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TROUT MASK REPLICA

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TROUT MASK REPLICA

by
Kevin Courier



Trout Mask Replica

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Trout Mask Replica



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Acknowledgments

Although this was the most enjoyable (and least disruptive) experience I've had yet writing a book, the idea for this little tome followed some rather unfortunate circumstances. After working as a film critic at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation for close to fifteen years, I was let go in 2005 by an aspiring executive who didn't find me (among other things) consumer-friendly enough. It therefore seemed perfectly fitting to go on to write a book about an album that was even less consumer-friendly than me.

For that, I have to offer deep thanks to David Barker, my editor at Continuum press, for giving me the opportunity to delve deeply—but quickly—into my love for a peculiar record that makes demands on that love. Besides being the progenitor of a fascinating series of books for those who truly adore music, David continues to affirm my faith that there are still sharp editors dedicated to creating a nurturing climate for good writing. (He also returns every e-mail query promptly.) Gabriella Page-Fort supplied a concise copyedit, too, which made my job as a writer about as painless as anyone could hope for.

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I set out to write this book with a keen ear for the larger culture that informs Beefheart's work, in an effort to prove that it doesn't exist in a vacuum. It's an important aspect of what a good critic does. For those fans on Internet sites, though, who only crave "new information" (i.e. minutiae), or resent other informed voices who value digging into the "nilly-willy" in order to get at the "nitty-gritty," this book may not satisfy any fetishistic urges. I can only paraphrase Frank Zappa: information is not knowledge. For those fans inquiring enough to delve into what is maybe (for you) a familiar story, I've tried to magnify my appraisal of one of America's most original artists by including those (like Blind Willie Johnson) who also occupy a kindred spirit of invention. In that vein, I hope you find this book an enjoyable and valuable edition to the ongoing discussion of *Trout Mask Replica*.

Preface

The Truth Has No Patterns

Like most stories, the tale of this particular book begins with an earlier one. It's about a love affair with music, and how our liaison with music takes unpredictable twists and turns. As our encounters in romance can begin so suddenly, so innocently, so mysteriously, timeless music can also follow a similar course. A record will sometimes hit us quite unexpectedly on a car radio, right at that moment when the music and the commercials blend into one totally innocuous whole. That's how I discovered Bob Dylan's "Like a Rolling Stone," for instance, on a family vacation to Florida. My father, who was driving the car (and who hated rock and roll), became so transfixed by the tidal pull of the song that even he couldn't find the will to change the station. Other times, it happens through chance encounters with an acquaintance.

When I first met Brian Potts in 1964—a grade school classmate I knew only from a distance—he adamantly insisted that I come over and listen to Beatles records at his house. When I told him that I had no interest in listening to music by four obnoxiously cute British guys in similar suits and cereal bowl haircuts, he played me "It Won't Be Long," which opened *With the Beatles* with thunderous joy. I immediately shut up. Brian and I became, for a few years, inseparable friends. Much later, we even shared Dylan's epic "Sad Eyed Lady of the Lowlands" from *Blonde on Blonde*. I remember both of us wide-eyed twelve-year-olds, in dazed silence, trying to find suitable words to explain how such a poetically dense song could hold us for the whole side of an album. But that's generally how we come to discover the music we fall in love with: the serendipity of friendship. There are other times, though, when music has a way of discovering you rather than the other way around. Unlike most pop music, it can connect with you in such an immediate and startling way that you ultimately have to catch up to it. The encounter does more than simply defy your expectations—it renders them inadequate to the occasion. So it was with Captain Beefheart & the Magic Band's 1969 double-LP, *Trout Mask Replica*. As with the previously discovered records, it, too, was a friend who introduced me to it.

In 1972, I had been working at a Youth Centre in Oshawa, Ontario, Canada, a small industrial town where General Motors was the economic engine of the city. With very little cultural life going on and boredom always looming on the horizon, some kids just naturally turned to drugs. One of them was my friend Mike, a young speed dealer who sampled his own merchandise maybe a little too often. A few years earlier, Mike had lost part of his leg when, much to his horror, he couldn't outrun a moving train. Now hiding a partial limp, he moved through life as if he were still within earshot of that predatory caboose. One day, Mike came up to the Centre while I was on shift helping other youngsters find ways to get off drugs. It was pretty common for folks to just wander in and hang out and chat, while waiting to see what crisis might come through the door. Oddly enough, it was in this centre that Mike always seemed relaxed and friendly. Who knows? Maybe it was in this sanctuary that he felt no longer encumbered by his street identity as the speed dealer.

On this particular day, I was talking to a coworker about *Hot Rats*, a 1969 Frank Zappa album I had first heard a couple of summers earlier. I commented on how the record had opened up, for me, a world of fascinating sounds by providing a storehouse of musical technique. It was liberating, I suggested, to hear energetic music that so freely combined such vastly diverse styles. Suddenly, Mike piped up from across the room, "Have you ever heard *Trout Mask Replica*?" Others in the office chuckled, as if some joke were being cracked to challenge a title as ridiculous as *Hot Rats*. But I had actually heard of *Trout Mask*. In fact, I knew of Captain Beefheart. He sang the only song that wasn't

an instrumental on *Hot Rats*, a blistering blues track called “Willie the Pimp.” Under the searing melody of Sugar cane Harris’s violin and fuelled by Zappa’s blast furnace guitar, Beefheart introduced Willie with a deep growling snarl that suggested Howlin’ Wolf on a midnight prowl. “I’m a little pimp with my hair gassed back,” he announced with libidinal delight, “pair of khaki pants and my shoes shined black.” It’s a powerhouse performance, but it was a brief one, since the epic track was for the most part an instrumental showcase for Zappa’s dexterous guitar work.

Although “Willie the Pimp” served as an overwhelming introduction to Beefheart’s limitless power as a blues singer, I was familiar with little else about him. A few months earlier, I had purchased a record called *Zapped*, a sampler anthology that Zappa’s record company had released featuring a number of artists signed to his Bizarre/Straight label. On this album, among tracks by Alice Cooper; schizophrenic street busker named Wild Man Fischer; fifties hipster poet Lord Buckley; folkies Tim Buckley, Jerry Yester, and Judy Henske; the GTO’s (a female groupie band); plus Zappa’s own Mothers of Invention were two songs by Captain Beefheart (“The Blimp (mousetrapreplica)” and “Old Fart at Play”) from *Trout Mask Replica*.

