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The Mother Of All Festivals



COSMIC GUMBO

Blues with just a soupçon of psychedelia. Dash of raga-rock. R&B to taste. Put in blender. Heat, serve. Repeat as required. *Blind Melon by Dave DiMartino.*

WERE IT NOT FOR THE DEAD GIVEAWAY OF TWO PAIR OF dated, aviator-style cycleglasses worn by two band members, the cover of Man's 1974 album *Rhinos, Winos & Lunatics* might easily have been recycled for the debut of Blind Melon 18 years later. No-one except for a recording engineer and mother of two might have noticed. Like Deke Leonard's motley mob – who sat in a cluttered room filled with junk and conspicuously-placed album jackets by inspirations Elvis, Bo Diddley and Quicksilver Messenger Service – Blind Melon also have their influences, musical and otherwise. Their weaving, two-guitar approach often recalls the early Grateful Dead; their lead singer sounds like Nazareth's Dan McCafferty but – as conceptually strange as it may be – is even less distinctive; and the back cover of their album displays a close-up of marijuana seeds, lovingly incorporated into a piece of visual art crafted by that same singer.

Bearing the unlikely name of Shannon Hoon, the lead vocalist of Blind Melon seems an odd one. I first encountered him while sitting at the Pantages Theatre in Hollywood watching the horrendous Guns N'Roses perform many of their best-known songs, including *Knocking On Heaven's Door*, *Live And Let*

Die and other, less memorable, stuff. Hoon – who was a complete unknown at the time, but would later appear on the Use Your Illusion albums – came onstage and sang with his fellow Indiana native Axl Rose. Upon finishing, he zealously extended his hand bandward and declared, "Guns N' Roses – the best fuckin' band in the world!" It was not the finest first impression one named Hoon could make.

Indeed, when the thirtyish Hoonster next appeared in the Guns N'Roses video, *Don't Cry*, it seemed likely his talents as a singer might be equalled by his skill as a self-serving, hanger-on yes-man to the dorkish Rose. But Hoon was already in the midst of making a record with his own band. The group was Blind Melon, and the doltish name was, in its way, remarkably appropriate. Think of Blind Lemon Jefferson, think of dyslexia, and think of a musical style that takes all that precedes it – blues, psychedelia, R&B and even raga-rock, then forcefully shoves it all into a food processor powered by cannabis fumes and alkaline Sony Walkman batteries. George Clinton may not be involved, but Blind Melon plays cosmic slop.

Hoon, who left Lafayette, Indiana seeking fame in exotic Los Angeles, met up with guitarist



Blind Melon – (top, from left) Rogers Stevens, Glen Graham, Brad Smith, (below) Shannon Hoon, Chris Thorn.

Rogers Stevens and bassist Brad Smith — both Mississippi pals — in early 1990. Before long they added yet another guitarist, a Pennsylvanian named Christopher Thorn, then summoned drummer Glen Graham, a friend of Stevens and Smith, from Mississippi, and became Blind Melon. As often happens, they recorded a demo and got a record deal.

Blind Melon then sold over two million albums in the United States alone. But they did not do it quickly. Why were they so successful? Choose one: a) They recorded their debut album in Seattle, a popular locale, with producer Rick Parashar, who'd produced Pearl Jam and Temple Of The Dog; b) They toured, variously, with Soundgarden, Ozzy Osbourne, Alice In Chains, John Mellencamp, Neil Young, and Lenny Kravitz, all of whom have their own very large and very different fans bases; c) They made a video. The smart money, as we Americans like to say, is on 'c'.

"You know what's an oddity, to me?" asks Blind Melon guitarist Rogers Stevens. "It's the fact that in the beginning we were fairly well received by the critics. And as things moved on, we became successful. We had a song which became successful and basically brainwashed everyone into buying our record. And it seemed to me that there was a backlash against that — where people became disgusted with us or something. Which was no fault of ours."

If it was anyone's fault, it was that of the scarily monolithic MTV music channel — which ran the group's No Rain video clip at seeming 10-minute intervals until every American with a wallet became familiar with the bee girl central to the clip, modelled after the same one (drummer Graham's sister) conspicuously situated on the group's album cover. "I'm just as sick of it as everybody else is," Stevens notes wearily. "I think the video presents a perception of us that is not necessarily 100 per cent accurate. The video is amazing, but it seems to me that we've been labelled this neo-Grateful Dead thing — and personally, I never listen to The Grateful Dead."

While this sounds like predictable doth-protest-too-much patter, Stevens seems genuinely puzzled by

the comparisons — as he does by the peculiarly American habit of pop music journalists to ponder in print whether or not his band fits the dubious classification of 'alternative'. Why do writers have such a hard time with this moronic pigeonholing? "I think it's because the people that we rip off run such a wide variety," says he. "I love Tool and AC/DC and Black Sabbath as much as I love The Allman Brothers," the latter being another band to which the Melonheads are often compared. "I listen to music indiscriminately. Whatever strikes me as being good is good."

