

Captain Beefheart (1941–2010) and Wyndham Lewis: A Relationship

David Stoker

'Everybody's coloured or else you wouldn't be able to see them.'

Don Van Vliet, the poet, painter and composer best known as rock musician Captain Beefheart, died on 17 December last in a hospital in his native California from complications arising from multiple sclerosis, a month short of his 70th birthday.

A little story to start with. In the late 1950s, Don was for a time a vacuum-cleaner salesman in California. Doing his rounds near Palmdale, he knocked on the door of a stone house and Aldous Huxley answered. Don recognised him from a photo he'd seen. He takes up the story: 'I said, "I assure you Sir, this thing sucks" – I was holding this vacuum cleaner. And he **laughed**. He said "Bring everything you have in the car in this house, I'll buy everything you have!" He was funny, was he **funny!** I walked and talked with him many times after that. But that's the last vacuum cleaner I ever sold'. (*P.S.* 7, March–April 1981)

Though I can't say I was a close friend, I was fortunate enough to meet and converse with Don several times over a period of thirteen years (in addition to seeing him, and filming him, many times in concert), and even entered into negotiations to mount a UK-touring exhibition of his paintings – which sadly came to nothing – whilst working at the Ikon Gallery, Birmingham in the early 1980s. Because of this amicable personal relationship, it feels forced to me to think or write of him in an impersonal way as Van Vliet, or Captain Beefheart (the origin of that stage-name is a matter of some controversy; suffice it to say that when he abandoned it when his touring days ended, he confessed to feeling fraudulent: he'd never even owned a boat...), but the latter soubriquet is appropriate in certain circumstances – in the context of his musical career – and will therefore be used when 'Don' can't be: and I'm sure he would be happy to think that fellow dedicated Lewisians are the constituency for this tribute, contemplating the affinities he had (and in few important ways didn't have) – a liking for impressive headgear apart – with one of his select band of artist-

heroes. (Don's advice to his guitarists: 'Keep a hat on. A hat is a pressure cooker.')

For Don had been a big Lewis fan for more than 30 years. Why and how he was shall be explained in due course; first it's necessary to give some idea of the scope of the achievement of this veritable latter-day Enemy: and if it's thought that that's a fanciful or un-earned claim for him, support can be drawn from one particular obituary – Ben Watson's in *Radical Philosophy* (no. 166, March–April 2011 – David Wragg brought this to Alan Munton's attention, who then forwarded it to me; it is discussed elsewhere in this *Lewisletter*) – that's actually entitled: 'Captain Beefheart, Vorticist artist'. Watson begins his tribute by declaring: 'Beefheart's art was Vorticist in the manner demanded by Lewis in the pages of *Blast*, developing the passage in William Blake's *Milton* where he inveighed against the banal sense of time instilled by institutional Christianity and exploited by the future-dreams of capital investment and speculation' – and he develops parallels between Lewis and Beefheart on the basis of a shared fierce integrity and personal vision at odds with the market-place.

"Iconoclastic American"

Extracting some headlines and straplines from the obituaries and tributes to Don gives some idea of the esteem in which he was held: 'Iconoclastic American musician who enjoyed hero status among the 1970s avant garde' – 'Provocative, unpredictable - but hugely influential' – 'Rock musician who was revered by the cognoscenti but failed to find commercial success' – 'Obsessive, reclusive: he was rock's father of invention' – 'Captain Beefheart didn't fit in anywhere—at school, in rock and roll or even, in the final analysis, in the human race' – 'Oddball musician John Peel hailed as pop's only genius' – 'It sounded like clatter. But it's surrealistic brilliance' – 'He made some of the most influential music of all time—then became one of rock's great recluses' – 'Acclaimed musician and painter who pioneered an avant-garde fusion of rock, blues and jazz' – 'Enigmatic blues genius rejected fame and wealth' – '[He] inspired devotion and bewilderment in equal measure. But his legacy

lives on in the music of artists from Tom Waits to the White Stripes [the latter are due to re-release their 7" of Beefheart covers]' – 'He will always be remembered for the visionary, cubistic avant garde rock he made' – 'son coeur pur [...] son oeuvre touffue [...] virtuose, rebelle, précurseur, génie' – 'Rock's one true maverick [...] one of [music's] most unique, mischievous and singular voices'.

