

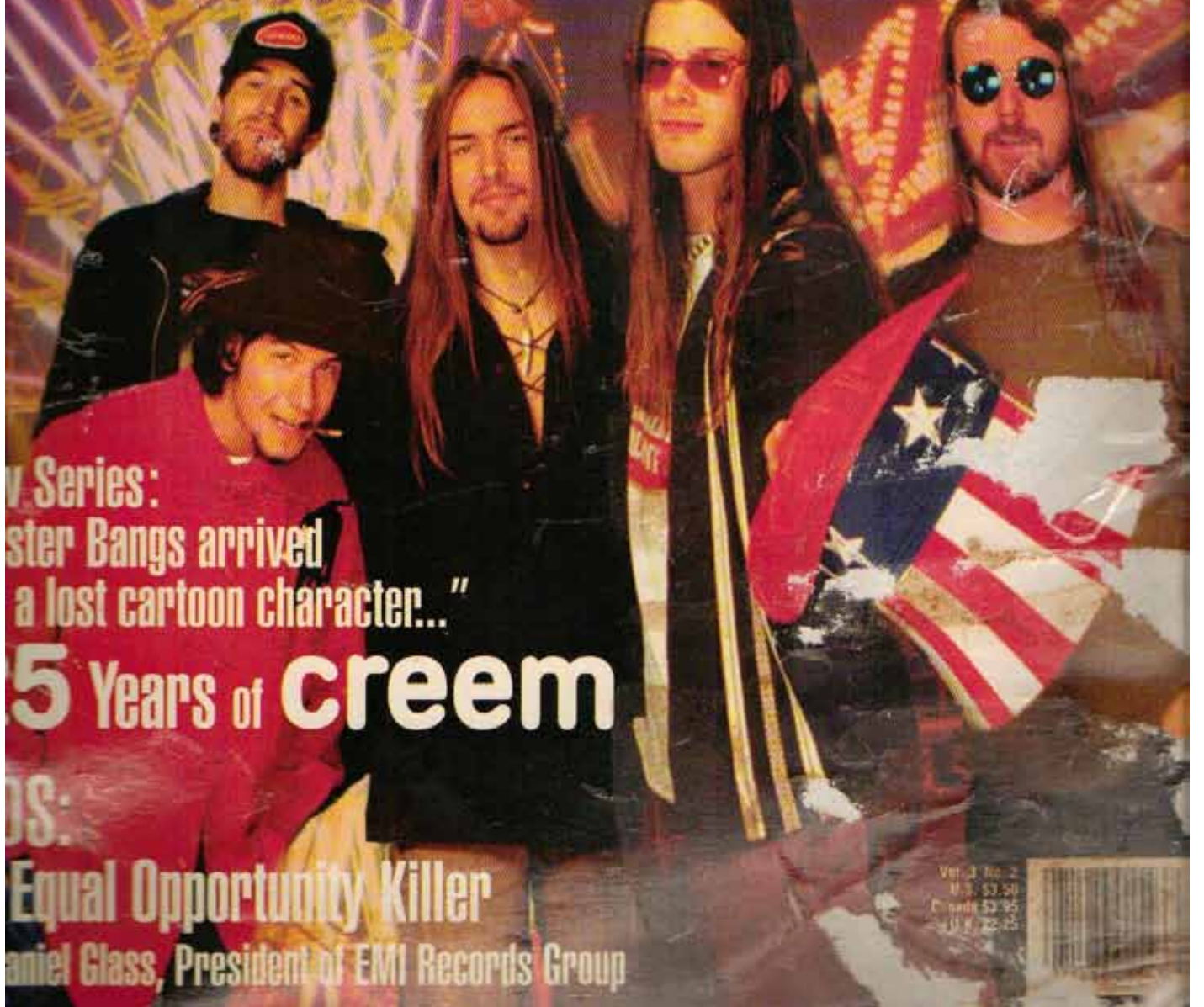
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Robert Hunter



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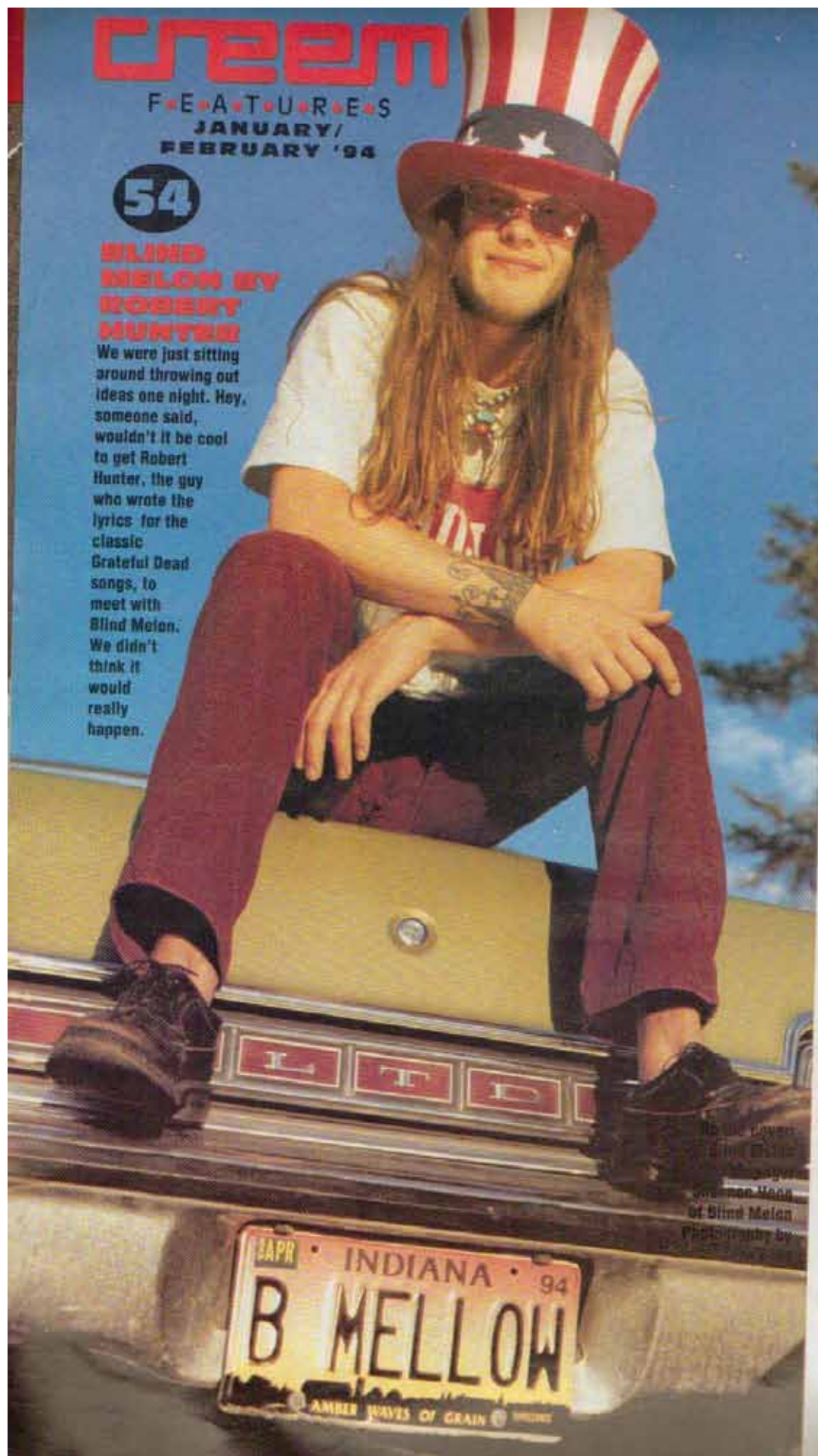
CREEM

