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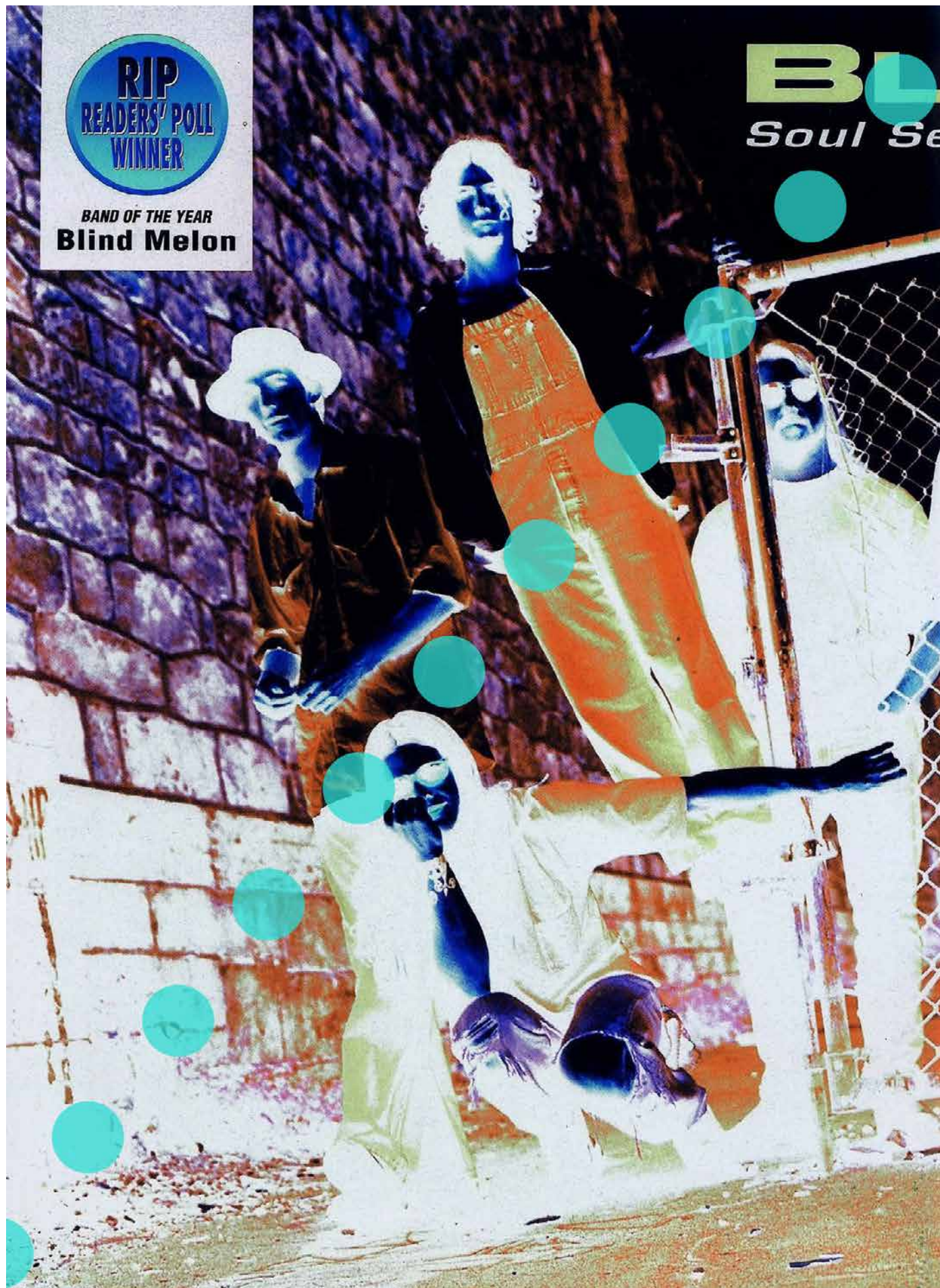
BAND OF THE YEAR:
BLIND MELON