For a 'cult musician' (that is, non-mainstream and rarely heard on the airwaves), Don's passing released an extraordinary quantity – and quality – of tributes from many quarters, in print and on the internet, including not just his hard-core fans, fellow-musicians (who number everyone from Johnny Rotten and Mark E. Smith to Kate Bush, The Red Hot Chili Peppers and The Black Keys; Tom Waits and Talking Heads and The Pixies to The Coral, Franz Ferdinand, Sonic Youth and P.J. Harvey), as well as music journalists and film-makers, poets, artists and environmentalists.

Against "the catatonia"

That weekend *The Guardian* and *The Observer* devoted full-page coverage to the news (no-one in Hampstead now had an excuse to say they'd never heard of him); nearly all the major rock and avant-garde music magazines had his photo or name emblazoned on the covers of their next issue. All fulsomely honoured a man who, whilst marginalised by the music establishment (scandalously, he was never inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame – though perhaps that's not a surprise, given his hostility to 'the big mama heartbeat' of rock – 'I like opaque music that would bug most people. Music from the other side of the fence' – and his crusade to create 'music to dematerialise the catatonia'), and being too little known to the public (none of his music charted in the USA), had achieved god-like status in the eyes of many. No less a trinity than Matt Groening, creator of *The Simpsons*, David Lynch and Tom Waits contributed their eulogies in Los Angeles at one of several Beefheart Symposia organised by the highly regarded virtuoso guitarist Gary Lucas, Don's manager-cum-band member on the final tours in the early 1980s and on the last two Captain Beefheart and The Magic Band albums – and the Lewisian who is the hero of this piece, as shall be revealed.

John Peel famously said that 'if there has ever been such a thing as a genius in the

history of pop music, it's Beefheart'; hearing Captain Beefheart and his Magic Band live was an epiphanic moment for him, as it was for many others – Matt Groening and Gary Lucas included. Peel, already a big fan, described that moment in the Whiskey-A-Go-Go in Hollywood in 1966, Beefheart singing 'with the voice of a desert Howlin' Wolf, his musicians squalling away behind him, producing a disassembled version of rhythm and blues, which although it owed something to the Rolling Stones and their like, conjured up visions which had nothing of Chicago's South Side nor London's King's Road to them.' Groening described how at the many Beefheart gigs he attended in the 1970s he was 'floored by the intricacies of the songs and the almost hive-mind precision of the band, who nailed the rhythms and changes with the perfection of a classical chamber ensemble and yet still rocked out,' and declared that the first time he heard Don and the band live, in 1970, it was 'the greatest concert I've ever witnessed [...] and it has ruined most of the rest of rock'n'roll for me ever since.' Tom Waits said that once you'd heard Beefheart, it was difficult to wash him out of your clothes. 'He was like the scout on a wagon train. He was the one who goes ahead and shows the way.'

British avant-garde composer Tim Souster, reviewing one of his albums in *The Listener* in 1973 – the same year Don wanted to have his medium-length hair cut because of the oil paint that was always getting in it; he already had his sights fixed on a London exhibition (but had to wait until 1986) – said it 're-inforces my conviction that Beefheart is the most original creator in rock music today.' That album was *Clear Spot* – perhaps the best one to recommend to anyone coming to Beefheart for the first time, and happily combined on the single CD re-release with its 1972 predecessor, *The Spotlight Kid* (the album I probably return to most often; legendary Roxy Music guitarist Phil Manzanera said *Clear Spot* knocked him sideways: 'Beefheart's completely out on his own in every way. His singing, the chords he uses, the musicians in The Magic Band – there's nothing like it anywhere'). But it was four years before this that Beefheart's by now consummate blend of rock and roll, Delta and electric blues, free jazz, Stravinsky (who invited him to visit, though he never made it), and other modern classical and non-Western influences, together with part-

improvised poems and studio banter made it on to vinyl in the majestic double-album, *Trout Mask Replica* (1969). This ‘masterpiece of pure force and confrontational vision’, Langdon Winner of Rolling Stone magazine hailed as ‘the most astounding and important work of art ever to appear on a phonograph record.’ Groening and his friends considered it then, ‘and still consider [it] the greatest avant-garde rock album of all time.’