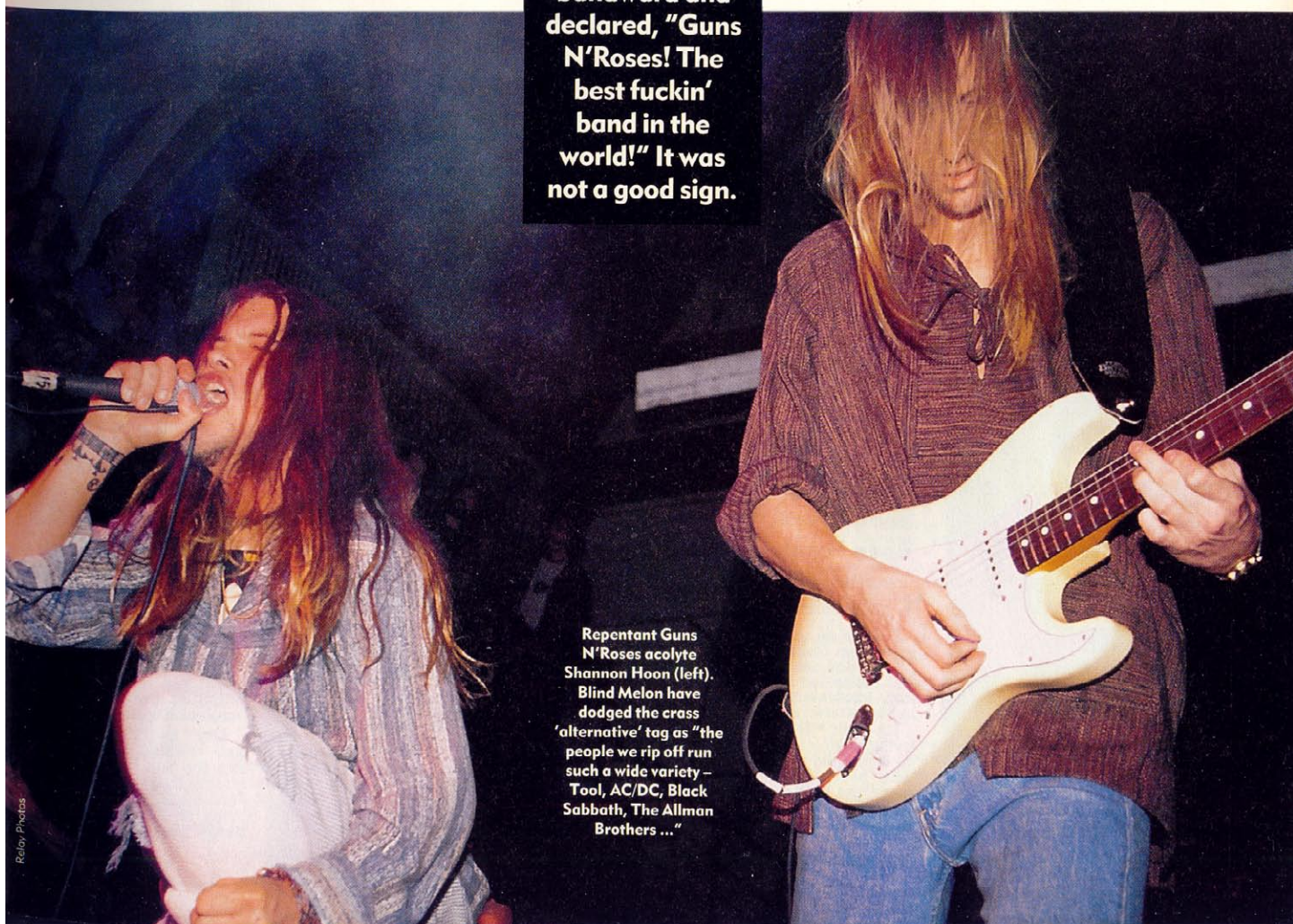
Likewise, the Melon's other guitarist Christopher Thorn claims his own variety of influences, from the expected Zeppelin/Beatles/classic rock (dire American radiospeak) mishmash to actual folk music, which his mother sang to him long ago. "I grew up around folk and I still listen to a lot of it," Thorn says. "You know, Woody Guthrie, Ramblin' Jack Elliot and people like that." Perhaps self-conscious of the ubiquitous retro tag that regularly gets hurled their way, he adds that he's "turned on by a lot of new things out there," including Luscious Jackson, Smashing Pumpkins, Soundgarden and Mother Tongue.

As their unexpected cover of the Velvet Underground's Candy Says (on their recent US CD-5 release of Change) attests, Blind Melon draw inspiration from occasionally unlikely sources. It is, however, jarring to hear the man who once called Guns N'Roses "the greatest fucking band in the world" deliver lines like "I've come to hate my body/And all that it required in this world" in his characteristic Mid-western drawl.

The best bands in pop music take all their influences and roll them up into something new and uniquely their own — and Blind Melon, though they're obviously trying very hard, haven't yet mastered that trick. Nor, for that matter, have they written a song that might be easily hummed. It took The Grateful Dead five years to make Workingman's Dead; five years into their own career, '90s band Blind Melon will be on the road, promoting only their second album. With any luck — and the appropriate video — it might even be called Hoon's Next. ■

Hoon zealously extended a hand bandward and declared, "Guns N'Roses! The best fuckin' band in the world!" It was not a good sign.

Repentant Guns N'Roses acolyte Shannon Hoon (left). Blind Melon have dodged the crass 'alternative' tag as "the people we rip off run such a wide variety — Tool, AC/DC, Black Sabbath, The Allman Brothers ..."



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