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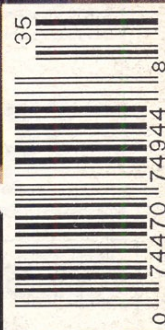
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*How Important Is A
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Blind Melon



Top Distributors Reveal How Records Get To The Stores

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By Chuck Crisafulli

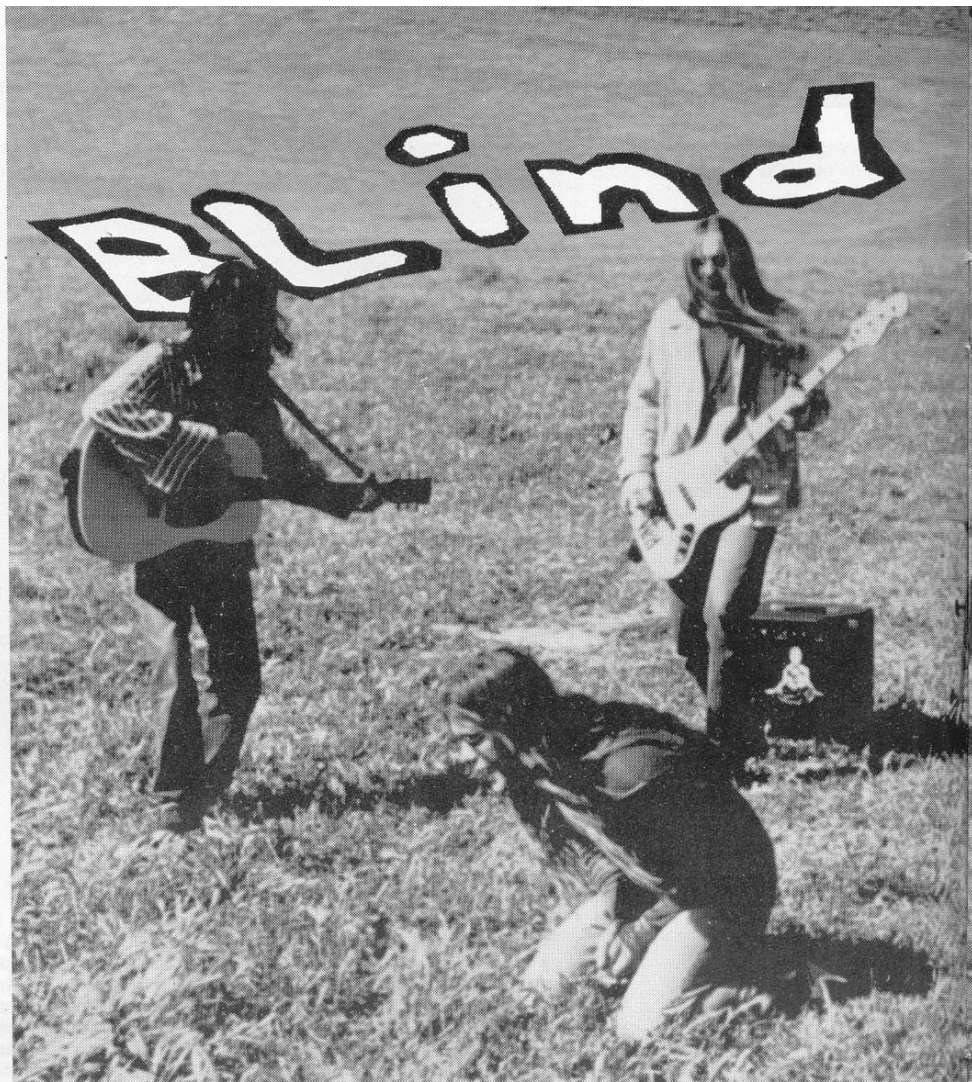
God bless the Bee Girl. It's been a hell of a year for the five young men of groove-rock outfit Blind Melon, and their success has at least partly hinged on the little girl in bee garb who graces the cover of their Capitol debut and who is featured prominently in their Buzz Bin video for "No Rain." But Shannon Hoon, the distinctively smoky voiced lead singer of the group and an all-around easy going, down-to-earth, likable kind of guy, isn't too ready to have his band pegged by any particular video image, or even by their recorded output.

