



Weirdo eccentrics of the margins & the curse of bel canto

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by Nick Hobbs

This lecture is mostly taken from two lectures I wrote for the Pantheatre Voice Performance School: "Weirdo eccentrics of the margins & the curse of bel canto", focused on the voice of the star of Popular music hell-canto, Captain Beefheart (nom-de-plume of Don Van Vliet), and "Singing whispers, croaks, growls and roars: An exploration of fractured voices from the Blues to Flamenco", which spoke, amongst many others, about Beefheart's main mentor, the Chicago Blues singer, Howlin' Wolf (nom-de-plume of Chester Burnett).

During this week we've heard both hell and bel canto – Phil Minton and Nataalka Polovynka to name two extremes. Enrique Pardo spoke about the image of Wolf as satyr and the myth of Marsyas's challenge to Apollo - the aulos versus the lyre, and we've heard MaryAnn Roberts in Bragod, whose singing engages with the crwth, itself a descendent of lyre, but one whose buzzing timbre led her to use guttural sounds and overtone nasality in Bragod's vocal palette.

Both Wolf and Beefheart are firmly in the camp of hell canto, and I suppose were not capable of singing bel canto if they'd wanted to. Their voices correspond to their subject-matter and to their personae. Starting from their stage names, there's a buffoon quality to both performers, giving them a kind of license to make barbed commentaries, to be nasty, wolfish, foxy and knowing.

Howlin' Wolf of course had his precursors and peers, but much of the reason for being Captain Beefheart & the Magic Band's mentor was that he, with help from Chess Records producer, song-writer and session bassist, Willie Dixon, and slide guitarist exceptionnel, Hubert Sumlin, was an extraordinary performer and innovator within the style of urban Blues, and also its foremost user of broken voice. Here's "Back Door Man", an exquisite Willie Dixon lyric written from the point-of-view of a pretty unpleasant character "I am a backdoor man; well, men don't know but little girls understand". Lyrically akin to gangsta rap but not sung as macho assertion, rather as a bald statement of male condition.

Back Door Man / Howlin' Wolf / from the album "Howlin' Wolf"

I call this embodied singing. Wolf sang with his whole body, put everything into it, hollerin' and howlin' and singing the words like they were physical entities, imbued with blood and sweat. And broken voice seems entirely natural to his physical approach to making music. Entirely in the Afro-American tradition, black in both senses of the word, singing the Devil's music, defiantly *not* Gospel. Rather than being possessed by the Holy Spirit, Wolf was possessed by a kind of intelligent, wicked devil, which, once on stage, erupted and dominated.

Astoundingly Wolf was barely recognized by the American mass media, appearing on American television exactly once, and that only thanks to the insistence of the Rolling Stones. Here he is performing "How Many More Years" on Shindig, May 26th, 1965. Note what a magnificent performer he was. Huge and delightfully lewd. I've been unable to track down a copy of the unadulterated performance, in the part you don't see there was some even more outrageous shimmying going on.

Howlin' Wolf on Shindig in 1965 performing How Many More Years / from the DVD The Howlin' Wolf Story (Region 2 - 2'25")

Here's one of his most famous songs, the self-penned "Smokestack Lightnin'" but with antecedents in Charlie Patton and others, making it, as so many Blues songs, a kind of hybrid between Folk music proper and authored music. Vocal performance poetry of the highest level. The moans imitating a train while at the same time being the moans of a broken-heart. And the voice in between is a summons and proclamation, angry but with restraint and resignation. A summons to the separated love and a proclamation that the singer will manage without her and a proclamation of the singer's woe.

Smokestack Lightnin' / Howlin' Wolf / from the album "Moanin' In The Moonlight"

Here's a version of "Dust My Broom" from a film of a club concert in '66, including a sozzled Son House (the guy in the hat) amongst the spectators. It seems to me that in his performances Wolf is like a towering satyr, a magnificent buffoon, throwing the hypocrisies of white culture back in its face. No matter how much he sweats he maintains his poise, his cool, his pride. He always knows where he is and what he's doing, and he sure doesn't give a damn what anyone thinks.

