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# ANTI-HEROES

They hate heavy metal, don't dig the Dead and could care less about alternative music. Blind Melon's Christopher Thorn and Rogers Stevens are rebels without a genre—and proud of it.

BY ALAN DI PERNA

"WHO'S GONNA BE on the cover?" Blind Melon's Christopher Thorn is going to appear in *Guitar World*, and he is naturally curious about "his" issue. "I hope it's not somebody like that Udo Whatsisname."

Udo? I ransack my mental file cabinet for the slim folder stamped "Great Japanese Shredders." Udo!!!!?

"You know," Christopher laughs. "What's that guy's name from *Extreme*?"

Ah, Nuno!

"Yeah. I'd be embarrassed if it was someone like that."

Yes, Thorn and his Blind Melon guitar buddy Rogers Stevens inhabit a different universe than many *Guitar World* readers. Or do they? Two fairly regular young dudes from smalltown America, Thorn and Stevens wear jeans, T-shirts, denim jackets and all the other normal stuff you wear if you don't want to get beaten up in a place like West Point, Mississippi (Rogers's hometown) or Dover, Pennsylvania, where Christopher grew up. Their hair is Regulation Stoner: long and blatantly *unstyled*. As teenagers, they flipped through the pages of guitar magazines as the sounds of their parents' Sixties and Seventies records inevitably wafted into their bedrooms. So how'd they fall from axe mag grace and come to a dark place that knows not the Name of Nuno?

"Growing up, I'd read all these magazines and see Jimmy Page or Eddie Van Halen or Randy Rhoads on the cover," says Thorn, "and I'd think all that guitar hero stuff was the most important thing. But what happened was I got away from that. I heard the Beatles and realized, 'Wow, it's about songwriting.' Then I heard Bob Dylan and said, 'Wow it's *totally* about songwriting!'"

Rogers Stevens experienced a similar set



Christopher Thorn (left) and Rogers Stevens

Jeff Tannen



## BLIND MELON

of changes: "I was always avidly into comic books. And I think I transformed my fixation for superheroes into rock stars at about the age of 13—right when the testosterone started kicking in. But I quickly moved beyond that sort of thing. I think I tried to play Van Halen licks for about two days and then quickly realized it was physically beyond my reach. I really got into Neil Young and Jimi Hendrix. Now I really like Bob Mould and Dinosaur Jr."

It's not surprising that listeners pick out all kinds of influences in the jumpy two-guitar mesh of Blind Melon's eponymous

debut album. Buoyed by the springy syncopations of bassist Brad Smith and drummer Glen Graham, Thorn and Stevens weave around one another like a pair of pie-eyed sandpipers. They might play in unison for a few bars, sharing a fluid riff. Then one will dart up for a harmony line while the other breaks into some spontaneous, choppy chording. It's all obviously off-the-cuff, yet somehow it hangs together beautifully. The loose, free-style quality of their playing invites frequent comparisons to the stone-free Sixties jamming of the early Jefferson Airplane or—more commonly—the Grateful Dead.

"Personally, I never liked the Dead," Stevens flatly pronounces. "I was more into

the Allman Brothers. And I was listening to a bit of Traffic at the time we recorded the album. I liked them a lot, but now I can't even listen to them anymore."

Thorn—who admits to having been a Deadhead at one point—takes a broader view: "Sometimes people call us 'retro' and want us to get angry about it. But how can we? Part of that retro tag is fair. I was influenced by the Beatles and Led Zeppelin and all that classic rock stuff. And the tones on our record all come from Sixties and Seventies amps. But I don't think we're 100 percent retro like maybe the Black Crowes. I really love the Black Crowes, but I think we've got a wider influence—stuff from the Eighties like U2 and REM. And I think we also have a Jane's Addiction influence. If you were alive and breathing in the Eighties and early Nineties you couldn't help being influenced by them."

