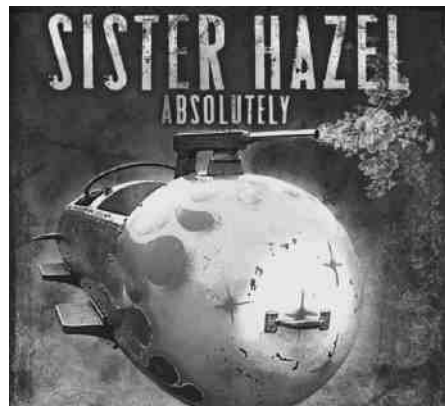


# Reviews



pressure to write songs with their wallets and not with their hearts. After releasing two full-length studio albums, the band was dropped by Universal Records. But the breakup served Sister Hazel well. Since 2002's independently released *Chasing Daylight*, the band named after a woman who operated a rescue mission in the '70s and early '80s for people down on their luck seems happier than ever, playing snappy roots-rock that crackles with earnestness and honesty.

On *Absolutely*, the group's fifth — and arguably best — studio album, Sister Hazel recapture some of the live energy that sweats all over 2004's *Live Live*. The rollicking opener, "Shame"; the first single, "Mandolin Moon" (featuring band pal Shawn Mullins on vocals); and the country-ish "Meet Me In The Memory" (produced and cowritten by Richard Marx) all sparkle with Sister Hazel's signature harmonies and familiar blend of acoustic and electric guitars. But it is the tender ode to loss "Tear By Tear" and its universal message, along with "Where Do You Go," which bridges the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina with a dissolving relationship, that raise the album above 2004's *Lift*. Singer/acoustic guitarist Ken Block's voice occasionally indulges in Dave Matthews-style quirks but is usually redeemed by catchy choruses and sweet harmonies.

*Absolutely* begins to lose strength after "Where Do You Go," with ballads ("This Kind Of Love," "Everything Else Disappears") and mid-tempo songs ("Truth Is," "Anyway") blurring together during the final third of the disc. Much of *Absolutely's* first two-thirds, though, deserves repeat spins and holds up to Sister Hazel's strongest material. This is friendly, feel-good but ultimately safe rock. Not that there's anything wrong with that...

— Michael Popke

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## DVD / CD Review

### Captain Beefheart & The Magic Band

#### *Doc at the Radar Station*

Astralwerks (065513)  
Grade: A-

#### *Ice Cream for Crow*

Astralwerks (065514)  
Grade: A-

By 1978, Captain Beefheart was coming off a near-decade dry spell. His last good album was 1970's *Lick My Decals Off, Baby*, a shadowy extension of his mind-blowing, post-*Sgt. Pepper's* masterpiece, *Trout Mask Replica*. Subsequent works were either over-produced, underproduced, short on inspiration or just plain lousy. Then came '78's *Shiny Beast (Bat Chain Puller)*, a magnificent return to the twisted mind of the Captain, Don Van Vliet. But not even the most loyal and dedicated fans could have foreseen the comeback right around the corner, spectacularly documented on two new reissues.

Turbo-charged and bubbling with musical ideas, the Captain assembled his most reliable Magic Band in a decade and recorded *Doc at the Radar Station*, a skittering, minimalist record loaded with jagged riffs, raspy howls and some of his most realized songs. Released in 1980, the record marked Beefheart's comeback in earnest; *Shiny Beast* was no fluke. Guitarist Gary Lucas' one-note fills alone are exercises both in restraint and overindulgence. It's an album of contradictions, maddening compositions, and sheer brilliance.

*Ice Cream for Crow*, from 1982, is a more complicated album (and Van Vliet's last before he retired from music to focus on painting full time). Beefheart comes off as a rambling surrealist poet at times, while the music strips away even more of rock's conventions than *Doc* did. The band plays around with structure as if the very concept of it is optional and disposable. There's even a twinkling of a genuine, gorgeous melody line dying to get out of "Semi-Multicoloured Caucasian." Also check out the sax-squawking "Light Reflected off the Oceans of the Moon," a bonus track originally issued as a B-side to get the Captain some new-wave club play. It may be the single most bizarre entry in Van Vliet's long, odd career.

— Michael Gallucci

### Captain Beefheart

#### *Under Review*

Sexy Intellectual (SIDVD500)  
Grade: B+

Captain Beefheart's *Under Review* is a DVD documentary and "independent critical analysis" of the artist's career in

## Captain Beefheart & The Magic Band

music and discussion of the process of recording each of his 12 albums officially released between 1967-82. The video is released with authorization of neither Don "Captain Beefheart" Van Vliet nor the publishing companies retaining ownership of his music. Without this collaboration, what are necessary to tell the tale are first-hand accounts from those who were intimately familiar with what transpired in the studio or on the road, as well as analysis by journalists who are knowledgeable of the changes in the artist's output. In that respect, the filmmakers deliver in spades.

The 115-minute feature presents conversations with numerous Magic Band members from the group's various incarnations. Notable inclusions are drummer/guitarist John "Drumbo" French, guitarists Jeff Moris Tepper and Gary Lucas, mid-period recruits Elliot and Ira Ingber, early members Jerry Handley and Doug Moon, and bassists Mark Boston and Eric Drew Feldman.

Critical analysis is provided by Beefheart biographer Mike Barnes, noted rock author Alan Clayson, and *Uncut* magazine contributing editor Nigel Williamson. What is revealed, amid the rare live performance clips and personal recollections, is that Van Vliet truly approached music as an art form — sonic construction. His ignorance of the conventions of music composition and music industry corruption produced material that has never been equaled in the popular music that followed his career and also led to the Captain's tragic frustration and eventual departure from the music business some 24 years ago.

Van Vliet's early love of blues and R&B performers, most notably Howlin' Wolf, is well noted. Footage of the Magic Band performing "Diddy Wah Diddy" on the TV show *Where The Action Is* reminds the viewer of what first inspired Beefheart. But given that the Captain first began recording in the experimental decade of the 1960s, was exposed to free jazz from the likes of John Coltrane and had been a painter since before kindergarten, his music rapidly mutated into something with varying degrees of commercial appeal and an undeniable identity. The description of Van Vliet's transformation of ideas for songs through piano "compositions" (read: noodlings) into transcriptions for individual parts and then finally made real during uncompromising months of rehearsal, is best told by French, Boston, and Lucas. Van Vliet tried to tether his visions, finding himself at odds with his musicians, his management and a fickle and unwelcoming American audience. His output is seldom "catchy" or with precedent, but the fascinating result of his off-kilter approach to songcraft is vividly presented on *Under Review*. The DVD may serve, as it did for me, as a catalyst. I need to revisit Captain Beefheart's recordings. The importance of his work is documented here; I now need to familiarize myself with what may be some of the greatest compositions of the 20th century.

— Mark Polzin

