

“The master must speak to you”

The small matter of an interview with Captain Beefheart

by Byron Coley

This interview with Don Van Vliet was conducted in New York City in November 1978, shortly after the release of *Shiny Beast*. It was only assigned (by NY *Rocker*) the day before it happened and represents my first “professional” q&a. For that reason, some of the follow-ups are pretty lousy, and yr humble interviewer was more intimidated than he should have been. The questions were cobbled together during an all night drinking session with my old friend & fellow Beefheart devotee, Robert Carey. We didn’t have any “research materials” apart from the records, so we just went and saw the show at the Bottom Line, wrote some stuff down, and I walked that long Warner Bros. hallway to the interview room somewhat like a lad on the way to the gallows, claspng a copy of Joseph Spence’s *Good Morning Mr. Walker* (and maybe the Orchid Spangiafora EP) under my sweaty arm.

Parts of this were transcribed at the time and ran in NYR, but it was only during a recent spate of research on the Magic Band that the interview tape was fully transcribed. It’s curious because it must have been one of Don’s first interviews with the “new wave” press and he’d obviously been told to say that he liked any band that was mentioned who he’d never heard. Later interviews were rather less accomodating of this stuff. As the tape begins rolling we’re talking about some art film...

Don: Yellow is so hard to deal with.

BC: Not if you’re colour blind.

But yellow is...Van Gogh dealt well with yellow, but so many painters have really blown it in my opinion.

Well, I saw it on a black & white TV set, so I missed that part. Um, how did you get this current band together?

Thank you for calling it a current band. Because the thing is that they really do have a current, don’t they?

Yeah. They play together as though they’d been doing it for a long time.

The thing about them is that they won’t work. Which is fantastic. My other groups, in the past, have fallen into work patterns. When that happens, that’s it, I leave. But these guys – it ain’t work to them. That’s excellent. Why put pyjamas on somebody and then turn on the lights? I’m in seventh heaven with these guys. I just wish that I wasn’t ill – did you see me over there?

Yeah.

Well, maybe you didn’t see me the night when the monitor machine went out.

The soundman seemed very harried.

He was a nice guy. But you know how sound is, for god’s sake. Why do you think he [points to photographer] takes pictures? Sound is a shit. Hey, want to trade one of those for a Balkan Sobranie? These are really good. They don’t hurt your throat.

I think there are some okay American cigarettes.

Camels.

I like Chesterfields.

They’re good.

I’m hoping I can save enough coupons to get a big house.

Get an iron lung. [to photographer] Did you ever meet Diane Arbus?

P: Yeah, I did once.

D: I knew you did. I’m a bit of a clairvoyant ~ just a bit of one. But I knew that you had. And by god wasn’t she great? Shit. Goddamn. She didn’t even think man or woman or anything, she was above all of that. When she shot...what did she say? Are you listening Jan? He met

Diane Arbus. Jan! (whistles) She’s got to hear this because she loves Diane Arbus. Where’s my horse, Jan? You know that Stravinsky called me to his house while I was doing a thing called “Trout Mask Replica”? Laura Huxley called and wanted me to go meet him. She said, “*The master must speak to you.*” And I didn’t go. Because of the fact that I was deeply involved in that album. The people I was with...if I would have left at the time they probably would have run right out the doors. So I didn’t go and I’ve never forgiven myself for that. You know I sold Aldous Huxley a vacuum cleaner, an Electrolux.

A good one?

Oh, very good. I wouldn’t have done it otherwise. I have a hard time selling anything. But that was one thing that was worth it, because it had a little bag – at that time there was a little paper bag and it just sealed off and you could dispose of it so easily. But I didn’t even know it was him when I met him. But after a few minutes I thought – this fellow is an awfully powerful, unusual individual. He could hardly see. He was very tall, but stooped over. “I want that,” he said. I said, “Well, I assure you sir, this thing sucks.” It was kind of corny, but I had read “A Brave New World Revisited” and I had seen a picture of him. So by the time I got to say that to him I knew it was him. He was great. Up in Lano, California, up near Pearblossom in the high desert. He wrote a thing up there called “The Crows of Pearblossom”. That guy wrote some stuff. An Englishman coming that far out of himself is amazing. Have you been to England? Then you know what I mean. The idea of him being able to get through all that school. [to photographer] Where did you go to school?

P: Rhode Island School of Design.

I’ll bet it’s good. They do some good things back here. Do you know...what’s his name, Jan? He does black and

white...god, I've been talking so much around here. What is the name of that, Jan? Arthur what?

Jan: Rudow. R-U-D-O-W.

Rudow, he's with Newsweek. He's the assistant editor or something. We ate at this restaurant. What was the name of that restaurant?

J: I'm going to go in the other room and read.

