

blind MELON'S

Blind Melon have come into season. As **"No Rain"** hits the top of the world's charts, Mel Toltz joins their endless road trip.

In Las Vegas, the Huntridge Theatre is crammed as Blind Melon bound on stage to perform their first headlining gig on a U.S. trek where, most nights, they are the opening act on Lenny Kravitz's Universal Love Tour. They bombard the audience with their blues-tinged acoustic and electric rockadelia, showcasing songs from their self-titled debut album as well as including a country reworking of the Velvet Underground's "Candy Says." Particularly impressive tonight are Brad Smith's plodding bass, which drives the positively funky "Tones of Home"; the epic and ever-changing "Paper Scratcher," which is sustained by Christopher Thorn and Roger Stevens's rhythmic and driving guitars; and a spooky reading of "Change," which Thorn opens with a plaintive harmonica while raspy vocalist Shannon Hoon strums an acoustic guitar until drummer Glen Graham kicks in and the song takes on an urgent vitality and momentum.

Shannon Hoon preens across the stage, writhing like a snake one minute, hopping like a flamingo the next. Towards the end of the show, Thorn begins a haunting, repetitive riff, over which Hoon begins to wail painfully the mantra: "It's not sane," "It's not sane." The band crash into a twisted and tormented version of "No Rain" that escalates to a surreal and climatic moment when a 40-year-old woman dressed as a bee leaps up on stage.

The bee girl is a great idea that has become an albatross to Blind Melon. In June last year, after touring their debut album for the best part of a year to encouraging if unspectacular sales, suddenly the band's single "No Rain" hit high rotation on U.S. MTV. Largely due to the cute, chubby ten-year-old girl in glasses and a bee costume who graces its video, "No Rain" touched a chord, first with the American public and then the rest of the world, that has seen Blind Melon rocketed to multi-million sales. Now, however, the bee girl's celebrity has got out of hand, threatening to eclipse even that of her creators. Recently she was seen yukking it up with the likes of Madonna after the MTV Awards and she has a movie deal, an entourage and as much attitude as a ten-year-old possibly can.

"In a way it's like they're mocking us, or we're going to become a parody of the bee girl sooner or later," says bassist Brad Smith in reference to the bee costumes that are now increasingly turning up on audience members at the band's concerts.

The band address their dilemma in the video for the upcoming single "Tones of Home," in which the bee girl undergoes an accelerated ageing process, and dies.



"Everybody has that Sybil personality," says Shannon Hoon playfully, a leering smile spreading across his face. "Sometimes I may be Mr. Positive, but most nights I'm pretty negative. Tonight's a good night."

I'm sitting with Hoon in the back of the Blind Melon tour bus, listening to the Velvet Underground and taking, in Hoon's words, "a mental shower."

Hoon grew up in Lafayette, Indiana, a town steeped in every kind of prejudice. Lafayette is also the home of Guns N' Roses' frontman Axl Rose, who has acted as something of a mentor for the band. Hoon and Rose are friends from their days in Indiana – besides appearing in a cameo role in the Gunnas' video clip for "Don't Cry,"

Photo: Jeff Treman

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Blind Melon (from left): Shannon Hoon, Brad Smith, Christopher Thorn, Rogers Stevens, Glen Graham

Hoon has also appeared onstage at a Guns N' Roses gig, delivering a pizza in his birthday suit. But the Gunnas connection has also become something of an albatross — some have suggested Blind Melon wouldn't have got anywhere without their popular friend. Worse, though, the link between the two bands, and Hoon's appearance in "Don't Cry," led to record company pressure for Blind Melon to release their then-incomplete album to coincide with the video. And pressure is something that Hoon doesn't have a good track record in dealing with.

Encouraged to be an athlete under the dominating expectations of his sports-crazy father, Hoon denounced jockdom and turned slacker when he was 17, severing ties with his old man. A time bomb

waiting to explode, he began to use drugs and alcohol heavily, picking up a police record as he moved. It wasn't until 1990, when he split Lafayette for L.A., that Hoon began to get his shit together. Blind Melon formed soon after.