ESP

The album was the result of more than eight months’ rigorous, punishing rehearsal in a rented house in the Hollywood Hills, where in conditions of penury and privation, Don, with cult leader-like control over his young, highly-talented and malleable musicians (all re-named by him: Zoot Horn Rollo had been Bill Harkleroad; Mark Boston became Rockette Morton; Antennae Jimmy Semens, Jeff Cotton; Victor Hayden, The Mascara Snake; and John French, Drumbo), tasked them with transcribing his often inscrutable ideas into complex and fiendishly difficult-to-play compositions. Though awed and cowed by his ESP-like methods, for the most part they willingly subjected themselves to the process – and had to marvel at the results. (Bitterness at their not being sufficiently credited eventually led this incarnation of The Magic Band to abandon him.) Their boss, though possessed of a formidable four-and-a-half octave range blues voice (he was a fine harmonica player – some would like to draw a veil over his un-trained, impassioned ‘channelled’ shenai and soprano sax playing, but not me), lacked the ability to read music and relied on whistling, humming, dictaphoning and drumming to communicate his intentions; years later he had sufficient mastery on the keyboard to use that to communicate with his musicians. This lack of conventional professional expertise detracted not one iota from his achievement. All who worked with Don marvelled at the exactitude and perfection of every composition. Henry Cow’s guitarist Fred Frith noted how ‘Dalí’s Car’, an instrumental on *Trout Mask Replica*, was ‘a brief, formal, organised piece, completely outside the terms of what two guitars in rock usually means. It’s discordant, angular, weirdly constructed and totally wonderful.’ Don’s – as one of his guitarists put it – savant-like ability to compose had astounding results. Perhaps this was part and parcel of his extreme hypersensitivity to sound.

The successor to *Trout Mask Replica* was *Lick My Decals Off, Baby* (1970), which some see as an advance even on the earlier masterpiece; it remained Don’s favourite, as it does some influential others, including Lucas.

Trout Mask Replica was produced by Don’s friend from teenage years, Frank Zappa, with whom he was initially very close; they fell out spectacularly in mid-career, commercial rivalry – Don being the jealous one – playing its part. Although Don was vicious in print about him, Zappa (who died in 1994) put out his hand to help him on more than one occasion afterwards, their joint ‘Bongo Fury’ tour in 1975 being a notable example of this. Now, apart from Beefheart aficionados, for every eight or nine people who’ve heard of or are familiar with Frank Zappa and The Mothers of Invention, maybe only one or two have heard of Beefheart (such is my experience) – frequently owing to the latter’s vocal on ‘Willie The Pimp’ on the best-selling *Hot Rats* album: and not always cottoning on to the fact that that’s the Cap’n’s voice. They are similarly astonished to learn that Ry Cooder was an early Magic Band member.

Salieri to Beefheart’s Mozart

Zappa deserves to be well-loved and remembered (Vaclav Havel is among his biggest fans, and, it’s gratifying to know, the Zappa/Beefheart *Bongo Fury* LP is his favourite rock record) – he thrilled and delighted me in concert and on vinyl, and the artistic success of *Trout Mask Replica* owes more to him than Don or most commentators allow. But I feel his moment has well and truly passed; he was politically challenging in the 1960s and 1970s, outrageous and funny, mocking American WASP culture and hippies equally – but it all turned a bit repetitive and self-referential and ever more rococo; the weasels of the zeitgeist have ripped his flesh; ultimately, he is Salieri to Beefheart’s Mozart.

