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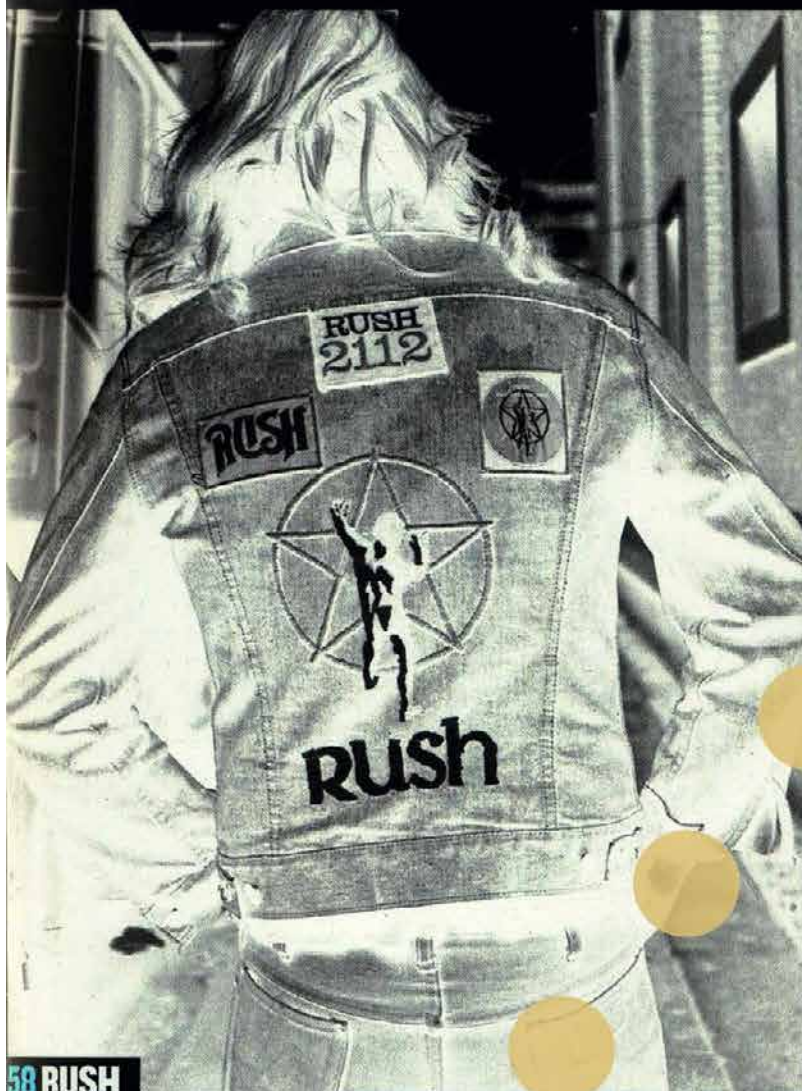
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58 RUSH

Time to dig out your age-old, patch-festooned denim jacket again, because Lee, Lifeson and Peart are back in action.



44 BLIND MELON

Their flame burned brightly – but all too briefly. Here's the juice behind Blind Melon's fast rise and sudden fall.

Classic ROCK

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No.1 MTV videos, touring with Guns N' Roses and Soundgarden, then thrust into their prime by the tragic, drug-related death of singer Sherry Hoon. *Classic Rock* tracks down the band members Hoon left behind to hear a tale of a group struck down in their prime. By Greg Prato.

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Thirty years and counting... Despite nearly imploding after the terrible events that occurred in drummer Neil Peart's life, the progressive trio from Toronto are back signing on all cylinders and about to make their first appearances in the UK for over 12 years. In celebration, *Classic Rock* ventures to Nashville to confront Geddy Lee and Alex Lifeson with your pertinent Rush questions, and Neil Peart agrees to be put under the interview spotlight for the first time in a decade. By Philip Wilding.

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"Just ignore him and he'll go away..." The other members of Blind Melon (l-r: Christopher Thorn, Glen Graham, Brad Smith and Rogers Stevens) don't find Shannon Hoon's (far right) jokes even remotely funny.

