

MUSIC

Jonesing for Johnson

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In order to capture the complex spirit of the band, let's look at the women who drive this wonderful beast. Lisa Mills is the lead vocalist; everyone else contributes to the harmony: saxophonist Tracy Ferrara, guitarist Laurie Miller, drummer Kim Carson and Leah Hinchcliff (who replaced Patty Mey three years ago) on harmonica and bass.

Hinchcliff lives in Portland, and the rest are based in Washington. Through the years the band played an average of two to three times a month in the Portland area and Eugene.

It would be easy for such an ensemble to fall into a pit of generic musical hell—I think it's actually the sixth level of purgatory. However, the original arrangements and energy that these musicians bring to each tune is spellbinding. (Pink's version of "Lady Marmalade" has nothing on SMJ's killer take.)

Tracy: We started out by mostly covering other people's music, playing our own organic version of the blues.



Lisa: We chose rather obscure songs to cover, eschewing "Mustang Sally" et al. for material that every other band in Pioneer Square might not be playing.

Tracy: Since then, we've all learned how to write, arrange and perform songs in a style that has become our band's signature sound—that funky, bluesy, groove thang.

Kim: It took about a year to settle into what we were doing musically and business-wise. I started playing drums about six months after Swamp Mama first formed. I didn't even own my own drum set at that point. I think we realized at the beginning that we had some-

thing special. We also committed to it as a business venture and started a band fund immediately.

Although they had great success in Seattle, where they were playing all the hot spots for blues, it was in Bellingham, Wash., where their popularity skyrocketed and the financial feasibility of the band became evident.



Lisa



Leah



Tracy



Laurie



Kim

"Swamp Mama Johnson has gone a long way toward proving that chicks can play their instruments, run their own label and write their own songs."

—Laurie Miller

SMJ's following grew, and they were able to start laying down some tracks. *Riverhops* was recorded and mixed in 17 hours, an amazingly short amount of time for an 11-song album.

The sales from that cassette completely paid for the second venture. No loans were needed for *Wetlands*, an unthinkable feat at that time in independent music. From there, SMJ began and continued a breakneck touring schedule of 50 weeks a year. Along the way, they recorded *Peachfish Stew* in '97 and *Fresh, Raw and Live* in '99.

Kim: We became an event. There was this dive of a bar we played at for years. We would have 200

people at every show. Bikers, farmers, hippies, rednecks, lesbians. A strange collection of people that would usually never be together. But for three hours it was OK—it created an entirely new community.

They even learned to play pretty good for a so-called "girl band." How hard is it to overcome negative images of female musicians, and doesn't that get old after 10 years?

Lisa: Over the years I think people stopped seeing us as a "girl band" and started seeing us as a band. It is unfortunate that "girl band" is

synonymous with "not very good band" and that in the year 2001 women still have to climb up that hill.

Laurie: Swamp Mama Johnson has gone a long way toward proving that chicks can play their instruments, run their own label and write their own songs. We've shown lots and lots of young girls that it can be done, and lots of adult women that it still can be done...and they can be the ones to do it.

Leah: Every time we play, we are smashing stereotypes that women can't play, that we have to be sexy and skinny to be popular and that we aren't competent to be successful. In every way this band has been on the front lines proving that we not only do it, we do it better.

Kim: People don't expect women to play aggressively. I still get comments from guys from that perspective. Just last weekend I had one say to me: "You're really good! I thought you were a guy up there!" I guess it was a compliment and took it that way. [Grins]

Tracy: If SMJ has shown the world anything, it's that truly good music is genderless. People come to our shows because the music is appealing and well performed.

All power to the sisterhood (raise your fist here) aside, the inevitable question arises: What's it really like being in an all-female band for 10 years?

Leah: Playing in an all-woman band definitely has its ups and downs. PMS—need I say more, to the power of five?

Lisa: It's nice knowing someone always has a spare tampon.

Leah: On stage I trust these women more than any other group I've ever played with. Being part of this has given me more confidence than I have ever felt before. Like together we create a formidable presence and power. I've never connected to a mixed-gender band like that before.

Tracy: There is a lot of inner strength that can be tapped into by playing in an all-women band. Playing with these four other women over the years—personal and menstrual tension aside—has shown me that women can do anything, even punch a big successful hole in the genre/profession that is more about the exploitation of women than its artistic appreciation of them.

Swamp Mama Johnson remains one of the most popular bands in the Pacific Northwest. It's hard to understand why a group still making incredible music would be retiring.

Laurie: As a business we were successful and achieved in a large measure what we set up to do. As a musical entity, we touched people.

They play our songs at their weddings, use our songs as personal anthems. I love that. The secret of a long life is knowing when it's time to go.

Lisa: All things come to an end; it's only a matter of when and how. We have decided to choose the manner in which SMJ closes its chapter. Let us leave the arena with cheers ringing in our ears rather than apologetic silence. It is time once again for the members of Swamp Mama Johnson to evolve.

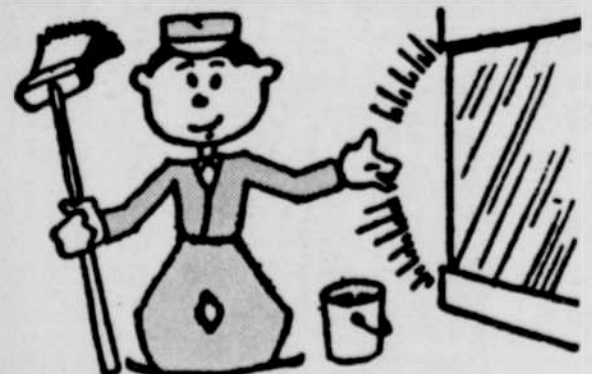
Don't miss your final opportunities to see this amazing band perform.

There is no group doing what they do. Their music and magic will be greatly missed. [F]

SWAMP MAMA JOHNSON will perform 6:30 p.m. July 31 at Mount Tabor Park and 2 p.m. Sept. 16 at the Eugene Celebration. Its schedule and CDs are available online at www.swampmama.com.

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