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Saving the Captain from himself

Quite why Captain Beefheart got his name will probably remain shrouded by the mists of time, but it seems to have been concocted ten years or so ago by the Captain himself and Frank Zappa, an old school-mate - some school that must have been! The Captain was to have featured in one of Zappa's movies - like most of his film projects never realized - with the tantalizing title of Captain Beefheart Meets the Grunt People. Whoever the Grunt People might have been, we may be sure that the encounter would not have been dull!

Once upon a time, previous to his re-christening, the Captain went by the name of Don Van Vliet; even now he has aberrant moments when his former identity comes to the surface. After, all, there were times when the forceful character of Mr Hyde lapsed back into his old persona, the colourless Dr Jekyll. Likewise it seems obvious to me that Mr Van Vliet is a timid conformist, lacking in security, who still resides in some dark recess of the Captain's soul; it is also obvious that it is this, the Van Vliet-ish half of the symbiosis, which has asserted itself on the recent album Unconditionally Guaranteed, which fraudulently purports to be a work of the Captain's.

This seems to be the only possible conclusion from the evidence available - can anybody seriously believe that this bland and plausible record could be a product of the man whom many of us see as the most lively and original figure in rock music? The singer with the most versatile and perfect instrument at work in the medium, with nigh unbelievable pitch and dynamic ranges, and a seemingly limitless gamut of vocal timbres? The composer of music which eschews clichés and conformity, abandoning regular time signatures, conventional modes, and regular forms, replacing them with a freely flowing spring of totally fresh ideas? The author of lyrics abounding in rich metaphor and word-play, fearlessly overriding conventional notions of meaning? The player of gritty mouth-harp, of anarchic saxophone? Surely not! Why should Captain Beefheart have restricted himself to such an arid corner of his talents as that which is displayed on this latest album? Who can doubt that it is in fact Van Vliet who is responsible?

Of course, the Captain's career has been - almost of necessity, considering the nature of the man - a chequered affair, encompassing a string of record labels, managers, producers, and personnel of the protean Magic Band, his collection of accomplices.

The excellent first album, Safe As Milk, (1965), re-issued as Dropout Boogie, has its roots in Delta blues, having a boogie-ish feel, with clear cut harmonies and clean-limbed slide-guitar. By contrast the second, Strictly Personal (1968), has few redeeming features: poor material, loose ensemble, and appalling production - the music is rendered almost unintelligible with an inundation of phasing. Also from about this time, but issued several years later, is Mirror Man, taken from a rehearsal tape, having all the rough edges showing, and comprising four rambling jams relying heavily upon vamped bottleneck-guitar figures.

The collaboration with Zappa on Trout Mask Replica (1969) was a mixed blessing. Zappa's Straight label gave Beefheart the opportunity to record the unprecedentedly obscure and seemingly unsaleable music that he had now begun to write, with production by Zappa himself. The resulting double album is, for my money, the most original of all time. It has, however, its failings. The liberty of a double album was a temptation into a lack of discrimination between good and indifferent. And Zappa's hand in production is as damaging as it is evident, falsifying Beefheart's conception. The two men, despite their shared background, are opposite poles. This may be seen in their humour - an important element in the work of each: whereas that of Beefheart is candid and playful, exultant in its love of puns and unexpected juxtapositions of words, Zappa's is hard-edged, satirical and subversive. Their separate humours often give rise to a similar end - the bizarre. But Zappa's self-conscious cultivation of the bizarre, the abnormal, and the socially unacceptable (and here remember the other artists whom he recorded on Straight: the GTO's, Alice Cooper, Wild Man Fischer) is part of a political stance, as is his precept of making ugly music for an ugly (American) society with the intention of undermining it. All this is contrary to the directness and comparative innocence of Beefheart. Zappa's veristic recording technique, with its studio noise, unevenness of sound quality, mistakes, ad libs and asides, is intended to make the album as much a vehicle of shock as are those records of Zappa's own Mothers which use similar techniques, e.g. Absolutely Free, We're Only In It For The Money, and to discomfit the listener by presenting Beefheart as a freak, in much the same way as the GTO's, etc. were promoted.

