

Iconic Figures of Popular Music: Captain Beefheart and His Magic Band

Spring 2014

Course no. MUSC 424

Section no. 47228D

Units: 2

Time: Mondays 12:00 – 1:50pm

Room: TMC G156

Course instructor: Bill Biersach

Instructor's office: MUS 316

Instructor's office hours: MW 9 – 10:30 am

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The Premise

Of all the musicians covered in this series, none approaches Captain Beefheart (Don Van Vliet) for nonconformity, originality, and sheer audacity. He is also the only artist who performed here on the USC campus (Bovard Auditorium, March 29, 1973 during the USC Festival of the Arts). Here is what Matt Groening (creator of *The Simpsons* and *Futurama*) has to say about Captain Beefheart's seminal album, *Trout Mask Replica*:

It was a double-record set. It cost seven dollars; it was too much. But Frank Zappa's name was on it so I bought it. I took it home. I put it on. It was the worst dreck I'd ever heard in my life. I said: "They're not even trying! They're just playing randomly." And I thought, "But Frank Zappa produced it. Maybe I should give it another play." So I played it again, and I thought, "It sounds horrible, but they *mean* it to sound this way." And about the third or fourth time it started to grow on me; and the fifth or sixth time, I loved it. And the seventh or eighth time I thought it was the greatest album ever made—and still do."

Jimmy Carl Black, drummer in the original Mothers of Invention, later briefly drummer in the Magic Band, made this observation about the same production:

I remember when they recorded the record, Frank [Zappa] had time booked in Whitney Studio; and in four and a half hours the record was done. And Frank couldn't believe it: "What do you mean, done?" Don said, "The record's *done*, Frank." And it was. They basically went in there and ... did a live album. They had it so together—that much rehearsing. And it was, I think, the best album they ever did. Not the best. *All* the albums that Beefheart makes are the best. I love the man ... Frank's good, but Beefheart's the *real thing*. If you want to get avant-

garde, Man, you're not going to find anybody that's gonna get more avant-garde than Captain Beefheart.

This will not be a class for the musically faint-hearted or formula-driven, but we guarantee it will open musical vistas you never before imagined..

Course Goal

In the course of this semester, we will scrutinize eleven of Captain Beefheart's albums and one he did in conjunction with Frank Zappa. Students will be divided into small groups who will listen to these albums, make judgments as to the strengths and weaknesses of the tracks, and present their findings to the class. Meanwhile, we will be reading and discussion two biographies in hopes of gleaning insights into what made this man tick.

Grades

Grades will be based on the following:

Weekly assignments (written discussion points based on the texts)	20 Points
Oral presentations (album reviews)	20 Points
First midterm exam	20 Points
Second midterm exam	20 Points
Final exam	20 Points

Scores for course grade will be tabulated as follows:

94 - 100	A
90 - 93	A-
87 - 89	B+
84 - 86	B
80 - 83	B-
77 - 79	C+
74 - 76	C
70 - 73	C-
67 - 69	D+
64 - 66	D
60 - 63	D-
0 - 59	F

Texts

Required:

Barnes, Mike. *Captain Beefheart: The Biography*. Omnibus Press, New York, 2000.
ISBN-13: 9.781.78038.076.6

Courier, Kevin. *Trout Mask Replica*. Continuum International Publishing Group, New York, 2007. ISBN-13: 978-0-8264-2781-6

Laptop Computer

It is expected that students in this class will have their own (or access to a) laptop computer for the giving of presentations. If your computer is a Mac, then you are *required* to obtain a VGA adaptor. DO NOT buy third-party products, as they often do not work with out A/V classroom systems. Be sure to buy an Apple VGA adaptor, or be sure that you can borrow one. The lack of a VGA adaptor is not a valid excuse for a missed presentation and will result in the loss of assignment credit.

Students with Disabilities

Any student requesting academic accommodations based on a disability is required to register with Disability Services and Programs (DSP) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from DSP. Please be sure the letter is delivered to me (or to TA) as early in the semester as possible. DSP is located in STU 301 and is open 8:30 a.m.–5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. The phone number for DSP is (213) 740-0776,
http://sait.usc.edu/academicsupport/centerprograms/dsp/home_index.html.

