# BEFHEART: HEEYES OF MAGIC

JOHN "DRUMBO" FRENCH

### John French's Drum Inspiration

So, here's the story of how I started playing drums. I had a platonic girl friend by the name of Cindy Anderson. Cindy's mom was a single parent. I hung out at their house a lot during the summer before I was a freshman in High School. One night, Mrs. Anderson invited me to go to the drive-in movie with them.

We went to see Kid Galahad, an Elvis Presley movie. In the beginning of the movie, Elvis was sitting on the back of a big 18-wheeler cruising down the road.

He was singing,

"I'm the King - of the whole wide world," and he was keeping time by patting his open hands on his legs.

This seemed to really impress Cindy Anderson who thought it was "boss," (a contemporary colloquialism like "awesome," or "rad" or "cool") and since I also wished to impress her, I started doing this, hoping that girls would instantly be at my command. (Jay Leno once mentioned that he thought a Playboy swizzle stick would do the same for him).

Although it didn't quite work for me as well as it had for Elvis, it did get me in the habit of keeping time to music that I listened to. I started listening to the different drums and what role each played in timekeeping



PAGE 90 CHAPTER FIVE; Surf's Up, Surf's Down

Don Up From Cucamonga

The impression that I later had when I joined was that Don had been spending most of his free time at Studio Z until the point in time when Frank was arrested. It was then that he decided to start (or join) the band. This does not take into consideration the fact that the band was indeed rehearsing with P.G. at the same time Zappa and Mortensen were still living and working at Studio Z.



Jerry Handley: So we had two guitars, bass, drums and then we didn't have a singer.

That's when Don came up to Lancaster having played with or recorded (with Zappa), I guess, I don't know what.

They were experimenting with movies and music down in Frank Zappa's studio in Cucamonga.

During this time, Mark Thompson and I formed the "walking wounded" society.

We thought it was a unique situation to have broken relationships and therefore we were its only two official members. The usual arrangement was to get his older sister to illicitly buy us a case of beer. We would ride in his parents"59 Ford, wearing the weirdest clothes imaginable in order to attract attention, all the while becoming more intoxicated and lamenting our lot in life. We kept the leftover beer in my room and would have a couple of warm ones in the morning before school.





One night, as we sat in the parking lot of Orange Julius, the most recent local hangout, Doug Moon approached me. After the usual small talk, I found that he had just joined this band called Captain Beefheart And His Magic Band. I thought it was a stupid name but was able to suppress my laughter because I had already heard the name, thus taking the punch from the punchline.

"So he was a member?" I thought, "Well, they would never amount to anything with a name like that."

PAGE 71 CHAPTER FOUR; Desert Convergences

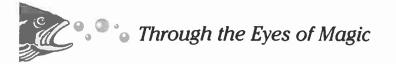
### Teenage Fair Audition /1965

We auditioned at the Ivar Theatre, which I believe was on Melrose Avenue in Hollywood. The same day we auditioned, another desert band auditioned: Captain Beefheart And His Magic Band.



I didn't actually get to hear them, as we had to leave quickly afterwards because of the number of competing bands in the crowded theatre. It was like a cattle call. I did catch a glimpse of them setting up.

Don Aldridge: So Captain Beefheart was all the rage. He was pretty new they were just breaking out around here playing the Elks club, playing various... John French: The animal houses...



Aldridge had spied an ad on Roehr's bulletin board, which read:



# "1956 Dodge, straight eight, real ginchy, call..." and it gave the number.



Don Aldridge: I said, "What's 'ginchy' Cliff, what is it?"
"Oh," he said, "you know who put that there,
Captain Beefheart - Don Vliet."

PAGE 104 CHAPTER FIVE; Surf's Up, Surf's Down

### Vic Mortensen

The drummer walked out and my mouth dropped open. It was the tall guy from the Salvation Army Store. His name was Vic Mortensen. He looked to be 6'4"or more. His hair was even longer than I remembered it. Although I'd seen the band briefly setting up at the Ivar Theatre in Hollywood I still hadn't connected Vic with the guy I had seen.

As the band set up, Don spoke to Alex about future plans and I could overhear.

