



## TV GENERATION

This month, two American bands, Blind Melon and Letters To Cleo, release albums in New Zealand. Both groups share little in common, except for the fact each owes their success to the little square box that sits in the corner of your living room...

**T**he concept was simple and unbelievably effective. All that was required to push Blind Melon from obscurity to the spotlight was a video, featuring a fat young girl dancing in a bumble-bee costume.

When Blind Melon released their self-titled debut album this time last year, media and public interest remained confined to the drug-taking habits of lead singer Shannon Hoon, and his friendship with one W Axl Rose. It wasn't until the MTV channel placed the video for their first single, 'No Rain', on high rotate that the group entered the realm of commercial success. Speaking from his home in Seattle, Blind Melon bass player Brad Smith is in no doubt that MTV is the reason he's not selling shoes or washing dishes for a living.

"MTV is so corporate, and a lot of bands don't want to sell out to the corporate rock, but without their support you really don't have a chance of making all that much money. They can totally make or break a band, they can put your video on *Beavis and Butthead*, and if *Beavis and Butthead* say it sucks, then everybody thinks it sucks. But if they put it on as a 'buzz clip', your album is going to sell. They fully kicked in our album sales with the 'No Rain' video."

Unlike his bandmate, guitarist Christopher Thorn, who told *RipItUp* last year: "It's pretty sick that they're speaking to such a large audience of our generation," Smith has no problem with American kids needing two cartoon characters to tell them what's hip that week.

"I think it's cool, I love *Beavis and Butthead*."

Smith has just returned home after spend-

ing three months in New Orleans, where Blind Melon recorded their second album at producer Daniel Lanois' home studio. Produced by Andy Wallace (Rage Against the Machine, Faith No More, Soundgarden), *Soup* slips between acoustic and electric blues-based rock, retaining a similar feel to *Blind Melon*. Does that mean they're going to need another oddball video? Smith doesn't think so.

"This album has a whole new sound for us, and people are probably going to have a hard time believing it is Blind Melon. I think people will get something more out of this album than just another bee-girl type video, though we've got a lot of work to do before people stop thinking of us as 'the bee band'. We're happy with that because we plan to be around for awhile yet."

Only if your singer doesn't wind up dead in a shit covered toilet, with a needle in his arm.

"Well, that's not going to happen. He went and cleaned up and he's been doing good for quite some time. He's pretty healthy. It did cause some setbacks in the beginning, but he's fine, he's on top of it."

**I**n 1990, Letters To Cleo were one of many struggling Boston bands living in the shadow of bigger names like the Pixies and the Lemonheads.

Despite the cult success of the bands headed by Black Francis and Evan Dando, there was no influx of major label A&R vultures to the town, with cheque books at the ready, all competing to sign 'the next big thing'. So, Letters To Cleo followed that well worn path that holds little or no guarantee of stardom at the end of the road. They



Letters to Cleo

released seven-inch singles on a tiny independent label, collected fans by touring and playing constantly, and shopped endlessly in search of a major label contract.

Still lonesome in 1993, they made their debut album, *Aurora Gory Alice*, for \$7000, put the bill on a credit card, and released it on Boston's Cherrydisc Records. Out on the promo trail, a chance meeting led to the band's inclusion on the *Melrose Place Soundtrack*. Their current single, 'Here and Now', plays during the closing credits of US screenings. Letter's To Cleo bassist Scott Riebling tells how the deal was done, and it wasn't because they were doing anything as interesting as sleeping with one of the actresses.

"We played a show in Texas at the South-By South-West Music Conference, and we got taken out to dinner by a representative of Giant Records, who were working on the *Melrose Place Soundtrack*. Well, three members of the band, *Melrose* is their favourite show on TV. Eventually we signed to Giant and got on the soundtrack."

Not unexpectedly, this set the wheels in spin. Letters To Cleo was the band name to drop, and suddenly it was standing room only at their gigs.

"This band's been around for a long time, and before this whole *Melrose Place* thing came about, we were lucky to bring 50 or 60

people into a club outside of the New England area. Now that's changed, and it's a real thrill to play at a club in Texas, or Detroit, or Florida, and fill it up. We were never able to do that before the whole *Melrose* thing happened."

Sensing a profitable cash-in opportunity, Giant reissued *Aurora Gory Alice*, which was then picked up by College stations throughout America, and MTV added 'Here and Now' to its list of 'buzz' video clips. Riebling sounds almost embarrassed to acknowledge the impact television has had on the band.

"MTV is very influential especially in our type of music, though I'd like to think that we would have done all right without them... but they certainly helped a lot. Once the *Melrose* thing kicked on, and the alternative stations started to playlist us, then MTV picked us up, and yes, they definitely had a lot to do with our success."

In closing, Riebling states the influence of 'the drug of the Nation' is also beginning to benefit other local bands.

"Before *Melrose*, there really weren't a lot of labels interested in what was going on here. Things have definitely changed a huge way in the past six months. Now there's record label people at all the shows, and bands are getting signed left and right out of Boston."

JOHN RUSSELL