GALA

PERFORMANCE

In 1993, Blind Melon released a video that went on to be one of the year's most aired on MTV; their debut album nearly topped the US chart; they toured with Guns N' Roses, Neil Young, Soundgarden and Lenny Kravitz; and they gained a legion of fans. But just two years later it was all over. Classic Rock talks to Brad Smith, Rogers Stevens and Christopher Thorn about the band's amazing rise and rapid fall. Meloncholic: Greg Prato

IT WAS A WARM SUMMER EVENING IN 1993 – July 9 in New Haven, Connecticut, to be exact. A few buddies and I had made the trek from Long Island, New York to catch a show by one of our favourite bands, Blind Melon, at a venue called Toad's Place. One small problem: it turns out that it's over-21 entry, and me and another guy are the only members of our group who are old enough to get in. Standing outside Toad's as showtime gets nearer, it's looking pretty bleak – until we see a smallish, long-haired 'hippy'-looking figure walking down the street with a backpack on.

"Hey, guys," he says in a friendly voice – and compliments yours truly on wearing a Primus T-shirt. This was the beginning of my brief but memorable interaction with Blind Melon's singer, Shannon Hoon.

Never mind that his band were about to go on stage, he seemed more concerned with our dilemma after we told him about it. "Don't worry, this is what's going to happen," he said. "When we go on, someone inside is going to crack open that door right there, then you guys gotta bum-rush the door."

A few seconds later, my friends and I are inside. Hoon announces from the stage that he's glad to see that the "young people" had made it in.

After the show, we meet guitarist Rogers Stevens, a friendly guy who, like Hoon, likes to chat with fans. The subject comes up of how Blind Melon appear to be on the verge of a big breakthrough. "If we do become big, we won't change. Stick with us," Stevens announces.

Stevens's words soon proved prophetic. A few weeks later, with Blind Melon's career suddenly skyrocketing, everyone wants a piece of the band. Sadly, looking back several years later, that time period could probably be classified as the beginning of the end for Blind Melon.

Talking to three of the surviving Blind Melon members (Stevens, guitarist Christopher Thorn and bassist Brad Smith) nearly 10 years after the band's abrupt end, you get a feeling of regret and sadness that Blind Melon never got the chance to deliver on their potential. You also get a feeling from the ex-members that they are proud of their experiences together, and of their memories of working with Hoon.

"We all had the same kind of background, moving from a small town," Smith remembers. "And we kinda wore that on our sleeves. At the time, right before Nirvana and Pearl Jam dropped, it was unique for a band to have that kinda stance, and I think that was our draw and appeal from a lot of the industry folks. Y'know, 'These guys are fresh off the boat and they kick ass!'"

When Smith says his ex-bandmates came from small towns, he's not kidding. Such obscure places as West Point, Mississippi (Stevens and Smith), Lafayette, Indiana (Hoon), Dover, Pennsylvania (Thorn), and Columbus, Mississippi (drummer Glen Graham) are linked to the band, none of which are exactly known for producing rock musicians.

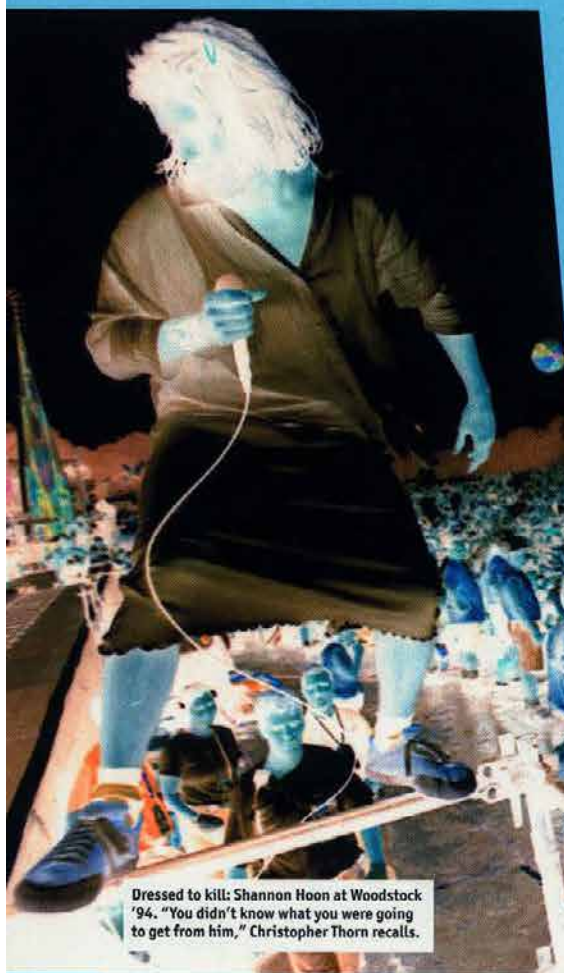
"When Brad and I were doing high-school bands, it wasn't so much that we were outcasts, people were completely baffled by what we were doing," Stevens explains. "I think they thought that we just lost our minds or something. And it wasn't that it got a bad response, it got no response. Other than, 'Well, we'll just let them do their thing and they'll grow out of it.'"

