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### Captain Beefheart

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## **Captain Beefheart and His Magic Band (1965–1982)**

Captain Beefheart and His Magic Band (1965–1982) pushed past the boundaries of rock music, inventing a radical kind of popular music that, to this day, continues to surprise and astonish. The music has become a touchstone for total musical freedom. It was punk well before punk and entirely unpopular popular music. Musicologist David Sanjek commented on the band's most important album, "Most people never heard of it and if they did listen to it, they wouldn't want to listen to it again" (Sanjek 2012). The band, however, was and is immensely influential on generations of edgy, arty musicians. Of the band's 13 studio albums, *Trout Mask Replica* (1969) is by far the most well known and is often included in surveys of the most influential rock albums of all time.

The story of Captain Beefheart and His Magic Band is fascinating in and of itself. It is laden with myths and tall tales created by an impossibly strong-willed painter and sculptor, Don Van Vliet (aka Captain Beefheart, born Don Glen Vliet, February 18, 1941, died December 17, 2010; vocals, harmonica, saxophone), who could not read or write notated music and yet conceived complicated musical pieces. He claimed that he remembered his own birth, went a year and half without sleep, could foretell when a phone would ring, and possessed three-and-a-half-inch ears. Vliet created his persona as a *sui generis* (unique) genius. Critic Ben Thompson (2001) stated, "It would not be an exaggeration to call Beefheart the most mythical figure in all popular music," and rock historian Greil Marcus (2011) described Van Vliet as a trickster figure (Marcus 2011).

To support his self-mythologizing, Van Vliet deliberately did not give credit to the members of the Magic Band as musicians as well as creative contributors. Every band member was known by their band name, assigned by Van Vliet. The Magic Band had its own fraught history, and not surprisingly, the band went through significant and complicated personnel changes. Some members went on to acclaim as solo artists—for example, Ry Cooder (born Ryland Peter Cooder, March 15, 1947; guitar). However, two of the most important and long-lived members of the band, Bill Harkleroad (aka Zoot Horn Rollo, born Bill Harklewood, December 12, 1948; guitar) and John French (aka Drumbo, born John Stephen French, September 29, 1948; drums, vocals, guitar), were known chiefly only by Beefheart fans. A significant number of Magic Band members were members of Frank Zappa's Mothers of Invention. This was not coincidental: Van Vliet sporadically worked with Zappa, his high school friend.

The band's first few albums were of their time, a combination of blues and psychedelia popular in the mid- to late 1960s, and music industry promoters thought they could make the band huge rock stars. However, between Van Vliet's curmudgeonly and paranoid personality and the increasingly difficult music, it became apparent that the band would never become massively commercially successful. By 1969, the year *Trout Mask Replica* was recorded, the band had transitioned to a totally avant-garde sound. Critically acclaimed, the album landed the band on the cover of *Rolling Stone* in May 1970. The subsequent album, *Lick My Decals Off, Baby*, also traveled in the same musical territory. Subsequent albums grew



American musician, singer, songwriter, artist, and poet Captain Beefheart (Don Van Vliet), on the right, and his Magic Band pose for a portrait in Topanga, California, on February 26, 1969. Together with the Magic Band, Captain Beefheart released radical music that remains influential to this day and contained punk music elements before punk existed. (Photo by Ed Caraeff/Getty Images)

increasingly more commercial, but the music only returned, in part, to its edgy aesthetic in its last six years.

Van Vliet had a multi-octave vocal range, but his growly, deepest blues voice (similar to that of blues musician Howlin' Wolf) is often described as the signature of the band's sound. The music was often based in the blues, both Delta and urban, frequently featuring slide guitar and Van Vliet on harmonica. Free jazz, rock, minimalist classical music, and spoken word are other key elements of the music. For the most part, the sound fits no genre or category in popular music. Many critics and scholars of Beefheart allude to art movements including Dada and Surrealism, as well as the pure spontaneity of Abstract Expressionism (which heavily influenced Van Vliet's own painting) (Courier 2007). Of all rock bands, Captain Beefheart aligned the most closely with the

visual arts. Lyrically, as well as musically, absurdism was combined with primitivism. The early 20th-century Dadaists created sound poetry, and Van Vliet's lyrics break with standard lyrical conventions of logic. The influence of jazz poetry from the 1950s was also found in the half-sung, half-spoken, or entirely spoken vocals. Thematically, a common lyrical thread was nature and ecology. Van Vliet gravitated to animals specifically because they were not humans. However, the line of separation was fairly thin: Van Vliet's lyrical universe was populated by strange, hybrid creatures such as Ant Man Bee.