But the way Blind Melon combines all these elements is unique to the band—especially with singer Shannon Hoon's high, haunted voice keening over the instrumental brew like some Civil War ghost. If the sound is fresh, maybe it's because these guys are still pretty green. Both Christopher and Rogers consider Blind Melon their first real band. Rogers and Brad Smith had only played in a high school rock band back in Mississippi, before they moved to L.A. in 1988, right after graduation. Christopher had just played in one "stupid sort of hardcore thrashy band" before he made the Hollywood pilgrimage around the same time. After an abortive attempt to put together a folk group, Christopher joined forces with Rogers and Brad, who—about a week earlier—had discovered Shannon, fresh off the bus from Lafayette, Indiana.

And when the band's first drummer didn't work out, Rogers and Brad sent back to Mississippi for their old pal Glen Graham.

"Glen's musical vocabulary is probably larger than anyone else's in the band," Christopher enthuses. "When you think you've invented some genius riff, he's always the one who says, 'Nope, that's out of this song, this album, that band.'"

Without playing a single club or aligning themselves with any of L.A.'s myriad rock scenes, Blind Melon got signed almost immediately after forming. They managed to create a major label buzz around Hollywood on the strength of a four-song demo. These were pretty much their only four songs, but they succeeded in creating the illusion that they were a seasoned group with plenty of great material.

"It was a big scam," Rogers admits, "but it worked out. We knew we had the ability to write good music. But we hadn't actually written it when we got signed. We were being taken to lavish dinners by all these record company people and basically lying to them. I just didn't want to have to work a day job, you know? Our philosophy is, 'Okay, we'll

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## BLIND MELON

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play the fucking slimy game to the hilt. Get what we can out of it." A lot of people will look at that and think we're assholes or think we got a pretty easy ride, but we don't care."

Of the two guitarists, Stevens projects more of a bad-ass attitude. He'll regale you with stories of a job he once had in a slaughterhouse or his almost-daily visits to our nation's video porn arcades. He can be devastatingly funny at times. Thorn can, too—although he seems a bit more eager to be understood, answering questions in carefully thought-out paragraphs, repeating key points for emphasis.

"We were lucky to sign with a label [*Capitol*] that understood that we needed time to write and learn how to play," he allows. "They gave us the freedom to do that. We left Los Angeles and went to Durham, North Carolina. We got a house, wrote songs and played a lot. And every Sunday night we were the bar band at a dive called the Brewery. So we got a chance to try out the songs we'd written during the week and see which ones the crowd reacted to. Everything worked out perfectly. I think it would have been a disaster if we had been forced into releasing records as soon as we were signed."

It was at the "Sleepy House"—the band's communal dwelling in Durham—that Thorn and Stevens's two-guitar approach really came together. "It just developed from jamming at the Sleepy House," says Christopher. "We'd just smoke dope and play, not even trying to write a song or anything."

"To be honest, we never really talk about it or plan things out," Stevens says of their collective guitar sound. "It just happens. Basically, we both just overplay a lot. My sound is the heavier sound in the right speaker. Christopher uses more effects and does more of the spacious coloring type of thing."

Christopher's role as Blind Melon's colorist gives him a chance to fool with lots of different toys. That's him doing the E-bow line on the song "Sleepy House," as well as playing harmonica and mandolin on "Change"—kudos to his mom, who played in a local bluegrass band. "I'm not that good a guitar player," he laughs. "So I figure I might as well pick up as many instruments as possible. Instead of trying to be really good at one thing, I figure I'll spread myself thin and be kind of half-assed at a few things."

Stevens and Thorn's individual guitar personalities come through more in their phrasing than anything else. Tonally, they both lay claim to the same basic harmonic zone. Both are confirmed Fendermen. Stevens plays a '62 reissue Strat through a few early-Sixties Bassman amps while Thorn relies mainly on a '78 Telecaster custom with a humbucker in the neck position. On the *Blind Melon* album, this axe went through either a late-Sixties Bandmaster, a '71 Mar-

shall, or—less frequently—an old Supro.

"Most of my rhythm stuff is played on the [*single coil*] bridge pickup," Christopher adds. "If you have two guitars in a band like ours, it can get real muddy if your sound is too thick. But for solos, I just switch to the humbucker and get more of a Les Paul kind of sound. So a Tele with a humbucker is a perfect guitar for me—and it's not as heavy as a Les Paul either."

