

MUSIC

They're back...

Portland's best export, Pink Martini, swoops into town for a few fast gigs

BY RICH BRAY



Thomas Lauderdale (left front) and his dream team appear uncharacteristically relaxed

Thomas Lauderdale is nothing but energy when we meet at his new digs in downtown Portland. The inside of his loft, built in 1878, allows a glimpse into the head of a very busy, extremely talented man.

The walls are covered with posters of past gigs and old movies. Books and CDs are everywhere. Also everywhere is Heinz, Lauderdale's large yellow dog and the namesake of the band's independent record label.

There is humor and relaxation amid this chaos, and I feel immediately comfortable there. The cheerily busy Lauderdale just recently moved in, and the spare, neat lofts featured in *Architectural Digest* don't appear to be in his future.

The young gay musician is well-known as the founder and artistic director of Pink Martini, a Portland band that has surely arrived. Reflecting influences from classical chamber music, French music halls and foreign films, the group has recorded only one album, *Sympathique*, which has become a cult and commercial hit, selling 325,000 copies worldwide. Not bad for a self-released effort.

This past year has been as busy a whirl for Lauderdale and the band as this next year is shaping up to be. In November, Pink Martini completed a marathon 25-city tour of Europe. The group performed three nights with the Hollywood Bowl Orchestra in September and three concerts in Taiwan last August.

Rave reviews abound. Pink Martini's unique sound also can be heard on the soundtrack to *Nurse Betty* and has been used on the television shows *The Sopranos*, *The West Wing* and *Third Watch*.

Travel is a constant in Lauderdale's life as he recalls a recent trip to the Cannes Film Festival, where he accompanied the band's singer, China Forbes, on piano during a late-night party in a chateau.

He's especially appreciative of the Cannes night life, which only begins after 2 a.m. "One of the small disappointments of Portland is there is no late-night culture." Reflecting on the energy of cities like Barcelona, Lauderdale says Portland is not "hot, sweaty and pulsing."

Lauderdale and Forbes recently rerecorded "Donde Estas, Yolanda?" for European release.

This spring and summer the band will alternate between touring and recording. Recording is scheduled to begin in a few weeks on the highly anticipated second album. Long before it is complete, the band will leave in April for a month's tour of Europe, then head back to Portland for more recording, then return to Europe in July.

Scheduled for tentative release in spring 2002

and still untitled, the new album will have something of a Japanese theme. Describing the new sound, Lauderdale uses the word *ukiyo*. Literally "floating world," it originally was a Buddhist term meaning "this transient life in which we suffer."

"Between 1600 and 1868 the meaning slowly changed to the more optimistic 'the temporal moments of joy in this life,'" Lauderdale explains. He seems to enjoy this philosophy and shift of meaning that "rides the line between incredible joy and sorrow, joy and suffering."

Asked about the content of the album, Lauderdale says Pink Martini will record just about everything it has performed that's not on the first album, then pull the best from that selection. Options include different versions of the same song—some including the full orchestra, others more intimate. Lauderdale's guess is that enough might be left for a third album.

Until now, he hasn't been doing that much writing for the band, but that seems to be changing as the new album will have some songs with his name on them.

"I'm not really a writer but find myself in the position of having to write," he reveals. "Pink Martini is ultimately right now very much a pop band, and there's an incredible pressure to write both inside and outside of the band."

Given the quality and variety of songs on *Sympathique* and all the great material the band already is performing, Lauderdale adds: "It's a definite challenge to try to write songs which are each as good as any of those songs on the first album. It's a huge challenge, if not impossible."

He continues: "I'm not really a writer. I'm mostly a classical pianist and in some ways a politician."

At their upcoming and increasingly rare Portland dates, expect to hear selections from *Sympathique* plus several new songs. I listened to some unreleased tracks off a CD Lauderdale gave me, and the band sounds tighter than ever. The material is fresh and lively and only makes me wish I didn't have to wait so long for the next album. **J**

PINK MARTINI performs 8 p.m. March 29 and 30 at the Aladdin Theatre, 3017 S.E. Milwaukie Ave. The opening act will be 3 Leg Torso Sextet, which plays tangos, gypsy folk and modern chamber music. Tickets are \$15 from Ticketmaster. Pink Martini also will give a free concert 1 p.m. March 29 at Starbucks, 1134 N.W. Glisan St., to promote a new CD released through the coffee conglom.

RICH BRAY writes a little in Portland, sees a career counselor regularly and wishes he'd taken more piano lessons.



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