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FEBRUARY '94

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BLIND MELON BY ROBERT HUNTER

We were just sitting around throwing out ideas one night. Hey, someone said, wouldn't it be cool to get Robert Hunter, the guy who wrote the lyrics for the classic Dead songs, to meet with Blind Melon. We didn't think it would really happen.



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*Robert Hunter, principal lyricist for The Grateful Dead, has four albums available on Rykodisc, including the recent *Sentinel*, a spoken-word recording that is also available in book form (Penguin Poets Series). His collection of lyrics, *A Box of Rain*, was recently revised and reprinted.*

by Robert Hunter

Blind Melon

came over to my house the other day to rap. Eventually I turned on the tape recorder (in mid-conversation) and got serious.

CHRISTOPHER THORN: It's kind of ironic that a dog named Fathead died of a brain hemorrhage...

ROBERT HUNTER: And you say Glen's dog got thrown off—was it the Bigbe Bridge in Mississippi?

GLEN GRAHAM: Right. Tom Bigbe Bridge...part of the Tennessee Tom Bigbe Waterway.

ROBERT: You've been doing openers. Is it getting to the point where the crowds are coming to see you?

GLEN: A lot of them. This is the first tour where the place is full *before* we get off stage.

ROBERT: The change has come for you guys. Are you feeling like taking more control of your own direction now?

ROGERS STEVENS: We've always tried, in our own naive way, to maintain as much control as possible. The company doesn't tell us what to do about our music or artwork. The only thing we can't really control is the way we're perceived and promoted to the public.

**B&W Photography by John Eder
Color Photography by Maureen Hunter**

SHANNON HOON: Like having them really overkill things in ads about the record. Now if we could control that, that would be something.

ROBERT: I went down to Burbank, when *Workingman's Dead* came out, and told them: 'Here's what we want on the new poster: NEW DEAD. HERE NDW. A picture of the album and that's it. No more bullshit.'

ROGERS: We have our ups and downs with the company, but there've been some good people involved. Like Domenique [Leopanna, *Capitol Records* publicist]—or [former head of *Capitol Records*] Hale Milgrim.

SHANNON: Hale gave us our big break and was always there for us, like if we needed money or anything.

ROBERT: He says you're about the nicest group of guys he's ever worked with.

SHANNON: Well, we love him too. It was a surprise when they replaced him.

ROBERT: Record company relationships eventually become less of a guiding force and more of a consultation thing. As I understand it, you're getting anxious to get into the studio again.

ROGERS: We're actually touring now of our own free will. If we really wanted to stop, we'd sit down with management and discuss it and do just that. We want to do a tour after Christmas and gain our own freedom...that's our plan.

ROBERT: If you've hit your pace and feel stable about it—as long as everybody's happy and nobody feels like they're going crazy.

BRAD SMITH: Too late! [chuckles of agreement.]

CHRISTOPHER: We've hit that and gone past it and hit it again.

ROGERS: I feel really good about it for awhile, then I flip out, then I regain my sanity and then, you know, we get back

out there. We feel pretty constrained every now and then. And we do want to get back in the studio as much as possible. But that's the only question we have. Things couldn't really be better. I mean, what can you do?

BRAD: Let's tour!

ROBERT: In the '60s it was almost automatic to take an adversary relationship to the record company.

BRAD: We like to manipulate the system to our advantage as best we can. Of course we're

ROBERT: For musicians who can really play, there's nothing more spontaneous than the full band playing in the studio with good instrumental separation. The Dead spent too many years trying to put records together piecemeal. For *In the Dark*, we hired a hall and just did it live, with reasonable separation, and got the best qualities of stage and studio.

ROGERS: Next time we'll do the basic tracking live, but we've been trying to get ahold of this guy who did the last Beastie Boys record, which has

BRAD: We want dramatically different production and sounds on each song. Our current record has a lot of different songs, but the production is basically the same throughout.

ROBERT: It has a textural unity. If you mix and match too many miscellaneous production values, you can easily end up with just another *studio album*. One of the strengths of this album is that it comes across live, but has the studio separation.

ROGERS: We want to transform ourselves on each album

recording. Since then we've done 250 shows. We've got small amps set up in the dressing room and work on new stuff when it's not too busy. I think what we're doing now sounds a lot different.

ROBERT: With that much going under your belt, you probably don't even have to think about being different.

ROGERS: We never really put too much thought into what we're doing at the beginning. We get inspired and set up ideas—the thought goes into arrangement, how one idea can best flow into the next. That's what takes the time.

ROBERT: One of the things that tickled me on your album was the use of mandolin. By the way, Christopher, why do you play that funky old Neapolitan? Do you have some particular affection for that mandolin as opposed to a Gibson?

CHRISTOPHER: Uh...well—I can't afford a Gibson.

ROBERT: I've had this ancient Gibson A-40 for some time and I don't play it a lot... [hands Christopher the instrument.]

GLEN: Oh my goodness!

CHRISTOPHER: So what are you saying?

ROBERT: This mandolin wants to be a Melon, man.

CHRISTOPHER: I'm blown away! [to Shannon] You thought you were cool when you got Neil Young's guitar!

ROBERT: Here's a David Grisman flatpick to go with it.

SHANNON: Can I have your dog?

ROBERT: Yes! Yes! The puppy farm won't take her back.

BRAD: I'd like that microphone!

CHRISTOPHER: [picking away] I can't thank you enough. The only reason I wasn't playing a Gibson was 'cause I couldn't afford it.

SHANNON: It sounds great in this room.



Robert and the Melons: "People in rock 'n' roll feel looser with one another because we don't have to speak in full sentences."

forging ahead, not really knowing what we're doing, but putting our foot down where it really needs to be put down. You could get to start enjoying that!

ROBERT: That's the brake... that's the brake... oh yeah, and that's the accelerator! You guys did the tunes on your record more or less live, right?

