. Shannon Hoon, however, had raised the band's media profile considerably by contributing vocals to five songs on Guns N' Roses' *Use Your Illusion I* LP, climaxing with his dual vocal/video appearance on the smash prom ballad "Don't Cry."

Right now, some 5283 chronically underemployed guitar players are sittin' on couches, scratchin' their asses, waitin' for their girlfriends to get home from their boring jobs with the keys to the car and maybe some groceries, thinkin', "Maannn, if Shannon

wasn't Axl Rose's homeboy-bud from Buttfuck, Indiana, or whatever, no way those dudes would've made it."

"I think it helped create a buzz," admits Christopher, "but if you look at the record sales, it wasn't as if we released a record, and it went gold because Shannon's Axl's friend. You need more than just to have a buddy in the industry to actually sell a lot of records."

Goin' Up The Country

As buzz became hype, the band decided to leave town. Settling in Durham, North Carolina, they lived communally and righteously, seriously woodshedding and putting together an album's worth of material.

"That was a good thing to do," Glen nods sagely. "In LA, just physically getting to practice was a hassle. None of us had houses here or anything, so you couldn't really go over and practice at somebody's house."

"And we were goin' to a lot of meetings. You get up. Eleven o'clock. You get in the car and go to some kinda meeting. You're not done until five o'clock, and your day's gone, basically."

"It was really crazy there for a while," muses Christopher.

Some people say that relocation from LA is but a less-expensive form of rehab.

Christopher's gaze narrows. "Uhh...I think we needed to be rehabbed. I think that might be slightly true. I think there was too much shit going on for us in Los Angeles, and we weren't getting anything accomplished at all."

"We were getting fed a lot of shit. And we started to believe it there for a little while. We just needed to get away from all that business part of the music business and become a band and play our instruments. And we always wanted to be together in a house. Living and playing in the same house."

Given the rambling, liquid nature of Blind Melon's compositions, the album sounds very much the by-product of a lot of jamming.

"Yes. Yes." Christopher and Glen

agree. "It takes us a while to really hammer 'em out," Glen adds. "And some things have changed since the record. We go off in certain parts. We've added sections of songs."

Dear Mr. Fantasy

Indeed, opening for Neil Young with Booker T. & the MGs and the Stone Temple Pilots at the Sports Arena later that evening, Blind Melon will weave swatches of the Allman Brothers' "Midnight Rider" and Traffic's "Dear Mr. Fantasy" into their sonic tapestries.

"I love Traffic," enthuses Glen. "That's one of my favorite bands."

You like that stuff they recorded with the Muscle Shoals Rhythm Section too?

"Oh yeah. Yeah." They chorus.

"Our rhythm section is a little more flexible," notes Christopher, "because we're coming from that Aretha Franklin style of being groovy."

(The Muscle Shoals gang played on Aretha's breakthrough "I Never Loved a Man" hit as well.)

"Whereas the Red Hot Chili Peppers are 'punk-funk,'" Glen explains. "You've got a bass player who's playing all over a guy keepin' time. It's not really an integrated rhythm section as such."

Woodshedding accomplished, Blind Melon left Durham for Seattle, where it coproduced its self-titled debut with Rick Parashar, whose credits include Pearl Jam's *Ten* and the Temple of the

as well as sharing the MTV 120 Minutes tour bill with Public Image Ltd., B.A.D. II, and Live. Since the *Blind Melon* album's release last September, they've warmed the stage for Guns N' Roses, Ozzy Osbourne, and Alice in Chains, and—at various dates on the Neil Young tour—Social Distortion, Suicidal Tendencies, Pearl Jam, Soul Asylum, and Dinosaur Jr.

"It's been different," Christopher shrugs. "On the 120 Minutes tour, we were playing for rich college kids. The Ozzy shows were true metalheads. GNR, same thing. Young, pimply-faced boys. Oddly enough, we did well in front of all those audiences."

"Neil's been good, too," adds Glen. "The Pearl Jam shows were especially good because there were so many people there early. You start off with a couple thousand people, and the crowd fills up by the time you're done. So the applause increases, but it's not that they're liking you more. It's just that there are more of them there."

"But," Christopher interjects, "we'd play a club for the first time and get 300 people there. Come back a few months later, and there'd be 600 people there. We built our following from playing live."

"We are a live band," declares Glen. "We don't recite the record. We try to make it more than the record. It's different in subtle ways, but it's definitely different every night."