At the show the other night you mixed a lot of old material with the new. Do you think that'll make it harder for this band to develop its own identity?

I don't think so. Because I thought it would just be a nice idea to see a band playing those things I did on "Trout Mask" and "Lick My Decals off Baby" and smiling and laughing. Those other guys were having so much work playing that stuff that they were brittle. That was part of the mystique ~ the fact that other than Rockette Morton they were all rigid. These people are superior. I hate to say superior for god sake. You know, mother superior. But they are definitely way above the thought patterns of those people. Some of those people had quite a few prejudices and things like that, which stamps out any kind of creativity.

So there will be less old stuff played after this tour?

Definitely. But it's kind of hard to not play a few of those things. You heard them hollering for certain requests. I said, "You paid six dollars for a jukebox?" What could I say? I'm trying to weed out those older things. I have so many new things that it would be absurd to play those old things for much longer. I didn't do "Big Eyed Beans from Venus". That's quite a thing right there, to get by with not doing that. And they didn't say that much. Well, they said a few things. (fake yells) "Big Eyed Beans." There was quite a chorus.

After "Dropout Boogie" you made a kind of pointed remark about the new wave, Devo specifically.

Well, I was teasing. I wouldn't stop progress.

Have you heard Pere Ubu?

They're pretty good, aren't they? What about the Weirdos?

I'm not that into them.

I'm not either. Not after what I heard about their nazism and facism. It reminds me of that orange juice chick, what's her name?

Anita Bryant.

Uggh.

But some of Ubu's older stuff uses musettes and really has a kind of "25th Century Quaker" feel.

It does? I've got to hear some of that stuff. I haven't heard it. I can't afford to buy it. Are you kidding? Me? How can I afford to buy that stuff. But Devo have one of my entire drum parts on their songs. But why do they put the Rolling Stones' "Satisfaction" together with "Ant Man Bee"?

All their original stuff was written on electronic drums. Supposedly their old drummer is building them a new set right now.

Do you think that's good? I wonder about electronic drums. That's kind of frightening. Can you imagine a cat with a steel pad...

With wheels.

Eewww, ewww...I hate to see people avoid the heart like that. I like Stockhausen, a lot of his stuff. I like *him* better than I do his music, I think, him himself.

What sort of things were you doing before "Safe As Milk"?

I did a thing called "Out of the Frying Pan Into the Fire". It was about the fellow that invented blood plasma, I mean the usage of it. They let him bleed to death in the street, a black man. That's what I meant by that, which is pretty frightening. It says, "Go downtown/I walk around/The man comes up says he's gonna put me down/You try to succeed to fulfill your need/You get hit by a car the people watch you bleed/Out of the frying pan into the fire/Anything you say they's

gonna call you liar." What do I think of the new wave and punk rock movement, is that what you want to know? I think it's a damn good idea that they get rid of that fixated heartbeat. But I hope they don't avoid the fact that the heart is what pumps the blood. But I think it's nice that they're delving into the fact that now music has no investigative qualities and no word transformation and a lot of these things that I hear have no regard for any kind of research or any kind of breaking down of cataracts. I may get hardening of the arteries, but I'll never get hardening of the eyes. Quote. And people should have the right to make their own preferences. And believe me a lot of people don't have the right, it seems that people are trying to take that right away from people. Well, Anita Bryant - people hater. And the people love her. Present company excepted, I'm sure *we* hate her. But man, there's an awful lot of people who don't. And that's frightening at this point. This is 1978. Isn't it frightening? That's the thing that scares me more than anything.

I read in a paper in San Francisco that she had been voted the worst woman in the world by schoolkids.

That's encouraging, but that's just in San Francisco. San Francisco has always been tolerant of everything hasn't it? New York, too. I love New York.

There are some spots in the middle of the country that are okay, too.

Man, I wouldn't want to be in any of them. Would you? You know where Ezra Pound was from, right? Nebraska or something. The idea that somebody like Ezra Pound could come out of Nebraska was quite amazing to me. Most people down in Texas say, "It don't hurt 'em." When they burn those cows. Good god, What do you think of that? Think of *any* brand.

The new album seems to be heading off in a new direction.

Well, I'm gone, man. I'm gone. I couldn't even put out an album. After you do something like "Lick My Decals Off, Baby" - meaning, get rid of the labels - the labels get rid of you. It's the truth. Pete Johnson is one who fortunately signed me to Warners.

What happened when you got off Warners before?

Terrible things. It was a power of attorney thing. I had signed a power of attorney thing to an attorney in Los Angeles. I had a corporation called God's Golfball, which was referring to the game of business. A golfball is supposed to stay up high in the air. But he signed me off of Warner Brothers, the son of a bitch, in the middle of the night.

