

The World of Captain Beefheart: An Interview with Gary Lucas and Nona Hendryx

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GUITARIST AND BAND LEADER GARY LUCAS AND VETERAN VOCALIST NONA HENDRYX PAY TRIBUTE TO ONE OF ROCK'S ORIGINALS IN THIS INTERVIEW WITH *POPMATTERS*.

From the opening bars of "Suction Prints", we knew we had entered *The World of Captain Beefheart* and that was exactly where we wanted to be. There it was, that unmistakable fast 'n bulbous sound, the sudden shifts of meter and tempo, the slithery and stinging slide guitar in tandem with propulsive bass, the polyrhythmic drumming giving the music a swing unlike any other rock band.

It's a late September night in Manhattan, and downtown venue Joe's Pub is presenting a quartet plus vocalist performing songs by Don Van Vliet who, under the moniker Captain Beefheart, and with a shifting roster of musicians who made up his Magic Band, created perhaps the most idiosyncratic and original body of work in what can loosely be called "rock". Van Vliet's music, from his debut album *Safe as Milk* (1967) to his final recording, *Ice Cream for Crow* (1982), was a unique mix of blues, R&B, free jazz, doowop, and surreal poetry. (Frustrated by his lack of commercial success, Van Vliet left music in the '80s to focus on his painting. An accomplished artist, he exhibited in major

galleries in the US and abroad. He died in 2010 at 69 from complications of multiple sclerosis.)

The bandleader onstage at Joe's Pub is guitarist Gary Lucas, a member of the Magic Band in the early '80s who has been performing Van Vliet's music ever since, in different formats, from a small, free jazz group to a 65-piece orchestra. Joining him are drummer Richard Dworkin, bassist Jesse Krakow, and keyboard player Jordan Shapiro, all longtime collaborators. Then, after the band finishes "Suction Prints", the singer appears: Nona Hendryx. That's right, the veteran vocalist, best known as one-third of the futuristic funk trio LaBelle, is filling in for Van Vliet.

Hendryx handles the vocals on *The World of Captain Beefheart*, a new album (released 10 November on Knitting Factory Records) comprising 12 Van Vliet compositions. Tonight at Joe's Pub she, Lucas, and the band are playing the album live for the first time. Hendryx, looking fabulous in a belted top over tights, admits to some nervousness, mostly because of the challenges presented by Beefheart's "odd lyrics". But she more than rises to the occasion. Whether it's the blues-rock of "Sure Nuff and Yes I do", the R&B ballad "My Head Is My Only House Unless It Rains", the jagged funk of "When Big Joan Sets Up", or the hilarious sexual mambo of "Tropical Hotdog Night", she gets inside the songs and owns them, without ever trying to sound like their author.

"I love these songs, as complicated as they are," she remarks between numbers. "It's important to keep alive the memory of people who are unique and who challenge our ears."

For the rest of the set, Hendryx, Lucas, and bandmates give us an exhilarating tour of Beefheart's world. Their renditions are faithful to the originals, but they're not replicas (trout mask or otherwise); there's no blues harmonica or

dissonantly raging saxophone, and Shapiro's keyboard fills and solos add harmonic elements not heard on the starker, guitar-and-percussion-driven original recordings. And with Hendryx on vocals, the show favors Beefheart's blues and R&B; over the knottier avant-garde material.

Several numbers in, band and audience are distracted by the sound of an alarm. A Joe's Pub staff member tells us we all have to leave the premises immediately. We file out of the club and gather across the street, along with several hundred other puzzled patrons. The entire Public Theater, not just its music venue, has been evacuated. During the summer, pro-Trump demonstrators disrupted the Public's production of *Julius Caesar* and the theater, a premier New York institution known for its left-leaning offerings, received other threats, so the management wisely is taking no chances. But before long we're allowed to return to the world of Captain Beefheart. "We didn't intend to have an intermission...." Hendryx drily remarks, and the show resumes. At its conclusion, the audience is on its feet, whooping and cheering. Singer and band, clearly delighted by the response, return for an encore, Van Vliet's take on Bo Diddley's "Diddy Wah Diddy."