"People come up all the time and say, 'I love the record, and the Bee video is great,' and I want to tell them that they ought to wander a little further than their remote control takes them. Get out of the house and come see a show," he suggests with a chuckle. And over the last year and a half, it's become easier for more and more concert-goers to catch Blind Melon gigs, as the band has supported their release with an almost relentless touring schedule. The band, which includes guitarists Christopher Thorn, Rogers Stevens, bassist Brad Smith and drummer Glen Graham, has only been together three years, but in their brief life they've already shared bills with heavyweights like Soundgarden, John Mellencamp and Neil Young. Hoon says he's starting to get used to hanging with the big-timers of rock & roll.

"Before I ever left my home in Lafayette, Indiana and I was just sort of

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—Shannon Hoon



Christopher Thorn

Shannon Hoon

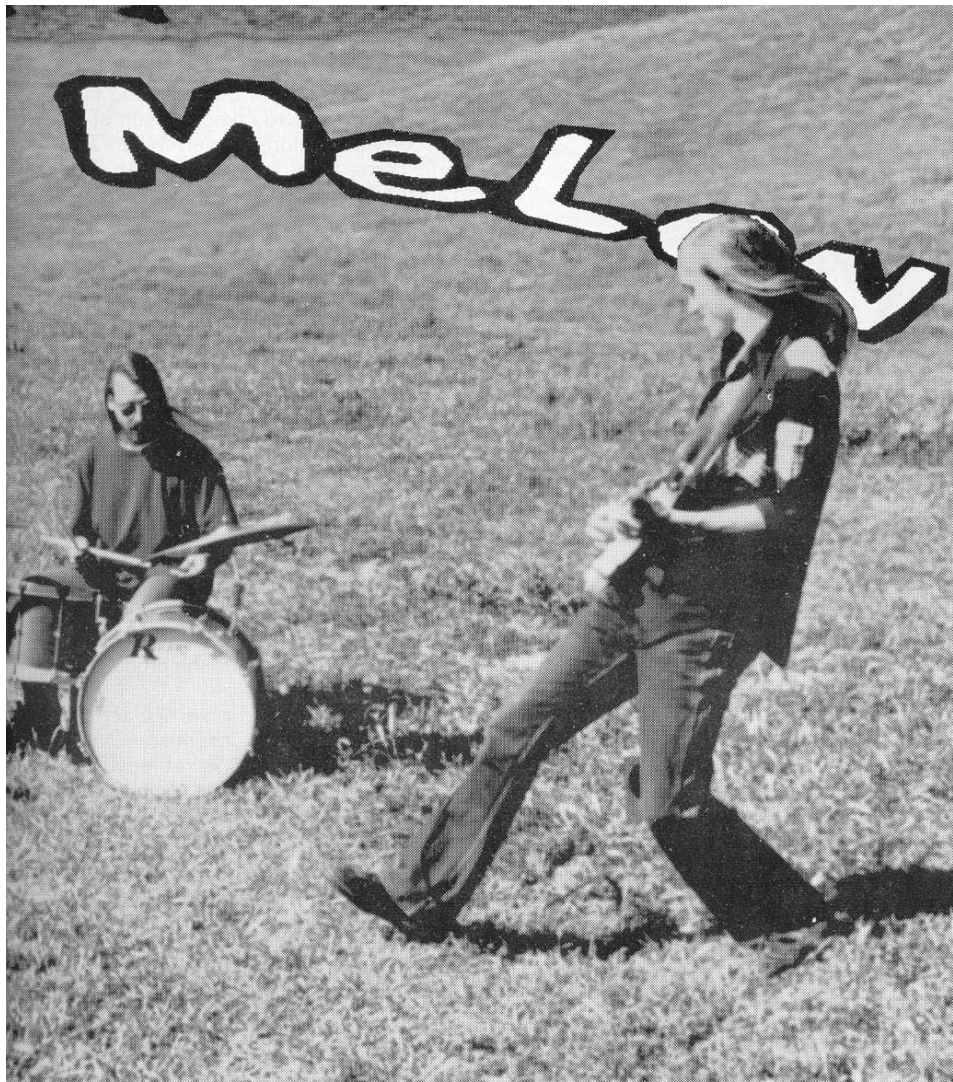
Brad Smith

looking out the window of my mom's house, this world was a universe away. Now that I'm a part of it, it's exciting and flattering, but real life is never quite as exciting as your expectations and fantasies. Music is a lot more enjoyable when it has some mystery to it. It's not that much fun to have stuff figured out, and sometimes it's more exciting to chase something than it is to catch it. Then again, sometimes I think of being on the same stage as Neil Young, and it makes my knees buckle."

On the day we spoke, Hoon was, as usual, on the road, but on this day he'd been relieving the tedium of his hotel room with a rarely indulged pleasure. "I've actually been listening to the radio today. The alarm went off and Carole King was playing, and I decided to just leave it on. It's been sounding good today. In fact, they just now played some Neil Young." Hoon was asked if he heard any Blind Melon on the playlist. "No. But if I did, I'd probably turn it off."

If the singer sounds a little wary of being a part of the starmaking machine, he has a right to be. Just as Blind Melon was beginning to take shape in Los Angeles in 1990, a major label bidding war started on the strength of their four-track demo. Hoon also raised his profile by looking up an Indiana buddy named Axl Rose and then appearing in the Guns N' Roses video for "Don't Cry." The band found itself in the odd position of having to stall the majors while they tried to figure out what kind of a deal they wanted. They were musical naifs in a vulnerable position, but they haggled their way into a deal with Capitol that ensured them creative control of their budding sound.

