

A conversation with Shannon Hoon of Blind Melon
February 26, 1993

By Ric Damm
Feature Editor
of the Royal Purple

Blind Melon played a small show on Friday, Feb. 26, at Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wis. Before the soundcheck I had an opportunity to talk with lead singer Shannon Hoon.

You may remember Hoon from the Guns 'n' Roses video for "Don't Cry." Shannon was the guy singing and frolicking with Axl Rose. He comes off as a shy and quiet individual, but when he starts talking, he blooms into a lively conversationalist who will talk your ear off. What follows is my interview with Hoon.

I know you've probably been asked this a million times, so let me get it out of the way. What was the experience with Guns n' Roses like?

It was an experience I find myself having to explain many times. It was different. Everything that surrounds them is a lot bigger than what I'm accustomed to. It's irrelevant to what Blind Melon is about.

A lot of people, obviously had heard of Guns n' Roses before they heard of Blind Melon. A lot of people tried to find the common bond as far as music between the bands, but there's not much. I'm just friends with Axl and I got to sing a song with him and it was heavily exploited by the media.

Did you know Axl from Indiana?

Yeah, we're from the same hometown. It was cool. I learned a lot about how snide a lot of the people can be as far as the way they were treating us as a band after something I did with Guns n' Roses. It was pretty overwhelming to see how a lot of the people in the business suddenly wanted to accept our band—which is not the reason I wanted to do it.

Kim Neely from Rolling Stone compared your voice to that of the late Janis Joplin. Do you feel that is a valid comparison?

I'm flattered.

I take that as a compliment. I like a lot of the '60s and '70s bands. I've been turned on to a lot of the early bands from the guys in this band. Everybody listens to different kinds of music. One of the common bonds between each one of us is the music we listen to, which is a lot of the music from that era. She's definitely a part of it. Janis Joplin was great. I thought what she did make a big impact on a lot of people who do music today, including myself.

Each of the guys in the band, including yourself, came from small towns. You're from Lafayette. Rogers, Brad and Glen are from West Point, Mississippi. Christopher is from Dover, Pennsylvania. Yet you all met up in L.A. But then, when it came time to record the album, you left the big city and settled in Durham, North Carolina. Did the small town atmosphere have a large impact on the music?

Yeah. We all left in the late '80s from our Smalltown, U.S.A., and moved out west. When we all met it was something we weren't all aware of; that we were all from, not geographically the same place, but as far as people and communities it was pretty much the same.

When we were doing the writing, we weren't playing the scene out there. We were just rehearsing and playing in a rehearsal hall. There are a lot of politics involved in playing the scene, like conforming to what was going on. If you didn't have a good relation with the club owner, you wouldn't get a gig at his club. It was something that we didn't feel like messing with. So we were pretty satisfied with staying behind and writing and just making music for ourselves rather than making it for a club owner.

When we finally signed with Capitol, they gave us the creative control that we wanted. Then I did the Guns thing. Then a bunch of hype came out about the band for the wrong reasons. I didn't want people to like us because they liked Guns 'n' Roses. So we immediately moved from L.A. to Durham, getting back to your question, to get away from all the hype and to find a comfortable setting.

Durham was in the middle of nowhere. We ended up getting management before we left and stayed in contact with them. We got a 5-bedroom house. We all lived in it together. It was kind of like a commune setting. A couple of the guys girlfriends moved in with us. It was cool. We all stayed there all of the time. We never really left. We set our equipment up in the living room and we started writing again.

A lot of friendships were built stronger in the band. Because we were thrown into the game so quick, it was the smartest move we made as far as the longevity of the band. I realized then, that I was in a band with four other guys

that I didn't mind spending the next twenty years of my life with making music, if it was to last that long. That was the strength behind what keeps us going.

You've described making music as a "mental recess." Could you explain what you mean by that?

Being able to escape. Therapy. Therapeutically bleeding yourself through music. Closing your eyes and painting a picture for yourself. It's the only way to release a lot of frustrations or to create a mood through each song. Something like that.

If you ask me twenty-five minutes after this interview I'll probably tell you something different. Right now, sitting here, that's what I think.

The album was recorded almost completely as a live album with minimal overdubs or retakes. Was that the original plan or did time restrictions play any part in the decision?

Actually, doing things in a comfortable air is what has always been important to us.

When we first signed with Capitol, we didn't want to make our record right away. We wanted to tour and build a grass roots following before we had a record out. We didn't want to sign with Capitol, have them mass-produce all these ads about this band Blind Melon before people had a chance to see it for themselves.

