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Organically Grown

Blind Melon parlays its small-town roots into a big-city sound

By Kim Neely

LITTLE BANGKOK WILL NOT LET you finish your food," says Shannon Hoon, leaning over the tape recorder and speaking in a conspiratorial stage whisper as a waitress whisks away his half-finished appetizer. It's a humid mid-August afternoon, and Blind Melon's vocalist, escaping the heat in a Manhattan Thai restaurant with his band mate guitarist Rogers Stevens, is still new enough to the interview process to be flattered that someone else cares what he thinks. The moment the tape is rolling, Hoon begins describing his surroundings for the benefit of ROLLING STONE's readers ("We're here at Little Bangkok . . . for all you little Bangkoks"); he keeps up a running commentary on various aspects of the restaurant throughout the interview.

Hoon is all animation, every inch the kid in school who always had his hand up. At the odd moments when Stevens manages to wrest the floor away from him, Hoon looks ready to pee in his pants with the eagerness to share *his* views as well. Stevens seems to accept Hoon's exuberance good-naturedly; the singer has enough ham in him to be consistently entertaining but not enough to be annoying. Basically, he just likes to talk.

Today there is a lot to talk about. Hoon and Stevens are discussing the whirlwind of events that saw the members of Blind Melon — Hoon, Stevens, bassist Brad Smith, guitarist Christopher Thorn and drummer Glen Graham — breaking away from their small-town existences, hooking up in hellish Los Angeles in the middle of the late-Eighties heavy-metal boom, landing a record deal mere months after they began rehearsing and ultimately abandoning the creatively stifling L.A. scene for the more peaceful environs of Durham, North Carolina, to write their debut album.

Blind Melon has managed to stir up a lot of ruckus for a band that's been together for only two years — partially because of Hoon's appearance last summer in the Guns n' Roses video for "Don't Cry" but mostly because of word of mouth generated by the band's live shows and a striking, homespun video for the song "Dear Ol' Dad," which was released by Capitol Records to tide the masses over while the band recorded its debut.

The album, which will be released in late September, was well worth the wait. *Blind Melon* has a loose, jammy feel that is



Blind Melon (from left): Smith, Stevens, Thorn, Hoon and Graham

refreshingly genuine; it could only be the product of musicians who were steeped in small-town culture and blues-drenched classic rock during their formative years. It is mood music at its finest, veering from gritty, fast-paced material ("Time," "Tones of Home," "Paper Scratcher") to laid-back front-porch fare like "Sleephouse" and "No Rain." The band has a late Sixties/early Seventies feel — Hoon at times sounds eerily like Janis Joplin — but the five members draw from such diverse influences (they cite everyone from Jim Croce to the Misfits) that the result could never be derivative of any one group. Critics reviewing the band's live shows have fallen all over themselves trying to pin down the Blind Melon sound, invoking everyone from Jane's Addiction to the Allman Brothers.

"We owe a lot to a lot of people," says Stevens, "but we twist our influences around in a unique way. I don't think we sound exactly like anybody; everybody hears something different."

Blind Melon began taking shape in 1989, when Stevens and Smith fled their native West Point, Mississippi ("fucking *Mayberry*," says Stevens), for Tinseltown. A year later, in March 1990, Hoon got

off the bus from Lafayette, Indiana, looking for a band that needed a singer. Eventually, through a friend at a party, he met Stevens and Smith; the three began jamming, and they recruited Thorn, a transplanted Pennsylvanian, from the local folk scene shortly afterward. After scouring Hollywood for the right drummer ("Everybody was just too *rock*," says Stevens), Stevens and Smith placed a call back home to West Point and pulled their old friend Graham into the fold. "Glen came out with this drum kit that looked like it was from the Sears catalog," says Stevens. "It took a few weeks for everybody to figure out that he was the right guy, because he didn't hit the drums hard. He was really finesse oriented."

With Graham in place, the band began rehearsing. "We weren't really concerned about playing the club scene out there," says Hoon. "With the beliefs we had and the places we'd come from, it just didn't seem like a lot of it went part and parcel with what was going on out there."

What happened next was the stuff fairy tales are made of. After they'd been together a week, the band members recorded a four-track demo, "just to hear the songs on tape," says Stevens. The tape fell into the hands of "some bullshit industry guy" — and record labels came running almost immediately. For Blind Melon, the break came a little *too* soon.