"I think we handled the early hype pretty well," Hoon explains. "We kept our heads together and figured out what mattered to us and what didn't. In this business, you run into a lot more stuff that doesn't matter at all to the health of a band—like hype. But we were dedicated to building the band in a grass-roots fash-



GENE KIRKLAND

Glen Graham

Rogers Stevens

ion. We wanted to play shows for ten people, then build it up to sixteen and then get really psyched when we pulled in 25. Now it's evolved into something bigger, but we did it the way we wanted to."

At this point, Hoon is tired of hearing about "Don't Cry" and being known as "the guy who's friends with Axl." He hopes that over the last year, people have come to enjoy Blind Melon on its own merits. "I think anybody that likes us, likes us because of the music and not because I happened to be around the day they shot 'Don't Cry.' That was irrelevant to us as a band, and it should be to our fans. I still think of Axl as a friend, but we don't sit around talking about the music business or publicity stunts, because that kind of talk doesn't matter much to either of us. We always seem to find much more interesting things to talk about."

All the members of the band hail from smaller towns, and when it came time to record their album, they decided that the

bustle and distractions of L.A. were working against them. They relocated to an old house in Durham, North Carolina, where they wrote and recorded their groove-driven, folk-tinged, neo-Southern debut. "We've got nothing against LA," Hoon is quick to point out. "We really did some growing up in that town, but we spent our formative years in calmer environments, and we wanted to get back to that before we recorded. And we like L.A. as a city, but Blind Melon isn't really a graduate of the L.A. club scene. We just weren't interested in all the politics involved in trying to get the good time slot at the hot club on the hot night. If you don't conform, you don't play. I think we did two shows the whole time we lived in L.A. But we played for a lot of friends."

The songs on the self-titled debut range from the sprawling boogie-funk of "Soak The Sin" and the harder edges of "Tones Of Home," to the comfy, sunny charm of "No Rain" and "Sleepyhouse." Even when the beat is rock solid, there is a gentleness

to the swirling guitars of Stevens and Thorn, and Hoon's soaring vocals give every track a kind of "playing hooky at the swimming hole" feel. His intriguing lyrics usually work harder at setting a mood than they do at telling a story or sketching an explicit point of view, and that's the way he likes it.

