

“WELL, I WAS BORN IN THE DESERT”

He came from Antelope Valley and travelled to the far reaches of the musical cosmos... 55 years on from their debut single, Tom Pinnock talks to the surviving members of the Magic Band about Don Van Vliet's remarkable transformation into CAPTAIN BEEFHEART...

In autumn 1966, Captain Vic Mortensen was travelling down Vietnam's Highway 1 in an army Jeep. Stopping at a shack by the side of the road, he was surprised to discover that his old group had finally make a record.

"The Vietnamese would flatten old cars and make tin sheds out of them where they sold beer," says Mortensen today. "My driver said, 'Sir, can we stop here so I can get a beer?' I stayed with the Jeep, and then half an hour later he came running out. 'Sir, sir! There's a Captain Beefheart record on the jukebox!'"

The single, a cover of Bo Diddley's "Diddy Wah Diddy" backed with a Beefheart original, "Who Do You Think You're Fooling?", was hardly earth-shattering, but it was a step forward for the Magic Band. Here they were, a desert blues band, recording in Hollywood's Sunset Sound for A&M, a label keen to push them forward as a commercial act, being heard halfway across the world.

Undermining this progress, though, was a seam of chaos, a constant since the Magic Band had formed in the high-desert town of Lancaster, California. This was a dangerous group, in its sound as well as its working environment; unpredictable too, with members coming and going amid fights and intimidation.

"He liked to create tension right before going in to record," says Gary Lucas, later

Beefheart's manager and guitarist. "He liked to keep us off balance. He never wanted us to feel comfortable recording, so he'd make enormous changes at the last minute."

Yet their leader, Don Van Vliet – child sculptor and psychic (maybe), blues and free-jazz obsessive (certainly) – hadn't always had a vice-like grip on the group. The plain old Magic Band had been formed by guitarist Alex Snouffer but, following the eerier, darker path Van Vliet favoured, they turned the town's youth on to R&B and then set their sights on Los Angeles.

"They were the band that introduced the whole Antelope Valley to blues," says drummer and multi-instrumentalist John French, later known as Drumbo. "Us young guys that were playing in garage bands all of a sudden went, 'Hey, we gotta do some blues,' because everybody was going to their dances but not to ours."

"After I saw Beefheart, I stopped listening to The Beatles because it was cutesy," says Bill 'Zoot Horn Rollo' Hardieroad. "The Rolling Stones were trying to be tough, but Jagger didn't have a tough voice. They were coming from a similar place as Beefheart, though [image-wise] – pirates in the parking lot."

Here, 55 years after "Diddy Wah Diddy" and the Magic Band's legendary run at San Francisco's Avalon Ballroom, members of the group tell the full story of their beginnings: how Van Vliet journeyed from the dust of the Antelope Valley to the heart of the late '60s psychedelic



The Magic Band in 1966. Captain Beefheart (centre)

CAPTAIN BEEFHEART

underground, how his friendship and rivalry with Frank Zappa inspired him, and how they almost became a cartoon band for Hanna-Barbera.

"Don was different then," says guitarist Denny Walley, remembering high school days. "You just knew something great was gonna happen, somehow. He would say to brilliant things a day, but there was no way he could be trusted to guide his own destiny."

"Frank Zappa was a renaissance man," says drummer Vic Mortensen, "but Don was a genius. No question."

THERE wasn't much to do in Lancaster in the '50s and early '60s. In a town dominated by the aircraft industry, surrounded by little but dust, Joshua trees and turkey farms, the only entertainments were mall shops, burger joints and the long straight desert roads where cars could be raced.

"The Roadhogs, The Searchers... car clubs were a big deal in the desert," says Denny Walley. "There was nothing else to do; you'd get out there and go wild. There was so much more freedom to experience all kinds of crazy stuff and not be arrested for it. There were bikers too – the real badass group aside from the Hells Angels were Satan's Slaves. Instead of wearing



Wolfman Jack on early influence

"HE COULD NOT BE TRUSTED TO GUIDE HIS OWN DESTINY"
DENNY WALLEY

the colours they would have the entire thing tattooed on their backs."

The Vliet family moved to Lancaster when Don was in his early teens. By this time, his legend attests, he was already an accomplished sculptor. Bill Harkleroad is doubtful, considering Don's penchant for tall tales, but Gary Lucas is convinced otherwise.