Upon reading the liner notes on *Zapped*, I saw that Zappa had actually produced *Trout Mask*. “The Blimp (mousetrapreplica)” was a frenzied poetic recitation by a member of Beefheart’s Magic Band and recorded by Zappa over the telephone in the studio. He layered this delirious reading simultaneously overtop a repetitive bed of abstract jazz by the Mothers. “The Blimp” was a hilariously wild yarn of sexual terror cast in the famous soundscape of the Hindenberg disaster broadcast:

All the people stir
'n the girl's knees tremble
'n run their hands over the blimp, the blimp.

By contrast, “Old Fart at Play” had Beefheart himself reading a luxuriantly textured sensual limerick:

Her stockings down caught dust 'n doughballs
She cracked 'er mouth glaze caught one eyelash
Rubbed 'er hands on 'er gorgeous gingham.

For over its two-minute length, the song evolved into an intangible story of a man being reborn in a “wooden fish-head.” Since the track was sandwiched between “Lucille Has Messed My Mind Up,” a straightforward R&B performance by ex-Mother Jeff Simmons (with Zappa providing some tasty blues licks on the guitar), and the Mothers’ own Kurt Weill-flavoured “Holiday in Berlin, Full Blown,” “Old Fart at Play” seemed more a musical segue on *Zapped* than a clue to what secrets *Trout Mask Replica* actually held.

In answer to Mike’s question, I told him that I knew a couple of tracks from the record, but that was it. He persevered, “Yeah, but have you heard the whole album?” I pleaded ignorance. “No. I haven’t even seen it, Mike,” I replied. “Well, I’ve got it,” he said as if he’d just revealed ownership of the Maltese Falcon. Being both curious and excited, I asked him if I could borrow it. “Borrow it?” he asked incredulously. “You can *have* it!” All eyes in the room suddenly looked to Mike as if he were privy to a long dark secret we all wanted in on. “I can’t listen to it, Courier,” he said wincing at the very thought of hearing it. “It’s a horrible record! Noise, just nothing but noise. It makes me ... nervous.” After a man has lost part of his leg to a moving train, one begins to quickly wonder what kind of music could possibly make him “nervous.” But I accepted his offer and took *Trout Mask Replica* off his hands.

When Mike delivered the record, I realized that I first needed to get past the front cover before I could ever come close to sampling the music. Some of Zappa's album covers had been intimidating, too, but they were also so oddly amusing, so deliberately poking fun, that they became ultimately approachable. The front cover of *Trout Mask Replica* didn't seem funny at all. It was earnest rather than satirical. It exuded a quiet comfort about its own weirdness which just added to my discomfort looking at it. The back cover (featuring the refurbished Magic Band in their exotic apparel) merely confirmed my fears of what a hippie commune would look like once it had gone to seed. Their names were stranger than their looks. Someone named Zoot Horn Rollo was on glass-finger guitar and flute, would later discover he was a young blues guitarist named Bill Harkleroad. ("Contrary to what was written on *Trout Mask Replica*, I never played flute with the band," Harkleroad asserts today.) Antennae Jimmy Semens, who turned out to be Harkleroad's friend Jeff Cotton, was listed as playing a steel-appendage guitar. The Mascara Snake, who was Beefheart's cousin and also a painter, played bass clarinet and sang. ("He couldn't play a lick but had a lot of attitude," Harkleroad adds.) The bass player had the oddly quirky name of Rockette Morton (Beefheart: "What do you run on Rockette Morton? Say beans." Morton: "I run on beans. I run on laser beans"). He turned out to be Mark Boston, another musical pal of Harkleroad's. Oddly, there was no drummer credited. You certainly heard one once you played this record. There wasn't anyone—anywhere—who got sounds like these from his drum kit. In time, I discovered his name was John French (who had earned the appropriate moniker Drumbo, a Disney pun), and he turned out to be a pivotal figure in the making of this music. Although uncredited in the liner notes, French is featured on the back cover lurking under the bridge beneath the rest of the band. So why was he was airbrushed (momentarily) out of history? It took years to find out.

On the front, there was Beefheart in a green coat lined with dirty white fur hanging limply around his neck. It resembled some malnourished fox that had taken rest there many years earlier (and since died). Beefheart wore a huge stovepipe hat on his head, with a swizzle bulb on the top, as if he were the Grand Wazoo of some rogue band of Shriners. Covering his face was a real trout mask, with its eyes glaring out into the great beyond. Its open mouth was framed by an elegant thread-thin moustache, while Beefheart's hand, holding the trout mask in place, was open-palmed. His pose suggested he was casually waving to someone across the street. The music? There was nothing casual about that.

On the opening track, "Frownland," I heard an urgent manifesto, one boldly declaring a new world and a new music. Off the mark, Beefheart states defiantly that his spirit is in harmony with the natural world. He'd never go back to "yer Frownland." Yet the music that surrounds him is anything but harmonious. The sound seems to come from some hidden gulag *in* Frownland. The charging guitar chords that begin the tune are as recognizably insolent as the ones that open "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction." But the moment Beefheart declares that his "smile is stuck," the rhythms clash and collide around that paralysed grin like a collection of rocks crumbling down in a mountain avalanche. You're forced to think: If this man is happy, what can Frownland possibly be like? "With that voice, he sounds like he's been a resident in Frownland his whole life," a friend suggested years later. There is an open paradox in the song revealing to listeners a romantic who doesn't feel part of a harmonious landscape. Of course, that puts him in good company with a number of American musical artists—from Charles Ives to Harry Partch—who defined their work by boldly sparring with the young and turbulent country that spawned them. Yet with Beefheart, the rancour doesn't seem driven by a need for a sound different. It resembles the declarations of a man who was different because it was the only way he could truly be himself.

As a listening experience, *Trout Mask Replica* is the story of an artist who finds himself at his most free. It is a tale of one who refuses the comforts of security, yet still continues to dream of a world

where man and beast can commingle in harmony. In staking that territory, from a musical standpoint Beefheart doesn't rely on the lovely pop hooks that we ache to hear as listeners. The freedom *Trout Mask* offers is freedom from the familiar—the very element that often makes an album a hit, or at least, an audience favorite.