"I get asked a lot what each song is about, but even my idea of the songs changes from time to time and place to place. We're playing these songs every night, and a lot of them start to take on new meanings that don't even match up with the original lyrics sometimes. I think that's the way it should be. I don't like to explain what my songs are about, because I like to have my version and let the listener have his or her version. That keeps it from getting monotonous for all of us."

One theme that Hoon does seem to address in songs such as "Dear Ol' Dad" is the dangers of the conservatism and small-mindedness sometimes found in small towns. Hoon admits that the biggest change in his life was not brought about by the success of his band but by the fact that he expanded his horizons and perspectives by leaving Lafayette. "I love where I'm from, but I think I was slowly becoming the kind of small-minded, prejudiced person that I didn't want to be. I adapted and overcame and became a better person—not by becoming a 'rock star,' but by moving away and opening my mind. The guys in Blind Melon are from different geographic locations, but we all dealt with the same environment, which was communities where it's hard to walk your honest walk. Now I can enjoy my hometown, because I've got it figured out."

Hoon recently got the chance to bring
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"Songwriting is the way I reflect, but it's also like a great-tasting candy—you have to be careful not to eat yourself sick with it."

—Shannon Hoon

◀ 21 Blind Melon

Blind Melon back to Lafayette for a show and says that though it was great to see family and old friends, he also saw some of the behavior that he's happy to have left behind. "Well, people in Indiana like to get drunk and fight, and now that's very disturbing to me," he explains. "When I lived there, yeah, we'd get drunk, and if you couldn't find someone to fight, you'd fight your friends. Pretty pathetic. And going back, I saw that time had stood still. And it's still standing still. But at least I understand it now."

As Hoon and Blind Melon have grown, their music has become an improbable source of fame and fortune. But Hoon says that the most important function music serves in his life is as a tool of therapy. "Songwriting has become a therapeutic artery for me. Music is like this invisible person that's always around for a good discussion. My songs are always about some real emotion I'm feeling, so they become a kind of mental journal and a mental journey. It's been a great feeling to therapeutically bleed myself with music. But I have to be careful. If you force too much into the music, you give yourself a hernia. Songwriting is the way I

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reflect, but it's also like a great-tasting candy—you have to be careful not to eat yourself sick with it."

Critics have fallen over themselves trying to draw comparisons between Blind Melon's music and that of other bands. Jane's Addiction references can show up next to Allman Brothers influences, and Hoon's vocal stylings have even been compared to those of Janis Joplin. Hoon isn't too eager to have his band's music picked apart influence by influence. "If I got up every morning and thought about all the comparisons people are making, I wouldn't get anything done. That's why I try not to read a lot about us. We certainly try to capture the feeling of some of the music that meant a lot to us, but I think everybody does that. Everybody's influenced by something, and if they say they're not, they're lying."

And so, with the blessings of the Bee Girl, Hoon and his bandmates continue their musical travels. The MTV-watchers may just be catching on, but the Blind Melon success story is almost old-fash-

ioned in that the band has won over most of its fans through hard work and great live shows rather than a couple of hit singles. In-store performances in New



York City resulted in complete pandemonium, which the band graciously quelled by playing long enough for hundreds of waiting fans to get a chance to hear them. Extra shows had to be added at the legendary Stone Pony in New Jersey when overflow crowds turned up for a gig. The tour with Neil Young is selling out city after city, and the same is expected with an upcoming Lenny Kravitz tour. Hoon says it is the energy and good will of crowds like these that have kept the band's year-plus roller coaster ride enjoyable.

"Our live shows are looser than when we started out. We make everybody a part of the show. It's not just about the band. It's amazing to me that there's still something that rekindles the flame of excitement that we had when we first did the songs. A lot of that comes from the enjoyment of the people we're playing for. The people at the shows are really important in the life of Blind Melon. On a night you feel that the song is a chore, the crowd rekindles the flame. Then I can only smile a mile wide and enjoy the song again for another night in row."

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