"After we win the Teenage Fair," was his first line. That's all I remember hearing for sure.

After rehearsal, they asked me to play. I was hesitant at first. These guys were a lot older than me and aside from Doug, I didn't really know any of them. Doug persuaded me to play. Don picked up some maracas and Jerry had a tambourine. They made me feel completely relaxed and assured me it would just be fun. I played as hard as I could and played all my solo licks that I had spent hours working out over the last two years.

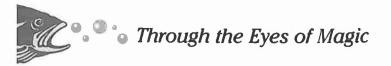
I didn't look at anyone until I was done, and I probably played ten minutes.



When I did finish and look up, perspiring, Vic was out of the room, and so was Alex. Don had a big smile on his face. "You scared the shit out of Vic, man," he said grinning. Page 106 CHAPTER SIX Precognition

The Teenage Fair

This particular Teenage Fair was probably held during the Spring break of 1965. Almost every band featured played their own version of Gloria by Them at least once. The place was packed and there was every conceivable type of group. The Standels (who were the Standel amplifier company's namesake group) played outside on – you guessed it – Standel amplifiers. We knew some girls whose parents had rented them a room in a hotel right next to the Palladium, so we went there to rest.



An interesting quote from Mike Barnes referring to the Teenage Fair at the Hollywood Palladium:

"Van Vliet was keen to keep on top of what was going on in the local scene - spotting a sixteen-year-old drummer, John French, playing in a booth with The Maltesemen, he went over and made contact."

Obviously, this is a small error, but as I mentioned before, I had already previously made contact with Don on several occasions, and jammed at a Magic Band rehearsal. I don't recall even seeing Don at the Teenage Fair although he was obviously there.

We heard that just as Vliet had predicted, Captain Beefheart And His Magic Band won the competition at the Teenage Fair at the Hollywood Palladium. I have been told since then by some band members that there actually was no competition. Who knows? Page 108 CHAPTER SIX Precognition



# Diddy Wah Diddy Shortly after joining the band, the subject of

Shortly after joining the band, the subject of the sound on Diddy Wah Diddy came up in conversation between Don and I. I was commenting on the power of the song, which was mostly due to the bass sound that had been achieved in the studio. Van Vliet took credit for that sound, saying something to the effect: (paraphrased) "I told Gates to do that to the bass, they argued with me, but I made him do

Snouffer, however, disagrees with this:

John French: So should credit go to David Gates for the overall big sound of Diddy Wah Diddy?

Alex Snouffer: Let's just put it this way, it was Dave's baby. You know what I mean?

All the way through. I mean, he was telling Don, "I want high notes on the harp here,"

'cause there's this one little section in the song where he just stays way up there in the upper registers. I don't care how much Don wanted to take credit for it, Gates told him to play it that way. No, it was Gates' baby, one through ten. It worked.

Page 150 CHAPTER EIGHT; Beefheart Rising

### Disorganized Lyrics

I persuaded Don to be seated at the dining room table. It was one of those Faux-Marble genuine Formica masterpieces with the chrome legs. I would pull out some scrap of matchbook or old napkin, or paper sack. He would usually be talking to someone, so I would have to get his attention each time. Then he would think about it and say, "Yeah, I'm sure it's Abba Zaba" etc. This went on for a couple of hours. I then had half a dozen or so stacks of weird little bits of lyrics on the table.





This was the hard part. I then had to get Don, with his short attention span, to tell me what came next - to concentrate long enough to put all the lyrics to a single song in order. Then, I had to hand-write the lyrics on a sheet of paper with a ballpoint pen. If he made a mistake, I had to start all over, as he seemed easily confused if something wasn't written correctly.

Jerry Handley: Oh, yeah, I always felt sorry for you trying to keep him organized. John French: Yeah, I was the kid that got stuck with the stupid details like that. He was very trusting of me at the time. I was kind of naïve, so I believed and accepted everything he said as absolute truth. So, he was really trusting of me and put me in charge of putting the lyrics together. Also, he didn't know how to sing the words to the music that he had already completely arranged, so Richard Perry helped him with that. JH: If Richard was involved, then that's why it came out to be one of the most organized albums he did.

