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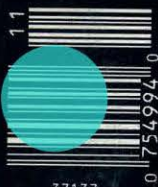
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37137



# Blind Melon

**B**efore the MTV nation discovered the Bee Girl, Blind Melon was just another group of small-town rock 'n' roll dreamers who collided in L.A. by chance and landed a record deal in a few short months. Just another new group with a silly name. Up till then, Blind Melon was most famous—and how they hated it—for their singer's appearance in Guns N' Roses' "Don't Cry" video. But the Bee Girl, and MTV, changed all that.

The original Bee Girl was Georgia Graham, the sister of Blind Melon's drummer, Glen. The photograph of her in her bee costume was taken years ago. Christopher Thorn, one of the group's guitarists, spotted it in Glen's parents' house. This chubby girl in glasses: so surreal, so humble, so insecure. It was for her tap dance class at Miss Betty Lott's English School of Dance in Columbus, Mississippi. Christopher thought it would make a perfect album sleeve.

They called the album *Blind Melon*. It sold a few copies. But just as they were preparing to record their second album, a single was released, a spritely, semiacoustic jig, "No Rain." Rogers Stevens, the other Melon guitarist, suggested they use the Bee Girl in the video, and a new real-life Bee Girl was found. Blind Melon didn't do much in the video, they just performed their song standing in a field of flowers. But that chubby Bee Girl who looks so sad and then—break our heartstrings!—discovers a frolicking fieldful of Bee People *just like her*: It enchanted the MTV nation. In five weeks the Bee Girl album, which had been released eight months before, sold its first million.

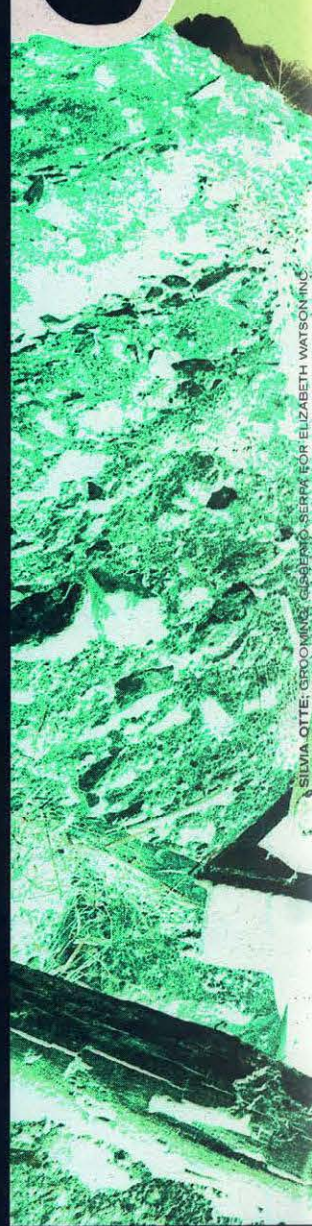
While the video suggests that Blind Melon are nouveau hippies, when record companies discovered them, their appeal was a bit more earthy, neatly fitting into the rock traditionalism championed by the band of that moment, the Black Crowes. Though the notion that they are either Southern or determinedly old-fashioned now makes them uptight, at the time they could live

with it. "That," says Christopher, "was before retro was so incredibly burnt out." *Blind Melon* the record doesn't hide its affection for, nor its connections with, the past. Onstage, "Holy Man" effortlessly slips into the Allman Brothers' "Midnight Rider," and "Change" drifts into Traffic's "Dear Mr. Fantasy." Rogers mentions paying tribute to the Beatles as a primary influence, that "you can sing 'Let It Be' over the top of 'Sleepyhouse.'" *Blind Melon*'s strengths are the tunes, Shannon's high lazy wench of a voice, and the relaxed feel which all the songs, fast or slow, angry or sad, assume.

"When we made that record," laughs Rogers, "we were completely stoned." Pop groups usually think that the music they make stoned will sound how they feel—loose-limbed, free, sinuous—but they are usually wrong. Usually it sounds fumbling, lethargic, and, er, *stoned*. But in Blind Melon's case it worked.

It took a while, though. They first recorded with Neil Young's usual producer, David Briggs, but it didn't gel. So they left Los Angeles and moved into a \$1,000-a-month house in Durham, North Carolina, the "Sleepyhouse" immortalized on their album. They covered up all the windows. They'd get up at four or five in the afternoon, smoke pot, write music, play music, and watch the sun rise. Now, it seems like the happiest time.

Along the way they unearthed an old folk tune by bassist Brad Smith, "No Rain." He'd written it about his codependency with a messed-up ex-girlfriend. "She had a hard time with depression," he explains. "I was telling myself that I was writing it about her: how fucked up she could be, but how intelligent she was and why she was so unhappy and how much she needed me to be happy. And I realized I was writing it about myself at the same time. I needed her just as much." He called the song "No Rain" because "she would sleep even when it was sunny outside and she'd complain that there wouldn't be any rain, because that would give her an excuse to stay in."