But they never did grow out of it. As childhood pals, Stevens and Smith hatched a rock'n'roll plan. Smith: "We always got magazines like *Hit Parader* and *Metal Hammer*, and were like, 'Fuck it, man, it's all happening in LA'. We had big balls and little brains, and moved to Los Angeles to take our chance."

Smith remembers his and Stevens's shock upon arriving on the west coast in 1989 and realising that the music scene there was anything but the rock haven painted in the press: "It was the remnants of the glam metal scene, which was ultra-sad. I was depressed from the music scene, it was just horrible."

But he found some solace when he came across another like-minded musician, Christopher Thorn.

"I moved out in eighty-seven or eighty-eight, and went on some auditions," Thorn recalls. "I was in this sorta folk rock band, and that's how I met Brad. I put an ad in the *Music Connection*, Brad called, and we became friends." □



Dressed to kill: Shannon Hoon at Woodstock '94. "You didn't know what you were going to get from him," Christopher Thorn recalls.

"Shannon's drug use... that was from day one. I mean, he went through phases; he was always game for whatever." – Rogers Stevens

KEVIN MAZUR/RETNA

It soon became apparent that the only way Stevens and Smith were going to assemble a band was to find other 'outsiders' from other states.

Enter wild-child Shannon Hoon. Having fronted bands back home in Indiana, Hoon built up such an extensive rap sheet with the local police there that he was effectively forced to flee the area. Only a few weeks after arriving in Los Angeles, he crossed paths with Stevens.

Smith: "Rogers had the first meeting with Shannon, called me up, and said: 'Brad, you gotta go down, right now, to the rehearsal space and meet this guy Shannon. I'm telling you, he's the guy, he's amazing.' He just seemed like a bro' from Mississippi. I swear to God it was like, 'Let's go smoke some weed and go out to the train trestle! He was just completely unpretentious, unaffected by LA thus far, and he felt like one of us immediately.'

Although they were taken by Hoon's musical talents straight away ("He played 'Change' that night on the acoustic" – Thorn), Stevens recalls an early introduction to their new singer's unpredictable and potentially volatile demeanour: "He talked a lot, he would not shut up. I remember that first night that we decided we were going to be in a band; we'd gotten really drunk. We were crashing at my apartment, and he tried to pick a fight with me! He got mad cos I was laughing at him—he said something really stupid. That was the thing about Shannon, he'd say everything that came into his mind. A lot of the times it would be like, 'Why did you say that?' Miraculously, he didn't throw a punch—it could've ended right there."

While the still-unnamed band was rehearsing with a local drummer, it was becoming apparent that they needed someone more like them instead—in other words, someone from a small town. Enter Glen Graham, a long-time acquaintance of Stevens from Mississippi.

"We fired the drummer cos he didn't really fit in the group as far as the way he played and everything," Stevens says. "So we called Glen and he drove out. He was getting ready to move to North Carolina, and he just made a left turn instead of a right turn, and drove to LA."

All that remained was to choose a band name, which Smith took care of when he remembered a phrase his father used to call a few hippy neighbours back home in Mississippi—blind melon.

A demo tape was soon recorded, and before the band had played even a single show numerous major labels were courting them. Stevens figures it was due to Hoon's relationship with a certain fellow Indiana native: "I think Shannon's sister and [Axl Rose] were in school together. Labels jumped all over us cos of Shannon's connection with Guns N' Roses."

Around the time the GN'R track 'Don't Cry' was released in 1991 (on which Hoon duetted with Axl, and appeared in its video), Blind Melon were signed to Capitol Records. And while the band were given a fair amount of artistic control, Stevens admits the main motivation for going with Capitol was that "they paid us more money".

