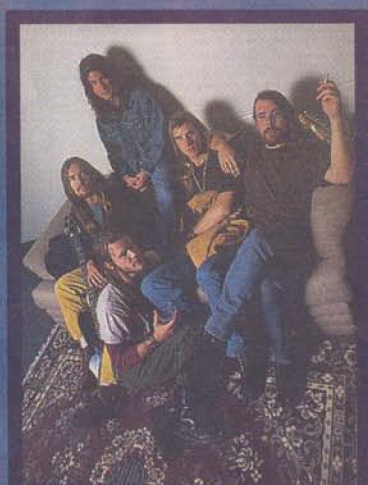


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# Goldmine<sup>kp</sup>

THE COLLECTOR'S RECORD & TRADING PLACE



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# Blind Melon

## By Their Fruits Ye Shall Know Them

by Sandy Stert Benjamin

"Some people spend a lifetime trying to make it in the music business, but in our case it was nothing that we set out to do. We were just basically in the right place at the right time," says Shannon Hoon of Blind Melon, on the band's zero-to-60 success during the past 12 months.

"There are lots of good musicians who can't seem to get a break no matter how long or how hard they've been trying. But we got one without any effort," he adds, "so who knows how it's all meant to happen?"

For Hoon, the band's 24-year-old lead vocalist, music didn't even enter the picture until a few years ago when he was nearing graduation from high school. Up until that point he didn't know *what* he'd be doing, except possibly to give in to a lifetime of crime. "I was kind of a bad seed," muses the singer, recalling that his mother had banned him from the bar she owned because he used to get so obnoxiously drunk.

"Where I grew up in Lafayette, Indiana, it was a pretty repressed environment, and I had a difficult time getting along with the people there. My friends and I were always causing trouble, doing petty crimes when we were 14, 15 and 16. Finally I realized that if we kept pushing the limits of the law, it would be just a matter of time before we were tried as adults and wound up in jail. I have a lot of friends who were caught in the system and are behind bars now," Hoon reveals, "so I knew at some point I would have to leave home, or probably be stuck there forever."

Admitting that he gave life in the heartland his best shot, Hoon explained that he tried fitting in with the people at home by taking jobs that provided a sense of security. "I detasseled corn," he cites as a prime example, "by pulling out the tops while I rode in a tractor. I really don't know much about the processing system, but I *do* know it's a job that most kids have when they're too young to do anything else. I also worked at a place called Wabash National, painting semi-trailers for a living."

Although Hoon says that music always lingered in the back of his mind, the idea of it as a profession didn't seem like a realistic goal. Citing his influences as Elton John, Jim Croce, Carole King and the Bay City Rollers, music to him was more of a pastime, not something corn-detasselers aspired to do.

Although he attended a school that had the usual allotment of student-comprised bands, Hoon says that music on campus was the kind of activity that never held any interest for him. "Not that I'm putting it down," he says. "I had a lot of friends who were in school bands, but I don't think I would've

applied myself in that environment. Our bass player, Brad Smith, played the snare drum in high school though, so obviously, the concept connects with some people."

Even though it would take a few years after graduation and some 2,000 miles before Hoon, Smith and the other three members would officially hook up as Blind Melon, Hoon feels their paths might've been predestined. "It's hard to find people who like the same music that you do," he points out, "especially in a place like L.A., where we got together. There are so many different types of music in the city... glam, metal, you name it. It's a lot like a broken mirror—bits of music everywhere, like pieces of shattered glass—but no one, single, solid chunk. It was a challenge just to find each other, but then again, maybe it was meant to happen."

Having arrived in Los Angeles in 1990 with \$800 to his name ("and you thought painting semi-trailers didn't pay," he jokes), Hoon says he was a man with a mission. Having finally realized that music was his calling, he set out to find some like-minded people, while also getting a taste of the world at large. "You don't see the four corners of the globe from Lafayette," he points out, "so I figured I'd start my journey in California. I got to meet a lot of different people from different cultures, stuff that I never would've seen had I stayed in Indiana."

Noting that life in L.A. seemed to move at an accelerated pace, Hoon said it was just a matter of weeks before Blind Melon had started to jell. After meeting some folks who knew bassist Brad Smith and guitarist Rogers Stevens, Hoon was introduced to them as a possible lead singer. "I thought to myself, 'This is great!' Here I had only been in L.A. for about 30 days and already I met Rogers and Brad, and we hit it off from the start."

The two Angelenos—by way of West Point, Mississippi—brought in Philadelphia-born guitarist Christopher Thorn (by this time a mainstay on the L.A. music scene), and called back home to track down their old acquaintance, drummer Glen Graham. When Graham was asked what he was up to and said he was moving to North Carolina the following day, the guys persuaded him to come to California instead, at which point Graham agreed there was nothing to lose and promptly headed out to the coast.

"When he arrived and set up his drum kit," Hoon recalls, "the thing I first noticed was that it looked like a Fisher-Price set! The bass drum was about as big as a coffee can, but he just played the shit out of it, and things were pretty solid from there on out."