Academic Integrity

USC seeks to maintain an optimal learning environment. General principles of academic honesty include the concept of respect for the intellectual property of others, the expectation that individual work will be submitted unless otherwise allowed by an instructor, and the obligations both to protect one's own academic work from misuse by others as well as to avoid using another's work as one's own. All students are expected to understand and abide by these principles. *Scampus*, the Student Guidebook, contains the Student Conduct Code in Section 11.00, while the recommended sanctions are located in Appendix A: <http://scampus.usc.edu/1100-behavior-violating-university-standards-and-appropriate-sanctions/>. Students will be referred to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs

and Community Standards for further review, should there be any suspicion of academic dishonesty. The Review process can be found at:

<http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/SJACS/>.

Schedule of Album Presentations and Reading Assignments

WEEK	ALBUM	DATE	Courier <i>Trout Mask Replica</i>	Barnes <i>Captain Beefheart</i>
1.	Preliminaries	Jan. 13		
2.	Holiday	Jan. 20		
3.	01 <i>Safe as Milk</i> 1967	Jan. 27	Preface & Chpt. 1	Chpts. 1-3
4.	02 <i>Strictly Personal</i> 1968 03 <i>The Mirror Man Sessions</i> 1968 (released 1991)	Feb. 3	Chpt. 2	Chpt. 4-5
5.	04a <i>Trout Mask Replica</i> 1969	Feb. 10	Chapt. 3-5	Chpt. 6
6.	04b <i>Trout Mask Replica</i> 1969 04c <i>Hot Rats – “Willie the Pimp”</i> 1970	Feb. 17	Chpt. 6 & Epilogue	Chpt. 7
7.	First Midterm Exam	Feb. 24		
8.	05 <i>Lick My Decals Off, Baby</i> 1970	Mar. 3		Chpt. 8
9.	06 <i>The Spotlight Kid/Clear Spot</i> 1972	Mar. 10		Chpt. 9-10
10.	Spring Break	Mar. 17		
11.	07 <i>Unconditionally Guaranteed</i> 1974 08 <i>Bongo Fury</i> 1974	Mar. 24		Chpt. 11-12
12.	Second Midterm Exam	Mar. 31		
13.	09 <i>Shiny Beast (Bat Chain Puller)</i> 1978	Apr. 7		Chpt. 13-14

14.	10 Doc at the Radar Station 1980	April 14	Chpt. 15
15.	11 <i>An Ashtray Heart</i> 1981 (released 2011)	Apr. 21	-----
16.	13 <i>Ice Cream for Crow</i> 1988	Apr. 28	Chpt. 16
17	Final Exam	Friday, May 10 Noon	(Chpt. 17 & 18)

Bibliography

Barnes, Mike. *Captain Beefheart: The Biography*. Omnibus Press, New York, 2000.
ISBN-13: 9.781.78038.076.6

Brackett, David. *The Pop, Rock, and Soul Reader: Histories and Debates*. Oxford University Press, New York. 2009.

Butcher, Pauline. *Freak Out! My Life with Frank Zappa*. Plexus Publishing, Louisville KY. 2011

Charlton, Katherine. *Rock Music Styles: A History*. Sixth edition. McGraw Hill, New York. 2011.

Courier, Kevin. *Dangerous Kitchen: The Subversive World of Frank Zappa*. ECW Press, Toronto. 2002.

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Corvach, John, and Flory, Andrew. *What's That Sound? An Introduction to Rock and It's History*. Third edition. Norton and Company, New York. 2012

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Garfalo, Reebee. *Rockin' Out: Popular Music in the USA*. Fourth edition. Prentiss Hall, Upper Saddle River, NJ. 2008.

Gitlin, Todd. *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*. Bantam Books, New York. 1987.

- Kubernik, Harvey. *Canyon of Dreams: The Magic and the Music of Laurel Canyon*. Sterling Publishing Co., Inc., New York, 2009.
- Larson, Thomas E. *History of Rock & Roll*. Dubuque; Kendall Hunt, 2012.
- Miles, Barry. *Zappa: A Biography*. Grove Press, New York. 2004.
- Pattison, Robert. *The Triumph of Vulgarity: Rock Music in the Mirror of Romanticism*. Oxford University Press, New York. 1981.
- Schloss, Joseph G., Starr, Larry; and Waterman, Christopher. *Rock Music, Culture, and Business*. Oxford University Press, New York. 2012.
- Neil Slaven. *Electric Don Quixote: The Definitive Story of Frank Zappa*. Omnibus Press, London. 2003
- Taruskin, Richard, and Gibbs, Christopher H. *The Oxford History of Western Music*. College edition. Oxford University Press, New York. 2013.
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