

Blind Melon plays it short, sweet

By TINA MAPLES
Journal music critic

IT'S BEEN a long time since there was any body-passing at the Riverside Theatre, onetime home of such celebrated non-moshers as Steve and Eydie, Johnny Mathis and Victor Borge.

But the front half of the house was one big happy mosh pit Thursday night, as **Blind Melon** inaugurated the theater's first general admission show in high-partying style.

Anyone over 25 was positively ancient in this near-capacity crowd of almost 2,500 flannel-and-plaid-clad fans (**Melon Heads?**). They crammed into the new dance floor near the stage, roared through a sing-along to the band's Bee Girl hit, "No Rain," and, every so often, flipped each other into the air just for kicks.

The only one having more fun was head Melon Shannon Hoon.

Sweet-faced, long haired and barely out of baby fat, the singer has a surprisingly mature, gravely voice that's a cross between Janet Joplin and Axl Rose, Hoon's fellow home boy from Lafayette, Ind. Hoon was an irrepressible stage presence, pitching himself into a gleeful hippie stomp dance when he wasn't playing acoustic guitar or harmonica.

There are more than trace elements of the Allman Brothers in Blind Melon's alternative take on classic Southern blues-rock. At least the band was savvy enough to make judicious use of potentially hackneyed throwbacks such as wah-wah pedal and bongos.

But compared to the sun-drenched melodies of the group's singles, "Tones of Home" and

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"No Rain," too many of the California quintet's songs are non-descript. They sagged even more when stretched into lengthy twin-guitar jams between Christopher Thorn and the newly short-haired Rogers Stevens.

Some weak material aside, Hoon and company had such natural stage presence that it was easy to forget that this is a young band with only one album under its belt. The song shortage became apparent, though, when the group left the stage for the first time after only 40 minutes.

An encore that included a workmanlike cover of the Velvet Underground's "Candy Says" brought the show up to 65 minutes. Still, the overall package was a little thin.

What the Melons need is to get off the road and write some more songs. With any luck, the fear of selling out won't keep them from writing more like

"Tones of Home" and "No Rain."

Dig, the Southern California quintet that took the stage before the Melons, put up a wall of sound with its churning triple-guitar attack. Lead singer Scott Hackwith managed to reign in the barrage with strong singing and some deft, guitar solos.

Alice Donut, a Greenwich Village quintet, opened the show with a set that pointed up the reason that, after seven years, the group still hasn't transcended its cult status.

Granted, it's not every hardcore outfit that has trombone and whistling solos. But by combining such shtick with concertedly bizarre lyrics and a propensity for album titles such as "Bucketfuls of Sickness and Horror in an Otherwise Meaningless Life" or the latest, "The Untidy Suicides of Your Degenerate Children," the Donuts come close to achieving the impossible: They're loud, angry — and almost precious.

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