The best bands that I've encountered were bands that I ran into when I went out to a club and they just happened to be playing. Then I happened to hear about them later. To ask the label to do that, in this day and age, it's hard to get them to wait for the band that they just signed to make a record.

We were fortunate enough to have a lot of people at the label who supported the way we wanted to go about doing things. We definitely took a backwards approach. We've never been pressured for time and we've never been pressured for output. I don't think that most of the people that we work with would think of putting that kind of pressure on us. It's not the way your most sincere output will come forth. It's subliminal when you're doing it under pressure, rather than having all your focus on making a good song.

Speaking of touring, you guys toured with Soundgarden. Is that how you met with producer Rick Parasher, through Chris Cornell?

Actually, when it came time to make the record we were still living in Durham. We had went on the tour with Soundgarden and all that. We were looking for someone who was new and hungry. We didn't want some deaf producer who's been doing it for twenty years. Because a lot of producers who have been doing it for a long time, their ears are shot. Their minds are blown.

Rick was a guy who wasn't a big rock 'n' roll fan. He had a good ear for making music sound good. We had done all the arranging ourselves. We needed, as Brad would say, "a quality control guy" who could sit back from outside of the fire and go, "Okay, that's a wrap. Let's call it a day." Rick's good at recognizing when we're beating something in the ground or beating a dead horse.

We had a list of five guys that we would be interested in talking with. Rick had just gotten done with the Temple of the Dog record. So we called Rick and he flew down to North Carolina. We didn't even talk about business at all. We wanted to just hang with him because it's important to us to be friends with the people that we work with.

I don't want to sit with someone and subject myself to them for any period of time if I can't think that we're going to get along outside of this business. I wouldn't want to talk to you if I didn't think that aside from doing an interview I couldn't walk down the hall and just chat with you off the record.

Rick was someone that when he came down we saw that we could hang outside the studio. It makes everything more comfortable. There are so many people who will, for example, dislike me because they dislike Axl Rose. Just out of common respect for someone, regardless of who it is, I'm not going to sit and bag on someone just because they associate with someone else I may not particularly like. It annoys me being subjected to those kind of people. I don't think I'm wrong for feeling that way.

There are a lot of people in the business who don't have that mentality. All they are is figures and "What's going to make it sell?" Rick was someone we could hang with which was important especially when you're trying to make a record.

When the record was done we were like, "Wow!" We looked down the song list and said, "Wow! It's done."

Everything was live. The guys did all the music and I sang, sometimes in a booth. Some of the things we would keep. Some of them we wouldn't. There were parts that we would keep and parts that we wouldn't. The vocals were the only things that were done later, but the music—everything was live. There were minimal overdubs.

This is how I feel, and a lot of musicians aren't going to feel the same way, but as far as us as a band, when you go in and you do the drums and the bass player comes in and listens to the drums on headphones to lay down the bass, you're missing an invisible sound.

You can tell when a band is really jelling. They're locked in and they're feeding off each other. That feed, that mental telepathy, comes through on tape. You can't put your finger on it. You can't turn it up to hear it, but it's there.

We get compared to a lot of '60s and '70s bands, obviously some of the guys are influenced by bands from that era, but that comparison also stems from the way we record. That's the way people used to record. It's rough. The Black Crowes do that too.

You do it live. Because if you can't do it live, then what the hell are you doing it for. For us, as far as recording, that's the way we like to do it. It makes it more real, rather than using a lot of modern technology to make your song.

The music seems to have more of a life of its own that way too.

Yeah. It's funny, because there are so many things. We could make a song and track every instrument separately and then make a song and do it live. You can listen to both of them and you can hear the difference, but you can't lay your finger on what it is. If you A/B a live song to a split track song you would hear the difference.

Getting back to the '60s and '70s comparisons, what were some of your major influences?

I liked Carole King. My mother was a big Carole King fan. It creates happy *deja vu*. A lot of my favorite influences are not because I like the songs, but more so because I remember things. A lot of what I like about Carole King is not so much the song itself, but what it makes me remember.

I have my own interpretation of the song, like maybe my mother spring cleaning. It is good in creating some mood or enhancing a mood. I mean to list my influences; how many different moods have you been in? There's are many.

I like Sid Barrett, one of the founding members of Pink Floyd. I could go on and on, but it'd be pointless. My influences kind of change by the week, too.

If you could meet one person in the entire history of mankind, who would it be?

That's a hard question. One person? I mean five minutes from now it could change.

How about five?

I would have liked to have met John Lennon. I'd like to meet Sid Barrett. Charles Manson, probably.