Cheap son of a bitch.

Not that cheap. It's taken me a lot to get out of it and I don't have a lot.

Was that about the same time as the split-off of the band as Mallard?

Weren't they a bunch of quacks? They ducked. With a name like that you can't fly, but you can duck. That's what I think. I mean, imagine it. Imagine six years of being with people. And they left five days before a tour of the United States and Europe. That's pretty nonchalant. Or something else.

Who played drums on "Trout Mask"?

Well, the thing with that is that Herbie Cohen didn't put who played drums on that, sort of casual again. But obviously it's Drumbo. If anybody didn't know that...you knew that. You know you knew that. God, anybody'd know him.

What do you think of covers of your songs, like the Tubes' "My Head Is My Only House"?

I thought at first that it was awfully nice. I even played harp on a thing on that album called "Golden Boy" and they turned it way down. And I played soprano on a thing called "Cathy's Clone". I like the girl who wrote it. I think she wrote that good. And I was really playing. I told her, "I like what you've done. And I'll really play for you." And I played it. I really thought it would be on there, but it was turned down, way down. I don't want anybody to govern me. That I didn't like too much.

How about "Alice in Blunderland" by Henry Kaiser's band?

Well, that's Elliot Ingber's solo, really. I did that for Elliot. I put that together and

gave him the complete freedom to play whatever he wanted on guitar, which I thought he should get. He never got it with Frank. He's really great. He wrote "Don't Bogart That Joint"?

What does Elliot do now?

He lives in Hollywood, right across the street from a windows-darkened-up bookstore, one of those places - gynecology shots and whatnot - trophies. But he lives there on Santa Monica Blvd., down from the Pink Pussycat, which is really funny. But he just plays all the time. He'll play again with me. He will. I think he's one of the greatest melodicists of guitar who ever lived. He's been a tremendous influence.

What's the deal on the original "Bat Chain Puller". Is it different than this one?

Oh, definitely. Glen Kolotin was the engineer on this album and man, I think he's one of the better living engineers. He did Stravinsky's last album. On this album you can hear everything. Isn't that amazing. I wish on "Trout Mask" you could hear everything.

You weren't happy with the way it came out?

Well, the idea of being able to do an album like that in that time was amazing. I was lucky to have gotten it out. I was lucky that Frank gave me the opportunity to get it out. How it was merchandised was disgusting, but I can't put that on Frank Zappa. What could he do about that? It's just business. I mean, he's being sued right now. You know that? He's locked out of one of the places he owns. He's in a big lawsuit. Not by Warner Brothers, but by an unmentionable jerk. I don't even want to mention his name. I don't think the press should have his name in it. I wouldn't want to give the unmentionable character fuel of any kind.

What's "Apes Ma" about?

It's obvious, isn't it? *"You're eating too much/You're going to the bathroom too much, Apes Ma/And Apes Ma, your cage isn't getting any bigger, Apes Ma."* That's self-explanatory. I think that's fairly good poetry.

Did Mary Jane do her own choreography for that?

She did that herself and in about ten minutes. She got that stuff at a food store. She's good, man. That is a great dancer. I think she's the best living dancer. The truth has no patterns, but I think maybe she is the best. I know she sure as hell can think. And that's the sixth time she's ever played maracas. The sixth time. She's never been out with a band, never played an instrument. Man, that I find really uplifting. She dug Eric Dolphy. She did a piece that no one would ever do, to a thing that Dolphy did that was pretty far out. He was really hip. It was thing called "Senor something". I can't remember the name of it. I knew Dolphy. I hope he doesn't come down and get me for this, because I can't recall the name of the tune. Probably because I write so many tunes, all of the time.

So she just came along with Bruce, pretty much?

Yeah. She likes my music.

Everybody likes your music.

I don't think everybody likes my music. If everybody liked my music they wouldn't buy orange juice from that damn woman we were talking about.

Do you listen to any new music?

Well anybody who's going on at all now used to be a lot better. I was in England and I played a thing in France - a festival. There were 10,000 people in the rain, and me under a thing where the rain didn't hit me. I was feeling sorry for people in the rain. Things like that are hard if you're at all feeling. I apologized at least 12 times, I probably bored everyone to tears. That's not good business. God that was horrible. It's wonderful to see people out in the rain, but not with me under a canopy. Do you know how cold it was that night? It would freeze the fur on a fishing pole, I'll tell you that. Contact lenses would be frightening in that kind of cold. I think it must have been at least 10 below.

You did a cover for the album "Blorpe Essette".



Oh, Ace and Deuce. I like those guys. They seem to be among those people who have a hold. Which is why I did that. I was quite annoyed by the fact that he put "Blorpe Essette" right in the middle of my drawing. I think he could have found some other way to do that. He's a nice guy.

