

## Rocky road leads to record deal McCutcheon grad now ready to enjoy success

By KATHY MATTER  
Journal and Courier

Rebellion seems to walk hand in hand with rock performers. At 23, McCutcheon graduate Shannon Hoon knows all about that.

His blond good looks, his boundless energy and his determination have brought him many things over the years.

It brought him honors in football, wrestling and track.

It brought him a spotlight as the lead singer with local heavy metal band Styff Kyttlen.

It brought him into contact with hard drugs.

It brought him, over and over again, into conflict with the police.

But on Monday, March 18 — a date that is now his mother's lottery number for luck — it brought Hoon and his Los Angeles-based band, Blind Melon, a \$500,000 recording contract with Capitol Records.

Multi-album recording contracts, promotional tours and videos, all the things Hoon and Blind Melon now have, are the stuff that young performers dream of. Putting your name on the same line as the president and vice president of a major recording company such as Capitol, and toasting the occasion with champagne on the rooftop of Capitol's Los Angeles headquarters, is almost beyond the stuff of dreams.

Having reached the contract stage, the first major plateau on the way to commercial music success, Hoon has no stars in his eyes — just determination.

"When life is hard you have to change," the gravelly voiced singer professes in "Change," a rock ballad he started writing in Lafayette and finished in Los Angeles.

The lyrics mirror Hoon's attitude and allude to the changes he has made and is making in his life.

"When I moved out here it was a chance, not to run away from the past, but I knew where I was going to end up if I stayed (in Lafayette). I didn't care about anything. I didn't care about life," Hoon says.

"I had to prove to myself, to my family, to everyone that doubted

me — and there are a lot of people who wanted me to come out and fail — that I could put my nose to the grindstone.

"I wanted to make a CD they would sell at Musicland in Tippecanoe Mall. I wanted to show them I could do something with my life, and I have."

Those who know Hoon remember different pictures of him. The last picture, for most, was the Styff Kyttlen picture — that of a bare-chested rock singer with tight leather pants, chains around his neck and long blond hair and drugs obscuring his vision.

Today the picture is different. Hoon has kicked his drug addiction and is into blue jeans and flannel shirts and funky, psychedelic southern rock — his description of Blind Melon's music.

When he was in high school his mother, Nel, night manager at C.W. Dandy's, and his father, Richard, a bricklayer, never thought music would be his life. Nel had enrolled her son at age 6 in karate lessons to absorb some of his boundless energy. By 9 he had a black belt. Starting with seventh grade his life was one long string of practices as he went from football to wrestling to track each year.