Sketch by Joan Chiverton (courtesy of Howlin' Wuelf Media)

In separate interviews conducted after the Joe's Pub show, Lucas and Hendryx spoke about the new album and Don Van Vliet, a mentor and friend for Lucas; for Hendryx, an important influence.

The album's title, said Lucas, came from a 2013 concert in Amsterdam conceived and presented by Dutch producer Co De Kloet, in which a 65-piece orchestra played Van Vliet's music. Lucas performed at the show and Hendryx was one of the featured vocalists. "The first time I ever played Amsterdam was with Don," Lucas recalls. "I did a tour with him in 1980, and he had a rabid fan base there. The audience would be chanting his name, 'Van Vliet, Van Vliet,' which is like 'Smith' there."

Although the orchestral Beefheart show was their first collaboration, Lucas had followed and admired Hendryx ever since he saw her, with Patti LaBelle and the Blue Belles, open for the Rolling Stones in 1965. He said he reminded her of that first "encounter" when they met decades later.

Asked why he decided to record *The World of Captain Beefheart* with a woman vocalist, Lucas said, "The problem with male singers -- and there are a lot of good ones who could do it and bring something to the table -- is that it's hard for them to lose the imprint because Don's vocals are so definitive, they're ringing in their ears and that's what they emulate."

It's often been said that Van Vliet's vocal style bears the imprint of Howlin' Wolf. The late critic Robert Palmer observed that "When it comes to capturing the feeling of archaic, Delta-style blues, he is the only white performer who really gets it right." But Lucas didn't hear only Wolf's influence in Van Vliet's singing. "I once said to Don that I heard a black woman in his vocals, and he loved that -- 'you got it man, you nailed it, that's so hip.'"

"Nona brings a different approach," he added. "Besides, she's a stone Beefheart fan. She met him once, and she really loves the music, the poetry, the paintings, all of it." He noted that although he had selected "some of the more R&B; and funk tunes because of her roots," she was "gung-ho to leap into the weirder stuff, too."

Hendryx, who came out as bisexual and has been involved in LGBT causes, doesn't change the genders in Van Vliet's lyrics to "straighten" them, which gives a sapphic spin to love songs like "I'm Glad" and "My Head is My Only House".

Lucas joined the Magic Band in 1980 and played on the final two Beefheart albums, *Doc at the Radar Station* (1980) and *Ice Cream for Crow*. He left the band in 1984. (For a brief period, he and his then-wife even managed Van Vliet.) Since then, Lucas has established a reputation as a prolific and versatile virtuoso whom *Rolling Stone* called "one of the best and most original guitarists in America."

Don Van Vliet, he said, was a self-taught musician who didn't read or write music. He would come up with musical ideas and then give them to his musicians to develop and perform. "He liked to incorporate elements of chance and randomness," Lucas recalled. "His approach as a composer drew on painting and sculpture. He felt that as long as the band was together, he could decorate the canvas, doing whatever he wanted. He liked to modify things right up to the moment of recording. He could really exasperate the band because he spent a long time trying to achieve what he thought was perfection. He'd be ripping up parts, and coming up with new parts. He liked that, though, because it created a tension and there's kind of a frantic quality to some of the playing."

That approach, Lucas said, drew on what Van Vliet called his "exploding note theory -- which was, play every note like it has no relationship to the subsequent or preceding note so you get a very fragmented, staccato phraseology. It's beautiful." The sound also reflected "the band being on a knife edge because of the tension of having to master and execute precisely these last-minute instructions."

On Beefheart's most avant-garde albums, like the double-disk *Trout Mask Replica* (1969) and *Lick My Decals Off, Baby* (1970), he unleashed his wild, often discordant sax playing, which, for some listeners, was a sound too far (out). Could Van Vliet actually play the horn, or was he faking it?

"I think he was a fantastic horn player," Lucas said. "He certainly could achieve a great tone and a great facility of expression. But was he an accomplished player who could duplicate note for note solos he'd played? Not to my knowledge." His sax was "just pure expression coming through him, sheer guts, willpower, and energy."

