

English translation of Ruta 66 interview by Iria Fernández Crespo

Exclusive interview with Gary Lucas (Captain Beefheart, Jeff Buckley, Lou Reed, Joan Osborne, etc)

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The Essential Gary Lucas has just been published, an exhaustive compilation of 36 songs better to understand an iconoclast of the guitar, a musician who has never been pigeonholed throughout his musical career, since he has never belonged to this or that faction. Some know him for his time in Captain Beefheart's band, others for the collaboration he formed with Jeff Buckley, but Gary is more than that. Here is a sample. He tells it himself over the phone.

It is the first compilation in your name. Does your resume summarize the way you see your career? It seems almost impossible to pigeonhole: classical music, rock, psychedelia, jazz, Hungarian folk, Asian pop ...

Let's see, it's a compilation that includes some things I've done in the last 40 years—or better yet, what I did after Don Van Vliet's (Captain Beefheart) musical career ended. And the material has been compiled from around 35 albums that somehow bear my name; it also collects some of the collaborations that I have done here and there. Let's say it's a good example of the evolution of my guitar playing. From the first recordings I did with Jeff Buckley to some things with Alan Vega from Suicide, not forgetting Najma Akhtar, or David Johansen from the New York Dolls.

I think that track with David Johansen is my favorite collaboration. The song belongs to one of the albums of what can be considered your band, Gods And Monsters.

Indeed. David not only sang perfectly in his very own style, but wrote the lyrics to the song ("One Man's Meat") and it was a lot of fun. Gods & Monsters is the band that I started in 1989 to do a kind of psychedelic jazz, with two bassists. That was at first all-instrumental, then the band evolved as I began writing songs and I started looking for singers. Jeff Buckley was in the band for a year. But then I started singing more frequently, because I couldn't be bothered to have a singer in there permanently any more as they tended to leave and it was a distracting problem all the time.

You have a functional voice, very human.

Thanks. It's a nice compliment. At first I was not so sure, but every time I sing more and I am risking a little more I feel more comfortable doing it. Regarding the new album, there is a version of All Along The Watchtower in Chinese that will surprise people, but I have a relationship with that world because when I was young I lived in Taiwan. I was there almost two years and I got married eventually to a Chinese woman I met there. A long story. But without leaving the subject, I love all kinds of music, that's why the album is so varied.

Where does your way of playing the guitar come from? You have to recognize an overwhelming originality, a unique tone and out of the ordinary.

My technique was formed in the Beefheart school, which means that when I joined their group, I was forced to learn to voice parts on my guitar in emulation of the way a standard pianist would do it. Don sometimes gave me pieces that he had written on the keyboard and told me to play them exactly like that on the guitar and that gave me a definite breadth of technique when it came to developing a different style. I had to relearn my way of playing, which in a way comes from flamenco, because the first important guitar I had was brought to me by my parents from a trip they took to Spain. Before that I had a cheap little rented guitar on which I could barely hear myself—and my fingers were always sore from trying so hard to hold the strings down on the fretboard.

But flamenco and Spanish music shaped me. I was also lucky enough to see Andrés Segovia play in my city when I was a kid. Many people say that what I do comes from the avant-garde world, but it all depends on the listener who makes the definition. If the writer comes from folk, he will say that I came from there. The same if the communicator comes from rock. I play everything I like.

I started with blues and psychedelia and classical music. But I also love soundscape science fiction stuff, through using a variety of very strange pedals; hence the avant-garde thing. I also use a lot of slide, because I can achieve micro tones that would not be possible otherwise. In short, I use my guitar as if it were a voice. I make the guitar speak for me.

I've always thought that what you do has no comparison. Take, for example, the two songs you wrote with Jeff Buckley for Grace: "Mojo Pin" and the title track. The 90s were a good decade for exploring certain harmonies and textures on guitars, but there is something to those songs that even then sounded different from anything else.