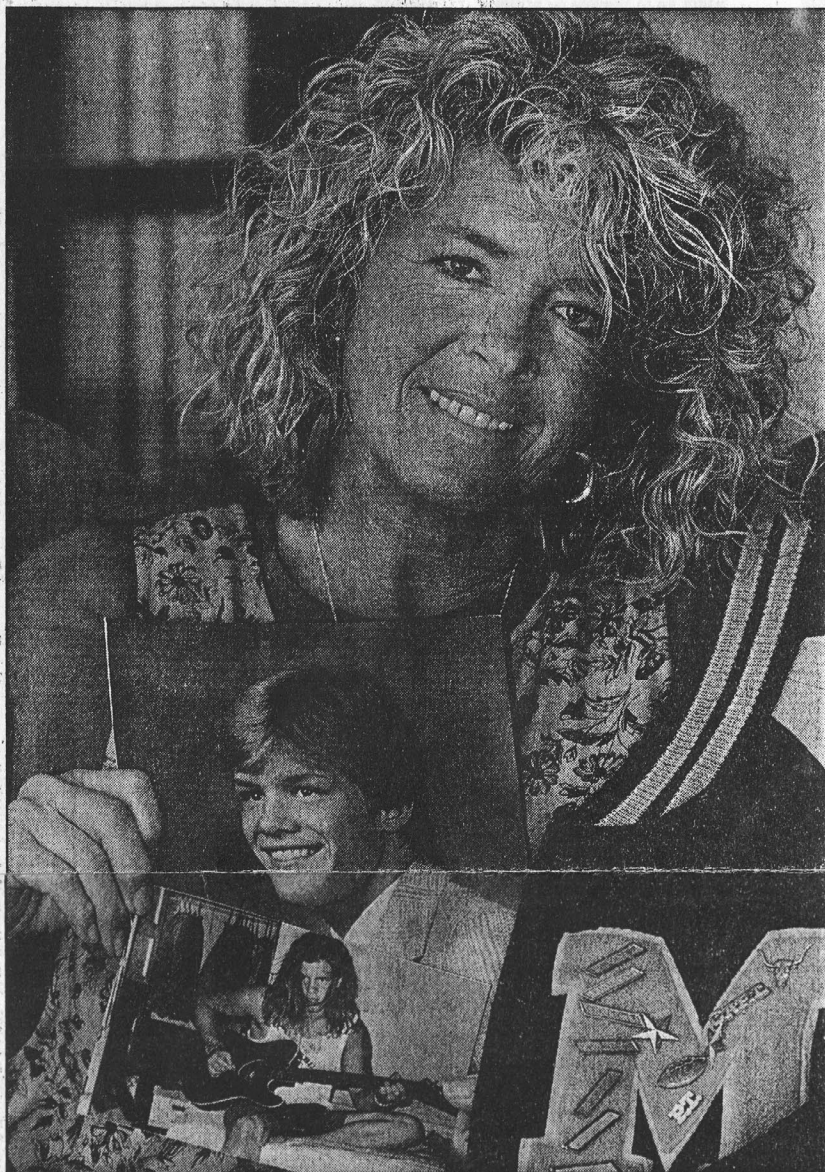
"I thought he could be a coach. I thought that his life would be sports," Nel says.

But a picture she's saved of him at age 8 foretold the future. On a performance stage specially built in the Hoon garage, he and a friend are mimicking the band Kiss complete with the stance, the guitars, the makeup and rocker outfits fashioned from karate uniforms.

Even now, "I don't think I could look at them and imagine one day Shannon would be here (in Hollywood)," she says.

Singing at that point was a shower activity. It was something to fill the driving minutes to school or athletic events. Nel remembers those times. Jim Croce, Cat Stevens, Elton John. "I would sing lead and make him sing backup or vice versa," she says.

April 7,  
1991



By Frank Oliver/Journal and Courier

Nel Hoon holds memories of her son Shannon as an athlete at McCutcheon and his senior class picture, along with a picture taken this year of him as a budding rock star.



On the roof of Capitol Records in the rain is (from left) Glenn Grahmn, drums; Brad Smith, bass; Tim Devine, vice president Capitol Records; Shannon Hoon; Rogers Stevens, guitar; Simon Potts, president Capitol Records International; Dennis Ryder, band's lawyer; and Christopher Thorn, guitar.



# Rock

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For a while Hoon thought he might go to Purdue on athletic scholarships, "But I didn't have the grades and didn't have the heart to make the grades to go," he says. So after graduation, "I basically had to start life over."

He worked a series of construction jobs and met Mike Tate, a singer with Whitehawk Band. "I was always envious that he was a singer in a band. I wished I was in this guy's shoes," Hoon says. "I wrote a song and gave it to Mike. He said, 'Don't give this to me, do it yourself.'"

His remarks prompted Hoon to hunt up McCutcheon classmate Mike Kelsey and make music. "We were doing the same old songs in the garage like everyone else," he recalls, but Styff Kytten, with a solid hard metal sound, came out of it.

"I really owe a lot of credit to Kelsey. He was always a perfectionist, and I wasn't until he pushed me to be. He opened my eyes to a lot of things."