A child prodigy sculptor, Don Van Vliet was born in Glendale, California, and grew up in the Mohave Desert of California. A fan of rhythm and blues, he loved Muddy Waters, Jimmy Reed, John Lee Hooker, and Bo Diddley as well as free jazz, including Ornette Coleman and Cecil Taylor. He went to high school in Lancaster, California, where he befriended Frank Zappa. Zappa became an important figure at critical junctures in the history of the band and Van Vliet's career. In 1964, the two moved to Cucamonga, California, and formed a band called the Soots, but the project floundered and Beefheart went home to Lancaster while Zappa went on to Los Angeles and formed the Mothers of Invention. On his return to Lancaster, Van Vliet took on the stage name of Captain Beefheart. The name came from a film that he and Zappa never made, *Captain Beefheart Meets the Grunt People*.

The first Magic Band, formed by guitarist Alex St. Clair (born Alexis Clair Snouffer, September 14, 1941, died January 5, 2006; guitar), a high school friend of Frank Zappa, played covers of rhythm and blues songs and became a very popular live band. Van Vliet was with the band largely from its inception. A & M Records signed the band in 1964 and released a single, a cover of Bo Diddley's hit, "Diddy Wah Diddy." The single sold enough for A & M to commission the band to record its first album, but the record company did not like the music and rejected the album. Some tracks were released in 1984 as *The Legendary A & M Sessions*. St. Clair also played on the band's first official album, *Safe as Milk*, as well as the subsequent album, *Strictly Personal*. Longtime

Magic Band member John French played drums. *Safe as Milk* (1967) opened up with the pronouncement, “I was born in the desert . . . came on up from New Orleans.” A mixture of reworked older material and new songs, *Safe as Milk* was heavily based in psychedelic blues and features outstanding slide guitar playing by Ry Cooder. Cooder, fed up with Van Vliet, abruptly quit the band, precipitating a cancellation of their gig at the historic Monterey Pop Festival. Some of the theremin-accented rock and pop-oriented songs sound of their time (the 1967 “Summer of Love”), but others incorporate unexpected time changes or feature spoken vocals. “Electricity,” the standout song on the album, was later covered by Sonic Youth.

At this relatively early stage of his musical career, Van Vliet had the opportunity to hear jazz musician Rahsaan Roland Kirk perform. Kirk was an audacious player of not only the saxophone but other brass and woodwind instruments and would sometimes play multiple instruments simultaneously. Van Vliet was awestruck and inspired—he and Kirk eventually became lifelong friends. The *Mirror Man Sessions* (some material was recorded for an aborted double album titled *It Comes to You in a Brown Paper Wrapper*) were originally recorded in 1967/8 on the Buddah label and released in 1971 as *Mirror Man*. The songs were lengthy, psychedelic blues jams. “Tarotplane,” an intense blues song, takes its title and some of its lyrics from Robert Johnson’s classic blues song “Terraplane Blues.” “Kandy Korn” was typical of how the recording marked a transition toward the more sophisticated fare of *Trout Mask Replica*. As Buddah Records shifted to bubblegum pop, they dropped the band from its label.

Full-blown acid rock with an ample dose of blues, *Strictly Personal* (1968) marks the band’s transition from the semi-commercial to the out-and-out noncommercial. Drug references were explicit in songs such as “Ah Feel Like Ahcid.” The blues infuse the album but were also satirized as well. Jeff Cotton (aka Antennae Jimmy Semens, born Jeffrey Ralph Cotton, May 31, 1949; guitar) joined the band on guitar and stayed on through *Trout Mask Replica*. Producer and record label owner Bob Krasnow remixed the tracks to create

a more psychedelic sound. Van Vliet was outraged, claiming that changes were made without his consent. Accordingly, the next album, *Trout Mask Replica*, produced by Frank Zappa for Zappa’s Straight Recordings, provided Van Vliet complete control of the recording process. In the same year, Zappa provided Van Vliet with the opportunity to sing “Willie the Pimp” on Zappa’s *Hot Rats* (1969).

