

# Captain Beefheart, Vorticist artist

1941–2010

**A**fter 766 pages documenting in exhausting detail the life and crimes of Donald Vliet, aka Don Van Vliet aka Captain Beefheart, author and longtime Magic Band member John French searches for an anecdote that can sum him up:

I remember Don once holding a pair of nail nippers in his hand and saying to me, ‘You are looking at these right now, but don’t ever forget that they are also looking at you.’ It was a puzzling statement for a moment, but I grasped that he was saying there are universes within as well as without, and we are collections of matter moving around in relationship to other collections of matter.<sup>1</sup>

This statement is pregnant with suggestion for anyone interested in the subject/object dialectics of Western philosophy, particular those who might wish to combine a radical materialism with a dada absurdism sourced from everyday objects. It was not for nothing that in *Phenomenology of the Spirit* Hegel said: ‘The Enlightenment ... upsets the housekeeping of Spirit in the household of Faith by bringing into that household the tools and utensils of *this* world, a world which that Spirit cannot deny as its own, because its consciousness likewise belongs to it.’ (§486). But how could this extraordinary statement insert itself into the conclusion of a massive biography written by someone who is now a born-again Christian, and who more than once defines Beefheart as a demon? Beyond his silence (no release since the short spoken-word CD that accompanied the *Stand Up To Be Discontinued* catalogue of Beefheart’s paintings in 1993) and beyond the grave (multiple sclerosis finally took him in December), Beefheart’s heavy influence warps the thought of even his detractors.

In drumming for Beefheart and piecing together his bandleader’s hummed and whistled ideas into something other musicians could interpret, not to mention suffering the ‘cult’ aspects of the band’s lifestyle, which included paranoid interrogations, victimizations and even assault, French went through a lot (the reader is spared no detail). The 1960s’ counterculture went wholesale for LSD, subsequently revealed as an invention stemming from US government military research labs, and with ‘freaking out’ and then ‘cybernetics’, it played with other mind-control techniques pioneered by the secret services. In the mid-1960s, Beefheart led bands which sounded like the Yardbirds or Them; by the late-1960s, he was dabbling with the modes of ‘experimental’ social reconditioning which also gave us EST and Charles Manson. No news there; Beefheart was a 1960s’ rock artist. But it’s hard to think of a biography exhibiting such bipolar extremes of love and hate, accolade and accusation, as French’s *Beefheart: Through the Eyes of Magic*. Partly, this is to be explained by its genesis: it’s a patchwork of transcribed interview tapes assembled by an author of rudimentary literary skill and ambition. The book lacks intellectual ‘coherence’. But, in a way, that’s appropriate. Like Frank Zappa, who he grew up with and who was a continual point of reference (and/or thorn of irritation), Beefheart was polemically opposed to the literate, educated overview. To moralize Beefheart would be to betray him. What hope, then, a reluctant obituarist? His art. Because it matters.

Beefheart's art was Vorticist in the manner demanded by Wyndham Lewis in the pages of *Blast*, developing the passage in William Blake's *Milton* where he inveighed against the banal sense of time instilled by institutional Christianity and exploited by the future-dreams of capital investment and speculation. Blake proposed wide-eyed amazement at nature – in cosmos, earth and our own bodies – as the 'heaven' sought by his pious contemporaries, something the mature mind achieves and looks back on, while the unpredictable course of our actual lives on earth becomes the vortex to concentrate on. Lewis amplified this anti-transcendent materialism into the demand that artistic creation should be more than a lifestyle indulgence of the privileged, and actually pack into its physical techtonics the intimation of an existence beyond ideological blandishment. Like Blake in his Preface to *Milton*, and like Captain Beefheart denouncing the 'momma-heartbeat lullabies' of conventional pop-rock, Lewis excoriated the 'hirelings' who have corrupted this artistic cause. The Vorticist polemic glowers at you each time you happen upon a Wyndham Lewis in a provincial art gallery; and each time you hear a track by Captain Beefheart. This clanking, uningratiating, unintegrated *thing* will not serve as decor, or illustration, or ideal, or anything but the assertion of its own irreducible knottiness. Like a burr left by burdock or goosegrass on a silk chemise, Vorticist art is annoying and abrasive, but when made the object of attention, its internal detail and construction make it mind-turning and expansive.