The release of the *Blind Melon* album came at a time when record labels were starting to market an increasing amount of heavy metal as "alternative," and when more and more alternative sounds were starting to be heard in metal. As a result the band got slotted into both genres—much to their chagrin. The metal tag was bolstered by Shannon Hoon's friendship with Axl Rose and his vocal turn on Guns N' Roses' "Don't Cry." Also, Blind Melon opened for Ozzy, Alice in Chains and Soundgarden and scored big on MTV's *Headbangers Ball* with their video for "Dear Ol' Dad." But at the same time, another one of their songs, "No Rain," has done very well on MTV's alternative show, *120 Minutes*, and the band has opened for acts like Big Audio Dynamite and Public Image Limited. Do they feel any closer to one audience than another?

"I definitely don't feel metal," says Thorn, who chose a Telecaster as his main guitar because it was the most "un-metal" electric he could think of. "I'd like to be placed as far away from metal as possible. I think that's just gross. People who put us in that category are idiots."

"But I don't feel close to alternative either," counters Stevens. "Because I don't know if that crowd of elitist intellectuals thinks we're cool enough. I'm not basing my life on whether or not [*Sonic Youth's*] Thurston Moore thinks I'm a cool guy."

"What is alternative anyway?" Thorn adds. "I don't understand what that word's supposed to mean anymore. I understood it in the Eighties, when you had bands like R.E.M. and U2 that were doing something really different. But now, to me, all the so-called alternative bands are just rock and roll bands. I mean, are Pearl Jam alternative? They're just reinventing Led Zeppelin riffs, like we are. I'm not dissing Pearl Jam. I love them. But I don't think that they're alternative."

Metal, alternative or retro hippie? While the debate rages, Blind Melon's album continues to climb the charts. (It's still ascending as this is being written.) By touching on a lot of different rock styles they've reached a wide spectrum of listeners.

Adding to the genre speculation is the fact that the band recently opened some shows for Neil Young. Blind Melon consider it a true honor. But after a full year on the road, they're getting antsy to knock off and make a new record.

"We'll probably get another house and

all live under the same roof while we're making the record," Thorn predicts. "It seems to help the songwriting."

"But our next record will be very different," Stevens notes. "I think it'll be much more song-oriented. There'll be a lot less jamming. I don't even want to hear a guitar solo on the new record. We were all so stoned when we made the first record, and I think it sounds like it. I think we'll be a bit more alert next time." ●

## SCORPIONS

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use the right microphones and right room. We recorded with the Shure SM 58 and Neumann 47 and a Sennheiser.

**GW:** I understand that you guys designed a new microphone for miking the guitars.

**SCHENKER:** We liked a few Sennheiser mics, but we worked with them to get a great vocal mic and a very good guitar mic. In my studio we did some pre-production, made some tests, and discovered we could get a very good sound by using the SM 58 and the Neumann 47 together. So we had Sennheiser put the 47 and 58 into one microphone, and that was it. **GW:** You mentioned that you played through a Soldano and a Hiwatt at the same time. Did combining microphones inspire you to do the same with amps?

**JABS:** Yes. This guy from Wizard [*a Canadian amp company*] came by to alter my amplifiers so that I could run them parallel, up to three amps at a time, without losing my signal. That way we could blend in whatever we needed. It's not doubled, just one take with each amp on a different track simultaneously. It's very tough to do, and this was the first time anyone was able to do it.

**GW:** You have a new bass player, Roth Rieckmann. What was the story behind Franz Buchholz leaving the band?

**SCHENKER:** We found out that we couldn't keep Franz in the band, and then people heard we were looking for a new bass player. A friend recommended Roth, we checked him out in Hanover, Germany, and immediately decided we had the right person. I have a big book at home with tapes and pictures of a lot of bass players. But we didn't have to hold any auditions because Roth just fit in. He's a great musician. His work on the album is great and we are happy.

**GW:** Did Franz just not want to tour anymore?

**SCHENKER:** No. We weren't happy with our business people. We found out there were a few things not right and we got together and made a change, but Franz said he was sticking to the old guys. And we said, "Franz, there is something wrong; you have to come with us. If you want to keep the old people, we have to go our separate ways."

We tried to convince him for six months. We don't know why he wouldn't go with the new people. It was a very hard move for us.