*Trout Mask Replica* (1969) was by far the most influential and critically acclaimed Captain Beefheart album. However, the album’s greatness came at a high cost. *Trout Mask Replica* took over a year to compose and record under extreme conditions. The band lived and worked in an isolated cabin in Woodland Hills, outside of Los Angeles. Van Vliet kept his young band of talented musicians in a state of fear and dependency. John French needed countless hours to transcribe the parts for the band. Van Vliet, unable to read or write music, had complex musical ideas in his head, and no means to easily communicate them, and acted out his frustration. At times Van Vliet used a piano to explain his musical ideas, but he continued to use unorthodox means to communicate with French (and subsequent Magic Band members), including whistling or singing as well as cryptic, surreal verbal descriptions of the sounds he wanted—for example: “Make it like Fred Astaire dangling through a tea cup; like BBs on the plate; babies flying over the mountains.” Jeff Cotton was often responsible for transcribing Van Vliet’s lyrics and spoken word output. Original Magic Band members Jerry Handley (bass) and St. Clair (guitar) left the band to be replaced, respectively, by Mark Boston (aka Rockette Morton, born 1949; bass, guitar) and 19-year-old Bill Harklewood. When the album was released, French was not even listed as a band member. A spiteful Van Vliet removed French’s name in response to French leaving the band. Van Vliet would tell the media that the Magic Band were musical novices, an ironic twist.

A double album with 28 relatively short tracks (at this time, many rock bands were venturing toward longer songs), *Trout Mask Replica* had its own avant-garde technique. Some of the album was

recorded at the cabin—Zappa approached the recording in the manner of an anthropological field recording. Van Vliet, however, wanted to record in a studio, so the album was a mix of both styles of recording. The music was created with some improvisation but then endlessly rehearsed, recorded, and performed without variation. Richly varied stylistically, and loaded with surprises, the album deserves its fame. Rhythms change unexpectedly; often, the drumming is totally freed up from traditional timekeeping. Musical themes shift constantly with little repetition. Although the musicians often do not seem to be playing together, the music still coheres. In 1991 Van Vliet explained the album as “trying to break up the mind in many different directions, causing them not to be able to fixate” (Barnes 2002).

An exciting element of *Trout Mask Replica* can be found in “Orange Claw Hammer,” a song featuring unaccompanied vocals based on field hollers and sea shanties. The clicking of the tape recorder being paused was deliberately left intact in this piece, and when Van Vliet stumbled at the beginning, he just started over again, leaving the mistake intact. Van Vliet engaged his cousin Victor “The Mascara Snake” Hayden (bass clarinet) in a bizarre patter: “A squid eating dough in a polyethylene bag is fast’n’ bulbous. Got me?” Snatches of conversation between songs and a phone conversation enhanced the experience of the album as lived and alive.

Some studio vocals were recorded somewhat out of sync with the band. Van Vliet refused to wear headphones and would sing to the leakage of the recording coming through the panes of glass from the control room. *Trout Mask Replica* required repeated listening to appreciate. Many fans of the album found it off-putting if not cacophonous on first listening (Chusid 2000). The album was not successful in terms of sales. Zappa promoted the album with his roster of oddball performers on Bizarre/Straight, and Van Vliet was deeply displeased to be labeled a freak. Friction between Zappa and Van Vliet intensified.

The successor to *Trout Mask Replica*, *Lick My Decals Off, Baby* (1970), was also lauded. With the critical success of *Trout Mask Replica*, the band landed

with Warner Bros. Jeff Cotton left the band and Artie Tripp (aka Ed Marimba, born Arthur Dyer Tripp III, September 10, 1944; marimba, drums, percussion), a member of Frank Zappa’s band the Mothers of Invention, joined the band. Tripp played marimba to great effect, especially on “Woe-Is-Uh-Me-Bop.” The band moved to Laurel Canyon. They recorded *Lick My Decals* in a standard manner, with multiple takes of songs. The group was now known as Captain Beefheart and the Magic Band. Many of the songs were more straightforward and rock-oriented with a more prominent bass. That said, the music itself was just as complex as before, if not more so. Some songs were about sex, such as “Neon Meate Dream of a Octafish.” Other songs (e.g., “Petrified Forest”) touched on ecological disaster. The album ranged widely from Bill Harklewood’s beautiful guitar piece to the punkish double saxophones on “Flash Gordon’s Ape.” Van Vliet rated *Lick My Decals Off, Baby* as his favorite of his albums.

