





MONDAY, APRIL 10, 2006

My Favorite Bands "Under Review"



Fans of, shall we say, audacious rock music will be excited to learn about two new releases coming out later this week from Music Video Distributors and Sexy Intellectual. The first two DVDs in a new series called "Under Review," these feature length programs focus on two 1960s bands whose legacy was supremely influential on the cutting edge music of subsequent decades: Captain Beefheart

and The Velvet Underground. They street on 4/15 and retail for \$19.98 apiece.

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Fans of these cult groups will find it almost wondrous to see their histories discussed so seriously and eloquently, not only by well-credentialed critics but by former members of the bands in question. [VELVET UNDERGROUND: UNDER REVIEW](#) (85 minutes) interviews VILLAGE VOICE music editor Robert Christgau; Clinton Heylin, author of essential books on punk rock, Bob Dylan, bootleg albums and Public Image Limited; Total Rock DJ, author and journalist, Malcolm Dome, and Luna mainman Dean Wareham, as well as Velvets members Maureen "Moe" Tucker and Doug Yule, and Andy Warhol Factory photographer/Velvets album cover designer Billy Name.

[CAPTAIN BEEFHEART: UNDER REVIEW](#) (115 minutes) interviews Beefheart biographer Mike Barnes; author/critic Alan Clayson; UNCUT magazine contributing editor Nigel Williamson, and a vast assortment of Beefheart Magic Band alumni, including John "Drumbo" French, Mark "Rockette Morton" Boston, Jeff Moris Tepper, Elliott "Winged Eel Fingerling" Ingber, Ira Ingber, Jerry Handley, Doug Moon, Gary Marker, Eric Drew Feldman and Gary Lucas. Both discs contain many clips of rare performances, archival interview footage, and are supplemented with interview outtakes and interactive quizzes. It's also great to hear the music of these bands remixed in stereo surround. I want a whole album of how "Ella Guru" sounds on the BEEFHEART DVD.

Both programs approach their subjects chronologically, single by single and album by album. As someone intimately acquainted with the discographies of both bands, I found it actually cathartic to watch these documentaries, to see the work of these often overlooked units so fulfillingly appreciated. Of course I have my own feelings about their recorded output, so I was somewhat disappointed that Beefheart's ultimate statement TROUT MASK REPLICA was not addressed with the same gravity as, say, THE VELVET UNDERGROUND AND NICO on the corresponding release. (There is some disagreement among the Beefheart authorities assembled here, but LICK MY DECALS OFF, BABY and CLEAR SPOT seem to vie for their #1 choice, with TROUT MASK being... well, singular. And for a double album, it IS pretty singular. I wish Matt Groening had been invited to balance the books.) My own favorite Velvets album is their third, self-titled album, which I feel is given

WatchBlog

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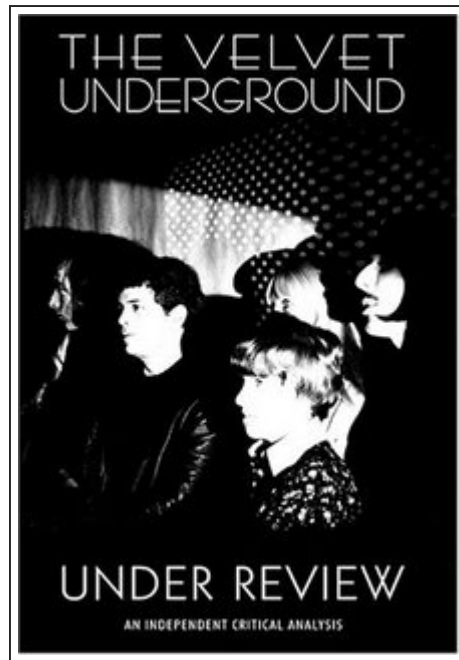
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its due her, but the VELVET UNDERGROUND program actually reminded me of the importance of the AND NICO album, their first, which was actually recorded in 1966 and not issued until 1967. It is not the better album, but it is unquestionably the more important group statement. Likewise, Beefheart's CLEAR SPOT track "Big Eyed Beans from Venus," his most beloved track by fans and arguably his best-realized studio performance, is rather surprisingly dismissed by Mike Barnes as popular on account of its accessibility. Accessibility doesn't explain why I am nearly moved to the point of tears every time I hear it; it has much more to do with the alchemy of its clean production and the sound of every member of the band mining dissonance until they tap an almost exorcismal sublimity and sweetness. Again, the Velvets disc excels in this area with its extended appreciation of "Venus in Furs" from THE VELVET UNDERGROUND AND NICO, which the critics identify -- to a man -- as the moment where that album becomes timeless and transcendent. To hear Robert Christgau, echoing Lester Bangs, cite this track as the moment "where modern music begins" is incredibly satisfying and insightful.