I think I agree. Look, the first time I met Jeff, I heard him sing and I thought he was extraordinary, a diamond in the rough. The first thing I asked him, since he was a boy with such a different and distinct personality, what were his favorite groups and his answer was: The Doors, Led Zeppelin and the Smiths. Great, because I loved those groups too. Those groups had a lead singer and a guitar hero, and I thought:

Let's do something to update that formula. I was at that point trying to reorganize my band and compose new music for Jeff—and when I wrote I could I imagine his voice matched something I was strumming on the guitar, I would push it forward, hone in on it and not discard it. With Jeff I did not compose a riff or a verse conscientiously, I only played unconsciously as if my fingers were there by accident, until I heard that magical chord that gave meaning to the beginning of something. That's how "Mojo Pin" came out, for example. It sounded fresh, it was atypical. It was great music. It was like polishing a sculpture in black marble and you have the certainty that something has chemistry as soon as that spark appears. I would send out cassettes to Jeff with my finished guitar instrumentals with all the songs riffs and harmonic structure there, and he would tell me they were lovely. But what fascinated me was that unusual way of his putting his voice into my guitar pieces. It worked. It wasn't your typical rock music. And people really liked it.

Make no mistake about it. I still remember with chills when a friend came from New York and brought that CD home; I hadn't heard anything like it. Continuing with Jeff, and I know that you may have asked yourself this and that it is nothing original, but can you imagine how his career would have developed?

I think he would have done whatever

he wanted, because he didn't follow the rules. Two months before I died, I got a call out of nowhere: it was Jeff. "Do you remember the great songs we did?" "Of course". "I wanted to see if you had something new you've been writing that could end up being a song." At that time I had just arrived from a trip to Puerto Rico with my wife and had written a new instrumental piece during the 'holidays'. I also sent him three other recent instrumentals I'd composed with possibilities. Jeff was starting to work on them when what we all know happened... At that moment I did not want to force asking him how he was doing with those songs, because I knew how Jeff worked and if you pressed him he would run away like a butterfly. But at some point I was told by his A&R guy I might be getting a call to fly to Memphis to work on those new songs with him. Needless to say, I was waiting for that call. The next thing I knew about him is that he had died. The work I did with Jeff reminds me of what I had felt when I first heard the Stones. I mean that what you heard in songs like "Satisfaction" or "The Last Time", those guitars, married in a very atypical way with the voice.

You have collaborated with famous people: Lou Reed, Leonard Bernstein, Kevin Coyne, Los Van Van ...

Leonard Bernstein was the first very important person to congratulate me on my work on guitar. And it arose because when I was at Yale University they were looking for musicians to be part of a production of Lennie's that aimed to modernize the Catholic "Mass" with rock elements. It was a music theatre piece whose music had a lot to do with what was performed in Broadway shows in places. Leonard supervised the music, so I had the pleasure of meeting him. He was like a monarch, a guy with a presence that really stood out. With Kevin Coyne it was a dream come true, because I had idolized him since my parents brought me back from London the first album of Kevin's with his band, Siren. I had asked them to bring me back the first Syd Barrett album, but they added the Siren album on a record store clerk's recommendation. So when a friend told me he was helping to arrange a series of recordings with Kevin in Dusseldorf and they'd asked about my availability to work with him I took the first plane to Germany I could find and joined him in the studio. Some of those songs appeared on Knocking On Your Brain, others I added to my play list on Soundcloud. One guy I really miss is Chris Cornell. He called me to record a song on his Carry On album and I ended up spending nearly a week in the studio with him. In the end I played on about 6 songs on that album.

We can't finish without talking about Captain Beefheart. (Note: dear reader, keep an eye on spanish Ruta 66, paper version, to learn more about the relationship between Gary and Don Van Vliet).