Soon after the release of *Lick My Decals Off, Baby*, another member of the Mothers of Invention joined the Magic Band: guitarist Elliot Ingber (aka Winged Eel Fingerling, born August 24, 1941; guitar). *The Spotlight Kid* (1972) sought a more commercial sound and a broader audience. The pace was slower and the songs were bluesier (although not standard 12-bar blues). Some critics found the lyrics less humorous and more ominous. “Click Clack,” a train song, was the standout track on the album. Critical reception of the album was fairly positive and the album was commercially successful without being a hit.

Van Vliet had his first art exhibit in London in 1972. He married his wife Jan in 1969 and at this stage of his career, Van Vliet stated repeatedly that his intention was to create music for women. In *Clear Spot* (1972), the songs were more melodic and the rhythms much more groove-oriented. “Big-Eyed Beans from Venus,” was critically regarded as the best cut on the album, particularly for its outstanding guitar work and its lyrics. This complex, big song harkened back to *Trout Mask Replica*. Harklewood, Ingber, and Tripp stayed with the band. Mark Boston moved from bass

over to guitar with the addition of Mothers of Invention bassist Roy Estrada.

After *Clear Spot's* disappointing sales, Van Vliet left Warner Bros., moving to Virgin Records, and hired new managers. The two ensuing albums, according to most critics and fans, represent the nadir of Van Vliet and the band's career. *Unconditionally Guaranteed* (1974) deepened Van Vliet's efforts at commercialism. A few critics felt the album worked well as a pop album. More notably, after years of poverty, and with disgust at the results of *Unconditionally Guaranteed*, the Magic Band quit before going on tour. This devastated Van Vliet.

For *Bluejeans & Moonbeams* (1974), a pickup band of studio musicians were brought on board. Critically dismissed as the weakest album, *Bluejeans & Moonbeams* had some charming songs, particularly "Observatory Crest," which featured Van Vliet's melodious singing. However, the album had a generally sanitized, Southern California rock sound and was a commercial failure. Van Vliet was at a professional low point. He apologized to Frank Zappa, asking to work with him again. The result was documented in the live album *Bongo Fury* (Discreet, 1975). Van Vliet contributed "Sam with the Showing Scalp Flat Top" and "Man with the Woman Head." Yet again, the collaboration ended in rancor. Van Vliet, while on stage but not performing, would sketch Zappa, infuriating Zappa.

During this difficult period, a teenage fan, Moris Tepper (born Jeff Moris Tepper; guitar) became Van Vliet's friend and next door neighbor. After the *Bongo Fury* tour, Van Vliet re-formed the Magic Band and John French rejoined the band not only on drums but also guitar. Bruce Fowler (aka Fossil, born Bruce Lambourne Fowler, July 10, 1947; trombone) and Jimmy Carl Black (aka India Ink, born James Carl Inkanish Jr., February 1, 1938, died November 1, 2008; drums), both formerly with Frank Zappa, joined the band, and Elliot Ingber returned on guitar. The band toured successfully. By 1975, Black left the band and French moved back over to drums, with Denny Walley (also previously with Mothers of Invention) on guitar. The original Magic Band (Tripp, Harklewood, and Boston)

formed a group called Mallard. With the support of Ian Anderson from Jethro Tull, they released one self-named album in 1976 on Virgin. Van Vliet was outraged and badmouthed Mallard in the media.

Despite the considerable friction between Zappa and Van Vliet, Zappa became the executive producer of the next album, *Bat Chain Puller* (1976). Moris Tepper joined the band on guitar. This album returned, in part, to the more avant-garde territory of earlier Beefheart. Stylistically, the album was extremely diverse. John French played an exquisite solo guitar piece. "Brick Bats," featuring Van Vliet on saxophone, was punkish. "The Floppy Boot Stomp," was classic psychedelic Americana. After the album was completed, Thomas quit the band and joined Mallard. Eric Drew Feldman (born April 16, 1955; keyboards, bass) was brought into the band. Unfortunately, due to legal problems involving Zappa and his manager, the album was not issued for sale. In 2012, Zappa's estate released the original album.