Despite the abrasive atonality of the music, the varied themes on *Trout Mask* are never less than inviting. Whether it's the pure erotic sensuality of the passionate wet sex in "Neon Meate Dream of a Octafish"; or the abstract a cappella recitation of "The Dust Blows Forward 'n the Dust Blows Back," which seems to conjure up a Walt Whitman poem after it has been soaked in hillbilly booze; or "Dachau Blues," where the horror of the Holocaust gets dipped in an abstract rendering of apocalyptic gospel, Beefheart openly welcomes listeners to hear him rail against a world that is often at odds with his own distinct brand of humanism. The unsettling nature of the songs somehow guarantees a more hermetic audience for this album. Beefheart defined that sensibility years later as "music from the other side of the fence." By drawing that line in the sand, he continually puts his audience to the test trying to define exactly how that fence separates his music from all others'. Elvis, the Beatles, the Stones, they all reached out with their best songs to create a larger popular appeal, a culture that would share the pleasures held within their music. Beefheart, on *Trout Mask*, assures us that those pleasures could only be reaped in isolation. His was not a party album—unless you wanted the party to go home.

If *Trout Mask* is to be considered a hermetic experience, it ultimately inherited a secret society of followers consistently keeping its spirit alive. Unfortunately, the same couldn't be said for Mike. After he divested himself of the record, he just couldn't find solace in anything else. Within a few weeks of my receiving *Trout Mask*, Mike committed suicide. His death continues to overshadow my listening to the record, not only because the record had once spooked him, but because *Trout Mask Replica* became a parting gift before I could ever tell him my thoughts about it. Lost was an opportunity to remove his burden of being "nervous" about its contents. But stories never do end so simply.

As it turns out, I didn't have to consider my possession of *Trout Mask* for long. Just before the funeral, his mother came to visit me at my apartment looking for items he may have recently lent to his friends. "I'd like to bury him with some of his favourite things," she told me. Maybe if I had kept my mouth shut, I might still own that original first pressing of *Trout Mask Replica* on Straight Records, and he wouldn't have literally taken it to his grave. But while telling her about this strange record, she immediately assumed that I was lying about being the new owner and wanted the album back. How could I argue with a grieving mother? I reluctantly gave it to her and never saw her again. I didn't buy another copy until Halloween night in 1987.

On that evening, I was going out on a second date with a woman I recently met. There I was dressed in a powder blue suit with a wicked cat's face painted on my face, and we were off to see Clive Barker's movie *Hellraiser* in preparation for a radio interview I was doing with him a few days later. Before arriving for the special screening at the Bloor Cinema in Toronto, I detoured into Peter Dunn's Vinyl Museum to look for records. While combing through the stacks, grinning through my painted whiskers at curious onlookers, I found a brand new sealed copy of *Trout Mask Replica* on Reprise Records. Without thinking, I immediately snapped it up and ran to the counter. As the clerk was ringing it up, I started thinking of Mike, fifteen years in his grave, helplessly cradling the very record that had once so unnerved him. That night, masked and disguised, as Beefheart was himself on the cover, I had once again inherited this album. Mike and I now both possessed it. But I was to go forward into the years ahead, continuing to plumb the bottomless mysteries of this odd epic masterpiece. The very friend who introduced me to it lay motionless, somewhere deep in a hole in Oshawa, still being chased by the music he couldn't escape.

This book is for him.

Chapter One

A Desert Island of the Mind

Everybody hears my music, but the thing is, it's a matter of whether they want to or not. I don't know how people can say they don't hear ... like that [car] horn, when that horn is there. That's what gets me. What the hell are they doing, man? What are they doing? I mean, people must know they're wrong. They must know some of the things they're doing are so far back that a train don't go there.

—Don Van Vliet, “Captain Beefheart
Pulls a Hat Out of His Rabbit

Trout Mask Replica is an album so assured in its isolated world-view that no matter how much it might alienate potential listeners, it still demands to be heard—on its own terms. Yet unlike most commercial pop, Beefheart doesn't write songs to seduce an audience. We're not asked to identify with him in this music because his songs aren't a conventional baring of the artist's soul. Beefheart invites us to experience *Trout Mask Replica*, rather than telling us what to experience. So whoever you choose to share this strident and peculiar record with, you're always going to be on your own with it. Which is why *Trout Mask Replica* embodied the punk aesthetic eight years before it exploded in the UK with the Sex Pistols. If the 60s hippie culture was clannish, punks were solitary. “Punks were self-consciously outsiders in school and at work,” critic Greil Marcus told Geoff Pevere of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. “They picked things to like that nobody else did. They dressed differently, talked differently, and they weren't joiners.” *Trout Mask* would quite naturally inspire countless other artists—from the Clash to P.J. Harvey—in finding their own sound, their own voice—to walk comfortably alone in the world. “If you listen to it, you will find a world of voices speaking to you from all directions,” Marcus explained. “You might feel both exhilarated and completely lost.” Perhaps it was this very quality of being lost that made Mike feel so “nervous” about *Trout Mask*. The record didn't provide a map to guide him in finding his way back into the larger world again, the way most great pop music can. This album was about discovering yourself as an alien, about being as different as Mike once felt minus part of his leg. Beefheart's utopia wasn't borne out of the real world, a world that Mike had wished himself to be part of again. Beefheart's utopia is the true definition of the word—nowhere—a desert island of the mind.

Curiously, a few years after Mike handed me the *Trout Mask Replica* album, the record became part of a particular desert island study among music critics: What album would you take with you if you were isolated on a desert island? It's always been a tempting question, essentially a popular party staple which allows music critics a casual forum to defend their tastes, test the wits of others, plus brag about rare records that nobody but them gives a damn about. The idea is also a bit ridiculous. (What critic would ever want to be isolated on a desert island with no access to concerts, free CDs, records, or even an outlet to express his or her persuasive views?) After all, isn't music, even in the current age of iPods, still best enjoyed in a communal environment? A desert island seems to negate the whole purpose of music. It denies music an audience, save for that one lone fan, to test its true value. Yet this question became the subject of a 1979 book called *Stranded: Rock and Roll for a Desert Island*, in which twenty prominent American rock critics were asked by fellow scribe Greil Marcus to contribute an essay in response to this curious (and appetizing) request.

