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Waxed Oop

Fast 'N' Bulbous | Cuneiform Records

By [Troy Collins](#)

The greatest measure of any enduring composition is resilience in the face of re-interpretation. Even the most abstract renditions of works by composers as diverse as J.S. Bach, Thelonious Monk and Frank Zappa retain the core elements that identify their authors; such is the singularity of their vision.



Don Van Vliet (aka, Captain Beefheart) possessed a similarly inimitable style. Beefheart's enigmatic writing fused intricate counterpoint and polyphonic harmonies to unorthodox rhythms and primal blues expressionism. This fertile combination has influenced a diverse array of musicians, from the gruff abstract blues of Tom Waits and the angular indie rock of Deerhoof to the spidery jazz excursions of Marc Ribot. Years ahead of his time, his work continues to inspire artists outside the mainstream.

While chamber music ensembles like the Meridian Arts Ensemble and eclectic avant gardists like Eugene Chadbourne and Henry Kaiser have also dabbled in this oeuvre, Fast 'N' Bulbous embraces the Beefheart songbook wholeheartedly, offering inventive instrumental re-interpretations that blend soulful improvisation with tight arrangements. Co-led by legendary Downtown guitarist Gary Lucas and Microscopic Septet saxophonist Phillip Johnston, *Waxed Oop* is the septet's follow up to their infectious debut, *Pork Chop Blue Around The Rind* (Cuneiform, 2005).

In addition to nuanced precision and shrewd arrangements, the ensemble's most impressive feat is their ability to excavate the tuneful kernels buried in Beefheart's labyrinthine tunes. Translating the Captain's raspy diatribes into pithy horn charts, they transpose oblique tendrils of melody into opulent sketches of timeless, surreal Americana, most notably on the lush "Blabber 'n' Smoke."

As lead guitarist in Beefheart's last band, Gary Lucas lends an air of authority to the proceedings. He opens the album unaccompanied, with a folksy rendition of "Sure 'Nuff 'n' Yes I do," leading a rousing power trio with bassist Jesse Krakow and drummer Richard Dworkin on the rollicking medley "Click Clack/Ice Cream For Crow." Elsewhere, his psychedelic slide guitar musings cut through the horn heavy ensemble, weaving kaleidoscopic motifs through tunes like "You Know You're a Man" and "Trust Us."

Despite Lucas' myriad solo contributions and the ensemble's cantilevered charts, Johnston and his fellow horn players also offer incisive individual commentary, catapulted into vociferous flights by a crack rhythm team. Johnston's circuitous alto intervals on "Dropout Boogie," Rob Henke's jagged trumpet cadenza at the center of "Ice Rose," Joe Fiedler's braying trombone accents on "Smithsonian Institute Blues," and Dave Sewelson's skronky baritone salvo on "The Past Sure is Tense" are all dynamic, vivacious highlights of a carefully balanced session.

The album closes with a straightforward live reading of "China Pig" (sung by Robyn Hitchcock) that sits in direct contrast to the ingenious instrumental arrangements that preceded it, further reinforcing the record's original premise. *Waxed Oop* offers further re-evaluation of the work of one of the Twentieth Century's most misunderstood geniuses, not as an eccentric rock icon, but as a composer of serious merit.

Track Listing: Sure 'Nuff 'n' Yes I do; Trust Us; Smithsonian Institute Blues; Dropout Boogie; You Know You're a Man; Well; Ice Rose; Click Clack/Ice Cream For Crow; Woe-is-uh-Me-Bop; The Blimp; The Past Sure is 'Tense; Blabber 'n' Smoke; China Pig.

Personnel: Gary Lucas: electric guitar, National Steel guitar, FX; Phillip Johnston: alto saxophone; Rob Henke: trumpet; Joe Fiedler: trombone; Dave Sewelson: baritone saxophone; Jesse Krakow: bass; Richard Dworkin: drums; Robyn Hitchcock: vocals (13).