

# “Trout Mask Replica”--Captain Beefheart and His Magic Band (1969)

Added to the National Registry: 2010

Essay by Josh Shepperd (guest post)\*



*Captain Beefheart and His Magic Band*

Depending on who you talk to, Captain Beefheart’s third released album, which entered the Library of Congress National Recording Registry in 2010, can simultaneously be described as the most widely heralded or the most difficult and enigmatic rock record of the 1960s. Matt Groening (“The Simpsons”) has deemed “Trout Mask Replica” to be the greatest album of all time. The BBC’s John Peel declared Captain Beefheart to be “rock’s true genius.” Influential rock critic Lester Bangs once wrote that “Trout Mask” wasn’t ahead of its time, it was “outside of time,” and that he listened to the record five times in a row on the first night.

Upon initial listen, the album sounds chaotic, improvised, and to an impatient ear, almost mocking. Iconic British musician Fred Frith wrote that when he first encountered the music it was “alarming to hear people playing together and yet not in any recognizable rhythmic pattern.” But after a second, third, or in this writer’s case, 50<sup>th</sup> listen, the album stands out as a work of singular imagination and originality. Challenging, mystifying, funny, despairing, and moving, “Trout Mask” is a highly choreographed, sophisticated work of sound art. “Trout Mask” invokes movements in psychedelic, free jazz, and blues music, without ever fitting into one category. And a close listen reveals a rare dialogue between Magic Band instrumentalists that reflected an intense, intimate, closely quartered practice regimen that lasted for months. The album is less the paragon of a specific musical scene than an emanation of a singular yet collaborative artistic vision. Its legacy has reverberated for decades, through “no wave” music in the 1970s, art punk in the 1980s, and indie rock in the 1990s.

How anachronistic was “Trout Mask Replica” when it was released on June 16, 1969? “Get Back” was at the top of the charts for much of that month. The Beatles were dethroned by the “Love Theme” from “Romeo and Juliet” in July, followed by dystopic folk curiosity “In the Year 2025” by Zagar & Evans, and then the dive-bar anthem “Honky Tonk Woman” by the Rolling Stones. If one looks at the popular charts of 1969, mainstream music was a lot less challenging than one might expect. The top two top “Billboard” songs of the year were the addictively saccharine “Sugar, Sugar” by the Archies and genre-remediating “Aquarius” by the 5<sup>th</sup> Dimension. At the same time, though, rock’s underground was undergoing a period of

innovation and foment, with important first albums by Krautrock pioneers Can, King Crimson, MC5, and The Stooges. But it was "Trout Mask Replica" that most seemed to materialize out of nowhere, less imagining something new than an alternate and less-traveled aesthetic path.

Beefheart had an amazing vocal range, and had learned to emulate his heroes Muddy Waters, John Lee Hooker, and especially Howlin' Wolf on his first two albums. Indeed the name Captain Beefheart was an homage to great blues artist nicknames such as Screamin' Jay Hawkins. After neo-psychedelic masterpieces "Safe as Milk" and "Strictly Personal," Beefheart breached his contract with Buddah Records and spent some time in New York, deliberating about his next project. During this period of time Beefheart and the Magic Band sat down for a fateful meeting with Vliet's childhood friend Frank Zappa, who played them Procol Harum's "Whiter Shade of Pale," and encouraged the band to listen to and write music without conforming to conventional theory and notation. Ian Underwood, of the Mothers of Invention, would reportedly sometimes transcribe what Zappa would play on guitar to piano. The notion that rock could be composed like a classical composition deeply impressed Vliet, who bought and began to formulate lines on a piano. As author Eric Gudas points out, Vliet was a self-taught musician, but was able to sing parts and hammer rhythms on the piano, often without being able to repeat the same line twice. Magic Band Drummer John "Drumbo" French wrote tablature for Beefheart to chronicle his creative output, and so that Vliet's ideas could be transposed for the rest of the band. Jeff "Antennae Jimmy Semens" Cotton was assigned the role of "paper monger" and would serve as a scribe for Beefheart's free-associating recitations of poems and lyrics. Beyond blues and rock influences, the Magic Band became deeply interested in free jazz, listening to John Coltrane's "Afro Blue," "Africa Brass," and Village Vanguard recordings, Eric Dolphy's "Out to Lunch," and Ornette Coleman, as well as New York minimalist composer Steve Reich.