This is the kind of question where after we wrap this up and you're gone I'm gonna sit here and it's gonna hit me and I'm gonna chase you down. But right now, I don't know. That's a good question. But those are two people who I'd definitely like to just sit down and have a chat with just to find out what's rolling around in there heads.

I'd like to talk with anybody who is a believer, opposed to what the masses think, not a rebel, but anybody who just believes in what they do. It might be a non-famous person. People who live life with conviction are people that I really like, people that I admire more so than a lot of other people. There are so many people I'd like to meet.

Like with Axl, a lot of people dislike the guy, but why? Do they really know him? Do they really know what he has to deal with on a daily basis? And if they did know, maybe they would understand why he might be pissed off all the time or why a lot of the things happen. That's why I don't feel like the people who do a lot of the writing about bands are the proper mediator between the artist and the people who want to support this person or the band that this person is in. It seems like all the wrong people are at all the biggest, mass-produced magazines.

Like that person I was telling you about earlier, the one who said he didn't like me because he didn't like Axl, was someone who is at a large magazine. It's a shame that someone like that person is the mediator between the artist and the public.

I would rather talk to people one-on-one. I love conversation. To me, people understand where you're coming from in a conversation. The bigger everything gets, the bigger problems you encounter. The more you have, the more you have to lose. I'm a true believer in that.

That's where working with Guns 'n' Roses, you can foresee what things could possibly be or what you're going to have to deal with. It makes you think, "I just want to tread water, to be able to make enough money to make the next record." It's a definite challenge.

I just try to keep the beliefs that I've had all my life and apply them to what I might encounter. I want to be able to sit back and laugh when things start to get to serious. It's really easy to not take it seriously and everything that surround doing this.

We're serious about making good music as a band. I've never gotten in a band because I wanted to do an interview five times a day. I've never gotten in a band because I wanted to feel like I'm standing on a soapbox telling people how to live. But it's the position you're put in. Like doing this. Whatever you write, people are going to read it and think one way or another. I always think that someone thinks I'm standing up before the blackboard saying, "And rule No. 2 about how to live your life should be..."

I stagger my way through every day feeling my way on how to make it to the end of the day just like everybody else. I'm not any different than anybody else, never thought I am. I'm just trying to keep the beliefs that I've been handed from my parents along with the things that I've always kept sacred and try to apply them to my life. It's a simple theory.

Would you much rather play a small club like this than a big stadium?

Yeah. We have done the big shows, and it's so funny to me, because I like being within an arms-reach away from the people. I believe in everybody as one. As a band we need the crowd just as much as the crowd needs the

music to get off on.

Sure, I have fun playing with the rest of the guys. We have fun as a band playing and jamming. It just makes everything a little brighter when you have a warm group of people.

If they're looking for things that are wrong with the way we do things, they're gonna find them. They're there. They're all over the place. I'm not the type of person who wants to sit and try to find everything that's wrong. The less monitors you have, the less monitors that go bad.

We did some shows with Ozzy and Alice in Chains and the roadies were asking, "Which monitor do you need turned up?" There's 40 monitors here! As opposed to this type of situation there's only maybe eight. I was just like, "They're over your head. They're right behind your ass. They're in front of you. I don't know. I don't know which one I need turned up."

It just seems like when you're 20 feet up and 30 feet back that there's a wall there. There's a lot of intimacy lost in 10 feet. It makes you feel like you're different. With that big gap of security barricades and security guards, it makes you feel that you are different. It's hard when you feel you're not, when you know you're not and you want to be down with everybody rather than sit up here like everybody is at a movie. Everything is so unreal then.

The interaction is what I like most about the club thing and playing the small places. Everything is so diverse on our tours because we go out for six weeks on a big tour, and as soon as it's done, we'll jump right back into the club thing. Rather than establishing yourself as just touring in a big circuit, we mix it up.

You might find us in a dive bar one week playing to 250 people, and then the next week you may see us playing in an arena somewhere. It's pretty funny, but it keeps it interesting, as long as there's good conversation with people who are at the show.

We're not the big party band who likes to surround itself with wild women after the show. We're not about that. One thing we are about is being able to meet a lot of different people from a lot of different communities, a lot of areas from around the nation or parts of the world to get a feel with what they have to deal with.

Unlike "Headline News" it helps me understand why in this part of the country these people may feel this way. Even though sitting in my chair back in Indiana, if I had never been to that part of the country, I would think, "That's wrong for them to feel like that." Whereas planting your feet and being able to sit down and have even 10 minutes of conversation with someone from a certain community or certain city you can get a feel from where their point of view might have come. It helps you understand a little more. That's the mental partying that I get off on. It helps you grow a little bit.