SILVIA OTTE; GROOMING: CLARENDON BERRY FOR ELIZABETH WATSON INC.

**Blinded by the light (from left): Christopher Thorn, Brad Smith, Shannon Hoon, Rogers Stevens, and Glen Graham.**



There's nothing more exhilarating—and terrifying—than  
**overnight success.**

Except the people it happens to. **Chris Heath** goes  
on tour with **Blind Melon**, this season's platinum-plus,  
seeds-and-stems rock group.





## music

It's strange for Brad, now that people think it's about "this cute Bee Girl being accepted." Although, he says, that's not the worst. Some people think they wrote it for the flood victims.

I JOIN BLIND MELON ON THE ROAD. THEY'RE BOTTOM of the bill with Neil Young and Soundgarden. This is what being a new rock sensation is like: You have an album in the top ten and yet life is not a series of nonstop congratulations and self-gratification. No. You play half-hour sets before the sun even goes down. You have to ride in a second-rate bus with NO ONE U KNOW written on the destination board. You must work hard, and at the most mundane things. You must visit radio stations and answer the same questions over and over again. (Their most hated: "What does 'Blind Melon' mean?")

We stop at WHTG, in the middle of the New Jersey countryside. The DJ asks about Shannon's hair. He dyed it green yesterday afternoon. He gives what will become his stock answer—"It's the New York water system"—then adds, "It's a tribute to *High Times* magazine." Last year he shaved his eyebrows off. "I always need to change something," he will explain later. "Can't eat at McDonald's every day."

Blind Melon play their ballad "Change" in the

studio, just standing around one microphone. Glen drums with wire brushes on a pad of paper. It's loose, but moving.

"Are you going to play 'No Rain'?" the DJ asks, barely controlling himself. The group of the minute, to play their big hit in his tiny studio!

"No," says Shannon, pointedly. "We forgot the Bee Girl."

**Pop groups usually think that the music they make stoned will sound loose-limbed, free, and sinuous, but they are usually wrong. In Blind Melon's case, though, it works.**

Blind Melon are boarding the bus to leave when the DJ sprints out. In his excitement he has committed that unforgivable failure of pop-world etiquette: forgetting the sick girl. Her father came in earlier, explaining that his daughter was missing Blind Melon's performance tonight because she had been diagnosed as having cancer. "But," says the DJ, "she was more upset she couldn't go to the show." He offers them her number at the children's hospital. Shannon and Rogers go back in and telephone her. They do it well: They are charming, with just

the right degree of humor and self-deprecation. They tell her that now that they have tracked her down, she will never be able to shake them off. "One of my friends died of cancer about a month ago," Shannon mentions as we walk back to the bus. Then he grins, and beckons for me to step into the Blind Melon tour bus. "You'll never be the same," he promises.

"DOES ANYONE WANT TO GET HIGH?" SHANNON asks, reaching for his bong as we head off. He uses a tattered Elvis Presley lighter. "It almost died on the same day as the anniversary of his death," he tells me. "Isn't that creepy?" Today the lighter does die, which Shannon finds not creepy, just inconvenient.

It's not far to the Garden State Arts Center. This is the place where Sinéad O'Connor launched her long dark dip into anticelebrity when she resisted the house policy of opening all shows with the national anthem. And they really do it. The lights dim, a spotlight is set on the American flag, and the audience are meant to stand with their hands over their hearts. And they really do it too.

They play to positive but muted response. Perhaps they should do "The Star-Spangled Banner." Shannon slithers around and exaggerates the spacey, chopping hand gestures he uses in the Bee Girl video. He explains his gesticulations thusly: "Going back through that mental Rolodex at a thousand miles an hour... you flip into an untouchable state of mind... it's healthy, whatever it looks like." He wears no shoes because otherwise he always kicks off the right sole by stamping his feet.

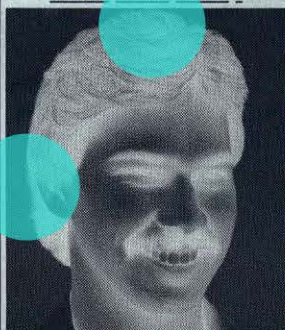
We leave. On the bus, the VCR plays the Rolling Stones documentary *Cocksucker Blues*. After a while Blind Melon's genial manager decides it is time the band and I talk.

Interviewing five people at one time is not a good idea. Voices fly at you, and at each other. Though they talk a little about the one thing they do like—"the music"—it is easier in these situations to rail against things they don't like. Success is something they have found strange. "Like this," Shannon explains. "None of us got into the band to sit on the back of the bus and talk to you." Another thing they don't like is the glib natural way the public has picked on one part of what they do—"No Rain," the Bee Girl—and made assumptions about what they are. They view this as an unfair side effect of celebrity: They don't seem to understand that this very process is, in a way, exactly what celebrity is.