"I love where I'm from and I love what I was running from," professes Hoon. "I was very frustrated and searching for a cure — and I found it making music. I found it in the appreciation for other points of view. Now I'm able to take that, go back, and repair what it was I used to sweep under the rug. Until you go back and deal with the things that you were running from, it really makes living the rest of your life a little bit more difficult. It's a hacking cough that will always be there."

"I've learned to appreciate my family a lot and I'm still with the same girlfriend that I went to prom with. You're in a travelling bubble, and you run into those people, like your family and friends, that you had before people started liking you for the bee girl. The way that I can tell this hasn't affected me is because the things that I held sacred before this are the same things that are sacred to me now. I don't need any more friends as long as I can continue to keep the friends that I have."

Down-to-earth and genuine, Hoon remains unaffected by Blind Melon's success and the industry that has nurtured it. "I'm not a tortured artist," he smiles. "I'm just a happy-go-lucky guy."

I tell Shannon about his bestial presence on stage and he laughs: "Maybe that's what it is," he muses. "My moods are more animal."

I ask him what animal he thinks he most resembles. "Thorn reminds me of a little tree frog," he replies, dodging the question. "Because he's so little, he'll run up, jump and just grab onto me with his whole body, and it won't even knock you off balance!"

Hoon's almost child-like enthusiasm for everything is one of his most endearing qualities. Combined with what I've coined his 'Conversation Game,' though, it makes things a little confusing – for both the listener and Hoon himself. Hoon has a penchant for beginning several stories almost simultaneously and moving each one along whilst keeping track of all the others. The object of the game is to eventually come back and resolve each story. Hoon usually begins with ten.

"You know I love animals," he begins, then immediately digresses. "My mum's a pack-rat, she's kept everything from each one of us kids growing up. Everything!" he enthuses before describing a little green hand print that he and his sister would put in the window to indicate to firemen that a child occupied that room.

"Anyway," he continues before suddenly stopping himself. "Man, I branched out way too far. I'm trying to pull myself back in."

"The last time I was home, I was going through my things that my mum had saved that I never really gave a shit to look at until now because you always want to see how you develop from point A to point B," he continues, acknowledging that he has just begun another story. "I find this cigar box that threw me back to when I was eight years old. I opened it up, and I found a little scroll."

"It was my pet cemetery that I had when I was a kid," he discloses. "On the scroll I'd written down the names of all my animals, and the date they died, and what kind of animal it was. Man, it used to just break my heart every time one of my pets would die. They meant more to me than my friends."

I prompt Hoon back to the original story, and he laughs at himself and instructs me to attempt to keep count. So, what animal would Hoon be?

"I don't know," he grins. "All of that and it comes to an 'I don't know.' I'd be a zoo."

Las Vegas is American kitsch at its most garish. The moral and aesthetic decadence flashes obscenely in colourful neon across the city, creating a vacuum that can easily suck you into its guilty pleasures. From the gig to the hotel and its adjoining casino, we pass "Treasure Island," and an enormous Sphinx's head jutting out from a building.

"I embrace the evil," declares the towering Rogers Stevens as he absorbs the passing scenery. "God, it makes me fucking proud to be



Christopher Thorn

an American."

We spend two days in Las Vegas and eventually embark on an overnight bus trip to San Jose where the band are to re-convene with Lenny Kravitz. At the front of the bus, Thorn is playing guitar. Thorn appears to have been born with a guitar in his hand. He's never separated from his instrument. Not even in the bathroom.

His other distinguishing characteristic is a pointy ear. "My mother had an infatuation with *Star Trek*," he says gleefully, pointing to the little pointy ear hidden under his mass of dark locks. "She claims that it's because she watched so much *Star Trek* while she was pregnant with me. It's a good thing I'm not called Spock."

Drummer Glen Graham, meanwhile, is at the kitchen table drawing cartoon-like characters with the agility of Mr Squiggle, while the band unsuccessfully attempts to coerce him to demonstrate for my benefit his Morrissey impersonation.