Are you familiar with the Residents?

They're pretty damn good. I like them. I think they're really quite good. But I don't have much time to listen to anything. I'm doing this and doing that and training this and training that and trying not to train anything. An artist is probably the one who kids himself most gracefully. Because somebody doing what I've created in an awful responsibility. It puts me in a sort of jail.

Are you still doing sculpture?

Oh yeah.

Your music is very sculptural.

Well, that's it. That's what I am. That's why. It's all textures and stuff.

Have you ever heard Joseph Spence?

I've never heard of him. What does he do?

He's a guitar player from the Bahamas.

Does he just do that constant beat? Man I hate that heartbeat being driven into my mind like that. That, I think, has got to change. That's what all of the drums things I've ever done have tried to do - to change that. Because if that doesn't change to some degree - and I think it won't be changed by electronics and I think that it won't be changed with mechanicals - that's why no electric drums. They could just hook you right into GE.

What kind of influences do you see on your music?

None. Never. You know why? Because it would be a distortion of a prism - a color distortion. I think that an artist should be exactly what he is or she is. I don't think that influences...

Everybody takes in so much information.

I don't. There's books that I'd love to read - love to read. But I don't want to get influenced by them. I think it would stop me. [to photographer] I can see what you do being an awful bombardment. It's a hard act, one of the hardest. Have you had any exhibits?

P: I had one in New Orleans.

I know a fellow that just went down there. He was sitting at a bar...did you hear that horn? It threw me right out of my thought pattern. He sells space shoes in San Francisco. You'd love this guy. He's incredible. And I think they make the best space shoes. Have you seen Murray's space shoes? They're like these things - they get moulded to your foot. They feel so good. But this guy up here is the best. The best I've ever seen. I'm going to have three or four pairs made. I don't know how I'll pay for them, 'cause I probably won't have enough money to walk after paying for hundred and a quarter apiece. But I've

had these ones for seven years. They last forever. I find that these are cheaper than any other way. You just revamp these things and they look brand new. If I wanted to really shine these things and dye them they'd look brand new. But this fellow is so good that he's definitely an artist. You should get some of these. His name is Travis and you should go see him.

But I never have enough money.

The thing is, you should save it and get a pair of these. You'll never forget it. You don't even know you have feet. Think about not knowing you have feet. You'd love it. That's the thing - get away from the feet and the head is fine. Because the foot touches everything and that does it up here. When I paint with these things on... I have a pair that I do nothing but paint in. And I can completely get out of here with these things. You know who told me about these? It was a fellow, when I was five years old, named Eden Ahbez - they call him The Nature Boy. He wrote the song "Nature Boy". Really good song (whistles it). I'm so hoarse. I whistle with my vocal cords, real unusual whistling. But I'm so hoarse from this tour that I can't really keep in tune, which is frightening. Because I sing with my vocal cords. If I go (whistles) then I know I'm not going to be able to sing, until I can whistle in tune. Although that was in tune. But you see there's a restriction on tuning. People like music to be in tune because they've heard it in tune all the time. Like a camera - the way it's going to be is the way that the camera is constructed. I tried to break out of that on an album called "Trout Mask Replica". I really tried to break that down. I made it all out of focus. I untuned the piano I wrote it on. One musician - I mean *really* a musician - Art Tripp came in and said, "I've got to fix some of these keys." I said, "Oh, no." He went to the Manhattan School of Music. So I got an Erector Set, when he was going to join my group. I said, "Well, this is a test. Form means nothing to me. Just take this Erector Set," - I'd built a little thing. And I said, "Now squeeze this Erector Set." Because he'd gone to the Manhattan School of Music he was very form-minded. Although it's better than Julliard, where for most people they just make a mould. But I said, "How does that feel?" He says, "It's horrible." I said, "Well, then, am I right?" He said, "Oh, that's right." So that was

better. I'm going to start lecturing soon at all the colleges and stuff. And the thing is I'm going to start telling people the way I do music. Because I have a different way of doing music. I'm a sculptor. And it does definitely pour form that.

Do you think they'll get it?

