

A look into heart of Beefheart

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Often called the Salvador Dali of rock, Don Van Vliet — recording as Captain Beefheart — was one of the genre's few true originals.

A singer with a Howlin' Wolf-like delivery, a musical vision comparable to that of avant-garde jazz pioneer Ornette Coleman and a poetic line in surreal, naturalistic lyrics, Van Vliet ran his Magic Band like some sort of cult, always seeking to stretch the limits of its sound.

His best-known album, 1969's groundbreaking, cacophonous "Trout Mask Replica," remains one of the most rewarding and intriguing records of the 20th century. Echoes of Van Vliet's music can be heard in Tom Waits, Franz Ferdinand, XTC and PJ Harvey, among others.



The Glendale-born Van Vliet, now 65 and in poor health, gave up music a quarter of a century ago to concentrate on painting, but his final two albums — 1980's "Doc at the Radar Station" and 1982's "Ice Cream for Crow" (Astralwerks; \$16.98 each) — have just been reissued with extra tracks.

We reached the inventive New York guitarist/bandleader Gary Lucas, who played on the newly re-released albums (and co-leads a jazz-oriented, all-instrumental Beefheart tribute ensemble, Fast 'N' Bulbous), for his recollections.

Q: What surrounded the making of Van Vliet's last two albums?

A: Ecstasy and agony — and not necessarily in that order. There's always a heavy price to pay anytime you have too much fun or pleasure — there's a hangover that extended for the life of working with him. Don was a very mercurial artist, but he could be delightful, too. I have mixed feelings, but on a musical level I'm honored to be part of this timeless music.

Q: Why is Van Vliet's music so intriguing?

A: It's challenging, complex, full of mystery, humor, complexity. His songs are little puzzles that people will be trying to work out for years to come. He had some of the most peculiar methodology I've ever heard of, but he got the music generated. His instructions to us were sculptural. One time in the studio he handed me a scrap of paper that just said, "Play like you died."

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