The Magic Band--John "Drumbo" French, Bill "Zoot Horn Rollo" Harkleroad, Jeff "Antennae Jimmy Semens" Cotton, Mark "Rockette Morton" Boston, and "Victor "The Mascara Snake" Hayden"--were all much younger than Vliet, and dedicated to the Beefheart vision. They intensively practiced his new compositional approach. The band started to live together in a small two-bedroom, two-bathroom house, and when all was said and done, they cohabitated and practiced together day and night for eight months. The band bought the thickest, heaviest strings they could find, and Vliet's compositions, arranged by Drumbo, were so complex that melodies would have to be fingerpicked so that each note could be played.

John French describes in his book, "Through the Eyes of Magic," that the tenor of the band's lifestyle led to intense exchanges, in which Vliet regularly broke down members emotionally, and on some occasions, through the initiation of physical altercations. At the same time an intimacy and reciprocal intuition emerged between the Magic Band. Vliet's compositions took on a life of their own under John French's direction. The music reflected, according to French, emergent unconscious and conscious qualities that built harmonies and rhythms, but also spaces between the sound of instruments, eliciting the feeling of surrealist art like Salvador Dali. Vliet had essentially composed an album of 29 songs, piece by piece, beat by beat, which French describes as a "universe of sound." In some cases, one instrument would play in 3/4, and another in 5/4, building completely different rhythmic measures that eventually synthesized as a polyrhythm. Unlike conventional rock structures of a lead and rhythm guitar, "Trout Mask"

featured dueling guitars and bass, and drums playing independent but equally complex and sometimes disorienting parts. Over eight months, the Magic Band developed a strong collaborative, intuitive form of exchange that made possible Beefheart's sound vision.

Frank Zappa reportedly only visited the house once during the band's intensive practice fellowship. His original plan was to record the music in the context of the practice space itself, as an "anthropological field recording." One evening, Vliet came home and announced that Zappa was going to give the Magic Band six hours in the studio to lay some tracks down. Eight months in, the band was so well practiced that 18 of the 29 tracks were recorded live in 4.5 hours. To ameliorate the band's new sound, and in friendly competition with Frank Zappa's Mothers of Invention, Vliet built the band's famously eccentric image. Their look was supposed to be funny, similar to the Mothers of Invention, but farther out. Yet the lineup only performed "Trout Mask Replica" once.

The following year, "Rolling Stone" did a feature on Beefheart, and praised "Trout Mask" as "truly beyond comparison" and "absolutely boundless." But the article did not credit arranger John French for his important contributions to the album. As the Magic Band broke up, reformed, and toured through the 1970s, Beefheart's legend grew. Credited as an influence by Tom Waits, Johnny Rotten, Pere Ubu, DNA, and PJ Harvey, the album exerted a clear influence on experimental rock music from the Residents, to Japanese noise bands the Boredoms and Ruins, to Chicago rock band U.S. Maple, and San Diego indie band Trumans Water. The Magic Band had recorded a third studio album in 1967, which was released as the "Mirror Man Sessions" in 1971 to help Buddah recoup their losses after Trout Mask's success. By the 1980s, "Trout Mask Replica" had accumulated the veneer of a legendary record, showing up on top 100 lists, name-checked on MTV, eventually receiving a documentary treatment from John Peel.

But what does it mean to hear the album for the first time? It's as rhythmic as it is harmonic. At moments, interplay between instruments elicits a sound similar to sympathetic strings in eastern music. There is atonality, delicate consonance, and a clear lineage of psychedelic music and blues. The liveness of the recording presents its own sense of fascination. The precise exchanges between individual musical lines form a whole as fascinating as its parts. It is thoughtful music. It is challenging. And "Trout Mask" writes a biography of relationships within the band and the aspirations of its leader, while reflecting a visionary musical world, all at the same time. It's both a singular accomplishment, and a performance that encourages the listener to retroactively contemplate rock 'n' roll's capacity to synthesize and remediate blues and avant-garde music into something completely new. And, finally, it's an album that can be appreciated from multiple perspectives--for its technical prowess, the synesthetic imaginative associations that it elicits from its listeners, and the horizon that it opens in reconsidering the contours of musical composition. "Trout Mask" requires multiple listens but, if one has patience and musical discernment, one can appreciate to what extent the Magic Band sacrificed themselves for their art, leaving us with a mysterious and beautiful record deserving to be considered at the top of the rock canon.

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\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.