ROGERS: Yeah. We had the guitar amps turned up really loud out in another room and we all played in the room, with the drums in headphones, so a lot of the music and the vocals are done live and we just go back and fix up the stuff that's wrong and put on minimal overdubs. Next time we'll treat it more as a studio than as a live environment.

a lot of really amazing sounds on it. He goes for radical sounds as opposed to standard drum and guitar. Weird vocal effects and stuff.

BRAD: It's all reel natural though.

ROGERS: Yeah, it doesn't sound like bullshit production.

SHANNON: There's some really vintage sounds on that record.

ROGERS: I don't think we'll ever be like a studio band where they go in and do bass and drums for a week. There's always a certain live element that's gonna be there—we're just looking for different kinds of spices and effects to put on it. But the live element will always be there.

to keep it interesting for everybody involved.

BRAD: I think we have transformed, in a way. Our playing has gotten a lot better, pulling from a wider range of influences. You can take one band and do the same thing into the dirt but we want to be diverse and able to expand. There's a lot of directions you can go and we don't intend to get stuck in just one. We've all progressed as musicians since the album was done a year ago. We've been on the road a long time.

ROGERS: We only played about 15 shows together before we went in and recorded the first half of our record, then we went out on tour and did about 25 shows during the second half of

BRAD: It must be nice to just sit here and look out your window and play your piano...

ROBERT: I watch my fingers when I play—if I look up, I miss the notes.

CHRISTOPHER: God, this man is beautiful. I'm almost afraid to touch it.

ROBERT: I got it in a hook shop 10 years ago. Paid about 50 bucks for it.

CHRISTOPHER: I'm so blown away I just started to sweat.

SHANNON: Go in there and do some of that salsa and funk. Be yourself up.

ROGERS to Maureen, Robert's wife: See your paintings.

MAUREEN HUNTER: Thank you.

ROGERS: Wish I could paint. I have no sense of color—a sense of shapes, but no sense of color.

CHRISTOPHER: Did you study or just kind of pick it up?

MAUREEN: I went to art school in England, but I just, you know, kept it up.

PAUL CUMMINS (tour manager): Do you mind if I take a few pictures with Shannon's video camera?

ROBERT: When you're done you can take some with mine.

PAUL: Shannon has the video archives. (Christopher is picking "Colored Aristocracy" in the background. A trickle of mandolin provides soundtrack for much of the rest of the conversation.)

SHANNON: This camera has a zoom mike. When you zoom in, it becomes a shotgun mike—great for recording acoustically in a room like this. It's great on the road for getting down ideas.

CHRISTOPHER: Well, we definitely have to play "Change" tonight, 'cause I've got to use this mandolin right away.

ROBERT: instruments should go where they'll be used.

CHRISTOPHER: It won't leave my side. My mother was in a bluegrass band called the Marysville Sunday Night Pickers, so I was always interested in mandolin and banjo.

ROBERT: I was in Seattle yesterday and when I mentioned you guys were coming over, my friends all agreed they like you just fine. You guys can accumulate a very diverse crowd if you stick together.

GLEN: That's it!

ROBERT: After the Dead had been together a few years, we got this manager (Lenny Hart) who said, "Why don't you all define what it is you want to do? We sat down that day and committed to the band as a lifetime project. We've had as many internal hassles as any other band, but there's always the memory of that spoken commitment.

CHRISTOPHER: I don't know what else I would do. I feel like I've put so much time into this I'd just be...I dunno...I don't know what I'd be doing if I wasn't doing music.

ROGERS: I could never actually work nine to five again.

CHRISTOPHER: We'll always be slackers!

BRAD: Not that this job isn't tough enough in its own way.

SHANNON: Your world becomes really small. There's not a lot of people who you relate to after being involved in something like this—traveling and meeting people and, constantly, the only ones you're around are the ones that you think you're tired of being around every day for the year, and then you think you want that time off, and then when you get that time off, a week into it, you get kind of sketched out because the only people you relate to are the people you thought you wanted to be away from. So it's like your world

becomes so small, y'know?

GLEN: Socially stunted.

SHANNON: You go back home and a lot of the people you went to school with are looking to see if you've changed as a person. You've changed but it isn't because you're doing well now in a band, like, "Oh, you're a prima donna now, you're too good for us"—it's not that at all, it's just that the priorities have shifted. The things that were important to me in school aren't the same things that are important to me now. I feel

I've grown away from that, and those people weren't a part of that growth, you know, so it's hard to really relate anymore.

BRAD: It's because we have a career now, although not in the traditional sense. The people we grew up with have careers in the traditional mainstream and haven't grown in the same way. We've seen so much in such a short period of time, it's hard to relate.

SHANNON: There's a lot of prejudiced people where I come from in Indiana. I was raised till I was 19 years old in an environment where you subliminally take on the local prejudices because you've never left the community and that's just the way it was and that's the way people were. I go back now and it's easy to see it for what it is. I always wanted to love where I came from, even though there's a lot of bad elements—I always felt it was right to love where you're from. If you step away from it and consciously see

what's wrong with it, it becomes easier to go back and love what there is to love about it. But I go back home now and

see a lot to circle around. A lot of my friends have racist comments and ways to be prejudiced against any walk of life that's out of the ordinary. But I know that they're good enough people, that if they were just to ever step away from this scenario for once, I'll hear someone say "nigger" with conviction, yet I know they'd realize how wrong that is, if they were to ever leave. But it makes going

back kind of uncomfortable.

ROGERS: I go back and I look at the people I went to school with in Mississippi. You can look at them and see the aspirations they had in their eyes are dead now—they've bought into the deal and they know they're working on the pension plan. Their life has gone out of them. I never want that. I want to age with some sort of fire. I'd rather be frustrated but still looking for something fervently than to give up on it and settle for the deal.

ROBERT: The old crowd can't help resenting your crust of fame, as though it's something you could share but won't.

SHANNON: You become a quick judge of character, and accurate at it. You can hear what's important to some people. You hear them bring it up two or three times and you realize what's important to that person isn't anything that really matters as far as anything to build any kind of friendship on.



"One of my goals is to create... a piece of music that lives on after I'm dead."

- Christopher Thorn

You know, real friendship.

ROGERS: I'm 23 years old and I should be changing, I shouldn't be one hundred percent firm set on the way the rest of my life is gonna go... people who challenge what I am and put me on the spot, fuck 'em. I'm changing, that's the way I am.

ROBERT: Who do you really owe explanations to? You can't win, so you walk away...

SHANNON: ...and think, "Too bad you can't change."

ROBERT: It's an extraordinary way to live, but it's as real as any other existence, and enough of us have lived it long enough to realize it can work...but it is rarefied.

SHANNON: When you first realize you've become comfortable with the whole process of changing and start to build the things that are going to be sacred for the rest of your life, the friends you make at that point are priceless. Those are the people who play a big role in what you do, like the friends we had when we all lived in L.A. trying to make ends meet. When one guy'd go out too far, everybody would reel him back in, y'know...those people don't even realize how big a role they play in helping you find yourself.