Dust My Broom / Howlin' Wolf / from the DVD The Howlin' Wolf Story (Region 2 - 9'28")

And then came Captain Beefheart. White, but, like so many white musicians of the Sixties, inspired by and immersed in Afro-American culture. He took the music of Howlin' Wolf, Screamin' Jay Hawkins and many others and transformed it into the most intelligently intense and extraordinary Blues-Rock music ever made. Beefheart's self-conscious sense of himself as a genius, his determined pose of being a modern artist, his rampant ambition and pretension, coupled with an exceptional cultural context - Sixties California - and - vitally - gifted and willing musicians, enabled him and them to explore his voice, music and lyrics in ways quite unique to the idiom.

As an encapsulation here's a LA TV clip from 1980; the visual quality is awful but the sound is okay, and the content is fascinating. The self-mythologizing - "I never went to school" - stoking the mythologizing of the American "primitive genius" - and the, partly self-deprecating, wry humour.

Eye On LA / Los Angeles TV newsclip / 1980 / from the bootleg DVD "Don Van Vliet" (chapter 11, page 4, duration 6'50")

If you didn't catch them some of the choice quotes are: "If you want to be a different fish you've got to jump out of the school"; "Rock 'n roll is a fixation... I'm doing a non-hypnotic music to break up the catatonic state"; "How do you teach these musicians to play your music?" "A whip"; "I don't like music, I like to do spells, because music is just black ants crawling across white paper".

Here's "I'm Gonna Booglarize You Baby", an understated, growling mantra, with contrasting, torn-scream punctuation.

I'm Gonna Booglarize You Baby / Captain Beefheart & His Magic Band / from the 1972 album "The Spotlight Kid"

Beefheart used his voice in every which way possible, from low growls to fractured falsettos and everything in-between. A voice characterized by an extraordinary sonic imagination rooted in the Blues. A voice which intensely used broken sounds, used texture, to colour every word. Hardly a word was casual, everything was charged. And for the converted, Beefheart's singing is a message from the beyond. From the Soul, from Hell, from magic and mystery.

Here's "Sheriff Of Hong Kong" from "Doc At The Radar Station":

Sheriff Of Hong Kong / Captain Beefheart and The Magic Band / from the 1980 album "Doc At The Radar Station"

Simply no holds barred. No-one before or since has sung with quite such fullness in Rock music. There are plenty of Rock animal screamers, but Beefheart sings like he's just eaten a menagerie. Like Soul, Body and Voice are all one thing. This isn't spiritual singing, it's inspirational singing. A voice which exhorts the listener to not just get up and dance but to get up and be damned; to explode with a dark, demonic vitality, explode with emotional and psychic charge; to embrace the extraordinary, to get burned up by it.

Beefheart's roots are: poetically - beat-poetry, dada and surrealism; visually - primitivist modern art; and musically - an incomparable mix of urban Blues, r&b & free-jazz. And the result is not easy-listening.

Here's The Magic Band's version of Robert Pete Williams' "Grown So Ugly". "Grown so ugly, I don't even know myself." Beefheart's then youthful voice slipping easily between the registers and in out of broken and unbroken voices.

Grown So Ugly / Captain Beefheart and His Magic Band / from the 1967 album "Safe As Milk"

This is kind of how you would sound if you woke up one morning and realised, like the man in Kafka's Metamorphosis, that you'd grown so ugly.

The Magic Band's music is avant-Blues with extraordinary lyrics and dense musical counter-point. On most of their records, the music has all the instruments riffing, all more or less with equal value, all carrying rhythm and melody and ill-tempered harmonies. There are rarely a distinct rhythm section and lead instruments in the Magic Band, all are mostly both, the parts adding up to a greater whole yet each part being splendid and separate in its own right. The drums talk, the bass sings, the music often abandons conventional Popular music structure. Tunings are often unconventional, sounding especially radically dissonant on "Trout Mask Replica" and "Lick My Decals Off, Baby". The music can slow down as often as speed up, everything's in syncopation with everything else, time-signatures and accents are unconventional, but the music is never played like some academic affair – the music rocks, it has balls and it burns. These guys were not reading scores; they learned and mastered everything no matter how difficult, and played it like they meant it.

