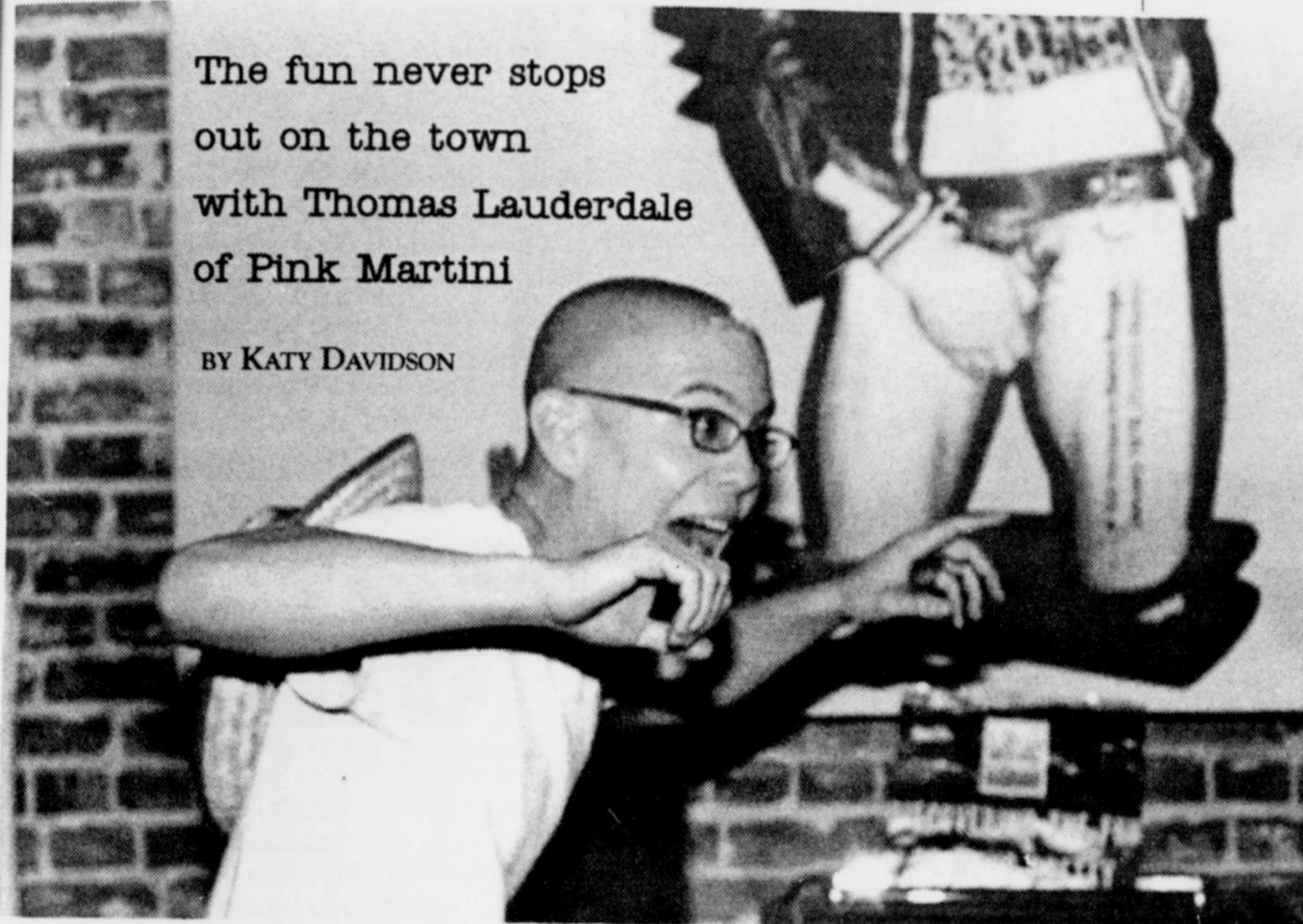


EVENTS

No excuse for boredom

The fun never stops out on the town with Thomas Lauderdale of Pink Martini

BY KATY DAVIDSON



PHOTOS BY MARGO GIRARD

Thomas Lauderdale's presence in Portland is undeniable.

He is small in stature, well-built and has a healthy shine. He has the face of a cherub and the clothes of a post-trendsetter. He is the guy you've seen smoking cloves and putting along Burnside Street in a 1959 Nash Metropolitan, jumping in puddles downtown, or taking an early morning walk in Waterfront Park with Heinz, his lumbering Labrador-golden retriever mix.

In the past, he has assisted city commissioners, helped organize Queer Night at LaLuna (where he met photographer and filmmaker George Calvo, whom he has been dating for three and a half years), and even penned a regular entertainment column for *Just Out* under the alter ego of Miss Betsy Hunt, "a professional business woman, on the go, with no time for games."

Aside from all that, he happens to be one of the city's most creative and talented musicians. At a mere 29 years of age, he occasionally invigorates the Portland Symphony with youthful spunk, and he is the charismatic leader of Pink Martini, the ensemble that released the hit album *Symphatique* and will perform at a high-profile party at Union Station on New Year's Eve.

Lauderdale says the idea for the party came to him because it sounded romantic and he wanted to play somewhere that evoked ideas of both leaving and arriving in Portland.

Deep down, who is this guy who brings a big city mentality to our sleepy streets? The catch about Lauderdale is that there is no catch; for the most part, he is what he seems to be. It's an understatement to say Lauderdale is brimming with ideas and emotion. Most of all, he says, he just wants to live fully and have fun.

I get my first glimpse into Lauderdale's life while observing Pink Martini practice amid the wonderful clutter of his loft. Beside tall, rain-splashed windows and underneath the warm glow of hanging lights, nine musicians sit in a misshapen circle. Lauderdale teaches the group a Japanese folk song, "Chrysanthemum Forever," which he would like them to perform and include on the new album, slated to be released next year.