"I was sceptical for a while, but I think that's all true," says Gary Lucas. "There are photographs of him and [sculptor] Agostinho Rodrigues, where Don has sculpted a little elephant. He said he got his own TV show, and I would say it's pretty probable – he was at least invited as a guest on a sculpture show a couple of times."

His ancestors, he claimed, included writer and adventurer Richard Halliburton and duchess Wallis Simpson, while his grandma, then living in Lancaster and known as "Granny Annie", grew up on a plantation in the South and claimed to have seen an early performance by Howlin' Wolf there.

Crucial to Don in this period was his friendship with fellow Antelope Valley High School pupil Frank Zappa. The pair listened to Zappa's impressive collection of blues and R&B records together, with



Beeheart's best buddy, Frank Zappa, on drums with The Blackouts in Lancaster, California, 1967

extra inspiration later provided by Wolfman Jack, the anarchic DJ broadcasting from a super-high-powered "border blaster" in Mexico.

"They were best friends," remembers Denny Walley. "I really got interested going to Frank's house because he had a big collection of 45s, doowop, R&B and weird shit. That was where I got hooked on collecting blues."

The pair made their first recording at school in the late '50s: "Lost In A Whirlpool", a seemingly improvised blues with spidery Zappa guitar, features Don first singing in falsetto and then unleashing his now-classic, Howlin' Wolf roar complete with a daring "motherfucker". That

recording must have been one of the more productive days at school for Don.

"He didn't go to school that much," notes Walley. "He used to just cruise by in his blue '51 Oldsmobile, a real bad-boy machine. He was funny as shit, though. People would go to parties and they'd bring their stack of 45s to play, so once Don brought some records and slipped in a parakeet training record. That went in the stack, people were dancing and then the parakeet came on – "Pretty boy, say hello!"

While Don devoured music, having little musical skill aside from his impressive voice meant he didn't play much – apart from a short-lived 1963 collaboration as The Soots with Zappa. In contrast, his multi-instrumentalist friend was regularly performing and recording – Harkleroad remembers breaking into a gymnasium to play basketball with friends and finding The Blackouts, featuring Zappa on drums, rehearsing there.

At the end of 1964, local guitarist Alex Snauffer, sometimes known as Butch, asked Don to sing in his new group. The guitarist adopted the surname St Clair, and Vliet added "Van" to his own name. Friends Doug Moom, Jerry Handley and Vic Mortensen joined on guitar, bass and drums, respectively, and the group were named after a quip by the latter.

"The first time I met Don," Mortensen says, "he walked into this roadhouse, a kind of biker bar, on Highway 66 with Frank, who I knew. Don was wearing a full-length leather coat. He introduced himself and said he was 'working on a movie in Hollywood'."

"Frank and Don were working on their own film project, *Captain Beefheart And The Grant People*, and because Don was addicted to Pepsi Cola, I said to Frank, 'Don should take a sip from his Pepsi Cola, and poof, the Magic Band would appear behind him.' We had a good laugh about it. But then when Don called me at my home

CAPTAIN'S MARVELS

The best of early Beefheart and the Magic Band



LIVE AT THE AVALON BALLROOM 1966

WAX RADIO 2018
Primitively recorded, this set shows off the early bluesy Magic Band at their peak. "Tupelo" is a masterful tart slow blues, while "Evil" is suitably savage. Throughout, Beefheart on harp and stinging vocals is very much the star. 7/10



SAFE AS MILK

BUDDAH 1967
Psychedelic garage-blues with extra Cooder! Alongside fuzzy, eccentric delights such as "Dropout Boogie", "Abba Zaba" and "Electricity", there's also a seam of soulful beauty in "I'm Glad" and "Call On Me". 8/10



THE MIRROR MAN SESSIONS

BUDDAH RECORDS 1999
Two LPs of lengthy material recorded in late 1967 for the *Safe As Milk* follow-up. As John French recalls, there's not much Captain here because he hadn't rehearsed with the band and was unsure how to fit his lyrics into their epic psych-blues pieces. 7/10

in Montclair and said he was starting a band, I said, 'What are you gonna call it?' He says 'Captain Beefheart & His Magic Band.' He must have heard it from Frank."