Not having his genius sufficiently recognised and struggling financially – whether through alienating real or potential allies, commercial naivety, intransigence, artistic integrity, pride, cocked-up contracts or sheer bad luck – was an affliction for Lewis as well as for Don Van Vliet, both of them larger-than-life, expansive and generous individuals: but also people you wouldn’t want to get on the wrong side of, with reputations for being difficult and obsessive, unreliable, jealous and subject to

bouts of paranoia. Neither was falsely modest; Lewis’s description of his own work as ‘electric with a mastered and vivid vitality’ would serve as a perfect epitaph for Don, who boasted: ‘I’m not even here – I just stick around for my friends’. Would this perhaps be as much as one needs to adduce to link them together – to see Don as the major candidate for inheriting the mantle of the Enemy? (For so the man he was?)

Juxtaposing the one’s first-half-of-the-twentieth-century achievement with the other’s second-half achievement could be enough to show what forceful artistic personalities, innovators and kindred spirits they were. People will make their own judgements; but one sees parallels emerge that it would be hard to draw with any other two painter-writers who led such opposite lives and worked in such different cultures (and in the shared disciplines of painting and writing, their idioms could hardly be more different). These would be: visionary reach; technical innovation; permanent war on stupidity and the nostrums of the day; subversive and absurdist humour, satire and verbal/non-verbal shock-tactics; openness to non-occidental influences, particularly African and Chinese; the re-invigoration of old or existing forms with elemental force; uncompromising life-long experimentation and a stance of constant challenge; contradictoriness (and augmenting Lewis’s ‘Contradict yourself. In order to live, you must remain broken up,’ Whitman’s ‘Do I contradict myself? Very well, then I contradict myself. I am large, I contain multitudes,’ can be cited as fitting for Don, the ever-contradictory, often gnomic, pun-addicted, verbal prankster); and – each of them often painfully seeing and hearing more than most – the Blakean project to be true to felt life, to keep cleansing the Doors of Perception and restore a sense of strangeness and wonder to the world.

Each also had the ability to clear a room. Poet and broadcaster Ian McMillan approved of this function for the music of Beefheart when he chose the track ‘Moonlight On Vermont’ off *Trout Mask Replica* as one of his eight record choices on BBC Radio 4’s *Desert Island Discs* last year. (Rarely can Kirsty Lang, or before her, Sue Lawley, have submitted their audience to so brief an extract of a guest’s record.) Mention of Lewis’s name most likely had, and still has, the same effect in English departments and common rooms the length and breadth of academia (John Cowper Powys being

the sole competition) – an instance of the writer for whom significant claims have been made, and equally fierce denunciations issued, that few – making their excuses and beating their retreat in a furtive yet civilised manner, unless risking the demolition of their half-formed prejudices – would like to admit not having read (Joyce, Eliot, and to a lesser degree, Pound, are of course a different matter).

There are some interesting similarities between the lives and circumstances of the two men, but too much could be made of this. Each was an only child; neither had children from their long marriages to devoted partners (Froanna, Jan); neither attended university, and the alternative training they had in art was of short duration, the prodigious gifts of each being recognised at an early age (Don was sculpting animals in a Los Angeles zoo and winning prizes before his teens) – they were largely self-taught as thinkers, writers and artists. Lewis couldn’t, but didn’t need to, read music; for Don, this was no disadvantage.

"Admirable talkers"

They were certainly among the greatest conversationalists of their respective times. Cecil Gray said of Lewis: ‘I have known many admirable talkers in my time, but I can say without hesitation that Wyndham Lewis was the most brilliant, witty and profound of them all.’ ‘I do not know anyone more profitable to talk to’, said Eliot. John Thomas, who played keyboards in The Magic Band in the late 1970s, testified as many others did to Don’s ‘unstoppable fountain of sheer creative energy’, and to his being the most charismatic conversationalist he’d ever met. ‘He could talk endlessly about nothing and made you feel you were conversing with the gods. It was amazing. He would call my house to talk to me and if I wasn’t at home, he would get my wife on the phone and I swear he could keep her engaged for an hour, just in the course of discovering I wasn’t at home and wasn’t around. I saw him call operators to make a long-distance call. These are people who are trained just to get on with their work and he could keep them on the phone for fifteen minutes before the call was even put through.’ (From Mike Barnes, *Captain Beefheart* (2000)). Drummer John French remembered seeing him ‘walk someone out to their car at 9 o’clock at night and I’d get up the next day and he’d still be standing out there talking’.