The concept of the desert island was intended to be a purely metaphorical one. But was it? In his introduction to *Stranded*, Marcus comments, “When I began to call up people I thought would be interested and asked them that question, asked them to contribute, the response was enthusiastic, but in many cases for a reason I hadn’t anticipated. ‘A great idea,’ said one person after another. ‘I feel like I’ve been living on a desert island for years.’” A remark like that can lead a reader to think that, included in *Stranded*, there will be essays about music that can only be nurtured in isolation, in the mind and tastes of the writer. Upon looking through some of the selections, though, the desert island records invited more of a crowd than many of these writers thought. For example, Simon Frith, a former columnist for *Creem* and *Melody Maker*, decided to bring along *Beggar’s Banquet* (1968), the Rolling Stones’ exquisitely popular tribute to country blues—hardly a record you could imagine wanting to hear alone. M. Mark, the former arts editor of the *Village Voice*, provided a fascinating overview of the mystically dark Celtic poetry of Van Morrison. This brooding Belfast Cowboy with his wailing brogue certainly wasn’t a voice made for a desert island. The late Lester Bangs, who described how Morrison’s *Astral Weeks* (1968) actually pulled him *out* of the painful isolation of a horrible year, makes the opposite argument of the book.

Most of the artists cited—whether it was Tom Smucker on the glorious gospel recordings of Thomas A. Dorsey or Kit Rachlis on the hauntingly lonely sound of Neil Young’s voice—were people that ultimately did reach (and intended to reach) a larger audience. Even if their work originated from a private, sometimes isolated pain (like Young), their records continued to exist because their purpose was to create a bridge from those desert islands to a broader civilization—where anxious ears were yearning to listen to them. Most of the essays were private musings by intelligent critics eloquently championing their favorite music. (Since he was the editor, Greil Marcus actually got to cheat and bring most of his own record collection to the island.)

The only essay in the book that, for me, made a convincing argument was Langdon Winner’s on *Trout Mask Replica*. Winner, formerly a political theorist, had written extensively about rock and roll for a variety of music magazines. He instinctively knew that this record was not one that was shaped for popular tastes, or one that an audience would (or could) quickly embrace. He easily recognized that this is an album which actually forces the desert island experience on a listener—whether the listener wanted to retreat to one or not. He realized that *Trout Mask* was an endurance test for most listeners and it was a record that strongly divided and confounded more people perhaps than any other pop album. It may indeed be this very attribute that made *Trout Mask* such an inspired choice for a desert island disc, for it was conjured in that island’s sequestered spirit long before the listener took the journey there. “One reason ... that *Trout Mask Replica* would be my personal choice for a desert island is that a desert island is possibly the only place where I could play the record without being asked by friends and neighbors to take the damned thing off,” Winner wrote. *Trout Mask Replica*, for Winner, provided a very succinct argument for desert island listening. “Created in isolation by a renegade artist/genius/madman and his band of unquestioning disciples, hermetic almost to the point of catatonia, yet challenging in every moment of its seventy-nine-minute duration, *Trout Mask* is a record uniquely suited to years and years of isolated listening,” Winner further explained.

Trout Mask Replica earned its desert island exile because it has a way of spurning simple, or easy categorization. Throughout its twenty-eight tracks, the album mixes and combines various genres of music, including Delta blues, free jazz and expressionist lyricism, and does it at the speed of a Cuisinart. The record is a scrapbook collection of songs and poems, impishly acted out with Dadaist abandon and jack-in-the-box hijinks, performed with jagged rhythms and sharp conflicting atonal melodies. Ultimately, the record comes to raise important questions about just what constitutes musical entertainment and what an audience’s relationship might be to it. “People like to hear music in tune because they hear it in tune all the time,” Beefheart once told Robert Carey of the *New York*

Rocker. “I tried to break that all down on *Trout Mask Replica*. I made it all out of focus.” It may be out of focus, but the music is never blurry.

According to Winner, Beefheart’s most radical move was removing from his songs the security of harmony (“the mother’s heartbeat,” according to Beefheart), where we traditionally seek a warm spot in the songs we come to love. “Beefheart’s music offers none of the qualities of a ‘good’ record; engaging melodies; a solid, interesting groove; poignant hook lines; and an intelligible reflection of the life of the listener,” Winner explained. “If the purpose of a phonograph record is to soothe us, to provide a beat for dancing, a pulse for making love, a set of themes to reassure us in the joys and troubles of life’s daily commerce, then *Trout Mask* fails utterly.... But if a record is legitimate in trying to overthrow our somnambulistic habits of hearing, seeing, and touching things, if it is valid in seeking to jolt our sensibilities and restructure the way we experience music and everything else, then Beefheart’s strange collection of songs begins to make sense.”

The songs themselves, though, are an odd lot in which to try and make sense. There may be no lulling melodies to draw us into the musical canvas of *Trout Mask*, but that doesn’t mean that melodies don’t exist. It’s just that these spiky and jagged themes are quickly gone before we can catch them on first listen. The fleeting let’s-try-it-on inventiveness of the compositions, in fact, comes across with a shocking ebullience. “It was a little like throwing a bomb,” is how Tim Page, the former music critic at the *Washington Post*, described the initial impact of this album:

From the moment the phonograph needle settled into a Beefheart groove ... everything changed. A crunching dissonance rent the air. Complicated time signatures and opaque poetry upset polite conversation and rattled the Mateus rose. Beefheart’s roar of purest gravel and the untrammelled violence of the rhythms sent resident hippies into bummers; lovers could find no slow dances; young professors would sniff around the turntable, scrutinize the spinning disc, pronounce the music “Um ... interesting,” and then move as far away from the loudspeakers as possible. Meanwhile, a small but significant counterforce of Beefheart fans would surround the captured stereo, beaming with anarchic triumph.

Quoting composer Charles Wuorinen on Arnold Schoenberg’s equally demanding *Pierrot Lunaire*, Page said that listening to *Trout Mask* is “rather like trying to befriend a porcupine.” With “laughing gas silliness aplenty,” the album illustrated, for Page, the way Beefheart explored “the interface of two aesthetics that had never before been mated: namely, the heartfelt emotionalism of rhythm and blues and the cool celebration of high surrealism.” That’s a pretty good description of the bomb that Page claims had been hurled at listeners. But the record is also a mating of two other sources seldom acknowledged: the world of abstract expressionist painting and the urban blues (“Jackson Pollock trying to play like John Lee Hooker,” is how Magic Band guitarist Bill Harkleroad accurately described the music to David Bowman of *Salon*).