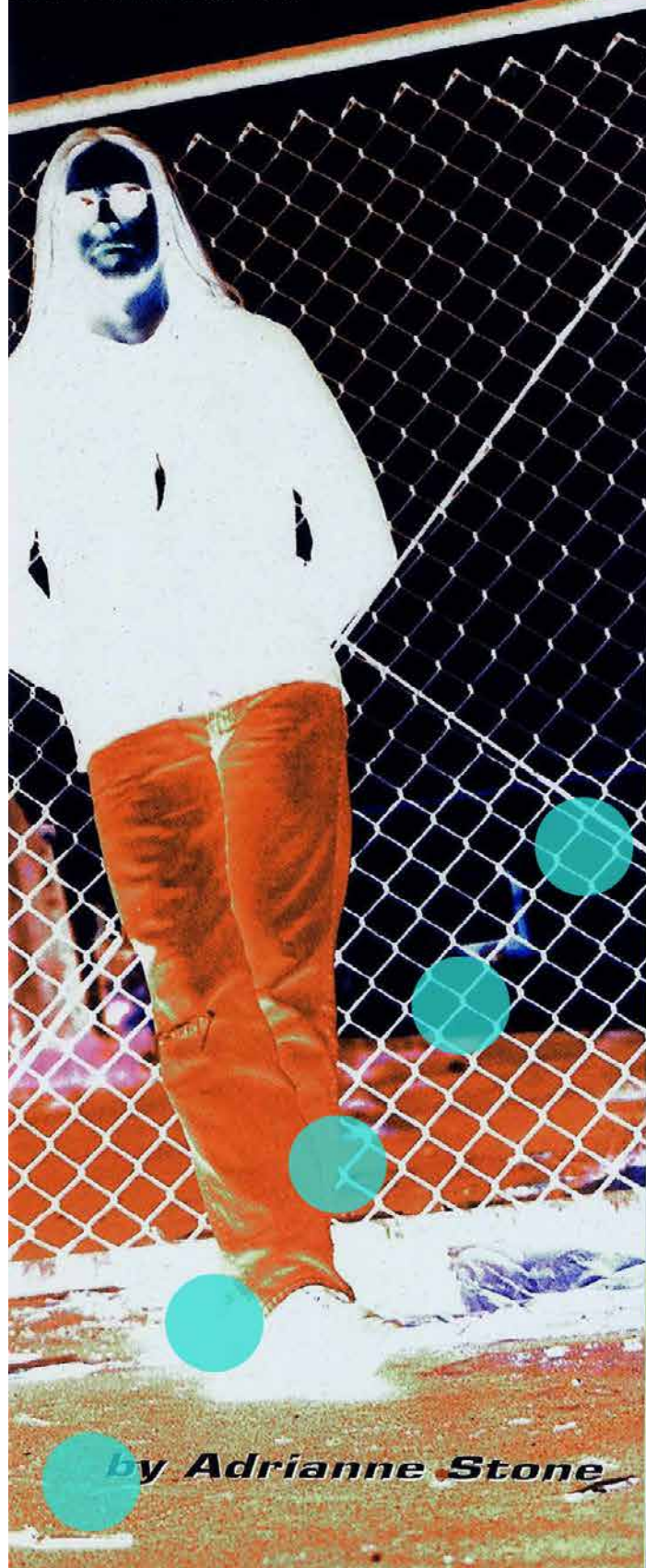
BAND OF THE YEAR
Blind Melon

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BLIND MELON

archers



by **Adrianne Stone**

Shannon Hoon is an angry man. Well, maybe not *angry*. Pissed off is more like it. Actually, he's perturbed. He's calling from Las Vegas—the capital of decadence, desperation and greed—where his band, Blind Melon, did its most recent gig, and he's just lost a bundle playing blackjack.

"I didn't play Vegas," the vocalist laments, "Vegas played me!" Conversely, guitarist Rogers Stevens has mastered the game, and he *won* a bundle (though he still describes Vegas as "embodying the American dream with the rotting carcasses of capitalism.")

Although the finer points of blackjack may have eluded Hoon, he and his bandmates have succeeded in a far more important gamble—achieving success in the music industry. Sales of their self-titled debut album (have reached) to 1.5 million, due in part to the popularity of their single, "No Rain," a tune that features a refreshing blend of rock and folk and a curious melange of various other sounds, including funk and progressive strains. The popularity of the song can in turn be related to the public's enthusiasm for the video, which features a pudgy, tap-dancing "bee girl" who finds true happiness among outcasts like herself (a metaphor for all those who march to the proverbial beat of a different drum). There was a time a few months back when you couldn't turn MTV on for more than 15 minutes without seeing the clip. Shannon would just as soon forget the video, however. He worries that people might be paying more attention to it than to the music accompanying the visuals.

"There was a time when nobody knew what any of our songs were," he says. "Having people just hear the band jam and enjoy it and letting that be all that mattered was kind of a good thing. Now we have a song that everybody knows. A guy can sit in the front row in his Polo shirt and look at us, jaded. Then when he hears that one song, he stands up and claps and looks at me like we're communicating on some level. It's weird. You want people to get it for more than the bee girl. People say, 'That song's a great video.' If people love the song because of the video, then they're just too lazy to get into the song for what the song is."