Page 265 CHAPTER THIRTEEN; Buddah's Tainted Milk



### **Vocal Overdub Babysitter**

I was 18 to Don's 26 but I felt like I was Don's babysitter through the vocal recordings. He had to use earphones, and I perceive his trauma from his headphone experience with Botnick added an edge of stress and distraction. He didn't seem in good voice on some cuts, for instance I'm Glad, of which I'd heard a previous demo tape seemed comparatively flat and dry.

Don was still going through a great deal of anxiety. I stood out in the studio with him, occasionally feeling his pulse upon request, and telling him he was going to be all right. At times, he would snap out of it and act like I was in the way, and then he would revert right back to the old fake-heart-attack syndrome.

One time he definitely sprang to life was when he sang Electricity. I was in the control room during part of the vocal for that one, and Hank Cicalo gasped when the microphone distorted. He grabbed his head with both hands and said, "Oh no! My microphone" It was an amazing moment. I hate to pop the legend of Beefheart destroying the microphone, but we used the same mike for the remainder of the session. I was curious and went out with Hank as he inspected it. It was a Telefunken condenser mike, which had a small vacuum tube inside. The tube had temporarily distorted, but the mike was fine and was used for the rest of the vocals. Apparently, Don was standing farther back when he sang in normal voice, so when he used the pinched trachea voice combined with moving closer to the microphone, it merely distorted.

### Performance At The Monterey Pop Festival

Surprisingly, We made it through the first number with little or no mishap. The kick drum was sliding around, but I would skip a beat, slide it back, and resume. Maybe That'll Teach Ya was a good theme for me. This morning's experience should have definitely taught me never to trust Krasnow's judgement concerning musical equipment, or at least drum equipment. I couldn't concentrate on anything musical so was almost impossible for me to put any feeling into the improvisation. One thing about Don was that he seldom cued an ending to an improvisation and so things seemed to go on dangerously long. The song seemed to go on forever and I finally just stopped playing out of frustration.

The next number was Electricity. I adjusted the drums the best I could. I looked down at my hand and discovered I had gashed my knuckles on a drum rim that had bounced out of position. The gash was dripping blood all over my white suit. I looked up, counted off the song, and off we went. Don sang the intro with his usual power. When he got to the end of his first "electricity", he just turned around, straightened his tie, and calmly walked off stage. When I say off, I mean "off." He walked off the back edge of the stage and fell on top of Krasnow, who was attempting to catch him. I wasn't surprised at all at Don walking off the stage. It just seemed right in step with the heart attack syndrome he was going through.

John French: Don, started to sing, and turned around and walked off the stage. He said he looked down at a girl right after he sang Electricity and she turned into a fish and bubbles came out of her mouth. So he walked off the stage.

Alex Snouffer: That's HER problem, man.

Page 277 CHAPTER FOURTEEN Monterey Meltdown

# On The Beach, Saturday January 27, 1968, Cannes, France

After the press conference, we were driven by Bob in a rented car west for a short way. There was a stage set up on the beach with the ocean in the background. Krasnow explained this as a television thing that would give us great exposure in France. It was a bit windy, but for the most part beautiful. We were actually playing rather than lip-syncing, which was unusual for a filmed appearance. The sound was bad on the beach, but a crowd had gathered. This is the place where the well-known picture was taken which was later used for the French release of Safe As Milk. I remember playing Sure 'Nuff 'N Yes I Do and Electricity. It was a great time in spite of the hunger.

Somehow, Jeff and I wound up alone at the condo that night. We were so weak from not having a good meal that we became giddy. It was the first time in a long time that Jeff had really opened up. We discussed how terrible this situation was. The tour had been only halfway planned. Germany had been a disaster, thanks to Bob and the lousy equipment. England had begun with an unfortunate mishap, thanks to Bob and Peter. Now, we were starving, thanks to Bob. We searched the place over and found nothing to eat.