I think it will go into their minds. I think everybody who has ever...do you hear those horns? Do you hear them? Well, then, of course they hear my music. Everybody hears my music. It's a matter of whether they want to or not. Everybody hears everything. Like, I don't believe that people say they don't hear that horn when that's there. That's what gets me. What the hell are they doing? What are they doing? People must know they're wrong. They must know that some of things that they're doing are so far back that a train don't go there. They must realize that and yet they still have the same concept. I'm talking about preference. Like weight, fascism, they don't change, man. Who in the world can say one thing is the same way? You heard that horn, but you heard it differently than I heard it. Maybe. And you heard it different. That's what I mean. I've gotta start writing. I'm gonna get political and then I won't be worth a shit. All those stupid people in high places - that's politics. That is politics - stupid people in high places. A beatnick poet in Santa Monica, when I was 13 and Frank Zappa was 13, he was with me - we were the same age - and we heard this guy and he says, "If you don't mind stupid people in high places, you'll love the government." He had a pair of dark glasses and a suit. I stood up and I said, "Yeah. Woo. I agree with you." They almost kicked me out of the club. Now, why would they almost take me out of the club if they had somebody like that there saying things like that? There are so many contradictions. So right there I knew that the guy who tried to take me out of there for standing up and saying that was...it's so crazy.

But can you get them to realise or admit it?

I wonder. I really wonder. Lysergic Acid was one way that people got out of certain things. But the thing is it's too fast, you can't see what's happening because it's too unnatural. Again, I'm back to the drums. You see, I don't think that that's

an answer. I just think that everybody's different. Somebody just being there and trying to project exactly what they think, just standing there. I don't know whether distinction is going to do it, although I'd like to hear it.

Are you looking for ways to break it down?

All the time, but I don't have to break it down because I've never been fixated and I'm lucky. I never went to school in my life.

Not even when you were a little nipper?

Not even when I was a little nipper. I wet my pants when I mother took me to kindergarten. So I did a kindergarten - wet my pants and got violent, 'cause I wanted to get the hell out of there. We were playing with blocks and I wouldn't do it. And I never did do it. Just wouldn't do it. Never.



What do you do about people who have gone through years of that structuring?

Well, I told you what I did with Art. I did that to see if he really thought that was not a painful technique, mentally. And physical is mental, to a degree. It helped him.

What about the rest of the people?

When I play I play to everybody. The fact is that I wouldn't select myself to be playing to fixation. Let's just hope that this new wave is not fixated. That is the thing that worries me about it. Maybe they will fixate themselves within trying to sell their records and whatnot. And use too much shock value. Which I think is not the answer. Because shock value is...it would be a pity if they let this one fall. Man, if they drop the ball this time, like these people did - ewwww. That's a shame, because they have some good ideas. Soap is not one of them, though.

Cleanliness is next to godliness. I really think that. And I think that they're wrong about that. I mean, not too much cleanliness, because your skin would fall off. I've had to take so many showers after coming off stage on this tour that my skin is getting so dry I find myself just putting on this cream. And the only thing I can use is Tom's and it costs so damn much. You know how much this Tom's cream costs? \$1.75, and I've had to use so much of it - my hands are cracking from holding the microphone, playing the teeth. It's just amazing what goes through and what happens. The good things are so damn expensive. Only a few of the wrong people usually get them.

The wrong people have all the money.

Yeah. And that's how they get it. The higher you go the rarer the vegetation. Salvador Dali said that. Although I don't know where he got it. I think I've read that in a classic of one sort or another. An older classic. What do you think about that? Am I right or wrong? Although there is no right or wrong. The truth has no patterns. I put that on "Tropical Hot Dog Night".

I don't know, I have a tendency to think of it in terms of hair. And since I'm going bald...

What? You're going bald? You mean you won't be able to have a new wave? But doesn't it all come down to preferences and decisions? And don't they create a girdle? Although some girdles are pretty hip looking - I mean those old Playtex girdles, oh man! Woooo! Where in the hell can one get some garments around here? I like baggy clothes because they allow more breathing. But I would. I wrote "Big Joan".

And there it ends. We print this interview in its entirety, word for word, without apology, explanation or justification because I honestly believe, sure 'nuff and yes I do, that Don Van Vliet is the greatest living American artist working within or without the field of music. Since I also have a sneaking suspicion that Byron Coley is the greatest living American rock critic, it's a source of great personal pride to be able to achieve two ambitions at once and feature them both in the Terrascope... Phil McMullen, October 1999.

CAPTAIN BEEFHEART & HIS MAGIC BAND – GROW FINS: RARITIES (1965-1982)

(Revenant REV210 5CD box)

BILL HARKLEROAD – LUNAR NOTES: ZOOT HORN ROLLO'S CAPTAIN BEEFHEART EXPERIENCE

(SAF Publishing pbk 0-946719-21-7)

To paraphrase Paul Krassner, I'm not sure where to begin. I feel like I'm about to suck off an elephant or something.