It's a common gripe among musicians these days: MTV is as much a hindrance as it is a help. Heavy rotation on the network practically guarantees an upswing in ticket and album sales, but now bands are forced to think in visual terms as well as audio.

"I don't like the fact that some people like 'No Rain' only because of the video," Hoon continues. "It needs to be the other way around. If it's not, then don't buy our record."

In spite of Shannon's stance, the band has lensed a second clip, this one for the heartfelt "Tones of Home." Inspired by the bandmembers' small-town upbringings, the tune addresses certain closed-minded attitudes and behaviors they grew up with. Hoon, for example, encountered them in Lafayette, Indiana.

"I love where I come from," he says, "but there's a lot of social classes there that are very discriminatory against others' appearances and ways of life. I've gotten more positive feedback from the stoners in my community than from any of the f!kin' people who stood on their pedestals and pointed their fingers, thinking they were right all the time."

Stevens, too, grew up in a conservative area.

"I grew up in Mississippi, in the country, near a small town," the 26-year-old explains. "Down there, prejudiced attitudes are handed down by parents from generation to generation. That attitude has disgusted me since I was a kid. I was always turned off by it, and that's one of the reasons I left."

Both youths found themselves traveling the well-worn trail to Los Angeles, in search of fellow musicians with a similar feel for the emotions created by music. They were in for a big surprise, however.

"I underwent a massive cultural awakening when I left the South and moved out West," recalls the bookish, introspective Stevens. "I was only 18, fresh out of high school, and had never been to the city. 'Tones of Home' is somewhat autobiographical. Brad [Smith, bassist] wrote the last verse, I wrote the middle verse, and Shannon wrote the first verse. So the song is sort of about our collective view of leaving our repressed, conservative environments and becoming more aware. My verse was about how I viewed Los Angeles when I first got there. I was so disillusioned. I assumed it was gonna be this utopian environment with lots of great musicians playing, all wanting to do different things. There would be good music going on, and it wouldn't be hard to find other musicians with similar ideas. Obviously, you have to wade through a lot of sludge to find that."

Hoon had a similar experience, sleeping on Smith's couch in Culver City ("a pretty bland, industrial part of town") and eventually moving in with a coworker of Stevens', and later Stevens himself. The three musicians hooked up with Dover, Pennsylvania, emigre Christopher Thorn (guitar) and called upon the drumming skills of Mississippian Glen Graham.

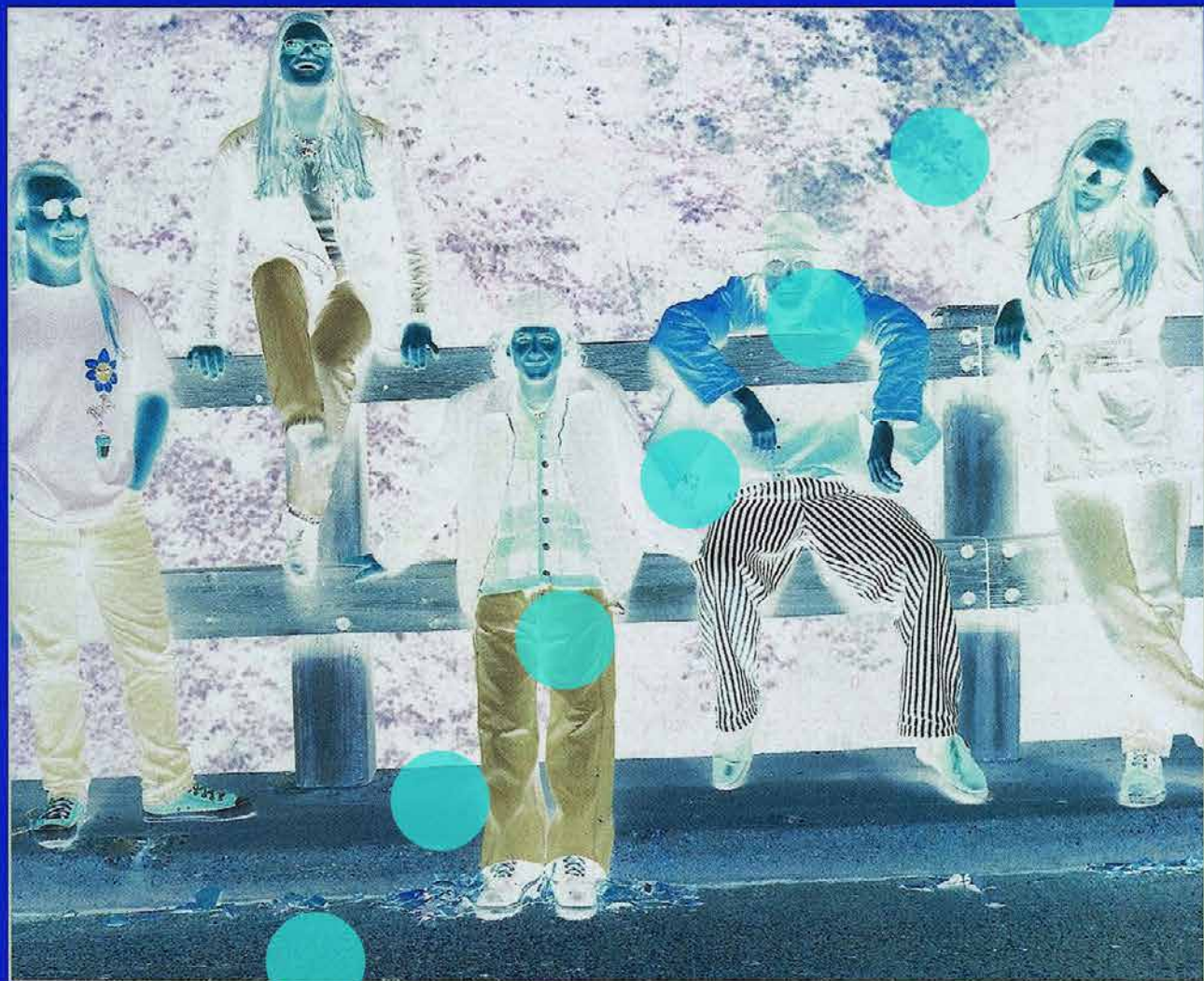
Though their demo was already making the rounds—eventually impressing Capi-