Unlike many of the jazz artists and critics of the late 50s, rock fans (and rock critics) of the 60s and 70s seldom delved very far into the visual art world. “Music was always more accessible than art,” said art critic Roberto Ohrt about rock audiences. “[The 70s] was a generation that regarded painting, in particular, as anachronistic, outworn, even decadent. Both concert goers and record collectors accepted and practised a degree of musical specialisation that outsiders often found positively grotesque, while any comparable degree of fanaticism applied to painting or to art in general was dismissed out of hand.” Audiences may not have grasped just how much Beefheart (an abstract expressionist painter himself) drew upon that world in creating *Trout Mask Replica*. He treated music no differently than the way abstract expressionist painters, like Arshile Gorky or Jean Dubuffet, treated paint. Beefheart was after, in sound, the immediate sensation of musical color explosively

hitting a canvas. The rock audience, largely unfamiliar with abstract art, couldn't truly account for the expressionism in Beefheart's record, since there was nothing in the pop music world to compare it to.

The sensibility at work in *Trout Mask* can also be tied to early twentieth century Dadaist sound poets like Hugo Ball, who mesmerized—and shocked—audiences in Zurich at the Cabaret Voltaire in 1916. “I shall be reading poems that are meant to dispense with conventional language, no less, and have done with it,” Ball wrote in the *Dada Manifesto*. “I don't want words that other people have invented ... I want my own stuff, my own rhythm, and vowels and consonants too, matching the rhythm and all my own. If this pulsation is seven yards long, I want words that are seven yards long.” Like Ball, Beefheart chose to dispense with conventional language. He hypnotically tore into the syllables and consonants of his lyrics in quest of that pulsation. But unlike Ball, who was burdened by the solemn mysticism of Catholicism, Beefheart takes off—guilt-free—into the vapours by spinning yarns and springing puns. Just listen to a wildly playful song like “My Human Gets Me Blues” (“I knew you were under duress / I knew you were under yer dress”), where he subliminally channels poet Gregory Corso, who similarly got caught up in conceptual wordplay.

Although *Trout Mask Replica* is generally considered a landmark avant-garde rock record, it's essential to note that Beefheart and his group didn't set out to make an Art Statement—like the Dadaists. Declarations always have a clearly defined purpose, a political intent that fixes them in time. It makes for easy explanations and pigeonholing, too. For example, when Lou Reed made *Metal Machine Music* (1975), a two-record assault featuring nothing but sonic feedback, he clearly intended to outrage fans and annoy his record company. *Trout Mask* doesn't set out to deliberately anger anyone, even if it ultimately does, because Beefheart sincerely wants to entertain us. The record is also not in the adventurous cast of filmmaker Stan Brakhage, who decorated the film frame in *Mothlight* (1963) by pasting moth's wings onto film stock and then running it through an optical printer therefore making us aware of cinema's tactile qualities. Nor is Beefheart's record in the same world as Andy Warhol, when he extended the epic form of filmmaking in the somnambulistic *Empire* (1965), where we lay witness to a static shot of the Empire State Building for twenty-four-hours. Beefheart's effort is the exact opposite of minimalist art, it's as maximalist as music can get. Yet what ultimately makes *Trout Mask* a bigger artistic challenge than any of those other departures from convention is that, while it effortlessly tears apart the conventions of songwriting, it attempts it within the commercial world of pop. “I thought *Trout Mask Replica* was a very commercial album,” Beefheart told Nick Kent of *New Musical Express* in 1974. “There was a lot of humour on that album that I thought people would pick up on.” The lyrics, in particular, are written with such polymorphous glee and wit (“A squid eating dough in a polyethylene bag is fast 'n' bulbous. Got me?” is but one sample) that the record overturns any avant-garde solemnity. But the rock audience was still generally deaf to it. Defiantly original, *Trout Mask Replica* is a declaration of the American imagination that speaks in an unknown language, not fully comprehended, yet spoken candidly without fear of recrimination.

Within the lines of this story, at its very heart, is a bond between two men who were early best friends, artistic collaborators and later adversaries: Frank Zappa and Don Van Vliet. Many critics (including former Magic Band members) have attempted to diminish Zappa's role on this record. They suggest that he merely “slept at the switch,” or simply pushed the record button. But those claims, specious as they are, seem to come out of a pathological dislike of Zappa and a romantic idealization of Beefheart as the hermit genius. Anyone who cares to truly listen to *Trout Mask* can feel the abiding spirit of both men on it. Those particularly familiar with Zappa's music, especially *Uncle Meat*, will hear the conceptual shape that Zappa, as a producer, gave to the production of the music on *Trout Mask Replica*. In terms of the creation of it, others elsewhere (particularly John French) have already illuminated the process by which the music was composed. Beefheart had for years (with the

help of some critics) taken full credit for the record's songs, when it was actually created with the full involvement of the group. While many Beefheart fans might already be familiar with that part of the story, this book examines why Beefheart had the need to perpetuate that myth.

Most great albums do create myths around them and *Trout Mask Replica* is no different, but the reviews (both hostile and friendly) have usually overvalued and undervalued this great record in a deep need to find a critical language to understand it. Delving into the critical fallout of *Trout Mask Replica* is part of my own way, as a critic, of illuminating what the work means to me while leaving the judgements to the reader. Finally, the influence of this record goes further and deeper than I could have at first imagined. Besides the many groups who cite *Trout Mask* as a template for their own musical adventures, the songs on this record have been continually covered by numerous bands, while others have boldly taken their names from the song titles.