Two former Magic Band members, John "Drumbo" French and Bill "Zoot Horn Rollo" Harkleroad, wrote books in which they described Van Vliet as tyrannical, erratic, and even violent. Lucas, who read both books, acknowledged that "they might have had a really bad experience." "But," he added, "it's unfortunate there's still a lot of anger there. Don is gone so it's like shadowboxing with a ghost. Let's just celebrate the good. He was one of the heaviest dudes who walked the earth. I saw him at his best. He was an inspiration."

"Both Zoot and French had a lot to do with the sound of those records," Lucas continued. "Don certainly always needed great musicians to realize his ideas. Was he abusive? Maybe. But he could also be a pussycat, as sweet as pie. Did he have mood swings? Yes. I saw him have some mood swings. Did I get some

flak? Yeah. But I don't really want to dwell on it. It's a shame these situations occurred but I'm trying to remember and celebrate the positive aspects. If you go into depth about most great musicians, it goes with the territory. I'm not excusing it. I don't want to emulate it. I try never to be a dictator with my own bands. But often if you want stuff done...."

"I was a little nervous because I know how fans of this particular kind of music can feel about it and when somebody else takes it on," Hendryx said about her initial reaction to Lucas' invitation to collaborate. "I think what Gary chose from [in the Beefheart repertoire] had enough for me to sing, the blues and R&B; influences, and we did it in a way so it felt like this is an interpretation, not me trying to be Beefheart because I never could be."

"From the moment I heard him my ears were challenged – what was that? I'd grown up with doowop and Chuck Berry and Fats Domino, and Little Richard." But Hendryx also loved more experimental, avant-garde jazz artists, like Sun Ra. "I think he [Sun Ra] and Beefheart kind of lived in the same territory."

Hendryx, though often thought of as an R&B; artist, has a long history with rock as a singer, songwriter, and collaborator with Talking Heads, producer Bill Laswell and his band Material, Brian Eno, Peter Gabriel, David Johansen, and Keith Richards. Her albums, most recently *Mutatis Mutandis* (2012), rock out, too. Hendryx also is a member of the Black Rock Coalition and served on the organization's board.

She observed that although black rock bands have a hard time breaking through because of preconceptions, it's even more challenging for a black woman. "I've been told I shouldn't do rock," she said. "People in the music business have said, why are you doing that? Why don't you do R&B;? You're wasting your time. Wait a minute – Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Big Mama Thornton, Bo Diddley – this is the music I grew up on. Why should I not do it?"

"I don't have to have the physicality of a male to do rock music. For me it's in my DNA. I can do R&B; and I can do soul but some things go best on a rock foundation, because of the energy, the power of the electric guitar and drums. I do funk rock. That's really what I do, a marriage of R&B; with electric instruments and rock. It's not even listed as a category but that's what I do."

More recently, she has collaborated with jazz musicians Geri Allen, Teri Lynn Carrington, and Esperanza Spaulding. Working with them was "a whole other level of musicality". "They take no prisoners and you've got to be up for it to be in it. Beefheart's music is like that; it challenges me. After doing so much music for so long, I need to be scared. Can I do this? It's like doing classical music. How do you work with people who are superbly trained in their idiom? I come from the contemporary music world, rock and R&B;, where it's all feel. You feel your way through it."

Beefheart's music might have been challenging, but Hendryx said she was prepared. "I knew many of the songs because I'd listened to them over time, especially *Trout Mask Replica*. It's my favorite of his records and one of my favorite records. And I did that show in Holland with the 65-piece orchestra."

Hendryx said that she hopes to tour with *The World of Captain Beefheart* in 2018, her and Lucas' busy schedules permitting. She envisions shows in Boston and Philadelphia, with a return to New York and possibly some West Coast dates. But before that she will return to [Joe's Pub in February](#) for an "electronic funk" show with SoulClap, a duo comprising the producers Charles Levine and Eli Goldstein. She will release a new EP she recorded with them, *I Feel Joy*. That's a pretty fair description of what she brings to the wild and wonderful music of Don "Captain Beefheart" Van Vliet, on record and onstage.



Don (Captain Beefheart) and Gary Lucas (1979) (Photo: Glenn Kolotkin courtesy of Howlin' Wuefl Media)

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