tol Records enough to sign the band—it was Axl Rose who first brought attention to the Melonheads, particularly his Lafayette homeboy Hoon. Shannon has a short fuse on that subject though. When queried about this association, he snaps, "Ask me something that's interesting to the reader. They've read this over and over and over and over. I have more friends than Axl, you know. Are you gonna ask about all my friends?"

Well, no. But, frankly, if Axl hadn't plucked Shannon from relative obscurity to costar in Guns N' Roses' infamous "Don't Cry" video, Hoon might still be tipping cows at midnight back in Bumf!k. Instead, he and his band are touring the world

I know that if Bob Dylan was doing an in-store, I would break my neck to get there and see it. I'd know that he didn't want to play in this store, but he's doing it because there's people who have bought his records and who would love to have a chance to see him play, but they might not be able to afford the \$28,000 ticket for Friday night's show. That's what it's all about. I can never look at our album as a product."

But if one were to analyze Blind Melon as product, what would they find? A five-piece group containing alternative elements, yet one that still allows subtle Southern and funk influences to help drive its songs. Harmonies are generously sprinkled throughout, embellishing the tunes, and, lyrically, the songs are thought-provoking



with the likes of Neil Young, John Mellencamp and, most recently, Lenny Kravitz. They're handling this sudden change in fortune very well, according to Hoon.

"I'm not going to sit back and act like a tortured artist," he says. "By no means. There's a lot of people who do that, but you just have to roll with the punches and separate the hoopla from the music. There's a lot of things you should have considered before you signed on the dotted line."

Like the fact that once you do put your John Hancock on a contract, you've basically agreed to sell a product—a pleasing, wonderful, satisfying product, but one that must sell in order for you to eat. This is, after all, the music business. As performers, Blind Melon spend two hours a day onstage (when they're lucky enough to headline), and the rest of their time is occupied with in-stores, interviews and meetings about videos, album covers, etc.—in other words, things that are less about their music, and more about setting it. Hoon dislikes this end of his career, but recognizes that it's necessary—not for the band, but for the fans.

"That isn't what I do this for," he says. "I have no problem playing songs, but I hate doing an in-store. I hate the vibe of an in-store—it's such a bland environment—but I don't hate the fact that there are some kids who want to see us play, and that's the sole reason we do these things, as much as they're a pain in the ass. I'm a music fan.

and inspiring. Hoon's vocals range from the gentle lullaby lilt of "No Rain" to the aggressive gutsiness of "Paper Scratcher." Stevens and Thörn's bag of guitar tricks includes flamenco (listen to "Dear Ole Dad"), progressive jazz/funk and some serious hard-rock licks, and the rhythm section of Smith and Graham peppers everything with trippy beats and unusual bass-lines. Still, the bandmembers don't think too much of their musical talents, even if their fans do. Stevens, for example, doesn't even remember whether he's done an interview with any of the "technical" magazines.