Watching these documentaries, one realizes that Captain Beefheart and The Velvet Underground had far more in common than their very different music makes apparent. Both groups were dominated by a single personality: Beefheart himself, Don Van Vliet (who abandoned music in 1981 to pursue a successful career in painting), and Lou Reed of The Velvets (who left the band in 1970 to pursue a still successful if increasingly literary solo career). Both groups had members in their early lineups who left after creative clashes with the "alpha male" -- John Cale in The Velvets, Ry Cooder in The Magic Band -- their departures radically changing the nature of the groups' music. Both groups were also "sponsored", in a sense, by



iconographic art figures: Andy Warhol (VU) and Frank Zappa (CB). Furthermore, as the two figureheads of these bands have become more remote and inaccessible -- Van Vliet, reportedly suffering from multiple sclerosis, has not been photographed in decades, while Reed prefers to focus on his solo work -- the contributions of their fellow band members have been given the space to come into much stronger relief. It's refreshing to see the Velvets documentary pay so much respectful attention to Moe Tucker, founding member/guitarist Sterling Morrison, and especially Doug Yule, who replaced Cale in the band, which he joined in time to play on their third album. The first VU album is almost certainly their greatest and most important, and their second album WHITE LIGHT/WHITE HEAT is just as grand in a darker way, but the greater balance of the group's classic core of material was written and recorded after Cale's departure. It was only after Yule's joining, and the loss of Cale's abrasive signature viola, that The Velvets became a classic rock-and-roll band.

An interesting result of Van Vliet's silence in recent years, and one about which I have very mixed feelings, is that much of his original projected persona has been revealed as, for lack of a better word, "show biz." His amazing voice, once self-described as encompassing six or more octaves, has since been professionally charted as somewhat narrower. His stories about never attending school and having never indulged in drugs have been proved various shades of hoey, and his former band members have portrayed him as a ruthless task master, almost a cult leader, not to mention a sometimes wrongful appropriator of song credit. And then there is the 1973-76 "Tragic Band" period when Beefheart turned his back on his muse to attempt more commercial music, only to discover that his watered-down brand of funk-pop attracted no new listeners and turned away those he already had. The stories presented on the BEEFHEART disc by his fellow band members are generally very respectful, sometimes acknowledging that Van Vliet was absolutely and unerringly aware of the impact his music would have over time. (John French recalls Van Vliet telling him, some 35 years ago, "Someday you'll hear a knock on your door and it will be someone who has travelled halfway around the world to record your recollections of what we are doing right now!") But the program pays rightful attention to the musical skills of Beefheart's associates, all of whom continue to do good work but clearly miss

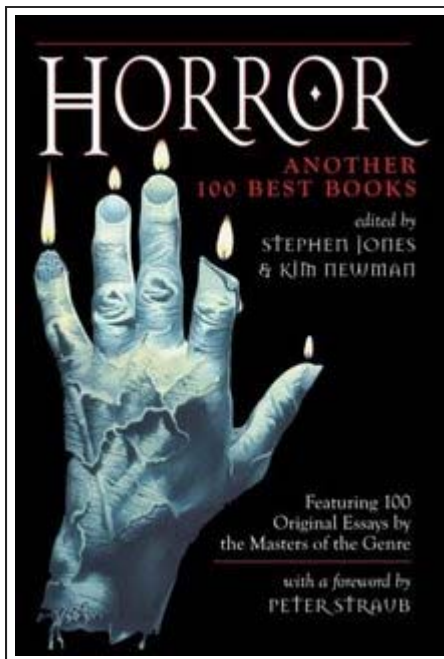
the "north star" visionary who led them in younger days to vistas previously unexplored in music. Some of them are working today in tribute bands to keep Beefheart's extraordinary blues-avant-art-swamp-rock fusion alive and available to fresh discovery.

These discs mark an impressive starting point for what I hope will be a successful, ongoing series. I'd love to see similar discs address the music of, say, King Crimson, Can, Nick Drake, Brian Eno, Laura Nyro, Amon Duul I and II -- and that's just for starters. Based on the choices shown here, I suspect the producers of these discs are thinking along much the same lines.

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SATURDAY, APRIL 08, 2006

Horror: Another Best Non-Fiction Nomination



Congratulations to VW contributor Kim Newman and his partner Stephen Jones are in order. Their softcover anthology **HORROR: ANOTHER 100 BEST BOOKS** survived the final cut of the preliminary ballot to be nominated this week in the Best Non-Fiction category of the Horror Writers Association's Bram Stoker Awards. The book's forerunner, **HORROR: 100 BEST BOOKS**, won this category in 1989 in a tie with

HARLAN ELLISON'S **WATCHING** by Harlan Ellison.

I contributed to Steve and Kim's outstanding genre survey an essay about Pierre Souvestre and Marcel Allain's 1911 novel **FANTOMAS**. As Kim kindly notified me by e-mail, I can therefore "claim 1/100th of the nod." That's very kind... but for me, the real award was