GLEN: I think we didn't realize that until recently. Meanwhile all these other people are calling up, people you haven't talked to for years, saying, "How you been? Can I get some tickets?"

SHANNON: Yeah. My poor mother has to deal with so much of that. She's got a heart of gold, and she opens her door to anybody who knocks on it, and man there's a lot of people knockin' on it these days!

ROBERT: I just got tickets for my mother's podiatrist.

SHANNON: My mother gets everything! It means a lot to be represented on the wall of your family household. We don't need awards to show how much she

album means to us. My mom knows more about what's going on with us than I do. I finally went ahead and put her in touch with the record company so she can get all the stuff directly and skip the middleman.

CHRISTOPHER: Our moms love everything we do. I mean, we could put bags over our heads and they'd think it was just dandy. They're happy for us, period.

BRAD: You've never interviewed anybody before. What persuaded you to do this?

ROBERT: *Creem* asked if I'd do it and I said, "I won't say flat no, but it seems unlikely, because I have a tour to prepare. But I'll listen to the record closely and get back to you Monday." I listened to it half a dozen times, really absorbed it. Then I called *Creem* back on Monday and said I decided not to do it because it'd be *too much work* to type it all up in time for the issue. There was some back and forth for the next couple of days until I asked the big question, which really hadn't been addressed: does *Blind Melon* specifically want me to do this? They put me on to Dominique, who convinced me that was the case. I thought they were setting up some situation where they'd come to you and say "Hunter's really hot to interview you guys," and you'd all say "That old fart? Gidoutshere!"

BRAD: Same with us! We thought it was being set up way beyond our means, like, does this guy even want to do it? We felt the same way, it was like the whole company well sitting between us or something.

SHANNON: It's just a good conversation to me, man. An even better thing would be to write some songs with us.

BRAD: We're just talking musician to musician. Talkin' shop. We've never done it that way before in an interview situation.

ROBERT: I didn't think doing the

interview would be any problem, and of course it isn't, but the idea of typing it all up...and then I had some problems with *Creem* back in the Lester Bangs years. He was the absolutely pre-eminent slash critic, he damn near invented it. He shot me personally right between the eyes in one of his reviews. It spun me around so hard, probably because I kind of enjoyed the way he slashed everyone else. But when he slashed me, I got a writer's block that lasted two years. Now I realize it was an honor to be slammed by Lester Bangs.

SHANNON: Sometimes you kind of want someone to touch base with the way you maybe really are. It's funny the way a critic once in awhile hits a couple of nails on the head, you know. Sometimes the beauty of what you're doing is that it does have flaws. Nothing's perfect.

BRAD: I'm anxious for the first searing review that gets real specific, because you basically hear these grand passages that damn us, or whatever, but don't really get specific. I want to know why? What about it don't you like, specifically? I'd love to hear it, 'cause I can tell you things that I don't like about it. I could go on for days, specifically.

ROGERS: Most critics don't seem to feel what they write nowadays, they do it so they can move up the publishing ladder. It's easy to assume a lofty position insulting someone else. There's not a lot of good writing in rock.

BRAD: No, it needs a breath of

fresh air—which is why this talk is such a good idea.

ROBERT: I wish I'd started recording this when we were talking [about] dead dogs. Now the world will never know.

SHANNON: Hey, you know what? I'll talk about dead dogs all day long. If you want a dead dog story from me, I have one. I have plenty of dead dog stories. We'll set aside some time and sit around and talk dead dogs.

ROGERS: I have a question. How do you feel about the poetry you're writing now, as opposed to when you were just starting out, when you had the inspiration and the fire of doing it for the first time, compared to now, when you've matured and have the power of reflection?

ROBERT: It's all one long poem to me. I've never been satisfied and I never will, or why keep

writing? I look at my songs and poems as aspects of one work, which is my life.

ROGERS: What sort of writers and philosophers did you read?

ROBERT: For example?

ROGERS: Did you read Nietzsche? Did you like him?

ROBERT: Yeah. I like Nietzsche. He was an egoistic rebel who would say any-

thing—often just to shake things up.

ROGERS: He just seems like he's on fire. He'll say things that are shocking—preach a whole new kind of existence in the face of nihilism. I like him even if I don't agree with everything he says.

ROBERT: When Nietzsche's Zarathustra is asked what the

superman can hope to accomplish, he says that the true pinnacle of achievement will consist of simply watching the children toss the golden ball around. He wants to see people bonded together in joy. The superman will be someone capable of taking pleasure in the pleasure of others, leading them to the same benign understanding he's acquired and presiding over this. Sort of a Jimi Hendrix without tragic consequences.

ROGERS: Not everyone got that out of Nietzsche.

ROBERT: No, they didn't. Leopold and Loeb didn't get it.

ROGERS: He leaves himself open to the wrong sort of interpretations.

ROBERT: If you write bravely, you have to leave yourself open to wrong interpretation. It's a dangerous game.

ROGERS: He was very powerful in that way, and I'm sure he didn't desire his impact to happen in the way it did.

ROBERT: Hitler would have utilized anything handy. Wagner and Nietzsche were ambiguous enough to serve many ends. They were very good friends, though Nietzsche later disavowed Wagner. He deplored the sort of nationalistic tendencies in Wagner that Hitler later embraced—wouldn't have anything more to do with him, which broke Wagner's heart, because he thought of Nietzsche as his disciple, the one who was translating into respectable philosophy what he was trying to achieve in musical drama. Whatever Wagner's failings, he revolutionized tonality and created the bridge from romanticism into modernism.

ROGERS: What do you think of Samuel Beckett?

ROBERT: Dismal, convoluted, and brilliant. A frightening writer. He examines the morphology of consciousness turned back on itself. A great black humorist when the mood

strikes him. He'd have to be, to see as he saw and want to live to tell about it.

ROGERS: Did you ever know Henry Miller?

ROBERT: I didn't. I read him in my twenties. Dylan went to see him in Big Sur, but he apparently wasn't very hospitable, which was a shame—it's not every day a Bob Dylan meets a Henry Miller. My father had a memorable line about Miller. I was raving on about him, and my dad said, "You know, son, Henry Miller writes a *good dirty book*."

BRAD: It's refreshing to come up here and see you in this sort of situation. I had this fear of driving up and, like, going to your office and you're sitting in a suit and the whole '60s idealism is just thrown out the window...like, you're sitting behind a huge desk and you have your secretary and your secretary's secretary. It's good to see you hanging out and still being creative.

ROBERT [ironically]: In spite of my untold wealth, I like to affect a deceptive working-class presentation.

SHANNON: There's nothing wrong with being simple.

ROBERT: After you feel able to handle the next economic emergency, and after you've got a little bit of what's arguably the most amusing kind of recognition, the rock 'n' roll variety, what else do you want?

SHANNON: Your priorities shift again and you realize things that really are important, like family.