Like Lewis, Don was no great lover of the human race. Both had no illusions about the violence that lay at the root of human personality. ‘Man’s lived a million years ’n still he kills’ – as a line from ‘Steal Softly Thru Snow’ has it. When asked at his home in the Mohave desert in 1982 what aspect of the future most frightened him, he replied: ‘The fact that man seems intent on getting rid of nature. You see pine trees that have been shaved until there’s nothing left but a little poodle tail on top and you just know that somebody had an awfully bad Christmas’. Don was passionate about the environment and loved animals – which feature in most of his paintings (but not in a cuddly way) – most especially whales and dolphins. He actively supported environmental causes and donated proceeds from many concerts to organizations such as the World Wildlife Fund.

Nor – again like Lewis – was Don a people-pleaser. When the audience called for more at the end of his 1972 Albert Hall concert, he responded by whistling the Andy Williams tune of that name. Pleasing the crowd was the last thing on his mind. After he’d given up touring, he reflected: ‘[I]t was only a few people I played to anyway. I mean, all the time that I was playing, there were only a few people – small pockets of people really listening’.

It may be personal choice rather than the inner Vorticist savage surfacing, but nothing acts as a pick-me-up and antidote to despondency as well as *Trout Mask Replica* for Iain Sinclair, as he confessed on Radio 4 several years ago. Another novelist well-versed in Lewis – spotted at the Centenary Conference at Tate Britain in 1982 – is Adam Mars-Jones. The *Times Literary Supplement* has not only hosted his intelligent and sympathetic reviewing of Lewis but also his review of Mike Barnes’s *Beefheart* biography (24 November, 2000). He demonstrated an intimate knowledge of the musician’s oeuvre. It would be good to know which other Lewisians or Lewis-respecters, novelists or otherwise, share this enthusiasm. Does A.S. Byatt bop to ‘Dropout Boogie’?

We can’t know what Lewis would have thought of Captain Beefheart; paradoxically, he might have had more time for him as a musician than for Don Van Vliet the poet-lyricist and painter whose surrealist-expressionist outpourings are unlikely to have been his cup of tea. Don learned much from early Stravinsky, and

it shows; Stravinsky-inflected work by George Antheil impressed Lewis: ‘As I don’t know the first word in musical composition I can say nothing about Antheil’s work, except that what he has played to me I have got considerable pleasure from.’ (See Alan Munton’s ‘Music Ho! – Lewis and Music Criticism’, *Lewisletter* 2, March 1975.)

A collection of Don’s writings is long overdue. Music apart, as lyricist and poet he is held in the highest regard by many of his American peers. Novelist Bradford Morrow, known to Lewisians as Lewis’s bibliographer and editor of the Black Sparrow re-issue of *Blast*, published several of Don’s poems in his influential magazine *Conjunctions* in the 1980s, as well as cover artwork. He spoke at the April New York Beefheart symposium organised by Gary Lucas.

‘A very sophisticated lyricist’, was Jerzy Kosinski’s verdict when Lucas showed him the lyric sheet to *Trout Mask Replica* at Yale. In 1973, Eric Mottram, then editor of *Poetry Review*, told me of his admiration for Don’s lyrics – and when at Kent State University he was a big supporter of the heavily Beefheart-influenced band Devo. He had written in 1971 (though this was not published until 1975): ‘Since Dylan and the West Coast rock groups of the Sixties, there has been little development in this field [‘The Poetry of Rock’] apart from the extraordinary lyrics of Captain Beefheart, which make a good deal of our poetry seem tame and dull’. (‘Sixties American Poetry, Poetics & Poetic Movements’, *Sphere History of Literature in the English Language*, volume 9: *American Literature since 1900*, ed. Marcus Cunliffe, London 1975, p. 301.)