The group's many artists, who play everything from xylophones to trumpets, squint at the sheet music and mouth the syllables in Japanese. At first it sounds like atonal gibberish, then Lauderdale chimes in on piano and the chaos evolves into a cohesion of sound, both clunky and elegant.

It's easy to tell this is the same adventurous group that created *Symphatique*.

The album, which was released in 1998, is a fantastic blend of many languages and sounds. It moves from the dark, quirky tones of "Amado Mio" to the self-deprecating "Sympatique" to the loud, inquisitive yearning of "Donde Estas, Yolanda?"

It's clear that Pink Martini is a cultured group, thanks to the effort and enthusiasm of Lauderdale.

A deeper understanding of Lauderdale's psyche comes while spending an afternoon with him the day after the practice—we talk while running errands together, drinking coffee and observing art.

"There's no excuse for boredom," he says, revving the engine of his stylishly ancient automobile. "A lot of people are really scared of having a good time. A lot of people wouldn't have fun if it sat on their face.... Wow, that's a really crass thing to say, isn't it?"

Just after hitting the streets of Portland, we hear a frantic call from the sidewalk: "Thomas!"

Lauderdale screeches to a halt in the middle of a three-lane downtown street. A curly-haired woman runs up to the passenger-side window and asks Lauderdale how he's doing, then invites him to a dance. They chat, then we move on.

"Where are you from?" I ask.

"I don't know," he replies.

"Where were you born?" I ask.

"Oakland," he says, "but I feel like I'm a cross between a Midwestern boy, a Portland boy and a Boston boy. Actually, I feel at home wherever I am."

Lauderdale is the oldest—"and the tiniest," he quips—of four adopted siblings. His descriptions of family life defy convention and are strange and wonderful all at once. His parents got divorced when his father came out at age 42; now Kerby and Linda Lauderdale are best friends.

"I come from a really amazing, fantastic,

supportive, incredible family. I've got a fag for a father and three adopted siblings—everybody's super liberal, very open and honest," he says. "They outed me, actually, when I was in high school. They made jokes about when was I going to bring a boy home; they tried to make me feel really comfortable."

We pull into a parking space beside the Federal Express office. Before going inside, Lauderdale balances his already-lit clove cigarette on the window ledge to await his return.

Lauderdale, who began playing piano at age 6, spent his school years in the moist grip of Portland. He says he was a closet case over-achiever in the Grant High School class of 1988.

"There was always tension because I wasn't comfortable with myself. I chose to do a whole bunch of hyper activities—I got involved with every single thing I possibly could," he says. "People work their stuff out in

strange, different ways."

When his high school years came to a close, Lauderdale's academic prowess earned him a spot in Harvard's class of 1992. He describes his college experience as an extension of high school, but it was "more about developing the theme of fun," he says.

"I mostly threw parties in college," he explains. "I lived in a really artsy dormitory, I paraded around in my dresses—I created atmospheres of fun."

He moved back to Portland after graduating with degrees in history and literature, then to New York for a self-described "summer of finding peace." After a few more moves, he made his way back to Portland again. Now, Lauderdale has the city in his grip.

He half-jokingly sums up Portland in two words: "It's Mayberry." But Lauderdale knows better than to be dissatisfied with the city he lives in. He says the most important thing to do here is be a tourist everyday, to look at the city with new eyes and disregard its limitations.

"I wish more people were out later," he says, referring to the city's early-to-bed habits. "But Portland is an amazing city to live in right now because it's so accessible. You can walk down the street and see the mayor."

"Why are you here?" I ask.

"Because I want to make the city better. I also want to make my life better," he says, "I want to create beautiful music that I'm really proud of."

After more errands, Lauderdale takes me to the Giant Steps coffeehouse on Northwest Glisan Street. By now I've learned not to be surprised that he knows everyone there.

I ask him how he's become familiar with so many people. "It's a small town—super small. I also run around in a

bunch of different circles, which is entertaining and good," he says.

We sit and talk for a while with his friends, then we walk a few blocks down to the Pacific Northwest College of Art to see the Senior Preview show. He knows everyone there, too.

We hit the streets again after seeing the show, eating dinner and talking with friends. On the drive back to his loft, Lauderdale shares some thoughts on life and a few of his theories on being queer.

"I think John Waters says it best when he says, 'Being gay is not enough.' I think, in this era, it's really about being post-gay." Lauderdale hums between sentences. "It doesn't matter who you're sleeping with—gay people are just as boring as straight people. I want to go to dinner parties where everyone is different," he says.

He tells me he's worried we're not talking to each other enough as a culture, much less singing and dancing enough. This culture is based on silence and denial, he says, and sexuality is a part of that.

"Hopefully what we're generating right now is a culture which is smarter, willing to talk openly, willing to get more complicated. Hopefully there's a growing awareness and a comfort with living inside the whole idea of contradictions," he says.

Lauderdale appears to bask in a perpetually warm glow. His movements are accented by his surroundings as though his life is set to European mood music. He perfectly melts into the mismatched style of his loft, a beautiful clash of many cultures. Lauderdale's record collection spans our great planet. Some might say the scope of his vision spans our planet, too.

"My feeling is that if I'm living exactly as I want to live, I won't have any issues—I can run around with a clear conscience," he says. "We can be whomever we want to be. Some will love it and others may not, but that's certainly not our problem."

■ PINK MARTINI's New Year's Eve party begins at 6 p.m. Dec. 31 at Union Station, 800 N.W. Sixth Ave. Opening acts include *Satan's Pilgrims* and *the Lions of Batucada*. Tickets are \$100 and are available through Fastixx.