PARTYING IN LA SOON BEGAN GETTING IN THE WAY OF songwriting, resulting in an unsuccessful stab at recording an EP with Neil Young's producer, David Briggs. With the tracks shelved, the quintet decided to relocate to the peace and quiet of Durham, North Carolina, where they would not be distracted by extracurricular activities. Renting a house that they would dub Sleepyhouse, Blind Melon got to work.

Smith: "We weren't going to leave and go out on the town, cos there's nothing to do in Durham, so we just played music, smoked weed, and everyone was into painting at the time. It was a blast. It was a very strange environment. Shannon tin-foiled the windows, so it was always dark in there, with candles. Rogers didn't take off his pyjamas for a week."

Early in 1992 Blind Melon were recording their debut in Seattle, Washington, a town in the midst of a musical uprising. Setting up shop at London Bridge Studios, Rick Parashar (whose name would soon be a fixture in the US album chart via his work on Pearl Jam's 'Ten', Temple Of The Dog's self-titled album, Alice In Chains' 'Sap' and others) was hired to produce.

"I remember it being really easy," Smith recalls. "Apart from all our dope-smoking and all the disagreements we may have had, we had our shit together musically. We would play two or three takes of a song and that was it. There was no chopping on the tape machine; the only thing that maybe got overdubbed were some guitar solos and the lead vocals. So I look back on those times and I'm like, 'There's a real sense of musical purity and performance to

that record'. I think that's what's missing from today's records. Blind Melon really captured that."

Taking a break from recording the album, the band accepted an offer to open for Public Image Ltd, Big Audio Dynamite and Live on MTV's 120 Minutes Tour that spring. Although taking a break in the middle of recording a debut album is not the norm, Thorn figures it actually helped them: "That was a really good thing for the band, cos we had the pre-tour recordings, went out and toured for six weeks and played every single night. So we were even that much better when we got back. I felt like we were really firing on all pistons at that point."

And they were. Listening to it today, 'Blind Melon' is definitely one of the more 'pure'-sounding rock records of the early 90s, modelled more on Lynyrd Skynyrd and The Allman Brothers than on the usual suspects that all the grunge and industrial bands were studying at the time. While most of the tunes were finalised after the band had worked on them together, two standouts were written entirely by single members prior to the band's formation – Hoon's acoustic 'song of hope', 'Change', and a quirky tune that Smith had penned about the constantly depressed state of a former girlfriend, 'No Rain'.

When 'Blind Melon' was released, on September 22, 1992, the GNR-linked buzz that surrounded the band a year previously had mostly died down.

"I think we were all under the false assumption that our record was going to come out and be a giant hit," Thorn says. "And then reality sorta struck us – we realised, wow, this is really hard work. We were having a lot of fun cos we were playing and seeing the country, but I think we were a bit stressed out. We didn't realise that you actually had to work a record. Thank God we had a record company like Capitol, who knew it was going to be a slow build, and they were more than prepared to keep us on the road for a really long time."

Smith has similar memories from that period: "We named one of our T-shirts 'Crammed In A Van Tour'. We knew we were making an impact, cos we'd come around to the same city the second time and the crowd had doubled or tripled, and the word was getting out about the band. That was probably the most romantic period of my musical career."

It was during this time that the band hooked up with 'Smells Like Teen Spirit' video director Samuel Bayer to shoot a clip for the upbeat ditty that always received a raucous reception at their shows, 'No Rain'. By combining shots of the band playing in a breezy field and of their album cover coming to life (the infamous 'bee girl'), the feelgood video catapulted Blind Melon to the top of the US chart in the summer of '93. But while their 'rock'n'roll dreams' were finally coming true, trouble was brewing.

"Songwriting issues came up, which was a bummer," Smith admits. "It came down to writer splits. It was really fuelled by Shannon and I duking it out, cos he wanted to split up the songwriting, and I at heart did not want to split up the songwriting. But Shannon had written a pretty hefty portion of the songs at that point, and so had I. So I got kinda dragged into a situation where I had to fight for my own splits. It's a shame, cos there's bands that do it the way we should have done it, which is everything gets split evenly. Then there's none of that unspoken resentment and grievances towards each other that I think we had."

In the end, however, everything worked out: "It was sorta a brutal battle," Stevens explains, "but we got it sorted out in a way that everybody was happy with it. We all compromised, and I was really proud of that."