Yeah, Beefheart: just where do you start? And what's not already been said? 17 years after the guy's last official record and it seems like every day somebody's dropping his name, whether it's Noel Gallagher or that airhead DJ Jo Whiley who not long ago made a complete fool of herself on TV by admitting she'd never heard Troutmask Replica and being told by fellow Radio 1 jock John Peel to toddle off home and buy a copy. Don Van Vliet's reputation as one of few truly innovative musicians to have changed the face of rock music is assured as we go into the 21st century – but what kind of price did he and his fellow Magic Band members have to pay to achieve it? At the time of writing the Cap, or as he now prefers to be called, Don Van Vliet, is an acclaimed painter but far from well man, whilst most of his ex-musicians have given up making the kind of groundbreaking music we grew to love and treasure so highly. Perhaps the best place to begin is with Bill Harkleroad's recent kiss-and-tell memoirs of his time as guitarist with what many consider to be the ultimate Magic Band – the one that made Troutmask, Decals, Spotlight Kid and Clear Spot. It's a worthy prelude to Revenant's hugely anticipated 5-CD and book boxed set. Aside from the recent TV documentary, this is the first serious attempt to put all that remarkable music into perspective – books on Beefheart are not every day occurrences! Since messrs Boston, Snouffer, Tripp and Harkleroad (aka Mr Zoot Horn Rollo) quit the band in early '74, tales of Beefheart's alleged beastly inhuman behaviour towards his fellow musicians have circulated widely in rock'n'roll circles. So as you might imagine, the Cap doesn't come out of this tome unscathed. Harkleroad takes us into the intensely insular world of those years, '68 thru '74 (and after, with tales of Mallard – his post Beefheart band which need their own separate piece and re-evaluation; but not here). The suffocating atmospheres of rehearsal rooms, band houses and recording studios are unremittingly recreated: he tells of the desperate way in which the band had to survive on no pay and handouts from friends and family in order to create those incredible albums. Back then it was easy to assume that being signed to a major label and touring regularly, not to mention all the critical acclaim going their way, that it was fat city for these guys – the sense of relief they must have felt to break free from just the poverty (let alone Don's mind games) when they finally got financially fucked over once too many times is almost palpable in these pages. But this biog isn't just a catalogue of moans and groans – we finally get to understand the whole process of how Troutmask came to be. As we might've guessed it was a far lengthier and more complicated experience than Don always claimed it was. And more collaborative! I was very interested to learn that

when Harkleroad first joined up in '68, there were plans to completely re-record Strictly Personal and that in fact two of the numbers for Troutmask were recorded separately with Rising Sons bassist Gary Marker playing on 'em! (More about whom later). Harkleroad also delivers an indispensable track-by-track breakdown of each of those aforementioned albums. Where he's less successful – and this is where co-writer Billy James should've come into his own – is in giving more details of the tours, especially the overseas ones, and more local colour: something John French pleasingly achieves in his own take on the Beef experience in the Revenant box. Then again it seems that members of this particular Magic Band could go for weeks without seeing daylight!

For any self-respecting Beefheart fan, owning the Revenant box set has to be like winning the fucking lottery. Sad but true, a day has scarcely passed since 1968 without me in some way thinking about the Cap'n. A European perspective is perhaps all that the accompanying book to the boxed set lacks – David Fricke's American angle for once simply isn't enough. I'd stick my neck out and say that without the support of his Euro fans, especially the hordes of disciples here in Britain, Beefheart would not have got as far as he did. For the sake of overseas and younger readers, let me explain how difficult it was back in the late '60s to avoid Beefheart's music over here. A lot of that credit has to go to John Peel, without whom it's just possible the Captain & co might've remained little more than the property of record collectors, a Nuggets style rock band or a freak in the vein of Wildman Fisher or the GTOs. Back then if you were seriously interested in 'alternative' or even just interesting music and you lived in the UK, Peel's Night Ride and Top Gear programmes were one-stop shops to find out just what was happening, and since his return from the US in mid-67 Peely had mercilessly plugged the Cap and His Magic Band; indeed it was on Top Gear that I first heard 'Beetle Bones'n'Smokin' Stones' live in session. Coupled with this fact was that shortly afterwards Liberty released a cut-price sampler called 'Gutbucket: An Underworld Eruption' whose opening track was 'Gimme Dat Harp Boy' from Strictly Personal – this cheapo comp found its way into every school, college, squat, club and army hut across the country and Beefheart's name was soon on everyone's lips. Then again all discerning music followers were also reading ZigZag mag by this time, whose very pages were littered with articles and references to the Captain, I mean the mag's very name was inspired by a darn Beefheart song!! It was true to say you couldn't escape from Beefheart madness as the 60s turned into the 70s in Britain – the cheap'n'cheerful Marble Arch label put Safe as Milk at the reach of even the most hard-up fan by re-releasing it for around 17/6 (about 85 pence nowadays). The much-maligned blues boom also threw up some decent bands who took their cue from Lancaster's finest: outfits like Screw and Stackwaddy – the latter a cruder version of those early Beefheart incarnations that had recorded for A&M, belting out slovenly versions of things like 'Sure Nuff "n" Yes I Do' – shit, no wonder Peel couldn't resist signing them to his Dandelion label! Most interesting of all was the Edgar Broughton Band, the one

blues-boomer to make the connection between Howlin' Wolf and Beef's space-age blues. They practically based their image on CB&TMB right down to Edgar's gravel-rinsed bark and huge black Uncle Remus hat. And their 'Drop-out Boogie' was not only a live favourite but formed the basis for what became one of the Harvest label's strangest 7" releases! Hip pirate radio station Geronimo even devoted all of one Saturday night's broadcast to a Beefheart special in May 1970. See what I mean?