After French decamped yet again, Robert Williams, a new drummer, joined the band in 1977. Bruce Fowler returned on trombone. Getting a deal with Warner Bros., Van Vliet decided to, in part, rerecord *Bat Chain Puller*. Many of the other songs were unused on earlier albums, but there were four entirely new songs. The resulting album, *Shiny Beast (Bat Chain Puller)* (1978), was not as edgy and exciting as its unreleased predecessor, but it was a critical success and stood on its own merits. The album, for the first time, included extensive artwork from Van Vliet. Van Vliet loved the album. Unfortunately, due to more legal problems, the album was not actually released until 1980.

Gary Lucas (born June 20, 1952; guitar) was a guest guitar player on the next-to-last Captain Beefheart album, *Doc at the Radar Station* (1980), and he and his wife took on managerial duties for the band. About half of the material on the album was repurposed from earlier material including *Bat Chain Puller*. Most of the same personnel from *Shiny Beast (Bat Chain Puller)* were on *Doc at the Radar Station*. John French rejoined the band for this album. "Ashtray Heart" shared some common aesthetics with the contemporaneous No Wave sound in

New York City. Lucas rearranged and performed “Flavor Bud Living.” In the post-punk era, the album was very well received: it was selected as one of 1980’s 10 best albums by the *New York Times*, and the band performed on *Saturday Night Live*.

The band toured on a receptive new wave/post-punk circuit. French quit the band again and Rick Snyder, another Beefheart fan, was brought in on bass. However, U.K. distribution by Virgin fell apart, leaving the band to perform in cities without the album available. Drummer Robert Williams also left the band after what ended up as the Magic Band’s final concert performance in Huntington Beach, California, in January 1981. Van Vliet decided to stop touring but returned to the studio for one final album.

*Ice Cream for Crow* (1982) was the band’s last album, and like its immediate predecessors, used some repurposed older material. “Hey, Garland, I Dig Your Tweed Coat,” sported intense surrealistic spoken word and chaotic instrumentals. Cliff Martinez (born February 5, 1954; drums), who played with punk bands, joined the band. Lucas performed his arrangement of Van Vliet’s previously unreleased “Evening Bell,” a solo guitar piece. Van Vliet wanted some of the cuts from the original *Bat Chain Puller* to be included on the album, but Zappa balked, refused to cooperate, and a confrontation ensued. Critical reaction was fairly positive but not as warm as that for *Doc at the Radar Station*. After *Ice Cream for Crow* was released, Van Vliet was persuaded to make a video for the title cut, a very catchy tune featuring Gary Lucas on slide guitar. This early rock video was shot in the desert and featured Joshua trees, tumbleweeds, Van Vliet’s paintings, and an exuberant performance by the band. It allowed the viewer to get a sense of Van Vliet as a physical being, grinning and flapping his arms in his imitation of a crow.

Van Vliet appeared on David Letterman in the early 1980s. Online clips reveal that Van Vliet persisted in his outrageous claims and self-mythologizing. Virgin still had an option on another album, and bizarrely, tried to induce Van Vliet and the band to appear in *Grizzly II*, a horror film about a killer bear. This was the final straw after years of disappointing

earnings. Van Vliet decided to end the band in order to focus on being a full-time painter.

Van Vliet abandoned the name “Captain Beefheart” and went on to have a lucrative and satisfying career as a painter, exhibiting widely. His painting style was heavily influenced by Abstract Expressionist Franz Kline. Beefheart fan Julian Schnabel helped introduce Van Vliet to the New York and German art scenes and gain gallery representation. Soon thereafter, Van Vliet was able to buy land and build a house in Northern California. He and his wife Jan remained there until his death from complications related to multiple sclerosis in 2010.

Most of the Magic Band members continued to perform and record. French and Harklewood published memoirs about their experiences, and French recorded *O Solo Drumbo* (1998). Gary Lucas has had a successful career as a band leader, solo artist, and collaborator with many rock and jazz luminaries. Eric Drew Feldman played with the Pixies as well as Frank Black, Pere Ubu, and P.J. (Polly) Harvey. Cliff Martinez drummed for the Red Hot Chili Peppers and now is a prominent film music composer. Moris Tepper performed both as a solo and supporting artist. Art Tripp rejoined the Mothers of Invention. More recently, the Magic Band, with French, Lucas, Walley, Williams, and Boston, occasionally re-form to perform. Gary Lucas puts together Captain Beefheart symposiums, where he lectures, shows video footage, and performs.