WHEN the Magic Band began, they were very much St Clair's group. He was far more experienced than Van Vliet, having worked for periods performing in bar bands in Nevada and in The Omens in Lancaster. From the start, though, the newly dubbed Beefheart made his presence known on stage.

"They had long hair," says Bill Harkleroad. "That was a big deal to kids like us because we weren't allowed to grow our hair. They stood out because of the way they looked, all dressed in black and wearing sunglasses indoors at night."

John French heard the group for the first time at a Battle of the Bands contest at Lancaster's Exposition Hall in 1965, organised by a local car club.

"The lineup was Merlin & The Sorcerers, The Jungle live Five, I was in a band called The Intruders, and Beefheart," he remembers. "We all thought we did pretty good, but then they came out and started with this fanfare with Don playing these fast harmonica notes. They played these slow chords and then counted it off and went into the first piece. I was blown away by the fact they had such showmanship. Of course we got our asses kicked, because they were the popular band."

"We thought the Beefheart band were the best thing on earth, we were pumelled by them," adds Bill Harkleroad, who first saw the Magic Band early on in Lancaster. "Beefheart was doing this stuff that seems really dark and real. It was like, 'Oh God, those guys are scary, don't meet them in the alley.'"

Harkleroad didn't see the Magic Band again until he joined them in 1969 – in the meantime, he left Lancaster to become an "LSD Buddhist" in Timothy Leary's Lake Tahoe cult – but they stayed on his mind. "It was a very powerful thing. Because of the desert, it was really easy to be focused on the one band that was making noise."

By the mid-'60s, Zappa was heavily involved at a studio in nearby Cucamonga, first named Pal and then Studio Z after Zappa purchased it. It was the scene of some out-there happenings, as Vic Mortensen recalls.

"Frank and I would be doing all kinds of experimental crap. We had a baby grand piano, and Frank sat on the piano stool, cross-legged, and I would crawl underneath the piano with timpani mallets and play the strings as he would depress the keys. Sometimes we'd be in the place so long that when we walked out we were surprised that it was daylight."

Mortensen taught a keen Van Vliet to play harmonica, which added a new dimension to their performances, then mostly at Lancaster's Exposition Hall, but also branching out to the local health spa and an excursion to Bakersfield. The drummer also bought Van Vliet a pair of finger cymbals, which were used to mimic the wheels of New Orleans burial carts at the start of "St James Infirmary Blues".

"I looked up and to God is my witness, there were tears rolling down his cheeks. We had a knack with audiences... mostly, we blew their minds."

By mid-1965, the Magic Band had a manager – someone, says Mortensen, who worked for an insurance company and had been intrigued by the bubble-written form Van Vliet had sent back after he'd crashed his Corvette. Their new champion secured them an unusual, if potentially lucrative, meeting with Hanna-Barbera Productions, makers of *The Flintstones*, *Yogi Bear* and *Scoby-Doo*.

"We went to Hanna-Barbera, set up our instruments and played," says Mortensen. "Then we went to a



Beeheart and the band in 1966 – Alex St Clair (second left) had been the early leader

MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES/GENE SIZEMORE

MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

CAPTAIN BEEFHEART

guy's office, he put on a record and asked if we could play it. 'We're gonna do an animated show about a fictitious group called The Bats, and we want you to become The Bats.' We said, 'We're Captain Beefheart & His Magic Band, thank you.' An animated show and a series of records, and we passed it up. I thought our manager was going to die on us."

Instead, at a Hollywood Battle of the Bands in April 1965, the group were spotted by agent Leonard Grant, who arranged for them to embark on a tour of Whisky-A-Go-Go venues out of state. Alas, it was not the greatest success. Denver was "a nightmare," says Mortensen. They were replaced halfway through their run by a country band. When they returned from Hawaii a few weeks later, Mortensen discovered that he had been called up for active duty in the army. The band's lineup shifted accordingly. At the end of '65, Beefheart and the Magic Band were signed to A&M. In Mortensen's absence, Alex St Clair took over the drumkit for the recording of their debut single, "Diddy Wah Diddy," early the following year. Meanwhile, Richard Hepler, a guitarist they'd met in Denver, took over from St Clair.