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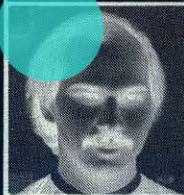
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"They think we're hippies for the '90s. They think we sit around and talk about love and peace in fields. When actually the video is the first time I've *been* in a field. . ."

"They think we hold hands and smoke peace pipes. . ."

"When actually what we do is sit around and figure out how we're going to manipulate that demographic to achieve maximum capital."

"We're hippies from hell, angry hippies."

They're even more affronted at the notion that they might be part of the same new breed—lovingly and lazily recycling pop melodies and guitar licks from the past—as the Spin Doctors. Then they start arguing amongst themselves over whether it would be unfair of me to report, as is shouted several times in this debate, that the Spin Doctors "suck." Next we discuss Pearl Jam and someone shouts, to general amusement, "The thing is, Pearl Jam wants to be us." Another heated discussion ensues.

Shannon has been hating this for a while. Twice already he has disappeared "to get some fresh air." Now his patience is stretched to its limits. "I'm bored," he sighs. He stands up. "I'm stating what I am. Nothing personal. I feel comfortable telling you that." He walks out.

"Bye," I shout after him, trying to sound as sarcastic as possible.

"Bye," he replies.

WE STOP FOR FOOD. SHANNON TAKES THE TABLE opposite me and apologizes. "I wasn't interested in any of the things we talked about. Right now I'm interested in hotcakes." He calls his girlfriend, Lisa, collect. Halfway through whispering sweet nothings, he abruptly hands me the phone. Lisa and I exchange pleasantries. He tells me she was his high school sweetheart; they went to the prom. Later they split up for a while. "We had to find ourselves," he says. He starts talking about his family. There's some trouble there which I never get to the bottom of. By the time he sleepily insists "I love my family more than I ever have, and no platinum record can take the place of that," I don't really think he's talking to me, just to himself.

The next afternoon, when he wakes up, Shannon apologizes again: "There was a negative air in the room which made me want to vomit. I like to be around the happy air." This is the Evan Dando side of Shannon, and it shows itself a lot, but it feels like only one side of a battle he is having with himself. I'd say there was plenty of fierce, unreasonable anger in there too. Last night I had been surprised (to be honest, mortified) that there was no beer on the tour bus. I eventually learn that this is not Blind Melon moralism, but a practical decision. "If Shannon gets drinking . . .," people say, and say no more.

In the hotel parking lot they have a photo session. Shannon has an exciting idea: If the photog-

rapher can persuade Ron the bus driver to pose with him, Shannon will take all his clothes off. Ron reluctantly agrees, and quick as a flash, Shannon is naked. They decide to shoot behind the bus, out of sight from the hotel—a rather counterproductive decision as Shannon is now in full view of the afternoon highway traffic ten yards away. I suspect he doesn't care. As the shutter clicks, Shannon kisses Ron on the cheek.

"That's going to be great," says Shannon.

Ron chuckles. "That'll go in the photo album—back page, under the brown sheet."

Later I hear that Shannon does this often. "I think he's pretty proud," Christopher tells me. "He has a pretty nice cock. If I had one as big, I'd be naked a lot more." A while back Christopher videotaped Shannon dancing naked on a car parked outside Capitol Records in front of a billboard of the Bee Girl. He also stripped in Switzerland when they were supporting Guns N' Roses. During the Guns N' Roses show someone always delivers a pizza to Axl (rock theater, you understand). That night it was Shannon, naked except for a horned Viking helmet on his head, in front of 30,000 people.

The Axl Rose connection is not one which Blind Melon enjoy discussing. This is understandable. Shannon and Axl come from the

same town. Axl went to school with Shannon's sister. In L.A. Shannon would get to know Axl and sing on several *Use Your Illusion* tracks. Back in Lafayette, before Shannon really knew Axl, there was a tape of early, not-yet-famous Guns N' Roses songs circulating. Shannon liked one so much he would sing it in a local band, Stiff Kitten. It was "Don't Cry." This is not the sort of fact that Shannon now tells people, but I know because I've seen "Makin' F@\*!ing Videos Part I," about the making of the "Don't Cry" video, where the not-yet-famous Shannon dribbles beer out of his mouth, introduces himself as "a redneck from Lafayette, Indiana," and talks too much. He smiles when I mention this: "They had one hell of a catering situation at that thing."

But when I brought this up last night on the bus, it was one of the final triggers which made Shannon walk. To begin with, the others say how cool they thought it was, but he looks hurt when they start teasing him. "You got famous for kissing up to Axl?" Rogers taunts. "So what?" Four Melons and I laugh. Shannon looks pained. Brad tries to ease the tension. He says the record company played up the connection.