Perhaps taking their cue from previous rock bands who stay on the road for an extended period to cash in on their success, Blind Melon remained on the road for a solid year-and-a-half. Looking back now, Smith feels the scheduling should have been set up more wisely.

"The pitfalls of keeping the band on the road – idle hands are the Devil's workshop, and Shannon took that proverb to heart. He'd made a mess of himself on the road after a certain point, and we should have gotten off the road sooner. Hindsight is twenty-twenty. We should have been in the States when 'No Rain' was getting played on the radio, but we were in Europe touring with



Red hot and blue: Rogers Stevens peels off a fiery solo.



Sitting down on the job: Shannon Hoon gets as laid back as possible.

Lenny Kravitz for two months. It was just small mistakes that brought down a flying ship. I remember fighting for that at the time. But these great tours kept coming up, and the managers were convincing members that we should take advantage of this. And from a business standpoint you trust them. But from a longevity standpoint I don't think it was the right thing to do."

The grind of the road mixed in with the group's sudden success proved to be a dangerous cocktail, as Hoon indulged in his drug of choice, cocaine. But this was nothing new, according to Stevens: "Shannon's drug use... that was from day one. That wasn't a new thing. I mean, he went through phases; he was always game for whatever. I think he had a lot of problems back when he was living in Indiana, and he got out. Coke was the problem, heroin was never the problem or anything like that. We tried to deal with it – got him into treatment a few times and things like that. We did an intervention one time and he didn't show up for it! Pretty classic."

It appeared as though Kurt Cobain's suicide in April 1994 had served as a wake-up call for Hoon, who took his first serious stab at sobriety around this time. But it was a brief one, and within a only few months he was back to his old habits again.

Finally off the road, the band members retreated to new home towns (Thorn to Seattle, Smith, Stevens, and Graham to New Orleans, and Hoon moved back to Indiana), where they regained their focus and cooked up some new tunes.

But before recording sessions for their second album commenced, Blind Melon took up the offer of a spot on the mammoth Woodstock '94 bill. Thorn's memories remain clear 10 years later: "I was really overwhelmed," he recalls. "You have those shows where you feel like you're really in control, you know what's happening, and you can 'feel it' – you're taking it all in as you're playing. And for some reason, Woodstock was so overwhelming I almost kinda felt 'shut-down'."

"I remember Shannon showing up in a dress, and just going, 'You're

Sunshine days and (below) studio fun.



JAY BLAKE/RETNA



JOE MALZ/RETNA

☒ fucking nuts. What are you doing? But that's what was great about him. He was never going to give you the same old shit, you didn't know what you were going to get from him. That's why he was such a great performer. I remember him just going for it, giving a hundred per cent."

With Woodstock out of the way, Blind Melon's attention turned to sessions for their all-important second album. Choosing producer Andy Wallace because of the variety of artists he'd worked with previously (Nirvana, Slayer, Jeff Buckley among them), the band opted to record in New Orleans—a town which always seemed to get to Hoon.

Smith: "That was total mayhem. At the time, I had just come out of my pot haze, but the band wasn't finished with that kind of stuff. So there was a lot of cocaine, ecstasy, heroin, marijuana... whatever you wanted. It was at the studio all the time. It was fucking crazy, man. We didn't go into the studio until two or four o'clock in the afternoon, and nobody left until the sun was coming up. It was just a total vampire existence, laced with drugs, alcohol and fucking craziness. People were there that I had no idea why they were there."

"Looking back, it's amazing that we got a record done at all. But our chemistry was that we had our shit together—everybody in the band could play, and we had this crazy, unspoken telepathy. And we finished songs so fast. We got together two months before the record, threw together everyone's ideas, had twenty-six pieces of music, and recorded sixteen for the record. It was so fucking fast. Bands don't do that these days, it's so over-calculated."

With such madness going on around and within the band, it would be understandable if the resulting album, 'Soup', had been a complete mess. In fact it was anything but. Arguably one of the great lost rock albums of the 90s, it certainly spun the head of the average Blind Melon fan upon first listen: gone were the loose, funky jams; most obviously, there were no sunny singalongs like 'No Rain.' Instead there were songs about child murderer Susan Smith ('Car Seat'), serial killer Ed Gein ('Skinned'), the effects of heroin ('2x4'), a suicide jumper ('St. Andrews Fall'), and a barroom brawl ('Lemonade'), among other 'sunny' subjects. But after a few listens 'Soup' showed how much the group had grown musically, and how they had put together an album that improved immeasurably with each successive listen.