Beefheart the artist

Don would carry a sketchbook with him everywhere. He would draw on tour buses, restaurants, bars – and paint whenever he could. He had three one-man exhibitions in the UK: at the Bluecoat Gallery, Liverpool, 1972 (his first ever); at the Waddington Galleries, Cork Street, London, in 1986; and finally ‘Don Van Vliet – Stand Up To Be Discontinued’, his biggest, at Brighton Museum & Art Gallery in 1994. The last time I was to meet him was at the private view at Waddington. His mentor Julian Schnabel accompanied him. Approaching him with a turned-on micro-cassette recorder, I asked if I might record our discussion. Fixing me with a stern gaze, but with the hint of a twinkle, he said: ‘That’s very *assumptious* of you!’ Why isn’t that word in *OED*?

I was impressed yet again by his remembering part of a previous conversation we’d had almost word for word. I wish now that instead of turning again to the subject of Lord Buckley, the cabaret artist and proto-hipster, I had engaged him in conversation about Lewis. (His old friend Ornette Coleman had played at Buckley’s funeral in 1960.)

The critics were mostly impressed by his painting. ‘Psychedelic expressionism’ was a term bandied about. There have been sceptics, but in a useful overview of rock artists who have turned their hand to oil and canvas, Matthew Collings cast his expert eye on a dozen of them and pronounced: ‘Don Van Vliet’s in a league of his own. He could easily compete with Turner Prize-type art. In fact, he’d easily win because he’s so good’ (*Q*, February 2002).

There’s no trace of Lewis’s influence in Don’s art. The drawings have always reminded me of Kenneth Patchen’s; the paintings clearly owe a great deal to Franz Kline, whom he rated highly, Motherwell and de Kooning, Bacon and sundry German expressionists. Affinities with Schnabel and his other friend and mentor, A.R. Penck, are evident; and he venerated van Gogh. Don had many successful exhibitions in the USA and Europe with the Michael Werner Gallery, gathering plaudits and respectable sales.

Lewis and Beefheart

So how did he get to know about Lewis?

This puzzled me for a long time. I was aware of his admiration, indeed alignment, with Lewis from at least the time of his interview with Christine McKenna in *New Musical Express* in 1982 (18 September) when she asked him: ‘In past conversations you’ve mentioned numerous people you admire: Wyndham Lewis, Shakespeare, Lenny Bruce, Franz Kline, Stravinsky. Is there a common quality those people share?’ To which he replied: ‘Yeah, they’re all real sensitive and honest. They have no choice other than to do what they do and don’t try to fool around about it. They just do it. And they suffered for it.’

In 2000, Mike Barnes’s biography, *Captain Beefheart*, appeared. It was no help; there was no mention of Lewis in it. Then, four years later, the American edition was published – I came across a remaindered copy by chance in London a year later. And there were the photos of Beefheart



(l to r) Don Van Vliet, Dagmar Krause, Jan Van Vliet and Eric Feldman outside the Manchester City Art Gallery: Wyndham Lewis exhibition, October 1980 (Gary Lucas)

and friends, taken by his guitarist-manager Gary Lucas, at the Manchester Lewis exhibition in 1980! (Lucas’s playing of the intricate guitar instrumental ‘Flavor Bud Living’ is spoken of with awe by musicians; I’d witnessed the miracle in Birmingham.) The text had been revised and expanded, and this appeared: ‘On their [1980] UK tour, The Magic Band drove from show to show in a van that Jan nicknamed the Goldfish Bowl. The tedium was relieved and the mood of the group – especially Van Vliet himself – would be elevated by some story telling. ‘At times he had me reading from this book by Wyndham Lewis called *Snooty Baronet*, which he loved,’ Lucas says. ‘It would send him into raptures, saying: “Old Snooty. Oh, man that’s so hip!” He’d be quoting from the book and chuckling backstage’.