Critical reception of the band has played an important role in its historical significance. British deejay John Peel, who was based in California in the 1960s, was a champion of the early Magic Band and cited *Trout Mask Replica* as his favorite album. The band also toured England extensively, contributing to its impact on the British punk and post-punk era. Critic Lester Bangs, who continues to be hugely influential in contemporary rock journalism, was a big supporter of the band. *Rolling Stone* currently lists *Trout Mask Replica* as number 66 in their Top 500 Greatest Albums of All Time; in 1987, *Rolling Stone* listed it as number 33 in their Top 100 Best Rock albums issue, calling it “rock’s most visionary album.” The band’s enduring popularity in Great Britain has not only *Trout*

*Mask Replica* but also *Clear Spot* and *Safe as Milk* on listings of best albums of all time. Two tribute albums featuring well-known bands were released: *Fast 'n' Bulbous—A Tribute to Captain Beefheart* (1988) and *Neon Meate Dream of a Octafish* (2003). *Trout Mask Replica* was inducted into the Library of Congress's National Recording Registry in 2010.

Notable covers of Captain Beefheart songs include the White Stripes EP *Party of Special Things to Do* (2000), a three-song tribute covering “Ashtray Heart,” “China Pig,” and “Party of Special Things to Do.” Early covers included the Tubes recording “My Head Is My Only House Unless It Rains” (1977). Magazine recorded “I Love You, You Big Dummy” in 1978, and Coati Mundi and Rubén Blades did their own version of Shiny Beast (*Bat Chain Puller*)’s “Hot Dog Mambo” in 1983. More recently, Joan Osborne covered “(His) Eyes Are a Blue Million Miles,” the Kills included a cover of “Dropout Boogie” on their debut *Black Rooster* EP (2002), and the Black Keys released a cover of “I’m Glad” in 2008.

Captain Beefheart and the Magic Band’s sound often is less apparent in the many bands that cite Beefheart as a major influence. In 1978 Devo’s Mark Mothersbaugh cited *Trout Mask Replica* as inspiring an underground movement of people. Beefheart inspired the guitar playing of the Fall’s Craig Scanlon “just in a liberating way; I wouldn’t dare to try to copy him” (Barnes 2002). Other punk and postpunk performers and bands citing Beefheart include Joe Strummer of the Clash, John Lydon of the Sex Pistols and Public Image Limited, the Gang of Four, the B-52s, and XTC. Industrial music pioneers Genesis P-Orridge of Throbbing Gristle and Psychic TV, and Z’EV, can also be counted as influenced by the band.

Some postpunk bands that clearly incorporated some of Beefheart’s musical innovations directly into their music include the Minutemen, Pere Ubu, the Residents, and the Birthday Party. Tom Waits’s 1983 *Swordfishtrombones* represented a shift in Waits’s work as a direct outcome of his hearing Beefheart. Black Francis of the Pixies references *The Spotlight Kid* as one of the albums he listened to regularly when first writing songs. Guitarist John Frusciante of the Red

Hot Chili Peppers cites the band as a prominent influence on their 1991 album *Blood Sugar Sex Magik*. Other bands referencing the Beefheart sound include the Henry Cow/Art Bears/Slapp Happy group of bands, Half Japanese, Sun City Girls, Thinking Fellers, and U.S. Maple, Deerhoof, and Olivia Tremor Control. P.J. (Polly) Harvey was a fan and became friends with Van Vliet. She taught herself guitar by playing along to Beefheart albums. Pavement’s 1999 song “Ground Beef Heart,” was influenced by *Lick My Decals Off, Baby*. Beck included “Safe as Milk” and “Ella Guru” in his 2009 Planned Obsolescence series of mash-ups. Captain Beefheart and the Magic Band continue to live on, inspiring future generations of rock experimenters as well as new listeners who now have access to the entire body of the band’s recorded work.