These days we hear the word 'progressive', used as a term of approbation, rather less than formerly, and the idea of originality as a virtue in rock has been somewhat discredited. This is probably justified, since those elements labelled 'progressive' were and are usually the most superficial and facile. The chief transgression in this respect is the use of electronic sounds in the manner of cosmetic surgery to prettify songs with banal lyrics and hackneyed chord-progressions. It has always been the case in an art so much subject to fashion that, in order to maintain a semblance of newness, surface features will receive the most attention, while the underlying musical idiom remains static. What Beefheart does on Trout Mask Replica is to revise completely the musical language, and the genuine progress away from rock's mannerist formulae is entirely laudable.

The precise effect has, of course, to be heard to be appreciated, but the means, for the most part are these: at the heart of the sound are the two guitars (often played with bottleneck, and in various tunings) and electric bass (frequently used as a chord instrument) weaving intricate patterns, and exploring bitonal and polytonal oppositions. The Captain's vocals are not usually integrated with the instrumental music, but laid on top of it as it were. It takes a certain amount of faith for the casual listener to believe that the guitar and bass parts are precisely composed and not a haphazard jam (I do not pretend that any of this music makes easy listening), but this is the case. The vocals, though, are more or less improvisations on set lyrics, indulging the fantasy of the moment, giving the record a pervasive spontaneity and vivaciousness.

The extent of Zappa's influence upon Trout Mask Replica becomes clear when we compare it with Lick My Decals Off Baby (1970) which was produced by Beefheart himself. Gone are the distractions of the previous album, replaced by an altogether cleaner sound. His new idiom is continued and consolidated, and despite his use for the first time of one guitar rather than two the textures and bitonal effects remain coherent. The percussion, which was not always convincing on Trout Mask Replica (the lack of a credit on the sleeve makes one suspect that it was over-dubbed), is now thoroughly a part of the music and exploited resourcefully. A happy feature is the use of the marimba, the energetic, edgy sound of which works so well that it is surprising that the instrument is not more frequently used in rock. Its use on the tracks Petrified Forest and The Big Dig evokes a vision of a clanking dinosaur skeleton in a lumbering dance. The 'dinosaur' in both these songs seems to be a metaphor for the industrial society; the subject of a large proportion of the Captain's songs is that of conservation, even though frequently disguised by elaborate metaphor.

Spotlight Kid (1972) provided another somewhat surprising change of direction - back toward a more orthodox tonal basis. Disappointing though the loss of an idiom so rich in possibilities is, the numbers on the album amply justify themselves; in none of them is there evidence of the failing towards which Beefheart tends - cramming too much into a song, with the result that it is too dense in meaning or texture, or else overlong. Here, each is favourably proportioned, with a well-timed ending. Especially impressive are Click Clack with its rhythmically ingenious accompaniment depicting a railway engine gathering momentum, and When It Blows Its Stacks, which must be about the heaviest number ever, based on a riff which becomes gradually simpler and more powerful beneath Beefheart's earthy delivery of the obliquely threatening lyrics.

Clear Spot (1973) showed every sign that the simplification which had taken place on Spotlight Kid was leading to an abundance of riches and that Beefheart's style had at last settled down. What could be more simple or effective than the stark and dramatic juxtaposition of sound and silence in Circumstances? The one track which failed to fit any of one's ideas about the Captain was Too Much Time: brass, female backing group, slick session guitarist, a song which bent over backwards to sound conventional,

and Beefheart's vocal, sung in the middle of his voice with none of the whoops, growls, falsetto notes, etc, etc, which are familiar devices in his compendium of expressive effects - what explanation?

When Unconditionally Guaranteed arrived we had our explanation: this is the new Captain Beefheart - or, rather, Van Vliet taking over. Really the two could hardly be more dissimilar. Gone is the sense of fun, gone the adventurousness, gone nearly everything valuable in his work; what remains is sentimental and trite.

Now, it may be said that I have overplayed the Beefheart/Van Vliet metaphor. But I think there is more to it than that. In each of us there is a Beefheart-ish part, a locked-up source of unruly and anarchical creativity. Beefheart has the ability to release this creativity and his work is as perfect an expression of its purely ungovernable nature as I can imagine. It will brook a limited degree of control only: Van Vliet steps in to try to manipulate it and it slips like mist through his fingers.