A short time later, after realizing that L.A. was a nice place to visit but no one wanted to live there, the band followed Graham's

advice and moved to Durham, North Carolina, where it proceeded to define the Blind Melon sound.

Renting a five-bedroom house that was slim on furniture but big on amplifiers, the members committed their time to becoming close friends while creating their musical legend. "We established a lot of unity in the band, which obviously made our music more real," says Hoon, "and from what I can see, 'real' is very *in* now. Besides being able to concentrate full-time on music, if any problems arose while we were under the same roof, we were able to resolve them immediately. And we *had* to, because if we *didn't*, it was like five minutes later we'd be running into each other in the kitchen."

In an effort to avoid distractions and replicate the after-hours music scene, the group members put tin foil over all of their windows, blocking out the sun during the day and the city lights at night. "Everybody slept all day long," Hoon recalls, "then we'd get up and play from about three to six in the morning. We barely left the house. And when we *did* go out to visit our families for Christmas, we looked pathetic—just pale and white with dark circles under our eyes. I kept wondering what our relatives must've been thinking."

After getting their sound down, next it was time for the group to come up with a name. Although they considered such possibilities as Head Train, Gristle, Frog, Mud Bird and Naked Pilgrim, the name Blind Melon came up when Smith suggested it after his father's pet name for his least favorite neighbors. If it was good enough for *those* lowlifes, he reasoned, it was good enough for their newly-formed band!

Confident that they had some songs worthy of outside attention, Blind Melon put

together a four-track demo, running off a few dubs for their curious neighbors. Although their initial intention was only to distribute them to friends, the group was surprised when it got a call from a lawyer who had a tape in his possession, and asked if he could represent them.

"We said, 'Ya know, there isn't much here to represent,'" recalled Hoon, noting that the band only had some five or six songs in its catalog. "So the lawyer said, 'Well, you guys just keep doing what you're doing, and I'll take care of the rest.'"

Figuring it was probably more hype than hope, the group didn't take the offer seriously until about three weeks later when the lawyer called again, saying that he had set up some showcases for them in Los Angeles.

Suddenly back on the left coast, Blind Melon was surprised to find themselves playing for the likes of Atlantic, Epic and Capitol personnel. Putting their collective best foot forward, they performed their four strongest songs, and although they pretended to have another dozen or so in the can, what they *really* did was scramble after the showcase to come up with additional material.

After realizing they were now on the brink of something big, Hoon and company started discussing among themselves just what they wanted in a record deal, and how they wouldn't allow themselves to settle for anything less.

"We figured, okay, this is what we want, and if no one offers it to us, or if we just can't get it, then we don't want any deal at all. Because the only way to secure your future is to make sure that everything is mapped out in black and white."

"It took about a year for us to finally sign our contract," says Hoon, at which point



Joe Krom/Photography



Capitol Records came through with the terms the band requested. "It seems like the industry is starting to trust the artists more with their art now, rather than transform them into something that an A&R person thinks they should be."

"We knew we wanted to have a hand in everything concerning the band because we knew that this was our future. We maintain 100 percent creative control over everything we do, be it our CD packaging, the artwork, whatever. A lot of people go to independent labels so they can do that, because most of the majors don't want to turn over that control to the talent. But we established those terms well in advance, long before we ever had signed our contract."

Once the band was a part of the Capitol family, the buzz was immediately apparent. After recording a demo called "The Good-foot Workshop," the group was quickly sent on the road, with their stops a case study in shrewd marketing. Their itinerary was very calculated, but then Capitol wasn't about to lose its shirt on its new, high priority act.

With only three days notice, Blind Melon was booked to appear at the Foundations Forum, an annual rock 'n' metal convention that brings together industry bigwigs from all around the globe. And even though their music doesn't really fall under the heading of metal, they entertained audiences from near and far that wouldn't normally be exposed to their music.

The next stop on the band's journey was MTV's "120 Minutes Tour," a mini Lollapalooza of sorts, that found them warming up audiences for such road-weary vets as Big Audio Dynamite II, Public Image Ltd. and Live. Aside from the exposure, the tour gave Blind Melon a crash course in the rigors of the road, as they traveled from city to city in a rented R.V., with nine people including their road crew.

Although MTV—the tour as well as the channel—showed a lot of support for the group from day one, Hoon finds it ironic that they couldn't repay the compliment: "We didn't have cable in our house back in North Carolina," he says, "so we hadn't seen MTV in something like nine months!"

To further enhance the buzz, in addition to touring, Capitol recruited the photogenic Hoon to appear in fellow Hoosier Axl Rose's video with Guns N' Roses for their song, "Don't Cry." "It was really a rush working with such a big band," admits the singer, who says it wasn't the first time that he and Rose performed together on the same stage.

"I remember we were in a bar called McGoo's in Lafayette back when I used to really drink a lot, and I was trying to sing some Bad Company song that I kept forgetting the words to. Axl, who was in town for awhile, was there trying to sing it with me but I kept screwing it up. Fortunately though, Axl's a pretty forgiving guy."