Monica Berger

### Selected Discography

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*Strictly Personal*, Blue Thumb, BTS 1, 1968.

*Trout Mask Replica*, Straight, STS 1053, 1969.

*Lick My Decals Off, Baby*, Straight/Reprise, RS 6420, 1970.

*Mirror Man*, Buddah, BDS 5077, recorded 1967, released 1971.

*The Spotlight Kid*, Reprise, MS 2050, 1972.

*Clear Spot*, Reprise, MS 2115, 1972.

*Bluejeans & Moonbeams*, Mercury, SRM-1-1018, 1974.

*Unconditionally Guaranteed*, Mercury, SRM-1-709, 1974.

*Shiny Beast (Bat Chain Puller)*, Warner Brothers, BSK 3256, 1978.

*Doc at the Radar Station*, Virgin, VA 13148, 1980.

*Ice Cream for Crow*, Virgin/Epic, ARE 3827, 1982.

*The Legendary A & M Sessions*, A & M, SP 12510, recorded 1965, released 1984.

*Bat Chain Puller*, Vaulternative Records, VR2012-1, recorded 1976 by Frank Zappa, released 2012.

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### **The Cars (1977–1988, Original Group; The New Cars, 2005–2007; Without Ben Orr, 2011–2012)**

In the late 1970s, rock music had splintered into punk, new wave, and mainstream. The Cars were one of the few bands who transcended these boundaries. Boston-based rock journalist Brett Milano remarked on this when writing the liner notes for a 1995 Cars retrospective album: "During the late '70s and early '80s, most rock fans were split into two camps, with hardly any common ground. Either you listened to 'punk' bands like the Clash, Talking Heads, and the Cars, or you were into 'mainstream' bands like Aerosmith, Queen, and the Cars" (Verna, 58). With the success of their first album in 1978, critics decided that the Cars were more "new wave" than punk, although this may have been a distinction without a difference; as Cleveland rock journalist Anastasia Pantsios famously said, "The term 'new wave' was invented to dignify what was previously called 'punk rock'" ("New Wave," F26).

Still, finding a concise way to describe the Cars was important for journalists and reviewers; despite the fact that the band had gained a local following by playing at a dirty and grungy club called "The Rat," which

was known for punk rock, most critics agreed the band fit better into the "new wave" category, along with bands like Blondie and Talking Heads; some critics also noted the influence of the art rock band Roxy Music (Morse, 17). But while many of the bands with whom the Cars were compared only attracted a cult following, the Cars consistently appealed to listeners of both top 40 and album rock, as well as to viewers of MTV, who loved their music videos. As the producer of a Cars tribute album observed in 2003, the Cars were important to rock music because they were the first to "[make] New Wave safe for the Heartland" (Guarino, 5). In fact, at the height of their popularity, rock critics were calling the Cars "the first new wave supergroup" (Johnson C8). Reviewers said their songs were "infectious" (Oppel, "The Cars' Performance," 10) and praised their "quirky pop hooks, techno-synth sensibility and sparse but punchy guitar leads" (Dickinson, 4E). The Cars' first two albums sold six million copies worldwide, and by the mid-1980s, they had become known as "one of rock's most dependably popular bands" (Pareles, C20). Even after they broke up in 1988, their influence continued to be heard in bands like the Killers, as well as Weezer and the Strokes (Rosen 2011).

The two men who founded what ultimately became the Cars were Ric Ocasek (born Richard Ocasek, March 23, 1949; vocals) and Benjamin "Ben" Orr (born Benjamin Orzechowski, September 8, 1947, died October 3, 2000; bass, vocals). They began working and performing together in Columbus, Ohio, circa 1970. Orr had grown up in Parma, a suburb of Cleveland, and gained local fame when he was still in high school: in 1964, he joined a popular band called the Grasshoppers, who made several records and even got some local airplay (Adams, 51; Scott, 34). Because his last name was so long, he jokingly called himself Benny "Eleven Letters" (St. John, 29) before finally shortening it to Orr sometime in the mid-1970s (Fricke, "The Return," 52). Ocasek was born in Baltimore but moved to the Cleveland area when he was in high school. His father worked for NASA, and from a young age, Ric was fascinated by all things related to engineering and electronics (Fricke, "Workaholic," E8). A self-identified loner, he briefly attended