The first time I heard about him I was still in high school. I saw a guy with an acoustic guitar and on his case he had written in red magic marker

'Captain Beefheart and his Magic Band'. I had never heard that name; This was about '68. I asked the boy about the group. And he said Beefheart was an artist his brother had recently worked with. His name was Fred Perry and putting two and two together I asked him if his brother was Richard Perry. Wait, I know him from Tiny Tim's records. It was indeed and that knocked me out— and I went looking for the first Captain Beefheart record I could find. His first record couldn't be found easily in my city; an album like Strictly Personal had not yet been released. But my obsession grew, and when I learned that Frank Zappa, whom I loved, was involved in his career, I was intrigued. In January 1971 I went to see his first ever show in New York. Ry Cooder opened the evening solo with his guitar. But the public did not stop talking and although what he was doing was very good, Ry got angry and ended earlier than planned. Before seeing Don, I had witnessed many tremendous concerts. I saw the Stones with Brian Jones, John McLaughlin, Big Brother with Janis Joplin... But the Captain Beefheart concert was the best thing I'd ever seen then. It blew my mind, even though his music was so strange and twisted. I thought to myself that if I ever played in a band, it was going to be his. That's how excited I was. I told everyone that it was the best I had seen, friends, colleagues in the newspapers, DJs in my area... I wanted as many people as possible to know about and acknowledge the musical power of Don and the band. Six months later he came to play at my university. The program director asked me to interview him for the radio station. And I did it. You can hear that interview on my Soundcloud page. You can hear me almost stammering I was so nervous. but he was very nice, with that deep and ghostly voice that he brought out from within. When we did the interview he was in Boston and I was in New Haven, but I got to meet him when he arrived two days later to play the concert. From there I became a total devotee. I went to see them every time they played in my area and wrote as much as I could about him and the band. At one point, we exchanged phone numbers, but then he disappeared for a time, was fired from Warner Brothers, and that band disbanded. It was the time when he tried to be "commercial" and made those records which are somewhat forgettable ... He alienated the few fans he had accumulated at that point instead of connecting with a larger number of buyers.

It's funny that he could make that turn in his career considering what he had established. But you have to understand that he also had to pay bills then. Still, Unconditionally Guaranteed seems like a very good album to me in retrospect.

I like him too, but that's not what you expect from Don.

In any case, in the mid-seventies I had the opportunity to go to work in the Far East, hence what I have told you before. But a few weeks before leaving I saw the announcement of a Frank Zappa concert with Captain Beefheart as his special guest. I thought these guys hated each other, because when I met Don, he exhibited a lot of resentment towards Frank; he felt that he had betrayed him. But the reality is that with that tour (from which the Bongo Fury album later derived), Frank was giving him a spotlight once again, since the two "commercial" albums he recorded for Mercury had been a disaster and his then manager had scammed him to the last penny. I went to see the concert in my hometown and it was good to see Don in such great shape. I'd say he stole the show from Zappa. At the end of the concert they finished with a brutal version of "Willie The Pimp", the Hot Rats song.

After a while, with the technicians collecting the instruments, I approached the stage and saw Don collecting his things in a brown paper bag: all his harmonicas, papers, drawings, water bottles... He seemed lost in his own world as if all that had nothing to do with him. Ipso facto he recognized me and came over to give me a big hug. We hadn't seen each other in two years and it was a great reunion. I told him about a place in a guy's backyard in the Black ghetto of Syracuse which served barbecue ribs, a place that closed late, and we went out to dinner. During our ribs, I told him that I played the guitar, and he replied: "Why didn't you tell me before?" "Frankly because I wasn't sure earlier on that I was good enough, I was coming from a basic rock and roll background. But I think I am ready, because I have studied your music". "I'll tell you the following" he said while savoring that excellent sauce that the ribs were smothered in. "Bring your guitar up to Boston, which is our next concert. You will audition for me in my hotel room". I went up to Boston on the bus and played for him. But as I had a ticket to go to Taiwan...

If you want to know more about the Lucas / Beefheart tandem, keep an eye on the pages of Route 66. In the meantime, let's celebrate the career of a singular guy with that mammoth compilation: The Essential Gary Lucas. Hopefully we can see Gary again in this land soon.

Text: Sergio Martos

(Thanks to Reuben Myles for his collaboration to make this interview possible)