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La Dolce Vita

Thomas Lauderdale counts his blessings

Thomas Lauderdale seems to find more energy the older he gets.

The gay 36-year-old, who has fronted the band Pink Martini since 1994, performed a solo gig April 29 to help raise money for the cultural and educational programs of Oregon Nikkei Endowment. The next day he was in Salem to rally for increased arts funding. The Oregon Cultural Trust praised him for speaking "eloquently about the inspiration and resources provided to him by the Oregon Historical Society—which since 2003 has become only one of six state historical societies in the nation without state funding."

All this while promoting the band's outstanding third disc, *Hey Eugene!*, which hits stores May 15. (FYI: The title doesn't refer to the Oregon college town but rather to a New York City man who snubbed Pink Martini chanteuse China Forbes.) After celebrating the release locally, the band will jet to Europe for two weeks of concerts and television appearances before making its Carnegie Hall debut June 13.



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Thomas Lauderdale

After sipping absinthe in the Park Blocks, we sat down outside Jake's Famous Crawfish to discuss a wide range of subjects.

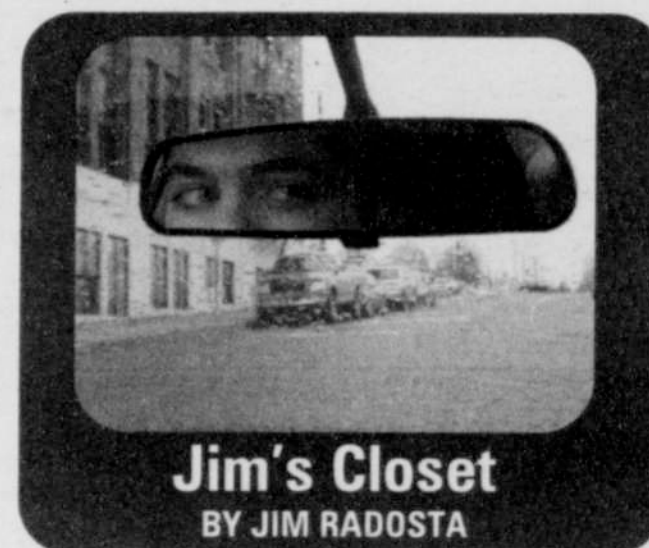
On his hometown:

"I love this city so much, I guess I worry that it's becoming overrun with people who are not necessarily from here who don't have an appreciation for its really progressive and dynamic history. Historically, the people who came to Oregon came west not to become rich, because those people really went to California during the Gold Rush. The people who came to Oregon...wanted to find a better life which was compatible and respectful of the land. There's that old joke about the fork in the road, and the people who could read the sign at the fork went north to Oregon."

On local politics: "What's missing right now in the city of Portland is this certain kind of leadership. I don't think right now we have a mayor who articulates...the dream for the city in a really beautiful, accessible and dynamic way. One of the amazing things about the Neil Goldschmidt years [1973-79] was that he had a staff of like 30 to 40 incredible people who were out in the community, who were highly visible, who were diplomatic, who were sexy and who got people to be better than they were."

On his fans: "Pink Martini audiences are great wherever we are. The band, in a way, is sort of like a small, little, tiny utopia. It's a fabulous escape with an audience which is largely very diverse—it's people from different ages. It's beautiful, festive, shifting music with the sense of a film like *Breakfast at Tiffany's* or *La Dolce Vita*.... If the United Nations in 1962 had a band, it would look like Pink Martini."

On global success: "We're really very lucky.... Everybody in the band bought a house. Part of it has to do with the fact that we remain independent....



Jim's Closet
BY JIM RADOSTA

If we were on a label, the band would maybe make 25 to 50 cents a record, to be then split up between how many ever members there are—10 to 12 to 15—versus being on our own label, we make like \$8 a record. That's just a huge difference.

"All I can say is thank God for NPR, college radio and incredibly devoted fans. Oh, and symphony orchestras, which have really allowed the band to travel inside the United States.... It's not like we're a band who gets stoned and then gets in the cargo van and goes toodlin' down the freeway. It's more like the band that travels in *Some Like It Hot*...except there are only a couple of drag queens."

On growing up: "Last year was a rough year but an important year. [Lauderdale lost his sister Jenny to a drug overdose; his best friend, 92-year-old Louise McLean; and Heinz, his dog and label namesake.] I worry that I'm not as fun as I used to be.... I was living too much of a slightly rock 'n' roll lifestyle, and ultimately it doesn't really quite work.... It was a sobering year, literally."

On the recording process: "The second album was so hard. I was terrified that I was gonna fail and disappoint everybody.... It was a disastrous time. [At this point in the interview, gay Portland City Commissioner Sam Adams approaches our table to warble Billie Holiday's "Strange Fruit." Don't ask.] I don't really listen to it.... When I hear something from *Hang on Little Tomato*, all I hear is the labor, and it reminds me of sadder times.

"This was just a peppier, joyous, much easier album to work on. We recorded it in less than a year; we were in good spirits throughout.... 'Hey Eugene!' is the poppiest song we'll probably ever make—unless we decide to do disco remixes. If Ethel Merman can do it, so can Pink Martini."

On bandmate China Forbes: "She's like the diva next door. She has all the quality of being a diva—great voice, beautiful to look at, intelligent, sexy, smart, hilarious—but she has a lower voice which soars, so in that sense her voice is approachable.... And she's really friendly—except for sometimes." 19

PINK MARTINI performs with members of the Harvey Rosencrantz Orchestra, the March Fourth Marching Band and the David York Ensemble 8 p.m. May 15 and 16 at Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall, 1037 S.W. Broadway. Tickets are \$27.50-\$65 from the box office or Ticketmaster.

Arts and Culture Editor JIM RADOSTA needs your feedback. Write to jim@justout.com.