ROBERT: If your immediate family isn't important to you, what the fuck is important? If it doesn't start there, you deserve a fall. And you will.

SHANNON: Because you evolve to realize that solving the monetary thing only allows you to sit back and realize what's really important, if that's what it takes.

ROBERT: You can sit back satisfied that you've taken care of a



"I want to age with some sort of fire."
—Rogers Stevens

lot of the goals which you had as a kid, like wanting to be famous and throw your weight around some. When you've done all that, then you have to ask yourself: What is it I want to do next? I find I want to get all I can of what I've learned down on paper.

SHANNON: You had the love for that before any of the monetary value of it ever really changed your life, so you started out where you wanted to end up.

ROBERT: It's just a setup to keep doing what you really want to do, not an end in itself.

ROGERS: I think there's a noble way to be rich and not have the guilt some rich people *should* have. You were saying that if you don't watch out for your family you're gonna fall, but what about really basic philosophic differences with your folks?

ROBERT: I more or less meant the relationships you enter into by choice. You did not choose your parents.

ROGERS: Well, that's obviously my only experience with having a family.

ROBERT: Right. I was talking like you were 45 years old. I forget. In most aspects other than physical, I don't feel any older than you guys. That's a funny thing about aging. It's mostly something the body does. I don't know if anyone quite catches up with it psychologically.

ROGERS: Well you don't act any older than us. [General laughter] I mean that in the best way, you know. We can carry on a conversation, whereas with probably ninety-five percent of people your age we wouldn't be able to have this kind of conversation.

ROBERT: That's sad.

SHANNON: I have a relationship with my mother which is the best. I was groomed to be an athlete like my father, but I realized I didn't have my own identity at age 17—I found that everything I loved to do was just

completely opposite to what I'd been groomed to become, so I immediately lost all communication with my parents. After five, six years of no communication, I'm able to step outside and kind of look in and see—and man, now I can talk to her about anything. You start realizing that despite some of your animosity toward them and their animosity toward you, they're your parents and you have to love 'em. You realize and you forgive—and sometimes, when the parent is able to do that too, the relationship is actually more golden than it would have been even if you'd always gotten along.

MAUREEN: What you don't realize while you're growing up is that they're just struggling along in this world too, but you only see it from one perspective. Sure, they make mistakes. Don't we all?

CHRISTOPHER: My dad used to say that to me all the time. He used to say, "You know, this is my first time through this too—I don't know what I'm doing either." Now, out of respect, I try to overlook annoyances with them. They've made all these sacrifices for me.

ROBERT: The old man's always right. If you get that straight, you can relate to him! [General agreement]

CHRISTOPHER: You're just saying that because your daughter's in the room right now.

JESSIE: I feel blessed I have wonderful parents.

ROBERT: We've got an interesting multi-generation situation in this family. How old are you, Jess?

JESSIE: There's the same age difference between me and Mum as between me [25] and Katy [5]. [Charlotte, 27, is outside keeping Katy occupied carving a jack-o-lantern.]

ROBERT: Three generations of beautiful women. Interesting seeing the genotype at widely different ages all at once.

GREG ANTON (a musician friend I invited to drop by): It's starting to blend together more than it used to. I play with this sax player, Martin, who's been gigging for over 40 years, and he looked out in the audience a couple months ago and said, "Are you the parents or are you the kids?"

ROGERS: That's pretty unique.

BRAD: The Grateful Dead certainly has that.

ROBERT: I wouldn't be surprised if our audience takes to Blind Melon.

ROGERS: They do, y'know.

ROBERT: They're extravagantly loyal.

GLEN: How do you explain that? It's a unique phenomenon.

ROBERT: I think they imprint on Jerry.

CHRISTOPHER: I had friends who literally thought Jerry was God.

ROBERT: Isn't he? He's always had that charisma. When he was in, St. Michael's Alley or the Kepler's bookstore crowd, he was pretty much the same as he is now, someone other people just seem to take to.

ROGERS: Well, we have that. [indicating Shannon]

MAUREEN: Pumpkin pie and ice cream anyone?

SHANNON: Sure!

ROGERS: Shannon, you're the type of person people are attracted to like that. The fans gravitate toward you because you have that charisma—you're

the same person onstage as you are offstage.

SHANNON: I annoy the holy shit out of these guys so bad!

ROGERS: But you enrich our lives, Shannon!

BRAD: We're better men because of you!

SHANNON: Because of me, I think these guys are going to be able to deal with any type of human being they will ever encounter.

CHRISTOPHER (to Robert): The gang you hung out with when you were younger, and even now, have they all reached the same spot

where you are now? I mean...

SHANNON: Happiness?

CHRISTOPHER: Are all the guys in the Dead living in the same sort of way you do, or have some of them lost track of who they were?

ROBERT: We're radically different types but, by and large, I think the guys are doing it right. [Bill] Kreutzman's down in Florida doing research on dolphins with a camera crew. Micky [Hart] is doing his ethnic music field recordings for Ryko. Jerry paints. Phil [Lesh] is involved in bringing obscure modern composers to public attention. Bobby [Weir] is way into rainforest preservation activities, and the Rex Foundation helps redistribute some of the wealth.

CHRISTOPHER: That's what I mean. I was just hoping I won't ever run into those guys and they'll be in business suits and not really concerned.

ROBERT: Who does that unless they have to? All you've got to

bother yourself about is doing what you're doing on a good honest level that's directly talking to the people, trying to be straight with them and clocking your changes. Once they give you their trust, they want you to report back on what it's like to be where you are. It's a service. Just don't forget who allows you that stage. It's an adventure.

SHANNON: It is. It really is. When you hear someone come up and say, "Man, I know what you're talking about"—that's the best! That's all you ever want—for someone to know what in the hell you're talking about. You bleed what is sometimes a frustrating point of view, you bleed it through writing it—and playing it—and to have someone interpret what you had to write down, because you couldn't find anybody else to comprehend what you were trying to say. To have someone you've never even met before come up and say "I know what you're talking about"—that's who you're looking for, I mean, it's just the best.

ROBERT: You've got a line "I only wanted to be 16 and free," which made me think, all I want to be is, say, 27-1/2 and free, but I know what you mean. But the way you sing it, for an instant, 16 and free sounded like just the thing to be, until I remembered what a pain 16 actually was.

SHANNON: That's when I first realized that I was restrained and I was trying to be what my parents wanted me to be, not realizing that it was *my* life.

ROBERT: It's not your life until you realize that. Then you choose your life, or else you're going to end up working in the mill or studying how to best sell out.

SHANNON: To ever look at what you do as a *product*—that's when you've sold out.

ROBERT: You're gonna do this once in awhile though. Don't be too hard on yourself, just realize it's a dangerous point of view.



"To ever look at what you do as a product—that's when you've sold out."