"J. Mascis – I like the way he plays guitar live," Stevens enthuses. "He plays his guitar so loud you can't hear anything else. The drums, the bass ... they're just flailing way for nothing because his guitar is so fucking loud, but that's what I like to hear."

While a great sense of humour is clearly evident the tour bus, the scene is relatively sedate. Blind Melon are not playing any rock & roll party anthems.

"I think you're catching us on a good week," explains Smith. "Not that we don't party sometimes, but we're not trying to expose ourselves as, like, the rock & roll cliché band. I mean, everybody likes to raise hell and party every now and then, but we're just not wearing it on a cuff."

"I don't know where all those people are," adds Graham. "They must still exist, but I think those days are passed. In order to get up every night and play well, and stay healthy or alive for that matter on the road eight months out of the year, doing drugs and being drunk all the time, I don't see how you could do it."

"To take advantage of our situation and go 'let's go and have sex because you like my band,' to me is so '80s it's ridiculous," Thorn explains. "We're not like that. We're so lame. We might smoke a



Melons (from left): Graham, Stevens, Hoon, Smith, Thorn

joint, become non-social and go to sleep. Our band's totally boring. We're not really decadent, crazy guys."

Thorn begins to play "Candy Says," and explains his love for the Velvet Underground. "I just love that real changy guitar," he says. "It's kind of sloppy. I play just as sloppy as they do, so I guess there's some influence there. And Shannon really likes the real drugged-out sounding song, so it's probably an influence over him."

Sometime in the middle of the night, we hit that Great American Institution – the truck stop – where all food defies identification. Thorn craves mashed potatoes, and the kitchen cannot accommodate, posing the question: how can one 'run out' of mashed potatoes? Graham eats something he can't describe, while Smith and Stevens eagerly abuse the resident pinball machines. Hoon is asleep on the bus.

We finally reach San José, a city which is so meticulously and unnaturally clean it's eerie. Hoon takes a lonely walk around the city and returns claiming that San José is boring. "But I had a good time being bored."

There are several fans surrounding the tour bus, waving papers for autographs, and the band are attentive to each one – even granting requests to inspect the instruments.

"The first time you get that sort of recognition for the first couple of hours your head's sort of swimming from it, but then I've pretty much forgotten about it," says Stevens. "It doesn't affect me. That's really not something I strive for. I don't think fame is that important

to me at all."

Blind Melon have a radio interview at the local radio station, where they play acoustic versions of "Change" and "Candy Says." "Aren't they going to play 'No Rain?'" asks the announcer to no one in particular. Smith seems slightly uptight with the whole ordeal, deeming himself as the Electrolux man – an American icon of the '40s and '50s where a salesman would go door-to-door, Jehovah Witness-style, selling Electrolux vacuum cleaners.

"It just seems like you're going door-to-door to cram your product down peoples' throats, and that's not what music's about," says Smith after he leaves the station. "Music is more of a feeling and a mood, it's not something you force on people. Are we going to do door-to-door next and try to sell the album? I don't get it."

Sitting on the grass outside the venue, Smith muses about *Sesame Street*. He's feeling a little jaded from the perpetual tour, and admits as much. Nor that he has to. You can see it in his face.

"It's something I'd really like to do – get messages across to kids to help them develop in life," he explains. "If you think about it, 'No Rain' is a *Sesame Street* song. It's a song about a little kid or a person being twisted and alone in his head, and I think it's something a lot of kids can relate to."

"Even the melody line, it's almost like the *Sesame Street* theme song," he notes, before singing, "Sunny Days, everything's A-OK," immediately following in the same breath with, "It's not sane, it's not sane" by way of illustration. "It's the same kind of gay melody



Shannon Hoon: too much rain

line attitude," he grins and begins to hum. As I begin to talk, Smith is still humming quietly under his breath, until he suddenly breaks out into booming coherent vocals, "Can you tell me how to get, how to get to *Sesame Street*."

"I'll probably go back to school and take some child psychology classes so I don't mess a kid up for life," he adds laughing. "They're already jumping off stage at age 40 in bee costumes, so..."