Page 355 CHAPTER EIGHTEEN Strictly Public



In The Hotel Nightclub
We were escorted out to the stage area. The equipment we were supposed to use was the house band's equipment. It was a Latin jazz band if I remember correctly. All the drums were tuned really tight and high-pitched, exactly the opposite to the way I tuned drums. The PA was tiny, and so were the amps. This was definitely bossa-nova time, with a crowd to match. We all looked at each other, shrugged, and started performing the best we could under the circumstances. We were supposed to do two or three numbers, but Bob stopped us cold after about two minutes. It was obvious that we were not going over too well, and the equipment made us sound tinny. Bob made some kind of public apology, which, of course, very few of the French-speaking crowd understood.

We walked into the kitchen, just off the stage area, where Bob told us that McCartney was in the audience and wanted to meet us. That we should leave our equipment and go follow him. We walked back out across the dance floor. Arthur Brown was just starting his set as we walked across the dance floor in front of him to the tables. "Ladies and Gentleman, I give you dignity incarnate: Captain Beefheart And His Magic Band!" Alex took this as some kind of insult and went back to get a knife out of his guitar case so he could carve up Mr. Brown. Krasnow talked him out of it. It seemed to me that Brown was sincere, and Don seemed to think so also. I later heard that Brown was a great admirer of Don's music.

We sat and listened as Arthur Brown sang and danced around like a madman to the accompaniment of solo drums. The crowd was laughing, and I didn't understand why. A Frenchman (I think this was the same guy who had said, "What are you doing, writing letters to everyone) leaned over and said to me, "He's singing that DeGaulle (prime minister of France at the time) should go fuck himself."

Page 356 CHAPTER EIGHTEEN; Strictly Public

### John Peel

Though most of the time we were crowded into the Zodiac with our driver, we (Don and I) were at least once transported by John Peel and his lovely wife. He rented a tiny car in which we rode in the rear. I recall stopping somewhere for a bite and Don saying that John's wife was interested in hearing about my observations



of Don's psychic abilities. So, I spent a time with her in the back speaking of this. At one point, Don asked Peel to pull over, as he wanted to hug a tree. I think Don probably had to pee and didn't want to say anything in front of Mrs. Peel. It seems to me that the place we played that night was actually a house turned into a club. It sat on the corner of two streets. The walls had been opened up so that more people could see the stage. This was a very curious venue indeed.

John French to Jerry Handley: That's where we met John Mayall, and Eric Clapton was there, except I didn't know much about who Eric Clapton was, unfortunately, back in those days. It was in a little house and someone had cut windows in the walls and it was like a psychedelic clubhouse. That's where we played. He was in one of the rooms and we were in the other one.

### P-K-Ro-P

Occasionally, Don would play the drums. I was outside one day and heard him playing and calling me. "John!" he kept saying in an almost pleading tone. I came in and Don was sitting at my drum kit. He was wearing his favorite indoor clothing that consisted of a black faux-Oriental robe with red piping that reached halfway down his thighs over his pajamas. He was playing a really simple, but infectious drumbeat and didn't want to lose it.

"Write this down, quick!" He said, in rhythm with the beat. I quickly got the music book and jotted it down in about 30 seconds, as it was simple. "Did you get it yet?" he asked. I looked to check it over and an impish thought crept into my mind: Don was completely in my control. So, I looked at the book, puzzled, and said, "No, this is really hard to write." I walked around the drums for a good five minutes, staring at his feet, looking at the way he held the sticks, and appearing to be really deep in concentration, occasionally holding the book up and pretending to scribble.

I was having a good laugh. This was one of those priceless moments, seeing Don ensnared within his own creative process and actually having to completely concentrate and be totally vulnerable. I finally told him "I think I have it, so you can stop." He shouted over the drums "Are you sure? I don't want to lose this, man. I can't lose this. It's too good." I finally convinced him I had it and he stopped playing and stood up.

"Oh, man, I hope you got that - see if you can play it" he commanded. I sat down and played it exactly as he had. It was a very simple beat, but, as I said, very infectious. That was the beginning of a song called Ant-Man-Bee. He called it P-K-Ro-P because of the way the last four beats sounded.

