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Come On Feel The Melonheads

1993 has been the year of the Long-haired American Slacker. Roll over Nirvana, stop hogging the duvet Pearl Jam... Blind Melon want to get in

IT'S FRIDAY EVENING at the Lakefront Arena in New Orleans. As Lenny Kravitz prepares for another night of love, peace and '60s pastiche, he can hear the roar which greets the arrival onstage of the slightly crumpled stub-end that bears that most unlikely of names, Blind Melon.

A quintet of hairy Southern state slackers, the humble Melons have shifted a cool million copies of their debut album in the short period of time that it's taken MTV to put the video for their single, 'No Rain', on heavy rotation.

Alongside Smashing Pumpkins, Stone Temple Pilots and the Spin Doctors, whom they detest—"They smile too much for us"—Blind Melon are one of the major American success stories of 1993.

Tonight is their 18th gig in support of Lenny Kravitz and his Universal Love tour, and while the Lenny die-hards in the audience are easy to spot—they're the tall girls in flares with football-players on their arms—everyone else seems to be a Melon Head. They pack the standing-only concrete floor in front of the stage, in their yellow and green Blind Melon bobble-hats, making human pyramids and winding up the security guards.

Backstage, Blind Melon's singer, Shannon Hoon, has turned out every light in the vast dressing room, bar one—an old-fashioned standard lamp with its pleated shade still covered in the shop's cellophane.



Georgia Graham—immortalised at the age of five... or, five



Barefoot, his filthy toes the colour of old potatoes, he pads around, forking Jell-O and peanut butter into lumps of bread. His woolly hat is pulled down tight to his ears and two vast tattoos glow on his left arm.

Hoon is from Lafayette, Indiana—the same hometown as Mr W And Rose—and his friendship with the singer, kindled just before Blind Melon began work on their first album, led to him singing on Guns N'Roses' 'Don't Cry', appearing in the video and whipping up a frenzy of publicity that apparently threatened to overshadow his own group's efforts.

"It was just a couple of friends getting together to sing a song," shrugs Hoon indifferently. "As far as the big deal that was made out of it, that was your fault not mine."

Twenty-five-year-old Hoon, like fellow Melons Glen Graham, Brad Smith, Rogers Stevens and Christopher Thorn, turned his back on small-town life at the end of his teens to try his luck in Los Angeles. Smith and Stevens had gone there, ostensibly, because the meat-packing company where they worked in Westpoint, Mississippi (population 8,000) had promised them a better-paid job in California. But after struggling in local Westpoint hands, they'd been looking for an excuse for years.

"There was no scene there at all," laughs Rogers. "We were the only people there who grew hair past the bottom of our ears."

"We were the black sheep of the community," adds Melon bassist Brad.

Chris Thorn went because he simply loathed his hometown in Pennsylvania; Hoon because he realised Lafayette was turning him into a belligerent and racist redneck.

"I was a prick till I was 17," says Hoon. "Where I come from... I love it, but you were subliminally scarred being raised in that type of community. I was raised to be almost a little bit shaky about people who came from a different walk of life than I did. I don't think I was prejudiced, but I could have become that way. I suddenly realised I'd spent 17 years not getting on with anyone at all. Your parents didn't even have anything to do with it. It was just the air about the place."

Blind Melon itself was the term Brad Smith's father gave to the hippies who used to live in a commune along his street. And from the album's arresting cover (a small girl—drummer Glen Graham's sister Georgia, when she was five—reluctantly shoe-horned into a home-made "bee" costume for her dance class), through tracks like 'Dear Ol Dad', 'Tones Of Home' and 'Change', Blind Melon try to make sense of a tight, moralistic upbringing.

MUSICALLY, THE GHOSTS of everyone from The Allman Brothers to Led Zeppelin, Guns N'Roses and Janis Joplin raise their heads amid Blind Melon's wobble of instrumentation and Hoon's troubled, spiralling vocals.

"We're influenced by all these bands that go on ridiculously long," explains guitarist Rogers Stevens. "But, at the same time, we're all hugely interested in The Beatles. There are some pretty blatant Beatles rip-offs on our album..."

Live, tonight, those elements bob around in the mix while Hoon vibrates with a fury virtually unheard on the album, rattling out the paranoid refrain of 'I Wonder'—"*I'm watching everything I do, and they're watching everything I say*"—in the machine-gun falsetto style once favoured by Robert Plant. At the climax to 'Dear Ol Dad', he lifts the microphone stand with both hands, then plants it down with impressive finality. Something, it seems, has been laid to rest.

After the gig, the "Bee Girl", Georgia Graham, now 23, talks about how her mom and dad think of the boys as "their children", have pictures of the band on their refrigerator and "frame everything Glen's ever done". She's been on TV herself now, too, since the album lodged itself in the US Top Ten, and posed for the local college magazine holding the bee costume.

"Oh sure, I've still got it," she says. "My mom keeps everything."

Along the corridor, in the dim light of the standard lamp, Brad is talking about *Slackers*, the cult American film which charted the lifestyles of the so-called grunge generation, and reckons The Melons are more than happy to be a late, borderline addition to the cause.

"We basically did what we wanted to do—which was totally far-fetched as far as earning a living or being successful goes. And we were! I don't know if it was a stroke of luck because we told the truth. But we're slackers. Lucky slackers. Slackers who got away with it..."

By Martin Townsend
Pics Ian Dickson