The gig at San José is packed to the brim, ironic considering that when the band played San José a few short months ago it was a shitty gig in an almost empty venue. Admittedly, the crowd size can primarily be credited to Lenny Kravitz. After Blind Melon pull off another phenomenal performance, larger-than-life Lenny takes the show in a silver space suit and elevated platforms in one of the most impeccably produced and rehearsed shows ever, even when asking the audience, "Hmmm ... What shall we play now? ... Why don't we just wing it?"

"I've enjoyed touring with Lenny Kravitz," says Graham after the show, one of the last of the tour. "Even though he is directly and blatantly ripping off people from our past, I think he does it very well and convincingly."

Coming from a band who have stepped out into the world as a straight-up cross between Neil Young and the Grateful Dead, such an observation seems comical. But that doesn't prevent Graham from delivering it without a hint of irony.

Outside the venue at Berkeley, California, a Deadhead named Skip instructs me to spell "guru" very slowly, "g-u-r-u," until it sounds as if I had said "gee, you are you," then hugs me in the light of this new found revelation. Welcome to Berkeley.

Berkeley was infamous as the horbed of American student radicalism 30 years ago, and for its support of '60s icons such as the

Grateful Dead and Jimi Hendrix. The town is trapped in a time warp – it's debatable as to whether or not record stores have re-stocked the shelves since the last Buffalo Springfield release.

It's rather apt that Blind Melon spend the afternoon in Berkeley talking to the Dead's principal lyricist, Robert Hunter, in his home. Hunter diplomatically conveys his disapproval of the mandolin Thorn owns, presenting him with his own mandolin – a Gibson. "So what are you saying?" asks Thorn. Hunter tells Thorn that instruments should go where they will be used, and that the mandolin wants to be a Melon. Thorn is awe-struck and remains that way for days.

"We stand to learn a lot more from someone like him than he does from someone like us," says Stevens quietly as the band returns from Hunter's home. "I think he takes us seriously, as seriously as you can take a band who goes on stage and jumps around like a bunch of idiots. It's all a fucking joke. The minute you stop laughing at yourself, you start to lose it."

Stevens is renowned for his humour, but his jokes are not those of an easy-going stand-up comic filling time. His humour brews from a dark cynicism, and over the last few days Stevens seems to have been even more introspective than usual, mostly due to burn out.

"I've done a lot of crazy, fucked-up things on this tour," he admits. "I've been raging drunk, made a complete idiot out of myself on many, many times. I get out of hand sometimes."

Laughing may be the way that Stevens reacts to his environment but he doesn't seem particularly affected by the band's success, nor convinced of the value of the pursuit of fame and fortune.

"I don't think fame is that important at all," he says. "I have friends that I went to high school with, I look at them in the eye now, and they look dead. They've settled for the deal – they went to college, got some job doing something they don't like, married somebody for the hell of it and aren't able to pursue what they really wanted to do. I never want to have that. I always want to be fervently searching for something. I don't know what."

It can be argued that the Berkeley Community Theatre's dressing rooms, decked out in psychedelia such as a tie-dye wall hangings, have not been revamped in the last 25 years. While Blind Melon recline on beanbags in their room, what was once Jimi Hendrix's dressing room is allocated to Lenny. Hunter enters Blind Melon's dressing room to pay his respects before the show.

The show is mesmerising, the highlight perhaps being the folk-tinged "Change," in which Thorn's new mandolin ripples with beautiful warmth over the acoustic arrangement. I wonder if Hunter is smiling. The end of the show signals that the Kravitz tour is coming to an end, and Blind Melon look tired.

"I think we're all a bit frustrated in a way at the success of 'No Rain,' because it's meant that we have to continue to tour," Thorn explains with a sigh. "We're dying to be creative again and make a second album."

"We're playing the whole thing completely by ear. We're lucky to be here and we'll be lucky if it lasts," Graham concludes. "We have no idea how we got here or where we're going. We're completely directionless. We're five different people with completely different lives, with different ideas, coming together." ■