

Captain Beefheart and the monstrous rhythms of the modern musical self

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Abstract

The musical possibilities opened up by Captain Beefheart and his Magic Band in the world of rock'n'roll remain, to this day, unsurpassed. Blurring the artificial boundaries between high and low culture, Beefheart created grotesque and surreal soundscapes that invited the listener into the violent and beautifully uncomfortable domain of repressed imagination. In a similar fashion to the paintings of Abstract Expressionists or to the work done by writers from the New York School, the Magic Band's music is poetically excessive in many ways and that is what makes it so unique.

Nevertheless, Beefheart's uniqueness and originality must not prevent us from trying to understand where his explosive music was coming from or, at least, from finding similarities in terms of artistic experimentation in the work of some of his peers. On this matter, one could certainly point, for instance, to the aleatory compositions of John Cage or to the seemingly spontaneous rhythms of Free Jazz as feasible unquestionable points.

The purpose of this essay is, then, to untangle the musical ideas that underlie Beefheart's compositions so that we can better understand what aesthetic conventions were being questioned and subverted as well as what are the implications of this monstrous polyphony in terms of the modern musical self.

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João Paulo Guimarães holds a degree in Modern Languages (English and Spanish) from the Faculty of Letters of the University of Coimbra. In 2009, he studied North-American Literature at University College, Dublin. He is now completing his MA thesis (American Studies) on the poetic and musical work of Captain Beefheart.