But it wasn't all plain sailing. With Beefheart, there was no middle ground. The Cap'n's music especially post-Strictly split us decisively into two camps, into those that loved it and those who hated it (most of my mates). For a bit I wobbled on the fence - when one of my circle finally procured Troutmask in the autumn of '69, we got off easily on the humour of stuff like 'The Blimp' and the album's sole "blues" track 'China Pig', in effect a solo vehicle for ex-band member Doug Moon. Harkleroad throws up a really interesting fact about this in his book. Apparently Doug was visiting the Magic Band house up in the Hollywood Hills one night during the album rehearsals and knocked out a blues tune, just off the cuff. Don reacted to it positively, turned round and harangued messrs Rollo, Morton and Drumbo for not being good enough to play in a conventional 12-bar style - and they just stared back in amazement having spent the previous nine months "unlearning" all that conventional shit! By that stage they couldn't even play that normal kind of stuff to save their lives! But as regards some of the other tracks on there, well I had no experience of free jazz and it was hard going - it was no easy leap from the acidified blues of Strictly Personal to hearing Don and his cousin the Mascara Snake squawking on their horns at the full moon on Troutmask. This was especially so when Decals came along - I think the first track I ever heard off that was 'Flash Gordon's Ape'. Hang on in there I did, though!

Cut to 1972: here in Britain we had been feverishly awaiting Beefheart live and in the flesh since the remarkable '68 shows which I'd sadly been too young to attend. He and band had made it here in '69 after a Belgian festival appearance (a snippet from which is included here on the Grow Fins box) but opted to do press rather than live appearances. In 1970 the organisers of the Hollywood Pop Festival promised us the Cap but in the end we had to make do with the Grateful Dead (not as bad as it might sound but a whole different story). Finally in spring '72 promoter Fred Bannister (I'd like to hear his Beefheart tales!) kept his word and a comprehensive tour was announced. In a way the timing couldn't have been better - it was the end of hippy, pomp-rock battled with glam-rock for centre-stage. Anticipation for something special was keen - the Manchester Free Trade Hall show on April 1st sold out in hours. For me it was the strangest concert I've ever attended - it may have been to do with the support act Foghat who came on and in an over-amplified 45 minutes of heads-down, no-nonsense mindless boogie mercilessly bludgeoned the ears of the audience into total deafness. There was the intermission, followed by the ballerina, then Rockette Morton's cameo before the show started proper - a weird scary evening. Was it that the entire audience were as stoned as parrots, 'cept me and my girlfriend? I've read since there

were major technical problems with the sound. Whatever, I came away numb and disorientated!! Yet six weeks later I saw the same line-up play a remarkable set that exuded fire and humour and confirmed all that I had ever supposed Beefheart music was all about - and I was sitting in a tent in a muddy field hundreds of yards from the stage! I'm talking about the Bickershaw Pop Festival near Wigan - two tracks from the Cap'n's set there grace CD 5 of the Revenant box. They played at some unearthly hour on Sunday morning - I seem to remember sandwiched between Family and the Flamin' Groovies, but they were superb and Don was the happiest onstage I ever remember seeing him be - the (sun zoom) spark and dazzling virtuosity of the band was confirmed by a mate literally sat on the side of the stage who reckoned it was the greatest performance he'd ever seen, especially Mr Zoot Horn Rollo's. The following Monday evening - and just to ram home that point about blanket coverage - on the six o'clock local TV news, Granada Reports (watched by several million people in the North West), there was Don and wife Jan being interviewed about art and painting by a young Tony Wilson. Beefheart's effect on young England was immense, I remember researching my Greasy Bear piece in 1990 and ex-band members CP Lee and Steve Whalley both separately telling me about what an influence CB&TMB was back then, not just in the way they impacted on Greasy Bear's image (the big hats etc) but on Mancunian youth as a whole. I can't help thinking that here in the UK, we psychically succoured the Cap with a kind of undying affection until he retired. And I know a bunch of people who'll never ever have a bad word to say about the 'tragic' band that toured here in '74. They even thought dwarf saxophonist Del Simmons was a divine piece of Beefheartian madness!!