— Shannon Hoon

It'll be continuously offered and sometimes you'll be tempted and sometimes you'll succumb, depending on the pressure of circumstances. There's a balance to achieve. You step in the dogshit a couple of times and your fans laugh at you and let you know about it. They're good for that.

ROGERS: There's nothing wrong with understanding why people foist that on you. If you understand where they're coming from, you're better able to defend your own position, I think.

ROBERT: Selling out is a complex subject. Somebody you care about may be in the hospital and you need to raise a lot more money than you can get your hands on, so you do a jock strap ad.

GREG: Recorded music is a product. So why record at all?

CHRISTOPHER: Actually, that brings me to a question I wanted to ask—I was thinking about this the other day. People who record music and are creative...do you think we want to be *immortal*—more so than, say, a guy who works in a factory?

ROBERT: In the sense of being remembered by generations to come, yes—by the very fact that you're beginning to think in those terms, while he has no particular stimulus to conceive life in that way. His children and his religious hopes are as close to immortality as he'd realistically project. He doesn't have much expectation of being remembered except through his children. Except for the odd *Secret Life of Walter Mitty* type, his goals and values would almost have to be a bit more immediate.

CHRISTOPHER: One of my goals is to create a piece of work, whether an art work or a piece of music, that lives on after I'm dead. That was one of my driving forces to get a record deal. I'm just wondering if you felt that way?

ROBERT: Sure. It's an ego trip, but so what? It's also a definite source of motivation to create something resilient.

CHRISTOPHER: I was just wondering if everybody has that drive to be immortal.

ROBERT: If you feel that way, it's hard to believe that other people don't. Not in the way you mean. Some people just want to get laid.

ROGERS: Creativity is arguably the highest brain function, but not everybody's brain works on that level. Either you do what you are or you don't. If you're a creative person, your brain works on that level in some aspect of your life. This band is the manifestation of all of our creative drives—everything you see is that manifestation, and I think that it's not even a choice.

CHRISTOPHER: No. It's not. I got sick about a year ago and I was thinking, "What would you like to leave behind? Is it important to make as much money as you can, so you leave money behind for your kids?"

ROBERT: You instinctively know the answer to that.

CHRISTOPHER: I'd rather my father left me some poems that he wrote when he was 18, or a painting, instead of a chunk of money he might work hard to lay by.

BRAD: He created you.

CHRISTOPHER: True. My dad's super-proud of me. He wears the Blind Melon hat and the Blind Melon shirt and if we

made Blind Melon pants, he'd wear those too.

SHANNON: And so would your mom!

ROGERS: My dad's an old-fashioned realist. He only took it seriously once we started selling records.

SHANNON: My dad still doesn't have much grasp of what's going on with my career.

CHRISTOPHER: On the other hand, I'm sure it depends on who you are. If some parents passed away and the kids were told, "There's no money for you, but here's 10 poems Dad wrote when he was 25," I'm sure they'd shit.

SHANNON: (digging in) Man, you eat well, boy, this is some good food.

ROGERS: Can we come over and hang out just any time?

ROBERT: When you're in the neighborhood. People in rock 'n' roll feel looser with one another because we don't have to speak in full sentences.

SHANNON: You learn to separate what matters from what doesn't matter and it

gives you the ability to sit back and actually be amused by all the things that piss you off about this. It's so easy to sit back and, just as mad as you are about it, you can laugh just that much at the same time. So it's like you write the songs and you play them and you communicate with people and that's really all that you have to keep sacred about writing songs. The rest of it's rather humorous.

ROBERT: Do you keep a journal as it's all happening?

PAUL: This video camera is his journal.

ROGERS: I think everybody keeps a journal.

BRAD: Yeah, I keep a journal.

SHANNON: I'll write it later. There's too much going on at one time.

CHRISTOPHER: I have such a bad memory I feel I have to write everything down. If I don't remember something that happened a year ago, I can go back and find it in my journal.

SHANNON: I read my journal and I still don't remember what happened! This video camera never leaves me. It's a part of my body. That's why we were late today—because it was in the bus and the bus took off without telling us and we had to chase it down.

ROBERT: I'm glad you were. My plane was fog-bound in Seattle this morning, and I thought I was going to be late. I was getting really pushed at United Airlines, sitting there with Lenny Kaye and Jim Carroll, and Lenny was saying, "Cool it, man; when something's inevitable, just relax," and I said, "You haven't just had two tall cups of coffee." I called Maureen from the plane to complain, and she says, "Look, cool out, it's not important," and I say, "It is important and I'm not gonna chill out, dammit."

MAUREEN: I didn't say it wasn't important, I said it was important to not get stressed! I didn't want you having a heart attack on the tarmac.

SHANNON: No, that's not the healing movement.

ROBERT: I know better, but for some reason I got it in my head it was a two-and-a-half-hour flight, and when the pilot said we'd be in San Francisco at 1:22 [the interview was set for 3:00], I went up! and then total-

ly relaxed until I got in my truck and popped your album on the deck. It makes a great soundtrack for running red lights.

CHRISTOPHER: Do you ever get sick of talking about the '80s? Do you think it's weird that our generation is infatuated with that period?

ROBERT: Where would I talk about it other than in interviews? It doesn't even seem to come up in interviews so much anymore. I think they're starting to look past that to the '50s now—the Beats seem to be recapturing public interest.

CHRISTOPHER: I'm gonna ask you something, that's why I'm asking if you're sick of it.

ROBERT: I don't mind spinning yarns about my younger days.

CHRISTOPHER: Did you hang out with Neal Cassady and that crowd?

ROBERT: Not the Beat crowd, no, I'm too young, but Neal was a friend. Once when he came over I gave him a joint and turned on a tape recorder and we rapped for hours. I've lost that tape. I left it with Karl Moore in New Mexico while I went hitch-hiking to Denver, then out to San Francisco to join up with the Dead, but somehow it strayed.

CHRISTOPHER: Was he a charismatic character?

ROBERT: It wasn't charisma so much with Neal, not as I perceived it anyway. He was that guy who gets in your face and you can't shake him if he don't wanta be shook, but he's also interesting and funny at the same time, undeniable, and you finally say, "All right, man, sit down," but it's not exactly what you'd call "charisma."

CHRISTOPHER: Isn't it bizarre that these people you hung out with are now legends and people like us read about them and are envious of that period of time...



"This is the first tour where the place is full before we get off stage."

— Glen Graham, on the band's recent tour with Lenny Kravitz.

SHANNON: ...base our lives on what we come to know from these people?

ROBERT: Bizarre until it eventually becomes a simple fact of life.

CHRISTOPHER: At the time you were in it, did you think, "This guy here has something—people are gonna remember him?"

ROBERT: That had already happened for Neal when I knew him. A lot of people were bowled over by the legend and couldn't separate it from the person, which was no good for him or anybody else. It can be crazy making. Once you achieve your "immortality," you'll have to deal with that problem yourself. It's not what you think it is. To make it to the other side in one piece, you have to struggle not to become an object, even in your own mind. Especially there. You can't do much about what other people think.