So now they play it down, though it is a little stronger than they advertise. They have the same managers as Guns N' Roses. The band

## Bettie Serveert



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## Palomine



## music

considered others, but "Axl was concerned," Christopher recalls approvingly, "that his buddy Shannon wasn't going to get fucked over."

TONIGHT'S GIG IS AT GREAT WOODS, NEAR BOSTON. Shannon had agreed to talk awhile, but when we arrive he grabs his guitar and tells me he just wants to sing for a bit. "My mental shower," he explains. I should leave? He nods. As I go, he begins to sing "Time," the final song on *Blind Melon*. "See, all these people, they won't leave me alone..." Tonight's set is even shorter than usual, because they're late onstage. They couldn't find Christopher. Eventually he was discovered out back, asleep under a bush.

After the show, Shannon motions to me. "We can talk on the bus, but I want to get high first." On the bus he plays the Beatles' *Help!* and prepares himself. "I feel more internal when I'm high," he says. "It's just comfortable. It's like, why do you take a shower in the morning? And on a tour like this, you don't have a lot of time to sit down and think. But when you're high, you find the time. You make the time. And then you realize that the time was *there*."

He chats about his life back in Lafayette. His father is a bricklayer, his mother works in a restaurant. Shannon used to pour concrete. He

pulls out his union card: Richard S. Hoon. Back in Lafayette he'd go fishing, he'd watch the car wreck races at Henry's Speedway on Saturday nights, and he'd get into fights. Shannon's always had a good feeling from singing. He used to sit on the toilet and sing the songs in his mother's *Song Hits* magazine. There was a lot of James Taylor in that magazine.

Later, when he worked at the semitrailer manufacturer's, he worked alongside this guy who played the harmonica and was in a band. So Shannon wrote a folk song and gave it to him, for his band. The guy knew what Shannon really wanted was encouragement to do it himself. So he told Shannon to form his own band. And Shannon did. That guy was older. He was married. Two kids. His wife told him that he had to choose between the three of them and his band. So he chose her and the kids, but she left anyway. In the end he killed himself.

Somebody comes in and asks Shannon, "Do you want to give two girls the thrill of their life?"

"I'd rather they gave me the thrill of my life," says Shannon, but he's all politeness with them.

"Will you write me a letter?" one asks him.

He tells her he'll write her one right now, and inscribes on a piece of paper: "Every day above ground is a good day."

She turns to her friend, happy, an ambition fulfilled. "Now I want to meet Morrissey..."

WE DRIVE INTO BOSTON, WHERE SHANNON, ROGERS, and Brad are to appear on "Rockline." It's the call-in program on which Bill Clinton phoned U2. "He won't call us," jokes Shannon, "because we're a bad influence on his daughter Chelsea. We got her smoking pot."

I am leaving them afterward, and on the bus Shannon mutters, "I've something for you." He rummages around awhile, and then hands me his defunct Elvis Presley lighter.

Thank you, I say, and mean it, both because it seems an unusually clumsy and genuine gesture, and because I like old junk like that.

"What?"

I said thank you.

"Oh," he says defensively, "I thought you were being sarcastic. I was getting ready to jump up and kick your ass." He laughs as though a little deranged. "I just love saying that to you, man, 'cause you know what? That's the last thing I would ever fucking do, man, but it's always fun to talk like that for a second and try to understand why there are people who are really like that. You know what I'm saying?"

In the studio they have a live linkup to "Rockline" in Los Angeles. Blind Melon talk down the line, off air, to presenter Beau Rials.

"Are you whacking off?" Shannon asks him.

"No, but I might in a minute," counters Beau. "Thirty seconds and you're on."

"Thirty... twenty-nine... twenty-eight... twenty-six green bottles hanging on the wall," says Shannon.

"Take one down, give it to Shannon, and he'll punch a cop for you," says one of the others, and they all roar. I remember a name Christopher had used for Shannon the night before: Mr. One Punch Hoon. After a few questions ("What would you classify your music as?" "Somewhere between Joni Mitchell and Ministry"), Beau plays a record and they ask Beau some more questions.

"Do you have back hair?" inquires Rogers.

"Yeah."

"You get it waxed?"

"You can get anything waxed in L.A."

"Have you ever had wax poured on your penis?"

"No," replies Beau patiently, "I haven't."

As they talk, the song that "Rockline" is broadcasting across the nation is their big hit "No Rain." It is, consequently, playing in their headphones. They are in desperate need of a favor. "Beau," pleads Shannon, his voice that of a man in torment, "is there any way you can pull that song out of our headphones? We're sick of it."

**Chris Heath's last bus trip was with Mercury Rev for Lollapalooza III.**



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