"We had four or five songs at the time," says Stevens. "Next thing we know, like a week later, we're having dinners with ten different record companies, and we're *lying* to all of them. We're like 'Yeah, we got twenty songs, we've been together for a year.'"

"People came to see us rehearse, just to see if we could actually play the songs on the tape," Stevens continues. "We played those songs and not far beyond that, because we didn't *have* any more."

"We'd play five," says Hoon with a laugh. "And then we'd go, 'Well, that's all we want to show you now.'"

The band members took advantage of all the interest, waiting out the offers until they found a label willing to meet their demands for creative control. Naive to the workings of the business and with no management to guide them, they nonetheless negotiated like cardsharps, taking contracts to different lawyers for second and third opinions and refusing to settle for mere record-company promises. "They'd say, 'Oh, we'll make sure you get that, we don't need to put it in the contract,'" says Hoon. "And we were like 'Well, where *we* come from, it needs to be in the contract.'"

Finally, after they inked a deal with Capitol and had management in place, they sequestered themselves in an L.A. rehearsal studio to begin making music. "For three months, we didn't even talk to the label," says Hoon. "We were concentrating on writing the other fifteen songs that we told 'em we had."

Unfortunately, they weren't getting much done; the L.A. scene proved too distracting. And unbeknownst to them at the time, the pressure to produce an album was about to increase tenfold. Hoon, who had visited fellow Hoosier Axl Rose in the studio and had supplied backing vocals to a number of tracks on Guns n' Roses' *Use Your Illusion* albums, appeared in the "Don't Cry" video — which brought the media swooping down on the band like vultures.

"We weren't in any hurry to make our album," Hoon says of the post-"Don't Cry" media attention. "We didn't want to put something out that didn't represent the band well." Instead, Blind Melon opted to tour, playing a series of club dates and a three-week stint opening for Soundgarden before returning to L.A. to make a second attempt to get some songs written.

Unable to concentrate on their songwriting because of all the attention, the band members moved to Durham and holed up commune style in a dwelling they dubbed the Sleephouse (the abode is immortalized in song on their debut). They tinfoiled the windows, rarely left the house and lived like vampires; rehearsals often took place at three or four in the morning. "There was no schedule," says Hoon. "You'd be in your room, and you'd hear some guy picking around on a guitar; next thing you knew, you'd hear the bass, then another [*Cont. on 84*]

Blind Melon

[Cont. from 27] instrument would join in. Everybody would just kind of migrate to the living room.

"Moving to North Carolina was obviously the best thing for the band," Hoon adds, "because we all got to know each other. There was a lot going on rather than just the music. There were a lot of relationships being built, and that helped to make the music more sincere."

Blind Melon was recorded almost entirely live; the band members, who coproduced with Rick Parashar (*Temple of the Dog*, Pearl Jam's *Ten*), say they left in plenty of mistakes and nixed all but the most minimal overdubs. "It's more real that way," says Hoon. "You get that invisible sound."

As for the lyrics, Hoon says, "There's no deep meaning – we're not a political band." Indeed, aside from "Paper Scratcher," which documents an encounter with a homeless man, and "Drive," about a co-worker of Hoon's who was an addict, *Blind Melon* is light on issue-oriented subject matter; the only preaching the band does is *against* preaching, particularly on "Holyman" and "Dear Ol' Dad," a biting love letter from Hoon to an Indiana acquaintance who iced him after she found the Lord. There are, however, recurring themes that tie the album together, the most prominent being the value of savoring the moment and the spirit-sapping nature of small-town conservatism. The latter seeps into nearly every track; more than anything else, *Blind Melon* is the musical journal of five individuals learning to overcome the creative constraints foisted on them by their sheltered upbringings.

"I was brought up being told more what I couldn't do than what I could do," says Stevens. "I like the South, and it's a beautiful place, but the attitude that's prevalent there made me the way I am today, which is struggling to let myself go. I want to be pissed off about things; I want to be overjoyed by things. But it's hard to do that when you have these buttons that have been pushed in your head since you were a little kid."

All in all, it is an astounding debut, right down to the album cover, which is graced by the most unforgettable image since the *Blind Faith* era: an old photo of Graham's sister – dressed up in a bee costume and looking slightly annoyed – that was snapped before some long-ago school play.

"It's a picture that everybody from a small community can relate to, because they've all had to do it," says Hoon.

"I hope people can find something on the album that they can relate to," Hoon adds. "And I think that's possible. We're not the only group of guys from small towns – there's a lot of people who come from repressed environments." ■