Isn't it odd that a band whose members pride themselves on their ability to jam made its big commercial breakthrough via a video? Let alone that the accompanying shufflin' lil' country-tinged tune, "No Rain," is markedly different than the organically funky psychedelic guitar splatter that makes up the majority of the CD...

"Videos are the most powerful thing today. You have to make a great video if you want to play music for a living," states Christopher, without the slightest trace of irony.

Bee Bumble Boogie

The "Bee Girl" on the album's cover—and now the video's star—where did that image come from?

"It was a picture of Glen's sister that was just hangin' on the wall of his house. Her name's Georgia. How old's that picture? Fifteen years?"

"Yeah. It was for a dance recital. Little girls' jazz, tap, and ballet. 'Be My Little Baby Bumblebee' was the song that the costume goes with. A line of five girls doing this little steppin' thing."

What's she think about this now?

"Oh, she loves it. She's eatin' it up."

"She's a star, man," Christopher adds. "She's famous back in Mississippi. People are always stopping her."

Surely she looks a little different nowadays.

"Oh, she's different. She's an art student," explains Glen.

So are you going to turn the "Bee Girl" into an Iron Maiden-style "Eddie" mascot?

"I don't think so," says Christopher. "It's a bizarre, surreal image, but I think she's gonna be retired here."



Blind Melon (l-r): Christopher Thorn, Glen Graham, Shannon Hoon, Roger Stevens, and Brad Smith

short-ly."

"There's not gonna be 20-foot inflatables hangin' over the stage," snorts Glen.

"It's corny [the concept of the rejected 'Bee Girl' finding acceptance in being allowed to dance along to Blind Melon's music]," Christopher admits. "But the message is positive, and I think everyone's felt that way before, and that's why it's been as successful as it's been."

The Biz

Meanwhile, there's been 16 tongues o' printed conjecture about just who at the label was responsible for Blind Melon's ultimate success. Was it recently departed honcho Hale Milgrim, under whose tenure the band was signed? Or recently installed poobah Gary Gersh, under whose auspices the video took off?

"I think credit goes to both," says Christopher, ever the diplomat. "Cause Hale made sure the money was there for us to tour for a year-and-a-half, and he kept everybody's attention on us. We'd sold about 80,000 records before the 'No Rain' video."

"But when the video came out—at the exact time Gary Gersh came in—the sales kicked in," Glen adds.

"But also there were a lot of people at the label, like Denise Skinner, who were very helpful and stuck with us."

"And even after Gary came in and cleaned house, most of those people were still there."

No Direction Home

Let us now damn famous men with faint praise and paraphrase *Los Angeles Times* Pop Music Editor Robert Hilburn's review of Blind Melon's

show two nights earlier. Something about a new-psychedelic act with a charismatic young singer that didn't know what direction they wanted to go in, yet sticks to the brainpan...

"I'd say that's probably true," responds Glen. "We definitely don't know what direction we're going in or how we got here, because we don't set out to do anything consciously. We don't have a plan."

"Also," Christopher notes, "Everybody's writing songs. Everybody's trying to pull it in a different direction. We're all into different stuff. That's probably why it sounds 'directionless.' And it'll probably be like that for as long as the band's together. I know our next album is going to be different, because we've changed."

"It's gonna be pretty spread out," Glen portends. "The first one has several different kinds of things on there. This one will have more different kinds of things. There's a couple of pretty heavy things. And there's a couple of things that I just don't know really what they are. Stuff like I've never really heard before."

"It'll really come together for us when we get together in a house," adds Christopher. "We're gonna do that again because it worked so well. We're gonna pick a different place—we're still discussing where—but that's when the most work will really get done."

"I mean, you tour in a bubble. We don't get MTV. We don't see that they're playing our video. Usually at 4 in the morning when you get to the hotel, the only thing they're playing is CNN Headline News. All we see are these numbers on these charts. And what's a number mean?"

"Right now, we're all a little concerned that there've been so many people who've been turned on to this one song."

"But I'll feel a lot more comfortable after we have a couple more singles out and things are still going well, and people know we have this sort of song and this sort of song and that sort of song—not just this one thing that we're doing. Which is all anyone is seeing right now, just that one song over and over again."

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As the evening's concert wears on and our seats in the patchouli oil section soon become the testosterone section, the guy standing in front of us turns around: "Didja see the opening band? Who were they? Blind Melon? What were they like? What? 'Southern-fried grunge'? Hey, I like that. I wanna put that on T-shirts. 'Southern-Fried Grunge.' Get some cool design."

Hey, there's a lotta cool people in Los Angeles... ■