Critics weren't that patient, however, and most panned it savagely. But Smith says the band were ready for the slings and arrows: "When people become really successful, people just can't wait to see you fail. We were prepared for that. That's why we made the record we did, to be quite honest. If we'd tried to follow

up that first Blind Melon record with some more happy, shiny songs, y'know, chicken-fried grooves, that would have been a dismal failure, in a sophomore slump kinda way. But when you come out with an art record, that's pushing the envelope and sounds completely original, it's hard to argue with that."

AROUND THE TIME OF THE RELEASE OF 'SOUP', on August 15, 1995, and with Hoon fresh out of another stint in rehab, Blind Melon set out for a tour of European festivals. It had looked as though fatherhood would straighten out the singer's party-hearty ways. But, midway through, Hoon was feeling the temptations of the road once more. This time, however, he had the wherewithal to suggest to his bandmates to cut the tour short, which they did.

The next month, Blind Melon embarked on their first full-on US tour in well over a year. Despite being upset with the album's poor reviews, and also wanting to be back home with his newborn, Hoon returned to the road, clean and sober.

Thorn: "I remember going from Seattle, down the coast, and Lisa [Hoon's girlfriend] and the baby were there on the bus. It was great. It kinda felt like, cool—this is the next 'phase' of Blind Melon. I remember playing really well, kinda loving it. Then we got to L.A., and some bonchheads turned Shannon on to drugs."

From there, things worsened, especially when the band's management put a 'caretaker' on tour to keep an eye on Hoon ("This big, huge guy, and his job was to keep drug people away from Shannon," Stevens remembers). When it became clear that the drug counselor wasn't doing his job (Thorn: "Shannon's in the back of the bus doing drugs, and the guy's up front, taking up room in the bus. We were like, this is stupid") the band sent him packing, with the idea that Hoon's latest binge would soon end and things would return to normal.

But drug use had now spread to other members of the band. And when it started to affect their performance, Smith considered taking drastic measures: "It was a secret I had between me and my now wife, that I may just slip off in the middle of the night, get a plane ticket and go home. It was fucking stupid. I was really frustrated. And I think part of that was because I didn't use cocaine. I never have. So when you see your friends start crumbling around you from that kind of substance abuse, and you're out on the road and you're trying to make the best of this 'people waiting on you to fail', you're giving them a lot of reasons to follow through with that emotion. And, lo and behold, we did, because of the cocaine use. It was really hard on me, personally. We could've done better than that."

After an especially sloppy performance in Houston, Texas, on October 20 (Thorn: "It felt that Shannon was high before he went on, and it just felt like a terrible show") the band boarded their tour bus, looking forward to getting things back on track for their next gig, which was in their adopted home town of New Orleans. Little did the group know that this would be the last hours they would spend as a band together. With Hoon having stayed up all night doing cocaine, the bus pulled into a New Orleans hotel the next morning. While the rest of the band checked into their rooms, Hoon roamed the city streets, then later climbed into one of the bunks on the bus. He never woke up. He died of a cocaine overdose. He was just 28.