It is saddening that the first reaction to a hearing of Beefheart's music is so frequently one of revulsion, and I do not think the cause is merely the unfamiliarity of the sound, but rather the listener's mistaking this wild and pure spirit of playfulness for the distorted and the grotesque. Saddening because if he cannot recognise it in Beefheart, then in all likelihood that part of himself is unknown to him.

From all unwarranted solemnity, Good Lord deliver us. (And the Captain from himself.)

DAVID LL. ROBERTS

As a supplement to this article, here is a review of Captain Beefheart's concert at Leeds University on 1 June by STEVE INGHAM.

As I left the Leeds Union on the night of 1 June with my head singing, an important truth crystallised - namely, never to write of the work of a performing musician solely on the basis of his recordings. Obvious? Apparently not, to judge by the reception given to the Captain's new album, which seems unconditionally guaranteed to throw even his most ardent and devoted followers into a state of confusion, uttering censorial pronouncements - all rather reminiscent of Dylan's Self Portrait album a year or two ago. And the criticism is wholly understandable. Let's face it, much of Unconditionally Guaranteed has as much spontaneity and excitement as a plate of wet cabbage, especially when compared with, say, Spotlight Kid. The songs seem dull and repetitive and the band playing very often sounds as though it were being done by bored session men rather than the colourful and individual characters to which we have grown accustomed in the past.

But the 1,500-strong audience at Leeds that night, who dutifully paid up their £1.10's for the privilege of straining their necks on the balconies or wearing out their backsides on the hard floor, were in no doubt about the Captain and his new Magic Band. Appreciative and enthusiastic, they generated the warmth on which all good bands thrive, and indeed, depend to make their full impact.

The warm-up band, Henry Cow - consisting of self-styled 'weirdos' and Royal Academy dropout types - played the by now familiar set of slick guaranteed-to-impress-by-their-complexity riffs coupled with meandering improvisations of a highly self-indulgent nature. One longed for some good old honest, unpretentious boogie - and when the Magic Band arrive and start belting it out, a cathartic surge runs through the crowd (who have been very patient). The Captain strolls on and off the stage, mouth-harp cupped in his hand, clad in baggy corduroys and a teeshirt bearing his own image. He sports an air of geniality very different from the scowling, aggressive leather-jacket-and-sweatband image of a year ago. The benign pachuco stands relaxed and at home in front of the sea of waving, cheering fans.

The band is different, too. Gone are Rockette Morton, Zoot Horn Rollo (about whom the Captain once said "If he leaves the band, I'll follow him"), Alex St. Clair, and Ed Marimba. Yet the new band sounds uncannily familiar - it retains its unmistakable flavour. The new guitarist lacks Zoot Horn's knife-edged neuroticism but compensates with a technique that is never flashily obtrusive and a fine sense of phrasing. Admittedly, the keyboards man and drummer seemed little more than competent on a first hearing (who could compete with Ed Marimba?), but the bass player has some of Rockette's enthusiasm and can copy his playing with great accuracy.

The numbers are, of course, drawn mainly from Unconditionally Guaranteed, but such old favourites as Abba Zaba and - somewhat surprisingly - Crazy Little Thing are included, as well as a sprinkling of new material. When the new reedsman Del Simmons produces a clarinet and the band play Sweet Georgia Brown at breakneck tempo, the crowd is hysterical. They repeat it immediately. Clowning routines, always part of the act, figure strongly this time, and the mood is happy and relaxed, contrasting with the performance here a year ago, where the atmosphere was heavy, tense, and charged with sexual aggression, the music drawn mainly from Spotlight Kid.

There are the usual attempts from the floor to goad the Captain to utter some pearl of wisdom but he would rather get on with the music. The set is rounded off by an overlong version of Peaches, and the inevitable encore is, strangely, a twelve-bar plod - something he surely would not have countenanced the year before. But it is no longer possible to doubt the sincerity of what he is doing. A song like This is the day, despite its simplicity and operatic appeals to the balconies, nevertheless convinces in a way the recorded version never will.

Whatever he may be singing now, the achievements of Trout Mask Replica and Decals are not negated. Instead of complaining about timid conformity, we should rejoice that the Captain is now earning a living and giving a great

deal of pleasure to many people. We have no right to insist that he goes on turning out the music we expect of him. I, for one, on the strength of this concert, would rate him as interesting as ever before, and I suspect there will be many more peaches to come before he plays himself to a standstill.

STEVE INGHAM

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