"This sort of thing is a very fickle part of my life," he says. "I'm not really that interested in it, to be honest with you. I'm thinking about lots of other things. I enjoy playing the guitar, but I don't really care to discuss it at length all the time. I really don't give a shit."

Humility aside, Stevens does admit that the bunch are eager to get to work on their second platter. With *Blind Melon* still going strong, though, their next studio visit has been put on hold.

"I'm way past ready to do the second album," Stevens says. "All of us are. We've got a lot of material, and it's completely different. *Blind Melon* is the first songs we wrote when we got together. We've played 300 shows since then, and the songs I'm writing (continued on page 94)



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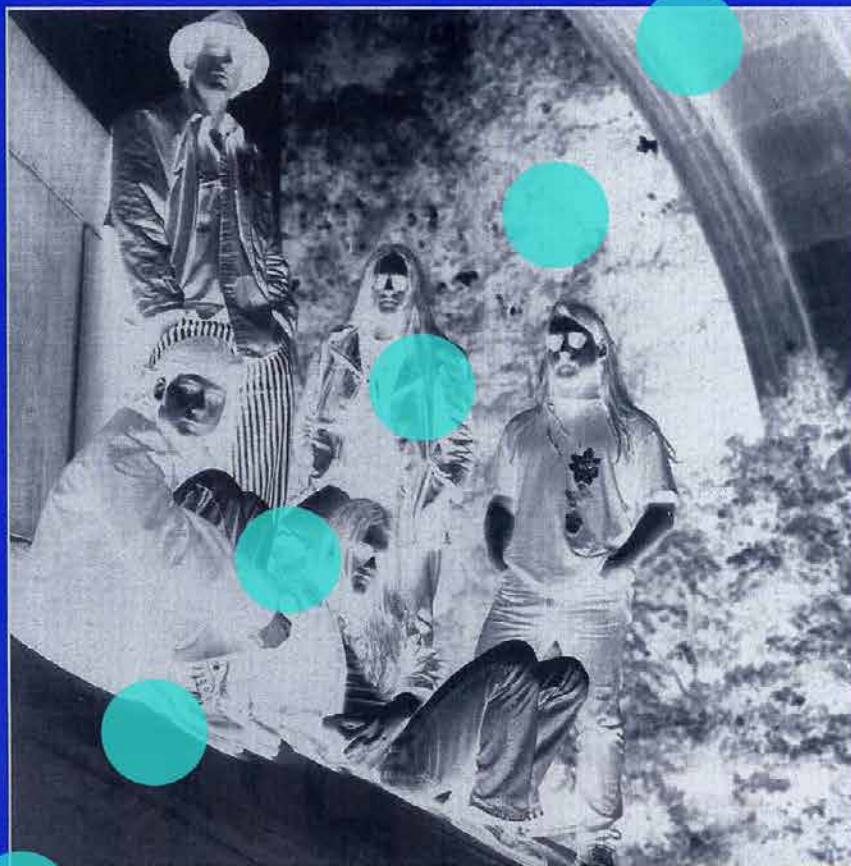
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BLIND MELON

(continued from page 47)

now don't sound anything like those. People are either gonna like the new album, or they're just gonna wonder what the hell happened to us and what drugs we took."

do explode, it's not because people don't want to hear the music; it's just because the energy in the room got a little bit too much for everybody, and we all kind of had a nervous breakdown together."



The ultimate high for Blind Melon, though, is performing live. Moon explains it best: "The best shows I've ever had were shows where the club was so full that there was that element of danger, where you really didn't know whether you were gonna make it to the next song. I mean, there was a lot of energy in some rooms where there was no way security was going to be able to handle what was going to start, and everybody knew that at the same time. When everybody knows that, all that has to happen is that the curtain just needs to be pulled open. On the stages we're playing now, that's a big element that I miss. I liked those shows where you wondered if you were gonna make it to the end. And even if things

People certainly do want to hear the music, as evidenced by the flood of ballots that poured into our offices naming Blind Melon Best Group in our Readers' Poll. The band's unusual combination of volatility and soulfulness has brought them sudden success and millions of fans, and it looks like this is just the beginning. Catch them when they play a show near you, and experience their unique vibe for yourself. If honesty is the best policy, Blind Melon just might be candidates for sainthood. •

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