In the end, *Trout Mask Replica* is a full expression of one American artist's quest for total freedom. But it is also an expression of the tyranny of freedom. When you find yourself becoming the person you want to be, doing exactly what you want to do, sometimes freedom can't be sustained. For Beefheart, his earlier records designed an intricate map that tilted him toward *Trout Mask*, where he acquired the autonomy to remake rock and roll by breaking every rule in the genre. Yet even as the record caught his yearning for a new world, it was delivered with a foreboding force that stripped the ground out from under him. Whether the subsequent records were good or bad, Beefheart really had nowhere to turn after *Trout Mask Replica*. He could either refine the sound of it (*Lick My Decals Off, Baby*), define it for commercial consumption (*Clear Spot*), attempt to repeat it (*Bat Chain Puller*), or escape it (*Bluejeans and Moonbeams*). Once you find freedom, you often realize that you can never really keep it. "Men are freest when they are most unconscious of freedom," D.H. Lawrence once wrote of Americans. "The shout is a rattling of chains, always was." Beefheart's rattling of chains becomes the living drama of *Trout Mask Replica*. It's also the subject of this book. Beefheart's brand of freedom raised the very stakes of personal liberty for the man who envisioned it, the band who created it, and the audience who would soon discover it.

Chapter Two

A Different Fish

No author, without a trial, can conceive of the difficulty of writing a romance about a country where there is no shadow, no antiquity, no mystery, no picturesque and gloomy wrong, nor anything but a commonplace prosperity, in broad and simple daylight, as it is happily the case with my dear native land.

—Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Transformations*

“If you want to be a different fish,” Captain Beefheart once said, “jump out of school.” The image of the fish, deeply rooted in Beefheart’s art, had arrived long before the emergence of *Trout Mask Replica* in 1969. Yet rather than discovering it by jumping out of school, he first encountered it in 1959. Ten years before *Trout Mask* was conceived, Beefheart and his young buddy Frank Zappa stumbled upon a lone Webcor reel-to-reel tape recorder in an empty classroom at Antelope Valley Junior College in Lancaster, California. “[It] just happened to be sitting there waiting to be plundered—maroon, with the green blinking eye,” Zappa recalled. One uneventful afternoon, in that vacant room Beefheart, Zappa, and his brother Bobby improvised a parody of scatological blues called “Lost in a Whirlpool.” It wasn’t close to being their greatest collaboration, but the song celebrated in irreverent fashion their shared interest in the blues and R&B. You could hear a nascent affection in their performance of the kind usually found in shared juvenile camaraderie. The song came out of the foundation of a friendship, one that’s formed when two outsiders suddenly find themselves killing time in an arid desert community. Looking back on the recording in 1993, Beefheart remarked, “Frank and I had a good time. We were just fooling around.”

In 1972, though, the good times and the days of fooling around were clearly over. It had been three years since *Trout Mask Replica* had been released to rave reviews from critics like Lester Bangs who writing in *Rolling Stone*, championed the record on release by calling it “the most unusual and challenging musical experience you’ll have this year.” BBC DJ John Peel, who helped launch a number of original bands from Half Man Half Biscuit to the Field Mice on his radio show, also contributed to the cheerleading, sending the record charging into the UK Top 50. “If there has been anything in the history of popular music which could be described as a work of art in a way that people who are involved in other areas of art would understand, then *Trout Mask* is probably that work,” he proclaimed. The more adventurous critics and listeners brought glowing attention to the record, even if radio stations wouldn’t dare touch it. None of that seemed to matter now to Captain Beefheart. He suddenly had a huge axe to grind and he was looking for someone to help him sharpen it.

He began the year by discussing his career with Roy Carr, a journalist with the British music magazine *New Musical Express*. “I’ve had my fun,” he said. “Now I’m going to make myself far more accessible to the public.” Just what “accessible” might mean to the man who conceived *Trout Mask Replica* was never really explained. But it was clear that he didn’t enjoy being perceived as a freak. The blame for that particular moniker was now laid at the door of *Trout Mask*’s producer, Frank Zappa. “Zappa is an oaf,” Beefheart told Carr. “All he wanted to do was make me into a horrible freak. I am not a freak.” Rejecting the tag of the freak was an odd denial considering that *Trout Mask Replica* represented the clearest representation of Captain Beefheart & the Magic Band’s most radical work, setting them apart quite dramatically from most contemporary rock groups. Much of his

chagrin, too, was directed toward the promotion of the record by Zappa's Straight Records. Beefheart was distressed about sharing space with such odd company as Wild Man Fischer, the GTO's, and especially Alice Cooper, who Beefheart thought killed live chickens as part of his stage act.

Beefheart was desperate to declare himself a true artist and not some circus act. "I am an artist ... paint, I write, I sculpt and I perform my own music," he pleaded. "The trouble with Frank Zappa is that he is not a good artist or a writer and by surrounding himself with good musicians and exploiting them, he boosts his own image." Beefheart provided for Carr his ultimate summation of the rancour between them: It's not worth getting into the bullshit to see what the bull ate. His disappointment was just as harsh when it came to describing his listening audience, whom he saw as "consisting of pickles." In other words, drug-addled zombies. "It hurts me," he said, "to see little girls sitting there looking like porcupines."

A few months later, he continued the tirade with Caroline Boucher of *Disc*, when he accused Zappa of "trying to keep the artist in me back." He went on to say that Zappa stole all his ideas in the early days, even using Beefheart's concepts for album titles (*Lumpy Gravy*, *Hot Rats*) without crediting him. "All this bit about being friends since we were young—I only met the guy about twenty-five times in the whole time I've been alive," he exclaimed. Suddenly the man who wished to be a different fish didn't want to be proclaimed as so different after all. It no longer mattered that he had finally found himself free to do the music he wished, on a record label and with a producer who offered it to him. It didn't help having at his disposal an amazingly skilled group of musicians dedicated to playing his music. Now he wasn't so satisfied with being different. "All the time, I have to explain myself to people," he told Boucher. "I actually have people trying to get me to explain why I have a right to be on this planet—hundreds of people a day." That right had suddenly become an ordeal, an albatross continuing to burden and enslave him. Freedom was defining him rather than the other way around. How did this happen—and so quickly—after the artistic success of *Trout Mask*? Perhaps it was much easier to be a free man when no one knew who you really were, when they didn't categorize you, or give a fuck about who you really were. To Captain Beefheart, that now seemed like eons ago.