Styff Kytten had a well-deserved reputation as a rowdy, anything-goes band. "Usually a good show would be one where the bar owner would not ask us to play again," Hoon admits.

Parrish Taylor, the band's manager, said in a 1988 interview that Hoon set the tone. "Shannon's got the desire. You look at him and automatically you know he's a band member. He's got the persona of a front man. You never want to take your eye off him because you never know what he's going to do."

Often he'd squirt water on the crowd. When he did it at the Harrison prom, soggy crepe paper streamers dripped so much dye on white tux jackets that the band's entire fee went to cleaning bills. That was Styff Kytten's last gig.

"I knew I had backed myself into a corner," Hoon says. "If I didn't make it in music I wasn't going to make it at all, and I wasn't going to make it with a local band playing cover tunes."

Musically he was in a corner, and Hoon had had so many run-ins with the Lafayette police that he felt it was only a matter of time until he got into bigger trouble if he stayed here. So, in March 1990, he sought a change and moved to California.

"I went through a drug period when I was in Indiana. For me to say I want to go to Hollywood, people would think it would only



1983 file photo

Shannon Hoon was a pole-vaulter for McCutcheon track team.

get worse. But there was so much to do out here that gave me the same high as the drugs I was on back home. This place was a big rehab center for me.

"You grow up really fast out here. If you come out with a goal you've got to stick to it. It's really easy to get derailed when surrounded by the black parts of life — the drugs. This is the kind of place where you're always looking over your shoulder. People are not honest out here. There's always a vulture waiting to find a small-town person wanting to make it."

With the same kind of determination that once made him put

aside the pain of a broken foot to win a high school wrestling tournament, Hoon stuck to his goal.

One lead he followed up brought him into contact with three Mississippi musicians looking for a lead singer. They had auditioned dozens of singers before meeting Hoon, but he was the one that fit the Blind Melon niche.

Bands in California are cheaper than a dime a dozen. "There are just as many out here as there are cornstalks in Indiana," Hoon says. "There are millions."

So Blind Melon's luck in establishing an early link with Atlantic Records was auspicious. It

didn't last long, but out of it they got a lawyer, Dennis Ryder, who believed in them and was eager to shop their demo tape to the labels.

Ryder lined up showcases where executives from MCA, Epic, Polygram, Mercury, CBS, Capitol and some smaller labels could hear them play four or five songs. Those showcases were "the most uncomfortable position I've ever been put in," Hoon says.

"I'd rather play in a bar with no one in it than play for three suit-and-tie men, age 50, trying to figure out where we're coming from."

Several companies liked what they saw, but in the end, it was Capitol and Epic bidding against each other. As negotiations dragged on Hoon filled his time with various projects, including vocal work on Guns N' Roses upcoming album, to combat nervousness.

"Each day I thought maybe this'll be the day. I was so stressed out I had no fingernails left to bite. Then Capitol offered a quarter of a million more than what we asked for to stop the whole bidding process. There was no way we could say no."

But, "As much as you think the contract is the hardest thing to get, it's the easiest," Hoon says. "It only gets harder." Soon they'll leave on a three-month club tour before coming back to record and make a video. Then it'll be back out on the road again for a seven-month promotional tour.

"We've got to meet as many people as possible to promote ourselves in a positive manner, not a negative controversial manner. With Styff Kytten I worked out my aggression. It was like basic training for where I'm at now. I can't pull that kind of stuff out here. I can't act like I'm a rock god like I did there."

In essence, Hoon says, the \$520,000 from Capitol "is like an interest free loan. We've got to pay it back through record sales. It'll be a long time before we see any money at all."

Eager for the challenge, Hoon says he now has self-confidence. "I'm glad I went through it, the drug addiction. I've picked myself up and dried myself up and that makes it a lot more rewarding to kick the habit on my own. From that time life has been one big whirlpool of luck."

"I overcame a situation I didn't think I had the power to do. That's my platinum album right there, that means more to me ... at least I got to the point where I have a chance."