Next "I Love You, You Big Dummy". A love song, but with what attitude! The music is dense, almost impenetrable, richly repaying repeated listenings. The singing style is wild. The voice snarling in and out of cruel laughter and broken howls. And like so often in Beefheart's singing there are lawyers of irony in both the lyrics and the singer's attitude which never allow the song to coalesce into one meaning. He is *insincere*. A singer who is one step ahead of the listener's interpretations, and so the song lives on, slippery as an eel.

I Love You, You Big Dummy / Captain Beefheart and The Magic Band / from the 1970 album "Lick My Decals Off, Baby"

This is hardly romantic. If someone came up to you saying they loved you but cackling like that at the same time, you'd be forgiven for feeling a little unsure how to take it. This album was made amidst the withering of hippydom. "Breathe deep, breathe high, breathe life, don't breathe a lie." On paper the lyric could almost be a hippy lyric but no hippies ever sung or played like this.

Beefheart's singing is wild, physical but keenly intelligent; in a rich North-American idiom; unsentimental, unromantic, fantastic, poetic, word-playing lyrics which take much of their imagery from nature rather than the city, and whose subjects are sex, improbable women, Earth matters, weird travellers' tales, other worlds and dream worlds. Little you could call introspective or self-pitying, little in the first person. The words exhort and declare. They're exciting and liberating. His voice veers between warmth, heat and plain nastiness. Cynical, ironical, humorous, furious, knowing, detached from the literal, manic, devilish, macho, boasting, vile and violent – not often what you might call *sincere* – the words are usually deeply felt but what feelings? Rarely the gushy ones. The singing approach tosses up emotions and puts them together again in the "wrong" combinations – this is not a voice to trust but one you should be wary of, one which unsettles and unnerves.

Another TV clip. "Ashtray Heart" on Saturday Nite Live, 1980. A particularly vehement performance from Beefheart. Note the vibrant engagement of the musicians. "You used me like an ashtray heart, case of the punks, right from the start, I feel like a pig, I feel like a glass shrimp in a pink panty, with a saccharine chaperone, make invalids out of supermen, call in a shrink, and pick me up in a girdle".

Saturday Nite Live / 22.11.80 / Ashtray Heart / from the 1980 album "Doc At The Radar Station"

Beefheart's a kind of anti-protest protest-singer. Not the song of the good guys nor, like Nick Cave, that of the bad guys, rather the song of the outsider who comments, observes, sometimes sneers and laughs, who often doesn't identify with what he's singing about or who he's singing to, who exhorts and rails at everyone to buck up and get on with it. Though what *it* is, is an esoteric business. For sure "it" isn't the straight world. Beefheart throws darts from the other side, and the message is it's better over there... And he seems to know something we don't and he's not letting on about what *it* is, how to get *it*, not saying how anyone can get there.

His voice can stop you in your tracks, make you reject it and hate it, damn it as a noise, or make you embrace it and love it; it can change your life, it can inspire and catalyse, it has such originality that it can sound like it comes from another planet, another culture, like animals rising out of the hidden places in our bodies, and spirits rising out of the hidden places in our psyches.

Here's a finely complex song bursting with Boschian imagery, revelling in a rural apocalypse. "The Floppy Boot Stomp" from "Shiny Beast". "The floppy-boot stomped down into the ground, The Farmer screamed 'n blew the sky off the mountains, Eye sockets looked down on the chest-bone mountains 'n the sun dropped down, 'n the moon ran off; His heels 'n elbows pale as chalk, 'n all the comets collided 'n blew t' dust, for fear they'd be seen."

The Floppy Boot Stomp / Captain Beefheart and The Magic Band / from the 1978 album "Shiny Beast"

The Magic Band's music isn't always wild. On the albums "The Spotlight Kid" and "Clear Spot" the music's much calmer. This is "White Jam", a love song featuring a summer-husky falsetto in the second half. More Louisiana than psychedelic California. "She brings me white jam and I don't know where I am."

White Jam / Captain Beefheart and The Magic Band / from the 1972 album "The Spotlight Kid"

A trademark mannerism of Beefheart's is a kind of hiccup, a miniature yodel, a gulp, and also grunts, and these gulps and grunts can happen just about anywhere – in the middle of a word, at the end of a line. They can add emphasis and they can also be like question-marks. Do I mean what I've just sung? Should you be taking any of this seriously? What on Earth *do* I mean? I sure ain't telling you...

