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DVD

# CAPTAIN BEEFHEART UNDER REVIEW

**AN INDEPENDENT CRITICAL ANALYSIS**

Review by Jason Quinn

**T**hey say he wasn't born.  
They say he was hatched.

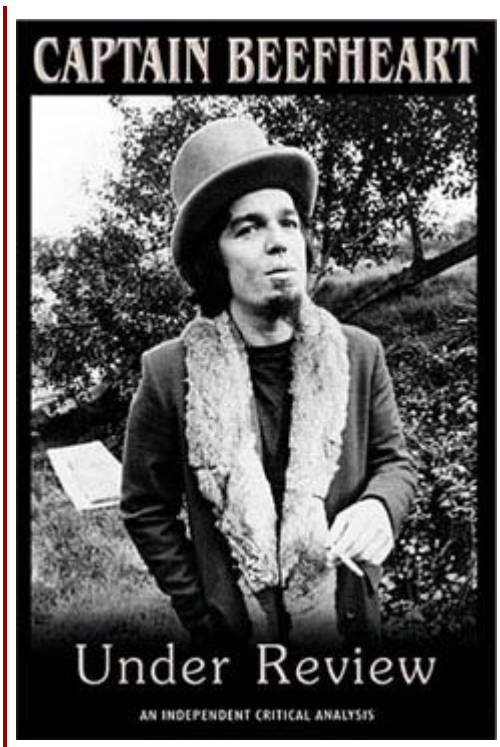
He cracked and came out of his shell somewhere in a baked stretch of desert outside Glendale, California. I've heard it said that he's not even from this dimension. He came out of that desert, helped show a young Frank Zappa how the good things were done, made many amazing sounds, gave us many paintings and then disappeared back into a baked stretch of desert. And as of this, writing, he's still out there.

□ The UNDER REVIEW series brings us "an independent critical analysis" of Don Van Vliet's enduring legacy. Like their review of the Velvet Underground, the UNDER REVIEW series spends the majority of its DVD's running time talking to some of the Magic Players and critics. Captain Beefheart, Don Van Vliet himself, is never interviewed.

The career of Beefheart and the Magic Band runs from great, solid risk-taking sound explosions to the mediocre years, of which the less said the better. And then finally into a declining but worthwhile coda before Beefheart dropped out of the music business and went on to concentrate on his art in 1983.

The albums almost seem to come in distinct groups: THE LEGENDARY A&M SESSIONS (recorded in 1965) fits nicely beside SAFE AS MILK (1967). Even though two years had passed between them, they're coming from the same root sound source.

MIRROR MAN (1967-68) and STRICTLY PERSONAL (1968) both demonstrate a pulling away from



previous conventions and show that things were about to get intensely strange. The characteristic “serpentine guitar” lines come to the front during these releases.

In 1969 and 1970 we’re hit with the amazing double-shot of *TROUT MASK REPLICA* and *LICK MY DECALS OFF, BABY* which are arguably the Magic Band’s finest moments. These two albums are the clarion call of outsider music and are still considered to be yardsticks in terms of Beefheart’s career.

It’s at this point, depending on your aesthetics, which the worm began to turn. *THE SPOTLIGHT KID* and *CLEAR SPOT* (both recorded and released in 1972) give a clear picture of a move toward a sort of stunted commercialism. There’s a shift away from the *LICK MY DECALS OFF* era material and an odd attempt at “commercialism” (albeit with a small “c”) that isn’t as bad as you might fear. Perhaps he and the Magic Band found that to go further out than *TROUT MASK* and *LICK MY DECALS OFF* would’ve been either redundant or impossible, so instead they begin a minor slide toward a more accessible sound. These two albums would be nothing however, in terms of MOR commercial pap, compared with the next two.

John “Drumbo” French doesn’t even own a copy of *UNCONDITIONALLY GUARANTEED* and that in itself tells us a lot. The companion piece, *BLUEJEANS & MOONBEAMS* has been universally reviled, and I’ve never met anyone who actually enjoys it. The Magic Band broke down while touring behind this album, and they were replaced with slick studio musicians, who subsequently became referred to as “The Tragic Band.” These two are the bottom of barrel in so many ways that to go on about them any further would do a disservice to Beefheart’s oeuvre.


*SHINY BEAST (BAT CHAIN PULLER)* is where Vliet and the Magic Band start to get back on their feet. The original version of *BAT CHAIN PULLER* (1976) is apparently still sitting on some vault shelf somewhere so this album is a reworked and toned down version of those original superior versions. Worthy members it would seem again join the good Captain.

Like *SPOTLIGHT KID* and *CLEAR SPOT*, the final two albums fit together in a similar manner. *DOC AT THE RADAR STATION* (1980), a solid effort was followed by the somewhat underwhelming *ICE CREAM FOR CROW* (1982) and that’s been the last we’ve heard of from Vliet...

The *UNDER REVIEW* series does a good job discussing the various stages and albums with members of the Magic Bands. The original bassist tells us about how the bass was plugged directly into the board when “Diddy Wah Diddy” was recorded. John French demonstrates a drumbeat and discusses what it was like to

work with Van Vliet. We see footage of the various Magic Bands in action as well, and all of this footage is used to great effect, but one has to wonder about the reason for not delving into the footage from the "Grow Fins" collection. Many Beefheart fans may have already seen this footage, but to not have included it made it feel like something was missing.

The DVD is very good for the first hour and fifteen minutes, but then we arrive at that part of Captain Beefheart's career that's a little painful. Watching the "award-winning" (???) video of "Ice Cream for Crow" is a bit uncomfortable because we're shown the latest version of the Magic Band jumping around acting like they think they're supposed to act. This feels false and even verges on dreaded "self-parody." They ape the moves of previous versions of the band, and even though we can see what they're trying to do, it still comes up short.

The DVD extras include full contributor biographies, a short feature containing unused interviews and what the producers call "The World's Hardest Captain Beefheart Interactive Quiz in the World Ever". I only ended up getting eight of the 25 questions. The various settings for the interview clips look somewhat contrived and silly. What's being said is solid information though, so the distracting set-ups are tolerable and taken as a whole, this documentary is worth owning. 

A Sexy Intellectual Production. Distribution: MVD. Release Date April 15th, 2006  
Narrated by Tony Pomfret. Edited by Elliot Riddle. Archive Researcher: Angela Turner  
Featuring John French, Mark Boston, Doug Moon, Jeff Morris Tepper, Art Tripp and Gary Lucas. With appearances by Mike Barnes, Alan Clayson and Nigel Williamson.  
Full frame. Running time: 115 Minutes

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