The American text has now been incorporated into the new English edition, but the photos have gone. After Don’s death, Gary Lucas mentioned this episode again in a tribute written by Barnes for *Mojo* (March 2011). Thinking that Lucas might be the man with the answers, I saw on a Facebook page that one of his half-dozen favourite books was *The Revenge for Love*. There was an e-mail address for Gary; that did it. I carefully phrased a letter and asked as many questions as I felt it polite to. Within twenty-four hours he replied at some length, despite the fact he was working and recording in Havana. All was then revealed:

Don became a fan when I first introduced him to Lewis’ work late ’78 I believe, so much so that we made a point to stop with the entire band at the Manchester City Art Gallery to see Lewis’ exhibition when we played Manchester on tour in Nov ’80. [If one Googles ‘Wyndham Lewis and Captain Beefheart’, a touching and

revealing account is available of a young musician's visit to the exhibition and his chance encounter with Don – of whom he'd never heard – and his entourage.] I would say he favored the writing over the art and was overall impressed by Lewis' rebellious Enemy persona in opposition to the prevailing accepted modern art of the time just as Don's music was always afforded outsider status (if that) in the music canon.

I became a fanatical fan myself around 1975 (he wasn't even mentioned at Yale when I was there studying English literature in the early '70s; a friend turned me on to him and I found a copy of 'Soldier of Humor' anthology in Hong Kong in 1975 and became hooked) and have amassed a collection of first editions of most of his books and magazines, also his 'Timon of Athens' portfolio [this can be seen on the wall behind Gary in his NYC apartment in a YouTube clip I can forward to anyone who's interested], '30 Personalities and a Self-Portrait,' and two original drawings of Lewis that appear in Walter Michel's book, one titled 'Sentinels' [Michel 667] and another whose name I forget at this moment which dates from 1937 and is a beautiful pen and ink and watercolour composition – I acquired these through the Anthony d'Offay gallery in 1985 (although I am hardly a 'wealthy rock star'! [I had used this phrase to characterise Lewis collectors David Bowie and Bryan Ferry.]

I sent Don quite a few Lewis books over the years we worked together including the UK Penguin edition of *Apes of God*; not sure if he actually read it himself though to tell you the truth, he preferred me to read him passages, as I mentioned in that article [*Mojo*; Don claimed to have read only one book in his life, *Sting Like a Bee* by Mohammed Ali – 'my favourite percussionist'; wife Jan among others would regularly read to him].

Yes, I was reading from a first edition of *Snooty Baronet*, on that tour (sans book jacket) – Don loved this book esp. the character of Humph.



Don Van Vliet in front of Wyndham Lewis's *Portrait of the Artist as the Painter Raphael* (1921) in Manchester City Art Gallery: Wyndham Lewis exhibition, October 1980 (Gary Lucas)

Gary went on to say that he acquired many first editions from Bradford Morrow. It was he who introduced Morrow to Don. Knowing that Mark E. Smith was a big Lewis admirer (see *Enemy News* 23, Winter 1986) as well as a Beefheart fan, I wondered if he'd come to Lewis through Beefheart. Gary thought this was possible, citing a *Melody Maker* article circa 1980; he afterwards sent me a copy. He concluded: 'To the best of my knowledge, neither Don nor Jan owned any Lewis originals'.

Talking to *Record Collector* magazine two years ago, Gary Lucas remembered Don Van Vliet as 'a sculptor and a scoutmaster, a bully, a visionary and an intimidator. He took the techniques of the artistic world to create a new way of writing and composing it, without notating it down. Who would have thought to do music as sculpture? He really saw a new way of looking at the world. He's one of the greats of all time, an American master, a genius up there with Charles Ives, Mark Twain, Walt Whitman or Allen Ginsberg'.

Gary has recently re-joined The Wyndham Lewis Society. He has solved the mystery of how Don Van Vliet became enamoured of Lewis, and deserves all Lewisians' thanks for communicating this and for being the catalyst for Don's engagement with Lewis. How many people (Mark E. Smith included?) have started seriously looking at and reading Lewis as a result of his and Don's enthusiasm?