In his review of recent biographies of Syd Barrett (*RP* 165), Howard Caygill analysed the tensions of the counterculture by opposing the art-school destructo-purity of John



Latham, Gustav Metzger and Yoko Ono to the corporate commercialism of the later Pink Floyd. Fine art counterposed to rock in this way runs the danger of reproducing nineteenth-century tropes of class: the self-denying entrepreneur maintaining his integrity while he waits for 'greatness' at the end of the rainbow, whilst his thriftless employees squander all on beer and skittles. Sure, Syd Barrett the art student faced different ways of making it in the world, but his dilemma doesn't summarize the 1960s, or how blues and rock'n'roll reconfigured class and cultural value. Let's swap Career Advice

for Materialist Esthetix. Blues form – the voice of the poet recorded directly on tape or disc without the medium of print – challenged literary values. The 'avant-garde' (Henri Chopin, say, or Bob Cobbing) responded to this challenge; the 'mainstream' pretended nothing was happening, only registering surprise that everything they did became tepid by comparison. The whole history of Black music in America, occluded in an art/rock opposition (as a glance at the pages of *The Wire* today will reveal), shows that commercialism *can* deliver artworks of power unimagined by the Lathams, Metzgers and Onos: records by Duke Ellington, John Coltrane and James Brown (to name but three). Vorticist artworks succeed because they do not depend for their power on ideologies of status or distinction, but actively create the spaces in which they are heard, which is why they keep popping back up in the 'wrong' social group (Duke Ellington as Easy Listening; the Pop Group bringing James Brown into the heart of post-punk; John Coltrane as Patron Saint of Noise rather than Jazz, etc.). Mere sociology cannot map Vorticist productivity.

The fantastic contribution of Captain Beefheart is that his brand of art rock did not occlude the demonstrable power and thrust of subaltern musics available in the commercial sphere. Quite the contrary. It amplified them into a polemic that could then take on the high ground of poetry, art and philosophy. Any survey of radical 1960s' poetics that doesn't include *Trout Mask Replica* is a dead letter: this is where the jazz

infatuation of Beat shook off its cheerleading role and shaped a music to carry a burden of blazing Blakean ecology. This is where the verbal intoxication of Gerard Manley Hopkins and Dylan Thomas exploded into something more than literature: a mode of life! Captain Beefheart took hold of the interview form and made it burst, refusing to stoop to the degraded chat of spectacular consumption, and realizing poetry in the room. Journalists' earnest questions were thrown back at them in puns which were like living performances of *Finnegans Wake*. As John French makes us acutely aware, Captain Beefheart's decision to live with no barriers to his unconscious – to deny no association, pun, thought or impulse – was incredibly taxing on those in his immediate vicinity, but it bore fruit in interviews and albums unexampled in rock.

The ideal of the Free Improvisor, in Derek Bailey's mind at least, is that of an *avant-garde griot* whose every performance constitutes a thoroughgoing interrogation of the whole point of music. This means that there are practically no tapes of Bailey that are insignificant, every practice and gig was played at a frighteningly high level of technique and will. Fluent in words – a talker who talked everyone around him silent with amazement or exhaustion – Captain Beefheart had no such fluency with musical structure. He learned his lessons from the 45 rpm R&B singles which he and the young Zappa collected. He was familiar with Abstract Expressionism. He conceived the tune as a finished artwork to be trundled out for audiences as accurately as possible. Improvisation wasn't the point. His singing and can't-play saxophonism were automatic gestures prepared for by his musical 'canvas' so they'd sound wonderful; they weren't the listening musical responses of the jazz musician. This is why Revenant's *Grow Fins* CD box set – a collection of unreleased tracks put together by John French – is so unsatisfying, a bunch of weak sketches, though they do prove how artful and deliberate Beefheart's albums were.

John French has had the difficult task of becoming the curator of Captain Beefheart's legacy. Whilst aware that Beefheart provided something special, in performance French makes the mistake of trying to supply it himself, coming on like an imitator (Mallard, the Magic Band *sans* Beefheart, did much better by bringing in Sam Galpin, a Las Vegas lounge singer, on vocals). French's judgements have become much reiterated, providing received opinion that needs to be challenged by listening to the actual records again. One of them – coloured by his own experiences during recording – is that *Spotlight Kid* is dry and sterile. No! This is quite simply one of the greatest spook-rock albums ever made, a convolute of imagery hacked from direct observation spun in a blue-green vortex of gnostic, minimal funk. Acknowledged as a challenge to rock musicians everywhere (Mark E. Smith is *still* trying!), Captain Beefheart's work should also be acknowledged as a challenge to anyone trying to do more than recirculate the already-known, to anyone trying to *express themselves*, in fact. In the passage of *Phenomenology of Spirit* quoted above, Hegel goes on to say that the Enlightenment's challenge to religion broaches the issue of absolute freedom. As well as naming Frank Zappa's second album with the Mothers of Invention, the attempt to be 'absolutely free' was the clarion call of the 1960s' revolution. The way Captain Beefheart did it – avoiding the airy speculation of the Floyds and Fusioners in favour of dense compositions which always negotiate the primal thump of the blues – defines freedom in opposition to escapism, which means shattering the illusion that exploiting other people's labour makes you free. Captain Beefheart's work was neither art nor rock, elite nor mass, but a protest against those who profit from their separation: not a promise, but its livid example.

**Ben Watson**

## Note

1. Don Vliet quoted in John 'Drumbo' French, *Captain Beefheart: Through the Eyes of Magic*, Proper Music Publishing, London, 2009, pp. 767–8.