

The first time I ever encountered the name 'Captain Beefheart' was in summer 1968, when I saw it emblazoned in red magic marker, hand-lettered on a battered acoustic guitar case, carried by a guy sporting the longest hair I had ever seen. I was still in high school and was hanging around Marshall Street, the boho district near the Syracuse University campus in upstate New York, with likeminded misfits, when this guy approached me. A fellow Anglophile, he had spotted me carrying an English import copy of The Move's first album under my arm (a rarity in the US). We bonded right away and then went off to listen to music. Later I asked my new-found friend, Fred Perry, about the group with the odd sounding moniker, and he replied, "Oh, that's a group my brother has just produced in LA." Later I put two and two together and asked, "Is your brother Richard Perry?" – whom I knew then as the producer of Tiny Tim's first (great) album on Warners. Indeed it was.

Fast forward a few months and I purchase a copy of Beefheart's second album *Strictly Personal* as a remaindered cut-out for \$1.97 at the Record Runner emporium down the street from where I'd met Fred, about a month after its initial full-price release. The cover definitely appeals to me, but the crude edges of the production – despite the fierce musical onslaught, the sound was overall muddy and indistinct – does not endear me initially to the album. I just can't get my ears around it. But some months later *Trout Mask Replica* appears in the shops. It says it's 'produced by Frank Zappa', and I buy it instantly because of the outrageous cover and the Zappa connection – and fall in love right away with

its sprawling sonic riot and sophisticated wordplay. I show the lyric sheet to visiting professor and National Book Award winner Jerzy Kosinski (*Being There, Steps*) when I begin studying at Yale the following year and, after a quick scan through, he exclaims, "This man is a very sophisticated lyricist!"

Shortly after arriving at college, *Lick My Decals Off, Baby* comes out (again purchased for \$1.97!), and to me this album is even more advanced and taut in its musical conception and poetic facility. It becomes, and remains, my favourite Beefheart album.

Unbelievably, in that same period, Don Van Vliet is featured on the cover of *Rolling Stone*, in an era when Miles Davis and Sun Ra are also deemed worthy of such immortalisation – and it is announced in the underground press that the group are scheduled to play their debut New York City concert in Manhattan. My buddies and I drive down from New Haven in winter 1971 to catch this show at a little club off Central Park West called Ungano's. The audience of freaks and hipsters rudely talks through a brilliant opening solo acoustic set by a young Ry Cooder, then the DJ in the club begins spinning The Faces' "Flying" (new Warner Bros product cross-promoted during the interval), when Don walks out, holds his hand up to gesture 'stop!', and demands imperiously, "Take that shit off!"

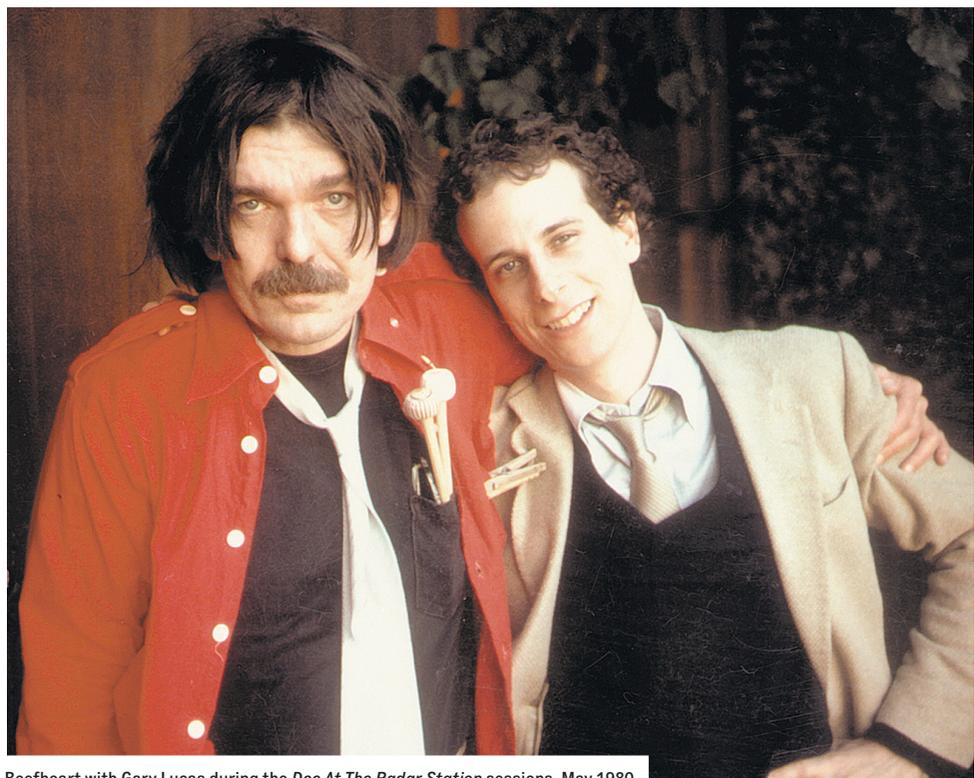
Rockette Morton comes out and confounds everyone with the strangest bass solo, contorting his hands to make chordal shapes on the fretboard and dancing his way around the lip of the stage. Drumbo and Ed Marimba follow with a drum duel that evolves into a patty-cake routine. Winged Eel

Fingerling and Zoot Horn Rollo come onstage and chime in with howling, spitting guitars, and the group launch into "When Big Joan Sets Up". I have never seen or heard anything remotely like this before. Van Vliet is the ringmaster, the relatively still centre in the vortex of this frenzied whirlwind spinning around him, bellowing, barking and blowing into his soprano sax like a force of nature, while the group hit one searing off-centre groove after another, all the time looking like mythical creatures straight out of Charles Finney's 1935 novel *The Circus Of Dr Lao*. Enthralled, totally enchanted by this spectacle, I say to myself: "If I ever do anything in music, I want to play with this guy!"

And I make a vow that night that I would pursue this dream and would not give up until I had accomplished this goal. To my mind it was like running away to join the circus. It was the best music I'd ever heard performed by the most exciting and colourful group I had ever witnessed, period. And I had seen The Rolling Stones live in 1965, The Mothers in 68 – and in 1971 witnessed titanic sets from both The Mahavishnu Orchestra and The Byrds with Roger McGuinn and Clarence White. None of this was in the same life-changing league as what I had just witnessed.

It was a turning point in my life for sure. I did not experience the like again until June 1988, after playing the old Knitting Factory solo for the first time, when I vowed to pursue the goal of playing music full-time for a living. I did not know either in 1971 or in 1988 just exactly what kind of 'dark carnival' I would be joining... but that's another story. □ Gary Lucas played guitar with and managed Don Van Vliet from 1980–84

Dark carnival By Gary Lucas



Beefheart with Gary Lucas during the *Doc At The Radar Station* sessions, May 1980

Glenn Kototkin