CHRISTOPHER: So how did Cassidy deal with that?

ROBERT: He was, in a way, running from the Dean Moriarty image. He was more a stand-up philosopher and a benign con man, perpetually in search of a pack of Camels, a dollar, and a joint. Kind of a bop sanyassi. And he had a great rap in return for it. But it happened under the cloud of the great Dean Moriarty, which was close, but not who he was.

CHRISTOPHER: I guess for fiction you have to embellish a little bit.

ROBERT: He was both larger and smaller than that. In the end it probably killed him.

CHRISTOPHER: It did? It bothered him that that stuff was written about him?

ROBERT: He felt his life had been appropriated. He didn't exactly say it in so many words, but it'd slip out.

CHRISTOPHER: You knew Jack?

ROBERT: No. I'd also not read *On the Road* when I knew Neal. I may have seen him more clearly for that reason. I understood that he was legendary, but didn't know the precise profile. I didn't find the book readable at the time, though I read it a couple of years ago and found it has a sweet youthful innocence about it, which is exactly what turned me off when I started to read it in the '60s.

A lot of variety in the sound and they don't play down—Joan Jones is someone to watch. And I like the Breeders.

SHANNON: We love the Breeders. (general agreement)

ROBERT: Curve is interesting...they use way too much synth-ped and you can't hear many of the words, but Tony Halliday has a way with angst.

BRAD: There's a wave of those

hear a lot of Grateful Dead comparisons. What do you think of that?

ROBERT: For some reason, it seems cool to be influenced by just about anybody but the Dead. I can't figure that one. My feeling is that the Airplane, B.B. King, Paul Butterfield Blues Band, Cream, and so forth, all draw upon a certain common core, some blues permutation. The Dead also relate to that

core, a hard-to-define thing involving tonalities, rhythm section co-ordination, and the rounder tones you might choose to play on guitar, all of which seem to relate to an ongoing evolution out of the blues which is currently taking a back seat to production. You fail to be monotonic and minimalistic, which automatically sets you apart. Actually, it's probably the long hair.

ROGERS: Christopher plays the rounder-sounding guitar. I play heavier-sounding guitar. I'm in the right speaker, he's in the left speaker. All of us listened to Neil Young. I was into the Allman Brothers more than I was into the Dead. We also listened to Black Sabbath and AC/DC when we were 14 years old.

ROBERT: I'll tell you what my initial hit was, the influence I detected most in it, what it kept bringing back to me: Revolver-era Beatles.

SHANNON: Whew!

GLEN: Wow!

ROGERS: Shooo!

BRAD: That's a great compliment, man!

CHRISTOPHER: I love that record!

ROGERS: We're all Beatles fans.

CHRISTOPHER: Absolutely.

ROBERT: I think the influence-pegging happens because you're a guitar band, without a lot of fuzz tone and distortion, and you don't rush your tempos, you're melodically conscious, just all the type of stuff that equates with a non-pop band such as the Dead in the minds of reviewers, for lack of something real to say. They're not listening, is what they're not doing.

ROGERS: Exactly.

ROBERT: You've taken this and amalgamated that in an amazing variety of ways. I can hardly begin to pick out the number of influences in your work. In an almost encyclopedic way, you're the product of everything that's come before you.

ROGERS: It's like our song "Change" has the same chords as (Traffic's) "Dear Mr. Fantasy," and on our song "Holy Men" we drop the third verse and put in a verse of "Midnight Rider" by the Allman Brothers, just for humor's sake.

SHANNON: We sit back and notice them just like anyone else would...

BRAD: After the fact we go, oh shit, that's where that one came from—you don't even know at the time!

SHANNON: Everybody's guilty of influence.

ROBERT: You sound more like early Airplane to me than like the Dead. There's so much raw energy in what you do—the Dead were generally more melodic and intricate, even in the old days. What sells lots of records is that insistent energy.

ROGERS: When we play live, we're at least 50 times as heavy as our record. I mean, we can play all of our parts, but we're definitely energetic



One for the time capsule: Robert Hunter, Blind Melon, and the mandolin "that wanted to be a Melon."

CHRISTOPHER: I was blown away by it. At first it was hard for me to read because of his style, poetry and prose kind of mixed in, but it was great. It just seemed romantic to me.

ROBERT: I've read most of Kerouac's stuff now. I love the pace and flow of his syllabics. He won't look back, just keeps moving. He may use the word "sad" a little too much—I mean, it's easy to take an ax and whack at old Jack, but the flow is very important and has made a sizable dent in modern writing.

SHANNON: What other bands have you heard today that you like?

ROBERT: Sun 60 is intriguing.

type of bands, like Curve and Lush and a band called My Bloody Valentine—they use the same kind of scale and mood to their music. You can't understand the lyrics at all.

ROBERT: I figure if you can't hear them, they don't exist.

ROGERS: My Bloody Valentine is the best of those type of bands, for me. They influence all of them. Karen Butcher sings with a really heavy effect that washes over the top. You can't understand a word she's saying, but the effect is really powerful.

SHANNON: I wanted to ask you a question. You've read a lot of the things that have been written about our band, you

to the point where sometimes the songs...

CHRISTOPHER: ...fall apart...

ROGERS: ...suffer in sloppiness where they gain in energy.

SHANNON: It's good to listen back to that, where it didn't sound as good as it felt.

ROBERT: You have to rein in your energy, where the older bands have to pump it up.

SHANNON: If you felt so good it sounds that bad, you must have been feeling pretty good, you know what I mean?

ROBERT: The feeling with reasonable cleanliness, that's all you can ask.

ROGERS: I'm glad we're having this talk. Most of our articles seem to imply we're not to be taken seriously.

BRAD: We're generally treated as fledgling pop stars. It's certainly understandable, but maybe this talk will help turn the tide a bit.

ROBERT: The tide will turn itself. This is all initiation stuff.

SHANNON: Do you enjoy music as much today as you did in the beginning? When you first started writing songs?

ROBERT: Not pop music, no. I think the youth and the heart and the blood in your twenties is unique. I don't engage high-energy music with the same physical intensity because I'm not so physically intense, but I still get a charge out of real inventiveness. I'm

always on a search for music that I could like. And, like you, I've tried to write the sort of

thing I wanted but couldn't find.

SHANNON: But you're at the same level of enthusiasm with your poetry as you were with music, so writing those songs only led to your finding the same level of enthusiasm with something that's pretty much a branch off the music, you know? You're still hanging out in the same neighborhood.

ROBERT: I'm generally drawn to the music with the most original approach to lyrics.

CHRISTOPHER: Dylan was the first to start writing songs that weren't about holding hands, and the Beatles picked up on that.

ROBERT: We owe him that much. Lennon was a superb lyricist. He systematically dismantled the Beatles' goody-goody image. Jagger is a good lyricist too, though he's so famous for image, people hardly think to notice.