This is the title track from "Lick My Decals Off, Baby". Fabulous syncopations between the guitars, drums and bass. A lyric ostensibly about sex sung in a voice which rather than seductive is almost lewd. Hard to pin down. Nastily intelligent. "Now you may think I'm crazy but I want you to lick my decals off baby."

Lick My Decals Off, Baby / Captain Beefheart and The Magic Band / from the 1970 album "Lick My Decals Off, Baby"

Some of Beefheart's most extreme moments are where he goes into madness. Here's "Telephone" from 1980's "Doc At The Radar Station". This is like being inside the head of a paranoid. The music and singing are determinedly ugly. A song about being strangled by a telephone.

Telephone / Captain Beefheart and The Magic Band / from the 1980 album "Doc At The Radar Station"

Beefheart isn't mad but he goes there. A kind of musical shaman, acting out our madnesses so that we can preserve our sanity. Beefheart's never depressed. Sometimes enraged, confused, bitter, nasty, but not depressed. He's too intelligent and too in control to be actually mad and too in love with life for self-pity. Wilfully eccentric, yes, and part of Sixties, experimental, psychedelic popular-culture, where drugs were integral. He also aimed high – regarding himself as a genius on a par with Ives, Partch, Cage & Coltrane as well as his favourite painters.

The approach was unique and has remained so, though there have been many musicians and singers influenced by his work (Tom Waits being the most obvious example). Regarding himself – and being regarded – as a genius gave him the liberty to do what the hell he liked, to experiment, to believe in his own ideas – for most of the time anyway.

This music couldn't have been written before the Sixties. It was part of its artistically glorious times. Also the way the band worked was part of its times. To prepare for the recording of "Trout Mask Replica" required monastic devotion from the musicians. Constant rehearsals. Living together. Poverty. Hardships. Accepting the eccentric commandments and authority of the guru.

Beefheart wasn't only a cackling, deranged, devilish commentator. Often the lyrics are deeply-felt lovesongs and paeans to nature, and sometimes exquisitely compassionate.

Here's "There Ain't No Santa Claus On The Evenin' Stage" from "The Spotlight Kid". A song about poverty with imagery lashing at Christian hypocrisies. And barbing Santa's ho-ho-hos into weapons. Not bel-canto but belly-canto. "And some day I'm gonna be saved, 'cause I gotta eat and drink and breathe and sleep and I'm a slave"

There Ain't No Santa Claus On The Evenin' Stage / Captain Beefheart and The Magic Band / from the 1972 album "The Spotlight Kid"

And "Dachau Blues" - a song from "Trout Mask Replica" which simply *is* sincere - a rumbling furious sincerity. Not sanctimonious but raging. A raging compassion. I know of no better attempt to grapple with the Holocaust in song. "The world can't forget their misery and the young ones beggin' the old ones please to stop being madmen before they have to tell their children about world war threes." The lyric comments and observes while the singer *feels*.

Dachau Blues / Captain Beefheart and The Magic Band / from the 1969 album "Trout Mask Replica"

Beefheart sings with a very twentieth-century aesthetic - quite opposed to traditional Western voices - the vocal aspect of modern art (where distortion, atonality, fractures, violence, animality, chaos can all be included); a revolutionary aesthetic. And yet, because Beefheart's is *Popular music*, because it is in essence traditional music - the Afro-American tradition, it carries within it the roots which anchor it, which give it weight and imbue it with meaning.

I imagine Beefheart and Wolf's cavernous, visceral sounds embodying not only the mysteries of the soul but also the ancestral voices of magic Africa and the animal voices of nature. Everything the domesticated voices of civilized folk are cut off from.

Wolf and especially Beefheart sing from some kind of state of imaginative liberation, where anything imaginable is possible, where imagination is the source of invention, where the physical and psychic imaginations are in tune with each other. Thus the sounds are real, connected, rooted yet heady - and headstrong - and unashamed, not academic, not reserved - they're discovered and intuitive not studied and refined. And their voices are constantly vital. Full of life-force and hell-drive.

thankyou

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