



Pink Martini and the Brain

Inside the beautiful mind and music of Thomas Lauderdale

BY FLOYD SKLAVER • PHOTOS BY MARTY DAVIS

The first time I saw Thomas Lauderdale, he was in a tartan plaid skirt riding down the street on a scooter and waving to passersby. Since then, I've seen him in an elegant black strapless evening gown and a frilly pink tutu. Each time, his closely cropped hair has been a different shade of platinum. ("This isn't my natural color," he jokes.)

But, as everyone knows, the 34-year-old Lauderdale is more than a dandy out to draw attention. He is a brilliant, classically trained pianist who has soloed with symphonies around the country and is the founder and leader of Portland's über-popular Pink Martini. The Harvard graduate formed the "little orchestra" 10 years ago to perform at fundraisers for progressive causes he supports, including public broadcasting, the library, affordable housing and, of course, civil rights.

A huge hit from the start, the band released its first album, *Sympathique*, in 1997 on Heinz Records. (Heinz is Lauderdale's 12-year-old mutt, whose continual demands for attention interrupt our interview. At one point Lauderdale slathers peanut butter onto Heinz's muzzle to stop him from whining. It works, and the

dog hoists his 96 pounds onto an overstuffed chair and contentedly licks the gooey delicacy from his mouth and nose.)

Sympathique, with its blend of jazz, classical and Latin music, became an international sensation, selling more than 650,000 copies worldwide—half of them in France. It also led to appearances in nightclubs and concert halls on three continents, as well as inclusion on movie soundtracks and compilation CDs.

Obviously, such success would lead to demands for an encore. But Lauderdale, who had never written a song before, became stymied by his own demands for perfection.

As the years passed, the anticipation (and pressure) mounted, and when word leaked out that recording had begun, fans everywhere bubbled with excitement. Now, after a seven-year wait, Pink Martini's second album, *Hang on Little Tomato*, has been released. It is garnering rave reviews and capturing the hearts and imagination of listeners globally. (It was recently ranked No. 21 on Amazon.com.)

Just Out had the opportunity to sit down with Lauderdale this month to discuss the new album, the creative process and his thoughts on Portland.

Floyd Sklaver: I'm not going to ask what took so long because I know you don't like to talk about it. But what was it like enduring the years of impatience from fans waiting for the sequel to *Sympathique*?

Thomas Lauderdale: It's sort of surreal because we live in a culture that's not used to standing in line. Everything is all about immediate, instant gratification and...the whole concept of taking time is not something that's ever really talked about.... We certainly could have released something a long time ago and could have probably done pretty well with whatever it was. I don't know that I could necessarily live with myself just releasing something for the sake of pacifying the general public or selling something.

FS: What do you mean?

TL: The goal was to create something that I would love to listen to myself in 20 years. That was the goal. I'm not quite sure if we achieved that. I'm still too close to it to really know what I think of this record. What do you think of it?

FS: I adore it. I haven't stopped playing it.
TL: Really? It was hard. This one was really

hard because we were writing all of the material, and that's such a different thing.

FS: Let's talk about that, because it hasn't been mentioned in any of the reviews. The last album was essentially covers—great covers, but you weren't writing them.

TL: Right, right. It's easier to start with a masterpiece like "Bolero" or "Que Sera Sera"...with the first record we started out with fantastically amazing material, and to try to generate basically all of the material from nothing was just crazy.

FS: How so?

TL: I mean, it's not my instinct to be a songwriter. I'm a classical pianist.... Writing a song was the last thing I ever expected to do...and so the idea was that, yes, I'm not a songwriter, but this is what we're engaged in doing, and we should make it as good as possible.

FS: Why did you decide you wanted to write yourself?

TL: I don't know. It almost seemed like everybody in the band kept saying, "We have to write all of our own material." I could have