"Alex already sounded dated on guitar," says John French. "When he did a solo it sounded like '60s rock n'roll, pentatonic scale all the way. But Hepler was BB King-inspired, a really great player. He was more in the contemporary vein, and all the guitarists



"DON WANTED TO OUTWEIRD FRANK ZAPPA"
JOHN FRENCH

in the Antelope Valley loved him. But when he left and Alex went back to guitar, the band wasn't as strong."

BLUES and R&B weren't enough for Van Vliet. He wanted to venture into weirder territory, incorporating new psychedelic sounds. He was also keen to capture the spirit of the free jazz he and Zappa loved – the pair had seen Ornette Coleman and John Coltrane, with Van Vliet securing the latter's autograph on a dollar bill. "Their sound was already stretching from the blues," says Bill Harkleroad. "Those psychedelic things like the song in 'Zig Zag Wanderer', 1966 was the beginning of my psychedelic life – just at that time everyone was getting into those things."

Van Vliet's tastes were surprisingly varied. Lucas recalls him raving about Jackie Gleason, Dave Van Ronk and Ewan MacColl and Al Lloyd's *Blow Boys Blow*, whose "The Handsome Cabin Boy" was later adapted into *Trout Mask Replica's* "Orange Claw Hammer".

They followed "Diddy Wah Diddy" with a second A&M single, "Moonchild", written by producer David Gates. Shortly after, the band were dropped for being too "uncommercial". All the while, though, they were building up an underground following. In June 1966, they played their most prestigious gigs to date at San Francisco's Avalon Ballroom. The setlist is still stuffed with blues covers, from Howlin' Wolf's ever-present "Evil" and Willie Dixon's "Down In The Bottom" to John Lee Hooker's "Tupelo" and the Stones' "Heart Of Stone".

"Tupelo" really stood out for me," says John French. "I got so enthralled by the way Don handled the story of this Mississippi flood and fire. The way he commanded the audience was amazing."

Among their other notable gigs during this period, they opened for Them at LA's Whisky – with John Peel and, apparently, a tripping Andy Williams in attendance. With John French newly installed on drums, the group moved to a house in Laurel Canyon, funded by St Clair and Van Vliet's mothers. There, their own songs began to flow with a psychedelic vigour – "Electricity", "Abba Zaba" and "Sure Nuff..." were early results, warped and weird blues mostly with lyrics by Lancaster beatnik Herb Bermann.

Mortensen wrote "Call On Me" as a Byrds-y ballad in late 1965, after a rehearsal was halted by his mother ringing to inform him of his father's death. Van Vliet rearranged it as a harder, soulful stomp the following year, requisitioning the writing credit in the process.

"Don was very good at taking the credit for everything even though he delegated a lot to other people," says French. "You know how they say creativity is one per cent inspiration and 90 per cent perspiration? Well, Don was the one per cent inspiration and we were the 90 per cent perspiration. Another problem was he hardly ever finished anything, so there were all these great song ideas that we didn't know how to play."

With younger members like French joining the fold, Van Vliet increasingly threw his weight around. He had always been unpredictable – for instance, refusing to rehearse with the group – but his behaviour became increasingly erratic.

Doug Moon departed in early 1967 after recording demos for their debut album, provisionally titled "Abba Zaba", Richard Perry and Bob Krasnow, the record's prospective producers, were unable to find Van Vliet. They eventually tracked the singer down in LA's Canter's Deli, where he informed them, "I've been

waiting for you..." "It was like he'd mentally commanded them to find him there," laughs Gary Lucas.

To replace Moon, Van Vliet recruited Ry Cooder – formerly a member of Rising Sons alongside Taj Mahal. A hotshot slide guitarist long admired by Van Vliet, he was able to whip the Magic Band into shape in time for the *Safe As Milk* sessions at RCA Studios. "Ry put the album together," says John French. "He wrote parts where they were missing. On 'Zig Zag Wanderer', Ry came up with the riff in the middle – he said, 'We gotta break this up, so it isn't just the same thing over and over.' Don was anxiety-ridden during the sessions. We had to take him to the hospital a few times; they gave him Librium, told him that he was just having psychosomatic attacks."

"*Safe As Milk* surprised me," says Harkleroad. "I expected more of a blues album. I didn't realise it was going to be so different."

"Blues was a good place to start," explains French. "But Don wanted to do something new. I could see he was way more ambitious than Alex."