Page 431 CHAPTER 24; Space In Scarcity



# Wasting Time It's hard to say how much time we

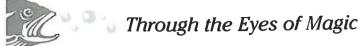
It's hard to say how much time we wasted during the so-called "talks" that Don would instigate and then preside over, but it was a lot.

A lot of time getting mentally and physically abused when the time could have been put to much better use practicing and developing the compositions even more, fine-tuning them and putting more energy forward to make the finished product more focused than it was.

John French: Let me ask you this. How long do you think it would have taken to learn Trout Mask if we would have had a normal kind of band situation, without Don's paranoia?

Bill Harkleroad: You know the nooks and crannies of that so much more than I do, John, but – I would say if it took nine months for us to go through that process – I would say a month.

JF: Really? I would say three, just to be safe, because it was new stuff, I mean we were breaking totally new ground.



Influences / Raw Talent

John French: To be absolutely fair, I do remember him "pulling things out" of all of us.

Bill Harkleroad: Oh, yeah!

JF: Saying, "Hey, that's not the way that should be played. It should be played like this." Getting us to move a different way or think about it a different way. All of a sudden it would start "sounding," coming to life.

BH: Oh, absolutely. He got us in motion and used us as the physical tools of his art to sculpt things after the fact. I don't think he had specific intentions in the beginning of playing those piano parts. I think he thought he had a rhythmic feel and didn't know enough melodically to create anything. This is just my hit - you were there - but that he had no specific intention, he was just an artist, banging out the fucking piano stuff, and after we got the parts together, we became the clay he moulded into certain parts, and I really learned a lot about guitar playing in that process.

### The "Talks"

The "talks" as Don referred to them, were cleverly started on a low scale by Don with a few seemingly reasonable questions. Then, they would usually slowly evolve into a more hostile interrogation-type atmosphere. Don, being a writer and a poet, was very good at manipulating words and conversation. In the beginning of these talks, he would ask a few questions, and as the person became more uncomfortable, knowing what would come next, he would include another member in the interrogation and get them to focus



Page 385 CHAPTER 21; Purging The Magic

Soon, everyone in the room would be pawns in Don's game. The "target" would be isolated and surrounded by the others, who stood by while Don as overseer verbally belittled the "band-member-of-the day" into some conversational trap.

Page 416 CHAPTER 23; Artists Draw Blood

## Sex, Drugs And The Environment

In a sense, I felt that Don's music was more "pure" than Frank's music. It said things about the fragility of our environment and the state of the world.

Trout Mask Replica was bigger than Don.

I think part of the reason it's lyrics are so astounding is that Don would often write in front of a captive audience (us), so he would get instant feedback from our reactions to each line. Dachau Blues one of my favorites, was written in this manner.

It was also written on an occasion when there was no turmoil in the room, and so I have happy memories of it as I do, Well and Orange Claw Hammer. I also like the things those compositions are saying, as well as others, but more on that later in the track notes.

Page 442 CHAPTER 24; Space In Scarcity

### Frank Visits

I could tell by Frank's conversation at the Log Cabin as we listened to music that he was exceedingly knowledgeable and I knew also that he was self-trained.

Jim Sherwood: I was amazed by the man. I think he's probably one of the best musicians I've ever heard. I've heard him play blues. I've heard him play jazz. I've heard him do the classical stuff. It's all self-taught. He taught himself on guitar, how to do that. He taught himself to read music. He was writing symphonies. It just blew me away. His musical ability, as far as his ear goes, it was incredible.

Page 398 CHAPTER 22; Cornucopia Of Chaos



### Through the Eyes of Magic

### Early Drawings By Don

During the "talks," Don started constantly drawing. He had started buying cheap pads of plain paper and drawing quick hard-edged sketches. His most manic output would be during our talks, where he might draw 50 - 100 drawings. It wasn't the output that bothered me, but was the subject matter. All of these drawings depicted the same basic feeling. They were drawings of monsters devouring each other - terrible views of destruction and violence depicted in a simple cartoon-like form. It appeared comical to the casual observer, but I felt as though these drawings were a direct manifestation of Don's mental state, a state much more seriously close to being dangerous than any outsider would perceive. We were living these drawings.

