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Category: Home > Reviews > Documentary > Rock > Political > Captain Beefheart - Under Review

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Captain Beefheart – Under Review

Picture: C Sound: B
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Captain Beefheart and his Magic Band are an all but forgotten part of pop music history. People may know the name but few can name any songs. Beefheart never had a hit single and their most famous album, **Trout Mask Replica**, is for most a nearly unlistenable album full of experimental noise. Upon hearing it very few venture further to hear anything else.

Captain Beefheart – Under Review, attempts to trace their development and history. Unlike VH1's Behind the Music series, which focused on the interpersonal relationships (and usually the downfall), of the bands covered, **Under Review** is more of an appreciation and critique of the music presented in an historical context. Through interviews with many members of the Magic Band (the cast changed dramatically over the course of their twenty year history), as well as record producers and others the ups and downs of their career and, more importantly, a discussion of the actual music are presented.



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The band was born in the early 60's, the brainchild of Don Van Vliet, an artist/sculptor who would become known as Captain Beefheart. Like many musicians of the time the Blues fascinated Beefheart. Their first single was a searing version of Bo Diddley's Diddy Wah Diddy. While it was a pretty straightforward cover some elements of the song established what would become the Beefheart sound. Van Vliet's voice, a loud gravelly growl, overtly inspired by Bluesman Howlin' Wolf, gave the song a gravity and sense of menace not heard in the original.

Through a friendship with Frank Zappa Beefheart eventually was able to make the contacts needed to record a full-length album. *Safe As Milk* (seen in **High Fidelity** as the album Jack Black wouldn't sell to an undeserving customer) was released in 1967. Though it is in many ways a straight-ahead Blues/Rock album, hints of the bands later experimentation creeps through.

That experimentation reached its height with *Trout Mask Replica* in 1969. Though it regularly appears on "top album of all time" lists this is a difficult album to listen to. It is unflinching in its refusal to give the listener anything readily identifiable to hang on to. It works as a testament to creativity, artistic vision and an uncompromising approach to one's art. It doesn't work so well as an album you just want to put on and listen to very often.

Beefheart continued to release albums until 1982 when the band retired. Van Vliet still paints and sculpts but has retired from the music business entirely. Other members of the Magic Band have appeared in various other musical endeavors.

The DVD contains several extras, including a profile of Van Vliet and a fairly comprehensive trivia quiz.

- Wayne Wise

Wayne Wise is a fan of Captain Beefheart but really didn't know very much about the band's history. He recommends the DVD as informative, entertaining, and well put-together, a must for fans and a great introduction for the curious. He still has a tough time listening to *Trout Mask Replica*.

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