From 72 onwards I was a fully-paid up Beef fan - for life. I saw him and various line-ups play when they'd come to England, followed the spin-offs, notably Mallard whose Roundhouse show I duly trekked down to London to witness, and would check out any band that would play the Beefheart influence card as a matter of course. Even went to see all the exhibitions of his paintings that reached our shores. Which brings me back to this Revenant set. The development of CB&TMB falls conveniently into distinct phases, all of which save the Mercury/DiMartino era are in some way represented here. Material is culled from many different but on the whole obscure sources - there's no direct licensing from any of the labels officially issuing Beefheart product between 1965 and 1982. Bits'n'pieces will be already familiar to die-hard tape collectors, but there's still some amazing sniff-snaff here! CDs 1 & 2 cover the band as it evolved through early dabblings with conventional r'n'b (they even featured a bunch of Stones covers in their early sets to get live work!) through to the sessions that led to Safe As Milk and Strictly Personal and live work-outs at places like the Avalon Ballroom by which time acid had become part and parcel of the music. Pride of place must go to the six tracks that start off this whole shebang which were taken from a 1966 demo tape unearthed only last year in Doug Moon's loft. Better than the A&M Sessions they show that even at an early stage the Magic Band was going way beyond the strictures of normal blues music, which explains how such members as Moon

eventually were forced to leave as the sound got distinctly weirder, more dischordant and the Cap played havoc with those time signatures. Equally revelatory are the sleeve notes which throw some splendid light on these early line-ups – John French, who was in and out of the band more than just about any other player, tracked down and interviewed all those ex-members willing to spill the beans! I was shocked

shanty flavour. I have a coupla minor quibbles, namely that the Bickershaw MB line-up was Harkleroad, Ingber, Boston, Tripp, and Boy (Orejon) Estrada (I'm taking this not just from memory but from the 1972 UK tour programme), and that the 1973 European tour line-up was Harkleroad, Boston, Tripp, Alex St Clair with Boston going back to bass full time. As a whole though this is just top notch stuff and



to learn that as part of the deal to get Ry Cooder in to play lead on Milk Gary Marker was going to produce that debut album – there were all kinds of political shenanigans going down.

CDs 3 & 4 ostensibly cover the rehearsal sessions and general weirdness that was going on in the wake of trying to birth Troutmask – for many Beefheart afficianados this will be the real meat of the collection despite the lo-fi nature of the recordings. There are few classic albums where the listener has become privy to all the minutae going down in the studio in the wake of recording them – CD 3's fly-on-the-wall spyhole perspective now ensures that Troutmask has become one of them. CD 4 contains various pieces of wacked-out dialogue recorded during these sessions – it is also the enhanced disc of the set containing a variety of live film and TV footage, including the two numbers from the Cannes beach gig when messrs Van Vliet, Cotton, French, St Clair and Handley played at the Midem Music Bit Convention there in '68. Priceless stuff! Finally CD 5 takes us from Decals through to 1982 when the last Magic Band was dissolved and Don turned to painting and drawing full time. This is an amazing hedge-podge of delights which for me is capped (no pun intended) by a totally reworked 'Orange Claw Hammer' performed live on US radio in 1975, presumably during the Bongo Fury tour. Here accompanied by Uncle Frank on guitar, Beefheart renders the Troutmask tune, originally bone accapella, into a real *tour de force* new version, bringing out the song's true sea

Richard Redus, guitarist in the band 77/78 has the best take of all on Don when he observes: "I feel like Don is a member of this very small subclass of humanity... they share a certain characteristic: it's as if they were 100% 'psychedelized' all the time... they're like windows into a more profound view of the cosmos. Look at it like they were witch doctors, with darker forces, or more magical forces... sensitive to everything: emotions, visual impressions, sounds, metaphors – very very sensitive people". If I do have one reservation about this release, it's this: what does Don think about the set? During his years as a 'rock' performer Beefheart's favourite topic of conversation was always how the music industry was ripping him off. If he blocked the release in 1983 of all those stunning out-takes from the Warner vaults, then surely he can only view Grow Fins with the same perspective, that it's one more example of the biz taking him for a ride. I hope I'm wrong.

Where this set ultimately scores is as a testimony to the greatness of all the many talented people who played in the various Magic Bands and who went to hell and back to help Beefheart achieve his wondrous musical vision. For without the likes of John French, Bill Harkleroad and all the others, this astounding music might never have reached the planet. And that is something too terrible to contemplate. (*reviews by Nigel Cross*)

Photo above features (left to right) unknown, Frank Zappa, Pete Frame and Don Van Vliet. Thanks to Pete for the pic!