When *Safe As Milk* came out in June 1967, Van Vliet, whether intentionally or accidentally, injected an unwelcome dose of drama into the proceedings. Performing "Electricity" at the Mt



Tamalpais festival, the frontman hallucinated that an audience member had turned into a fish and promptly walked off the back of the stage. A frustrated Cooder left the group the same day, reportedly heading to Oregon to escape to the wrath of the group's then-manager Krasnow. Thrown into chaos, the band pulled out of Monterey Pop a few days later.

"Maybe we'd do 'Electricity' or 'Abba Zaba' live," says French. "But most of the time Don reverted to the same stuff we'd done at the first gig I'd played with them. I think it was because he didn't bother to memorise his lyrics – he didn't know the words to 'Abba Zaba' for years!"

"After *Safe As Milk* came out we went to England, and we were still doing 'Down In The Bottom' for 20 minutes. But then we'd do 'Sure Nuff N Yes I Do', which is almost the same song, with different lyrics. Don didn't know how to lead a group, he had no clue."

BEEFHEART and the Magic Band went on to stranger, bolder things in the decade and a half following *Safe As Milk*. But those early years set a pattern – from infatuation, intimidation and anxiety came stunning music. Even the rivalry with old friend Frank Zappa would continue to reap rewards.

"Don wanted to get a piano because Frank had started writing on one," says John French, recalling the creation of *Trout Mask Replica*. "He wanted to out-weird Frank, that was his big goal. That was more important to him than making money or putting together a saleable product. He just wanted to do art, man."

Just as importantly, the high desert remained a constant source of inspiration for Van Vliet in his music



PSYCHIC BEAST

Gary Lucas on Don Van Vliet's ESP



"I SAW some examples of it. One night Don's doing an interview at my apartment in New York, and we heard something like a car backfire, and he says, 'Hold on, man, did you hear that? Something really heavy just went down, and you're gonna read about it on the front pages tomorrow.' In the middle of the next interview, the phone rang and it was the first journalist: 'Gary, I don't believe it, man, John Lennon was just shot. How did Don know?' He was definitely sensitive to stuff in the air. He'd say the phone would ring and then it would ring. I think there are people who might not have mystical power, but they just have different channels on the world and their nervous system picks up stuff that's out there."

and, later, in his art. "There was a part of him that was infused in that landscape," explains Gary Lucas. "He'd often stay up night after night, drinking coffee and sketching at Denny's. He always said the desert was too hot for him, but if he hated it, wouldn't he have moved? There were parts of him that embraced the landscape, embraced being a very big fish in a very small pond."

"He was an explosive creative person, with real vision," says Bill Harkleroad. "People say, 'God, some really great players came out of that desert area.' But maybe every little town had all these people, but they didn't get the break? Maybe there were two people that were explosively talented – Frank and Don – and then all these other kids got in rooms and started practising because, 'Shit, that's possible!'"

Whether Van Vliet planned it or not, the tumult of those early years endured as the Beefheart modus operandi. It created the cult-like atmosphere around the *Trout Mask* sessions, the shocking accessibility of *Clear Spot* and even arguably informed his sudden retirement after 1982's *Ice Cream For Crow*.

"It was chaos the whole time," says French. "I can't think of any instance where I went, 'There is hope! We were just terrified of him, because he would fly off the handle and scream at you.'"

"I never met anybody like him, not remotely," says Gary Lucas. "He threw out ideas like an oil well, an endless flow of creative ideas."

Even much later, when he was a luminary in the art world, Van Vliet couldn't escape his early years in Lancaster. Like the sandstorms that periodically hit the Antelope Valley, his past just kept springing up.

"We were out in the middle of nowhere in this diner," says Lucas. "It was a real beat-up place, like you're travelling into another dimension. And in walks this trucker guy and he spots Don. 'Hey! Don Vliet.' Don looks up and says, 'You mean, Don Van Vliet.' And he went, 'Yeah, Don Vliet. Remember when we didn't let you join the car club?' and laughs. Don says to the guy, [witheringly] "So whaddya wanna talk about – quantum math?" ☺

Bill Harkleroad can be found at zoothornrollo.com. The Essential Gary Lucas is out January 29 on Knitting Factory.

Don didn't know how to lead a group, he had no clue! Beefheart and the band in Los Angeles, 1966

