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ROCK & ROLL

BY JIM DEROGATIS



SHANNON
HOON
1967-1995

BORN IN LAFAYETTE, IND., SHANNON HOON launched his musical career from Los Angeles, but New Orleans was the city where he felt most at home in recent years. "[It's] a city where one's will-power is tested daily," Hoon told the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* newspaper in September.

It was a test Hoon did not pass. Blind Melon were scheduled to perform at the famous Crescent City nightclub Tipitina's on Saturday, Oct. 21. But when the soundman climbed into a tour bus parked on St. Charles Avenue to wake Hoon for an afternoon sound check, he found the singer dead of an apparent drug overdose. Hoon was 28.

"I'm walking around New Orleans in nothing but complete shock," says Blind Melon guitarist Rogers Stevens the following Monday. "This city got him every time — the minute he got here. It got him this time."

"He didn't want to die," Stevens continues. "He was always sticking one toe into the gutter, and it just caught up with him this time. The guy was definitely excessive in everything. He was excessive in his love for people and excessive in his violent tendencies and excessive in the good things he did and excessive in all areas of his life. In the five years that we were best friends, there was never a day that went by that he didn't do something that I thought was completely extraordinary."

Hoon was an addict who had been through two month-long rehab programs, in May 1994 and again in June 1995. When Blind Melon started their fall tour, the band employed a watchdog to keep Hoon away from drugs, according to the group's manager, Chris Jones. But that person was sent packing after a week on the road. The New Orleans police say no drug paraphernalia were found near the body, but Jones called the death an overdose without specifying the drug (it's rumored to be heroin).

"I've spent an enormous amount of time trying to get him sober and working with him and other people, trying to get him into rehab," Jones says. "I was behind him on everything he wanted to do, and he had the right intentions. He really cared and loved his little baby daughter, and that inspired him the second time he went into rehab to get straight and to try to accept the role of father." (Daughter Nico Blue was born to Hoon and Lisa Crouse, Hoon's girlfriend of 10 years, in July.)

As a hyperactive child growing up in the Midwest, Hoon initially channeled his energy into sports. But as in the classic rock & roll story, he rebelled as a teenager and turned to music. "By the time I



The gig that never happened: A flier for Blind Melon's show at Tipitina's. Previous page: Hoon (foreground) with members of Blind Melon in 1993.

was 17, I freaked out because I didn't have an identity of my own," Hoon told *ROLLING STONE* in 1993. "I realized I'd wasted years trying to be what my parents wanted me to be." He began hanging out with the stoners, and he started to sing: "Singing made me feel good, and finally I was around people who thought it was all right to sing."

In March 1990, Hoon left Lafayette for Los Angeles on a Greyhound bus. He linked up with guitarist Stevens and bassist Brad Smith, and they bonded over a mutual hatred of Los Angeles' prevailing glam-rock scene. They called their band Blind Melon and signed with Capitol in 1991 on the strength of a four-song demo.

Recording their first album was a labored process, though, as they struggled to write enough songs to fill out the disc. Hoon also took time out to appear in Guns n' Roses' video for "Don't Cry" at the invitation of Axl Rose, a pal from Indiana. (Rose refused to comment for this story.) The resulting publicity prompted Capitol to apply more pressure on Blind Melon for their debut, but when it was finally released in September 1992, sales were sluggish.

Then came the Bee Girl. Sam Bayer,

that favored more drawn-out jams onstage, echoing classic-rock influences from Pink Floyd to the Allman Brothers Band. This side of Blind Melon came further to the fore on their second album, *Soup*, released in mid-August of this year; the disc was harshly criticized and a commercial disappointment. "[Hoon] and I grew close during the making of the record," producer Andy Wallace says. "There's no denying that he liked to party, but it was not a major issue in the recording. Drug use was not an obstacle."

"I was aware of his drug use," says Tim Devine, vice president of A&R at Capitol. "[His death] surprised me because I had spoken to him two days prior. Although he was depressed about the record falling off the chart, we talked about hanging in there, staying on the road and that this was a long process. He seemed OK and ready to go for it."

Friends and band mates describe Hoon as a hypersensitive person who was often hurt by things that were written about him. He was quick-tempered and subject to intense mood swings, and rock stardom had a bad effect on his personality. "I saw him at Woodstock, and I'd just gotten married, and I was like 'Oh, wow, there's my good old friend Shannon,'" says former MTV VJ Riki Rachtman, a close friend from the early days in Los Angeles. "He just looked at me and was glazed and just walked right by. I was pissed. I thought, 'He's got the full rock-star thing going. He's fucked up out of his head.'"

Longtime friends of Hoon's say they barely recognized him in recent months. "Shannon and I were best friends; we lived together," says Howy Boschan, a Los Angeles musician who was an early member of the band and co-wrote "Tones of Home." (He left after a car accident injured him in 1991.) "And the last time I talked to Shannon over the phone, I called him a fucking asshole, sellout fucking poseur. He called about 'Tones of Home' royalties and was threatening me with attorneys. It just made me feel like crying because he wasn't the same person."

Hoon is the latest casualty on the sad list of alternative rockers struggling with drugs. Others who have had recent, well-publicized problems include Layne Staley of Alice in Chains, Scott Weiland of Stone Temple Pilots and Al Jourgensen of Ministry. "When I heard the news about Shannon," says Ed Kowalczyk of Live, who performed with Blind Melon on MTV's *120 Minutes* tour in 1992, "my first thought was, 'Here we go again, the big H is back. Would somebody please tell me what the fuck is so great about this drug?'"

As with every overdose, the saddest part is the loved ones who are left behind to grieve. "I feel sorry for that little girl," Stevens says. "Some day I'll be telling her what her daddy was like."

Additional reporting by JON WIEDERHORN, HEIDI SIEGMUND CUDAH and MATT HENDRICKSON.