Those days of yearning to be a free man existed before he met Zappa in 1956. Don Vliet, as he was known then, had attended Lancaster High School, where he possessed a passion for both drawing and sculpting. Earlier he had studied with Portuguese sculptor Augustonia Rodriguez and won a scholarship to study art in Europe. But his parents didn't approve the trip. For them, the art world was a haven for homosexuals all laying in wait to corrupt their only son. So when they moved to the Mohave Desert, they settled down in the safer white-bread community of Lancaster. They likely figured that, without much of an arts community, their son was safe there. But Don's folks couldn't anticipate his embracing of music. In particular, the work of other outsiders like blues giants Howlin' Wolf, Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown, and Sonny Boy Williamson. Vliet's growing fascination for the blues had been nurtured, in part, by the only musician in his family, his grandfather, Amos Warfield. Once a plantation owner in the South, Warfield was a white blues player who performed his songs using a lap guitar that he played with a pocketknife. It was through Amos that Don Vliet quickly acquired a natural fervour for that Delta sound. So when Vliet encountered Frank Zappa, he had found yet another outcast like himself, one who had a similar regard for blues and R&B.

On the day they met, Don was about to jump out of school, but not necessarily to be a different fish. His father, Glenn, who had a Helms bread truck route to Mohave, just suffered a heart attack and Don had to take over the job. Upon leaving school, Don just happened to give the spindly Zappa a ride home in his '49 blue powder Oldsmobile 88 Coupe. "[H]e was very fond of wearing khakis and French-toed shoes and dressing in the latest pachuco fashion," Zappa told British journalist Barry Miles. "It's a certain style of clothes that you had to wear to look like that type of teenager." Only it

wasn't the dress of your average teenager—especially from Lancaster. However, Zappa was hardly your average teenager, either. At that time, he was becoming a local legend. He had not only formed the Blackouts, the only racially integrated R&B band in Lancaster, he had already begun experimenting with orchestral composition. Vic Mortensen, who was the drummer in Vliet's first group, the Omens, grew up in Claremont, California, where he first encountered Zappa. Appropriately enough, it was in the music room at their junior high school. Since Zappa began his musical life as an aspiring percussionist in the Blackouts, Mortensen was on hand to see him gathering all the school's drum sets and tuning them all to sound like tom-toms.

The Blackouts may have been a local phenomenon, but they didn't last, breaking up a year after Zappa met Don. At which point Zappa gave up the drums and started to turn his attention toward the guitar. More importantly, he was becoming seriously interested in becoming a composer. Besides his love of R&B, he had fallen in love with the avant-garde classical composer Edgard Varèse, who was challenging the very principles of western music, along with other serialist twelve-tone composers like Anton Webern and the neoclassicist Igor Stravinsky. When Vliet and Zappa encountered each other, Zappa was studying musical harmony while Vliet was still working on his art major. In short order, Don and Frank became fast friends over music and food. They'd gorge on Don's growing collection of rhythm and blues records, while also helping themselves to partially stale pineapple buns from Don's father's truck. "We'd start off at my house, and then we'd get something to eat and ride around in his old Oldsmobile looking for pussy—in Lancaster!" Zappa mused. When they couldn't get any local hot action, they'd be back at Don's place eating buns and listening to records until 5AM. "It was the only thing that seemed to matter at the time," Zappa recalled wistfully. Music mattered quite a bit, to the point of zealous competitiveness. Often they would quiz each other on the records they listened to, testing each other's knowledge of an artist's work, the number of songs released, their B-sides, even the serial number on the single itself. It was at the height of this musical muscle-flexing that they happened on that magical Webcor reel-to-reel.

Zappa had been learning to play the guitar thanks to his brother Bobby's assistance. He was patterning his technique of playing on the sharp picking style of R&B artist Johnny "Guitar" Watson while adapting the aggressive tone of "Guitar" Slim. Don Vliet, on the other hand, was somewhat less assertive when it came to music. According to Beefheart biographer Mike Barnes, "[Vliet] would sing for his own amusement and obviously possessed talent, but he had to be cajoled or tricked into having his voice recorded." Barnes explained that Vliet would often become self-conscious and embarrassed when he performed, thus destroying his sense of timing. He would cover his awkwardness by becoming angry. When they gathered to record "Lost in a Whirlpool," Don had to be tricked into improvising the lyrics. "Without being kicked in the butt, he would never have started singing," Zappa explained.

For most of his career, Zappa's musical satire was largely based on his interest in documenting the unusual fixations of those normally not commemorated in pop songs—or for that matter, in classical music, too. For example, before his death, while working with the Ensemble Modern, he provided story material from *PFIQ* magazine—a magazine devoted to genital piercing—in order to create an orchestral composition. In "Lost in a Whirlpool," it was the peculiar story of a man being flushed down the toilet by his girlfriend where—to his horror—he encounters an eyeless brown fish. "There are few areas of basic human activity that have not been dealt with in rock 'n' roll, but a song about being pursued by a giant stool stands in a field of one," wrote Mike Barnes. But the idea of building a blues song around such questionable material was in keeping with a tradition much bigger than a field of one.

The blues has a long history embroidered with sexual slang and swagger—whether it was the

Mississippi Sheiks' down and dirty "Ram Rod Blues" in 1930, Blind Boy Fuller's 1939 ode to cunnilingus, "I Want Some of Your Pie," or Hattie North's "Honey Dropper Blues." "Lost in a Whirlpool" plays havoc with that legacy by adding a touch of the preposterous. As the song opens, Bobby Zappa rhythmically starts strumming the melody, while brother Frank picks out the lead notes as if digging for gnats hiding in his guitar. Meanwhile, Don Vliet clears his throat. Once they establish the tune, Vliet bursts in with an uncharacteristic high falsetto reminiscent of Skip James in his 1931 "Cherry Ball Blues." "Weellll, I'm lost in a whirlpool," Vliet cries out in a mock despair, "Yeah, baby, my head is going round / Well, ever since my baby flushed me / Ohhh, been goin' round, yeah, round and round." As the singer swirls deeper and deeper into the commode, he quickly encounters the stool, that eyeless brown fish staring right back at him. Vliet momentarily slips back into his husky baritone, as if the shock from the rendezvous suddenly transforms him from this aggrieved lover into that of an outraged suitor. "He ain't got no eyes!" he stammers loudly before stating the obvious: "How could that motherfucker possibly see?" Vliet pleads for his lover to save him, perhaps with some Drano, or possibly a plunger, because, "I'm gettin' tired of all this pee." As the song concludes Vliet lets loose with an improvised pun that, by the time of *Trout Mask Replica*, would be effortlessly supplied. "Don't go strangle Mother Goose," he warns. "Ooh, my head's in the noose." While the Zappa brothers continue to unfurl their endless chord progressions, Don decides to cap the tune with a quick "deedley-wee-wop." If "Lost in a Whirlpool" didn't produce anything astonishing, or terribly memorable, it did reveal something of the sensibilities of both men. You could clearly see the early origins of Zappa's penchant for bawdy humour, along with Vliet's style of inspired vamping. On that day, Frank Zappa officially began his quest to turn the history of popular music into a kaleidoscopic farce, while Don Van Vliet started to consider ways to transform the blues into an expressionist canvas for his own obsessions.