The band's next stop in building its profile was opening for Soundgarden in concert, which according to then-Capitol CEO/President, Hale Milgrim, was another opportunity for the group to publicly strut its stuff. "You really have to see this band live!" he enthused. "They're definitely an audience favorite."

Hoon agrees that Blind Melon is at their finest during concerts, and as the frontman, he's comfortable enough to do whatever comes naturally while he's prancing about onstage. If he feels like removing his shoes and socks and dancing around, he does so. If he wants to dive into the crowd and be caught by his fans, he does that, too. The only objections so far seem to come from security; otherwise the audiences are well in control.

"Even though I'm out in front," Hoon explains, "we're all very band-oriented, and everybody knows his part. If any of the elements are taken away, then *all* of the elements are taken away. We're that much a piece of the puzzle."

"Our strength is in our live shows," he continues, "and it's not like we're too good to play anywhere. If the offer is feasible and we can work it out, we'll be there. It's not as if we're 'above' anything." Describing the feeling he has while onstage, Hoon likens the mood to "tip-toeing between sanity and insanity. It's such a rush that you don't know how to control it. You never know what

you're going to be feeling from one minute to the next."

Part of that uncertainty can be explained by the band's desire to improvise, which bassist Smith says is a result of them "moving with the mood." Rather than recite the same songs over and over, he explains, they try to add something different to each performance, "and that's what's most exciting to us over anything else."

While the group has been plying its trade on the road for the last couple of years, the members also managed to take some time off in Washington during 1992 to record their self-titled debut album, a 13-song collection that runs the gamut from American folk to hard rock to acoustic melodies. The compilation features such equal input from each of the members, that they credit it as having been "written and recorded by Blind Melon as one."

Explaining that their songs are personal ("I'm not about to sing something that one of us hasn't experienced," says Hoon), the group believes that its music should make sense to most people because their lives are not out of the ordinary. "We go through the same shit as everyone!" confirms Stevens.

As relatable as that may make their album, Hoon admits that if one listens closely, some technical imperfections are bound to surface. "Anyone can go into a studio and make a slick, highly-produced

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Cory Weiss



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album," he observes, "but that's something we didn't want to do. It sounds good to have those human touches on a recording, like when one plays acoustically and you hear the guitar being hit by the pick. That kind of stuff delivers a real raw and natural sound."

When the group issued its first (and recently re-released) single and completed the video for "Tones Of Home" in the summer of 1992, it was almost a case of art imitating life. "The song was about leaving home and adapting," says Hoon. It's the kind of stuff we all have to deal with. When we came to L.A., for example, it was very much like a carnival atmosphere. Then when we went to Durham, it was basically just a college town mentality. And now when we're back in Indiana, I have to readjust to the attitudes and lifestyle there.

"I appreciate the people that I was around while I was growing up," he says, "but in a sad way, we've grown apart. When I'm home I don't normally volunteer to others what's been going on, but if someone asks and I tell them, it's as if they think I'm suddenly better than they are. Of course, that's not the way it is at all. It's just that if I've left and somebody asks me to talk about my travels, I'm going to tell them, and it doesn't mean that

I've turned into an arrogant snob."

If anything, Hoon says he's happy to be one of the old gang again, having recently moved back to his Lafayette home. "I can handle it now," he affirms. "It's the perfect place to get married, raise a family and have that home on the hill with the white picket fence."

"When I was younger, I wanted to see the world. I had to get out. If I hadn't, I'd probably be doing time right now. But I started appreciating Lafayette once I left it, and like they say, there is no place like home. I don't feel more comfortable on the streets of any other city than I do now in Indiana. But a few years ago, moving to L.A. was the best thing I could've done."

Now that Hoon has rediscovered his home and has a place to unwind when he's off the road, he often retreats to his old neighborhood to ponder the quirks of his chosen profession. After watching Blind Melon's first album go platinum-plus, yield the Top 20 hit, "No Rain" (and its hugely popular accompanying video), and place the group in good enough stead to tour with the likes of Neil Young, Lenny Kravitz and John Mellencamp, among others, Hoon finds the dichotomy of his life's work to be more than a little peculiar.

"It's the best job I could ever hope to have," he says, "but at the same time, the music business is every bit as dirty as people say it is. There are some folks who are trying to make it honest, but I've still seen some of the slickest people play games with each other's lives."

"I've seen really talented women unable to get a break because they won't sleep with an A&R guy, and women who get dropped from a deal that's just about to close because

they choose not to be messing around. Hopefully, there will come a day when music is just approached honestly," Hoon says, "rather than for a bunch of ulterior motives."

"Fortunately, we've surrounded ourselves with people we can trust, but it's still just a crazy business. I often feel like a kid running around in a playground that's about to be blown apart."

For the moment, Blind Melon's playground consists of a global stage that's brimming with music as well as laughter. At a

recent benefit concert in Vancouver, for example, they arrived clad in women's clothing; and when it came time for their recent *Rolling Stone* cover photo shoot, they were naked.

Obviously, Blind Melon is enjoying the fruits of its labor while being recognized worldwide in the process. The members are serious about their music, as well as their fun, and they're not about to apologize for the good times to anyone.

*Blind Melon, in concert*