SHANNON: Syd Barrett, who started Pink Floyd, is great. He worked on the first two records, then kind

of fell into the void. But you can tell he's got his own point of view, which is about all you ever want to be able to write. Plus he understands the common ground. He's so wide he's almost round.

ROBERT: I read some of your lyrics before I heard them and couldn't figure out how they'd work musically, but they make good creative rhythmic sense when you sing them. There's real musicianship in your phrasing.

SHANNON: Thanks. Brad and I worked a lot of it out together. We're the devil to one another, we kind of push each other.

BRAD: But his phrasing is natural.

ROBERT: Do you harmonize with Shannon's choice of phrasing more than he does with your choices?

BRAD: It goes against my grain sometimes, then I'll realize his choice works so much better, especially when I bring in lyrics and a melody line and I'll say, "Do something like this," and he'll master it and just move onto something else—or I'll have words that wouldn't phrase into the verse and he'll

use them anyway and make it all fit. Or on harmony lines, I often have to ax my old habits of phrasing and follow his.

ROBERT: Someone called his voice a "wrench," which is not a bad description of how he takes a phrase and adjusts it into a tight space.

BRAD: Right. I don't mean this as a slam, but he has a weird concept of correct musical time which he uses to his advantage.

SHANNON: That's the Velvet Underground influence.

BRAD: Even though it's a 7/8 beat, he'll bend the words into a 4/4 feel and it'll still flow. It's because he doesn't understand that it's 7/8, that it's hard, he just adjusts and sings over it.

SHANNON: My rhythm is terrible.

ROBERT: 4/4 against 7/8 is a sophisticated phase pattern, whether you have to count it out or do it by feel. You and Brad do a lot of close harmony diverging from parallel thirds that generate interesting overtones, what I'd describe as "blood brother harmony." Danko, Helm, and Manuel used to do that in trio with The

Band, but you guys manage it duet style.

BRAD: I'm a big fan of counter-melody. I don't feel like sticking too close to the thirds. There's no sense in doing harmony if you do that, in my opinion. You might as well play organ behind the vocalist.

ROBERT: Unless you want to make it on the country charts.

ROGERS: Their voices blend well. Shannon has that raspy quality and Brad's got that sort of falsetto smoothness. The frequencies lock well together. It's not like they're clashing tonally.

SHANNON: It's like with the counterrhythm thing, you have a different view of what we're doing than our critics...or the way Rogers and Christopher play double leads sometimes. That often gets written off as a flaw, but, for me, that's where the enjoyment of it comes out. I mean, it's never stagnant musically.

ROBERT: It doesn't occur that what they can't grasp in one hearing might not be the fault of the music.

CHRISTOPHER: How do you think drugs fit into the picture?

ROBERT: Which drug, in what situation, for who, and in what quantities?

SHANNON: I enjoy the way you can kind of transform into different identities with pot. Sometimes when you're stuck in the same mode, getting high induces change.

ROBERT: It can certainly nudge your right brain functions.

ROGERS: It sends me off on too many tangents as far as lyric writing and songwriting go, like changing keys five times in a song.

ROBERT: It seems better-suited to improvised music than writing.

SHANNON: Like in conversation, what you start off saying branches out into different directions, and the next thing you know you have a dozen threads you have to come around and resolve. But it's enjoyable to have talked about 20 different things in a 10-minute conversation. It eliminates a lot of wasted time.

ROGERS: I'm pro-legalization, but I don't know if it's the right thing for a bus driver. There are people who don't have the luxury of living our sort of lifestyle. If they start smoking pot all the time, it's not going to help them. But that comes back to particular addictive-compulsive personalities.



"I read these grand passages that damn us but don't get specific. I want to know why. What about it don't you like."

—Brad Smith



One's a kid, one's a kid at heart: Katy Hunter & Shannon Hoon

MAUREN HUNTER



Driving Blind: "Because of me" Hoon admits, "I think these guys are going to be able to deal with any type of human being they will ever encounter."

ROBERT: It got so popularized, everybody's developed definite opinions on what's, after all, such an indefinite thing.

SHANNON: Sometimes you need something just to go against the grain. It's like the thrill of the chase.

ROGERS: If I got busted, like Brad did, I know I'd be seriously upset at being punished for doing something I felt I should be able to do.

ROBERT: Greg here's an attorney and donates his time getting people off bogus pot busts.

SHANNON: I think they're all bogus.

ROBERT: Would you care to tell that story about you and that prosecutor in Arkansas?

GREG: Some kids got busted for doing 62 in a 55 zone, and [the police] found a bag of pot in a suitcase in their trunk. After the case was signed and sealed away, I went to the DA and said, "Well, Mr. Dinkins, I guess we solved your case," and he said, "What do you mean?" I guess you found out why those kids were doing 62 on the highway. Must have been that pot in their locked suitcase that was making them do it."

And he says, "I want to tell you something Mr. Anton. You have a very lack-adaisical attitude about marijuana," and he proceeded to lecture about how "it's a big problem out here and we think we should prosecute to the fullest extent of the law" and "where do you get off taking this kind of attitude"—and I just couldn't help myself, I had to say it: "Mr. prosecutor, I'm high on marijuana as we speak."

SHANNON: What'd he say?

GREG: He turned three shades of red and said, "It just goes to prove how right I am."

BRAD: So you got those kids off?

GREG: We settled for a drug diversion program and \$200 fine.

SHANNON: Wow. Insane!

ROGERS: Is it getting harder or easier to get people off in the last five or ten years?

GREG: It's just starting to be easier. Just a little bit. Between five and 10 years ago it was the hardest it's ever been.

ROGERS: It's really sad to see 19-year-old kids doing serious time on mandatory minimums.

GREG: It's a witch hunt. They'll look back at it like burning women at the stake.

MAUREEN: There's two-and-a-half-thousand Deadheads under the age of 30 doing time for acid and pot. Some are in for 20 years.

GLEN: That's truly disturbing.

SHANNON: A lot of the wrong people are taking the fall.

ROGERS: The fact is, most people in this country have a completely opposite point of view to the way we look at things. How do you turn such a massive tide?

ROBERT: A slow and steady infusion of information.

It's time for them to get to sound check. Several conversations get going at once as the talk winds to a close.

SHANNON: We're talking about my big ugly middle toe.

ROBERT: Let's get a snapshot of that.

SHANNON: One of these nights I'll have one too many and cut it off and make a key chain out of it.

I went to the show at Berkeley Community Theatre that night and a seat eight rows behind mosh pit. The band were tight as a spring-wound watch. Shannon hit the boards like a tornado, and the capacity crowd incandescently aware of present at the advent of major rock phenomenon. The high point for me "Change," when my o mandolin suddenly soared above the arrangement, speaking in a voice I recognize - full, throaty and warm, thanking for this chance to shake off the dust and sing.