Since all his blues idols gave themselves names, often fierce ones chosen to live up to the force they would become in the world, Vliet wanted one himself. Chester Burnett had turned into Howlin' Wolf. McKinley Morganfield one day became Muddy Waters. But Don Van Vliet? He became Captain Beefheart. Vliet claims he coined it himself because he had "a beef in his heart" for the world. In truth, it was Frank Zappa who actually gave it to him, as part of a failed oratorio called *I Was a Teenage Maltshop*. This teenage "rock opera," which Zappa had called "a stupid piece of trash," was essentially a fantasy about a teenage Lone Ranger. In the film, there was to be a character called Captain Beefheart, featuring Vliet in the role. It was also the name of a character that Zappa created for another aborted film project called *Captain Beefheart vs. the Grunt People*.

As for the origin of the name Captain Beefheart, it was worthy of a Zappa song itself. Apparently Don's Uncle Alan (who Zappa claimed looked like Harry Truman) lived with his parents. "He used to piss with the [bathroom] door open when Don's girlfriend [Laurie] walked by, and [he'd] make comments about how his whizzer looked just like a beef heart," Zappa recalled. *Trout Mask* drummer John French concurred in substantiating that story. "There was an old joke about a fellow having 'a head on his penis the size of a beef heart,'" French explained. "From what I can surmise and from what I've seen of Frank, it seems likely that he combined a childhood hero image (à la Captain Midnight) with the old joke to come up with this distorted comic symbol for 'the kind of male sexuality.'" The name soon started to take on mythical status in the studio right after the day's recording. Vic Mortensen and Zappa would sit around devising clever band names and they'd start riffing on the character of Captain Beefheart. "[He] was supposed to be this magical character," Mortensen recalled. "His thing is [that] he would drink the Pepsi Cola and he could make magic things happen, he could appear or disappear." Mortensen suggested that if he had those kinds of powers, he should also have a band to match them. "I told Frank, 'Hey wouldn't it be cool if Captain Beefheart had a Magic Band, and wherever he went, if he wanted the band to appear, he would take a drink of

Pepsi, and BINGO there's the band right behind him, 'jukin'?"

In the summer of 1963, right after Zappa had bought his own five-track recording studio in Cucamonga named appropriately Studio Z, Don Van Vliet was born as Captain Beefheart. "Hello the kids, this is your old friend Captain Beefheart," Vliet announced on tape in a carny barker's voice. "You know me—the Magic Man, invisible and all that jazz. Hah! I fly through time and space, dimension warp ... all that rhythm. Well, anyway ... I'm here tonight to tell you that we have a heck of a little teenage opera for ya. You're really gonna dig it ... hmm ... yes, it's really groovy." As groovy as it might have been, the grooves themselves never reached the ears of the public until years later when Zappa included excerpts on his commemorative *Mystery Disc* albums.

Before Captain Beefheart started playing pranks with his own Magic Band, he began singing in a new Zappa ensemble known as the Soots. Besides featuring Beefheart on vocals, the group included guitarist Alex St. Clair Snouffer and Vic Mortenson on drums. With the band, Don started gaining more and more confidence as a singer. They made a number of recordings including Little Richard's "Slippin' and Slidin'" (sung in the style of Howlin' Wolf) and "Metal Man Has Won His Wings," where Beefheart performed in the hallway outside the studio while the band played in the other room. This rather unorthodox technique for recording vocals was an early variation on the methods Zappa haphazardly developed for the sessions on *Trout Mask Replica*. Ultimately, Zappa sent their recordings for consideration to Dot Records, but Milt Rogers, the A&R guy at Dot, wrote him in December 1963 with some bad news. "[Although] the material has merit," Rogers stated, "we don't feel strongly enough about its commercial potential..." Zappa phoned Rogers for a further explanation, and he was told that Dot's lack of interest was due to the "distorted guitar." On the positive side, he had nothing bad to say about Beefheart's voice.

While Zappa opened the door for Beefheart to ultimately conceive *Trout Mask Replica*, Alex Snouffer provided a sufficient playhouse for him to ply his talents. Snouffer had been a student at Antelope in the late 50s, as well, and was a classmate of both Zappa and Beefheart. He also used to share in the record listening sessions at Vliet's house. Back when Zappa was wrestling gigs with the Blackouts, Snouffer was forming his own R&B band called the Omens. "[We] played early rhythm and blues during Little Richard's heyday and after that era," Snouffer explained. "Back then, it was Top 40 stuff." By the time Beefheart was performing with the Soots, Snouffer had left the Omens to do a paying gig at a Lake Tahoe casino. When he returned in 1964, he was itching to do some blues. "Don was one of the first people I went to see 'cause he and I had been pal-ling around together before I left," he recalled. Snouffer also sought out some other local musical pals: bassist Jerry Handley, who was a huge fan of John Lee Hooker and Jimmy Reed, plus guitarist Doug Moon, who had replaced Snouffer in the Omens when he'd set off to Tahoe. The idea was to form another blues band featuring Beefheart as their lead vocalist—even though he was hardly an experienced singer by that time. What sold Snouffer, though, was what he heard when Beefheart began to sing. "[H]e started to do this Howlin' Wolf imitation and I thought, 'Yo buddy!' This isn't bad at all," he explained. Besides, Beefheart had learned to play a mean blues harp. So Snouffer brought Moon and Handley into the group, while Beefheart nabbed Vic Mortensen for the drums. Captain Beefheart & the Magic Band began as imaginative fodder for Frank Zappa's failed film project, but now they were about to become a real live blues band.

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