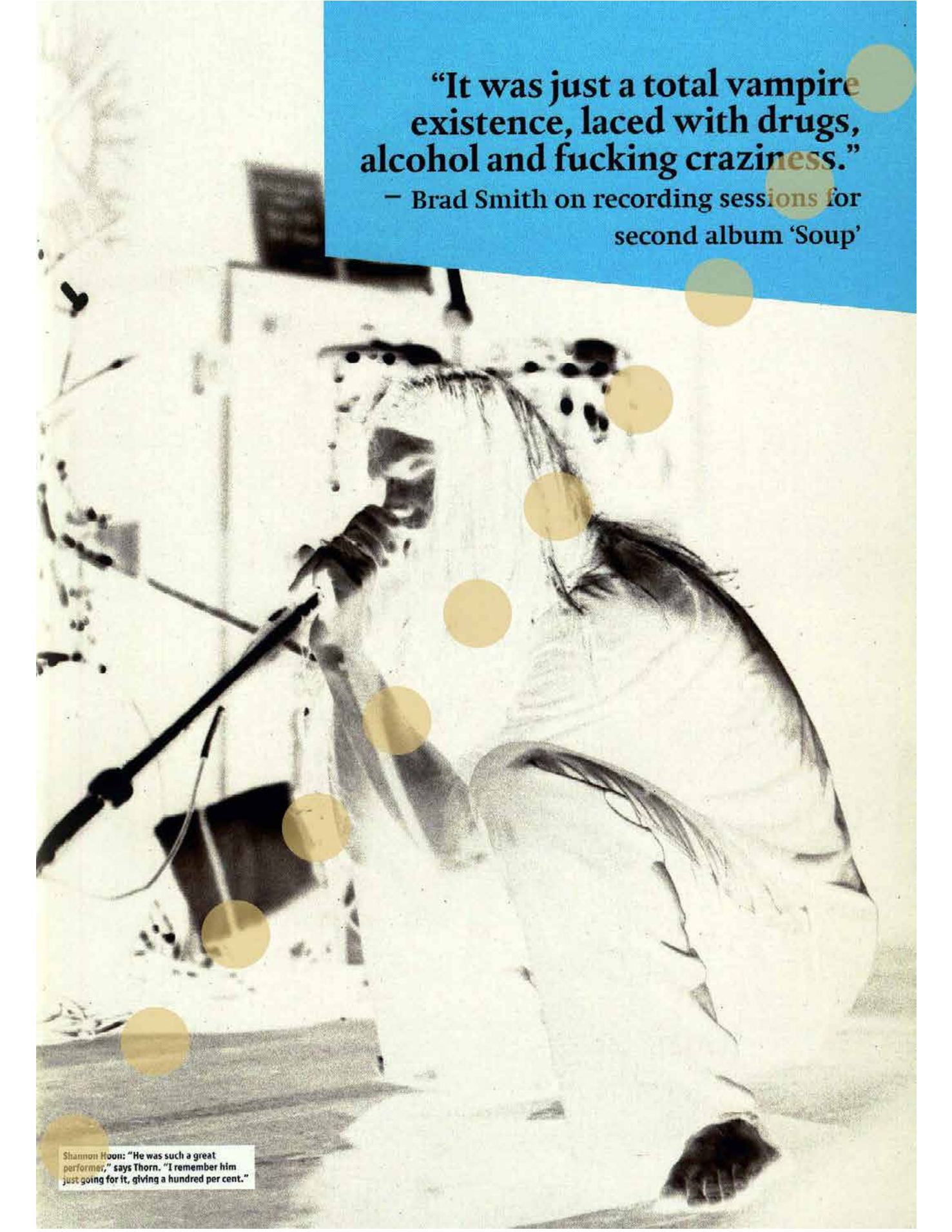
Many blame his death on the group and its management, saying that Hoon shouldn't have been back on the road so soon after a spell in rehab. But Stevens is quick to point out that Hoon's hometown of Lafayette wasn't the best place for him: "He had a lot of connections there. We caught a lot of flak later on, but I always told people: 'Look, this guy is showing up to rehearsal twenty pounds underweight.' And we hadn't even been around him. Then when we got out on tour, he was clean for a while, in the beginning. This was one of these instances where it was a two-day situation that got him to where he is today, after being clean for a while."

The surviving members pondered the idea of continuing with a different singer, but eventually they agreed that Hoon was simply irreplaceable, and decided to go their separate ways. Nowadays, most of them are involved in other projects. Stevens is collaborating with former Spacehog frontman Royston Langdon in the New York City-based band Sparticle. Smith and Thorn are producers in Hollywood, where they opened their own recording studio, Wishbone. Graham seems to have retired from the music business completely; he lives in North Carolina and spends his days painting. With one posthumously released out-takes album, 1996's 'Nico,' it looks as though Thorn will be assembling an all-new collection of previously unheard Blind Melon tracks, as well as a possible live album, in the near future.

Looking back nearly a decade since Hoon's death, Smith recalls a conversation with him shortly before he passed away: "The last meaningful conversation I had with him, I think it was after he got out of rehab. We were talking about how things were going to be better and different, and how he was sorry."

For Shannon Hoon, sadly those days never came. ■

JAY BLAKE/RETNA



“It was just a total vampire existence, laced with drugs, alcohol and fucking craziness.”

— Brad Smith on recording sessions for second album ‘Soup’

Shannon Hoon: “He was such a great performer,” says Thorn. “I remember him just going for it, giving a hundred per cent.”