### Ye Olde Roller Rink

Page 430 CHAPTER 24; Space In Scarcity

I wanted to rehearse the day before the first concert. No one else in the band desired to and so I said, "Well, fine, but we need it. If the show sucks, it doesn't really matter to me anyway. After all, I'm just a substitute." Everybody got really quiet for a minute and then they all agreed to rehearse. It was a good thing we did, because there were several misconceptions about songs that were cleared up at this rehearsal. Denny later confided to me that my little "speech" had made he and the rest feel a little guilty.

I was a little surprised at this, probably because I found myself staying as aloof as possible so as to not get sucked in to the old patterns.

Page 678 CHAPTER 37; The Woes Of Pearblossom

### 6. ELECTRICITY

At 2:42 is the point of the legendary "mike breaking" where Don's voice supposedly "broke" the microphone. I was in the control room during this take, looking through the window. Don was being recorded on a Telefunken microphone, which I believe has a vacuum tube inside, so it was probably on the level of a condenser microphone (I'm not technically equipped to know if the terminology is correct, but I know the theory), really a VERY sensitive mike. Don was back away from the mike softly singing "seeking electricity," and Hank Cicalo, the engineer, had the mike turned up a bit to catch it. If I am not mistaken, these mikes have "phantom power," which means they have a small bit of electrical current sent to them to feed the tube, part of which causes them to be so sensitive.

Suddenly, Don moved extremely close to the mike and simultaneously sang in his pinched-trachea voice, which is very thin and mid-rangey and the tube in the microphone was overdriven for an instant. Hank went, "Oh my God my microphone!

After the take, he went running into the

ne, just overdriven for a ar amplifier, and causes momenhe legend that Don's voice could ten used this technique as a th. Singing softly into a mic and massive distortion, which could



tracking room to check out the mike. It apparently was fine, just overdriven for a moment. This is similar to the effect of fuzztone on a guitar amplifier, and causes momentary distortion. However, from this small instance grew the legend that Don's voice could "break" microphones. Don later confided in me that he often used this technique as a trick to blow-out speakers, to create the same type of myth. Singing softly into a mic and then suddenly moving close and singing loud will create massive distortion, which could blow out speakers.

Page 777; TMR Track Notes



**Herb Says Tour** 

The shows at the Roxy were fairly powerful. I felt like the band had done a great job musically and also been quite entertaining. Herb Cohen went to the Saturday night show, and apparently, he thought so also. As I was walking outside, Herb walked up next to me and asked if we could talk.

He told me that there were plans underway for a major European tour, which would begin sometime in October.

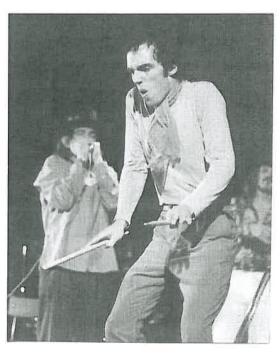
I had been surprised a little by the Roxy bookings, but this really excited me. I hadn't been to Europe (with the exception of Knebworth) since 1968 - six years previous. I felt like the band was still rough, but had the potential to do a great tour.

Don was in fine form and seemed to have lost his lyric amnesia. I had no hesitancy in saying yes as long as the money was right. Herb said that my services would be needed as musical director and that I would report to him on the progress of the band etc.

Then, he announced that upon returning, there would be an album recorded.

Don already knew about this and was gathering material. My head was swimming for a minute, but I agreed to do the album project also.

Page 623 CHAPTER 34; The Second Chance Kid



### **FZ** Tour

We played four dates on a short tour with Frank Zappa between Christmas and New Year, ending up at the Inglewood Forum. My local friends all thought I was really "big-time" because I was playing the Forum. For me, at this point in time, it was like playing in the boy's gym during an assembly, and the acoustics were about as bad.

### Paramount Theater, Oakland, California - December 26, 1975

We were staying in San Francisco at a Japanese style hotel near Winterland. They drove us by limousine to the concert location. It was my first time on the bay bridge. There was a steady, "bump, bump" as the tires drove across the seams in the roadway.

I remember Henry Kaiser showed up at this show and brought a chart with the main chords to *One Red Rose That I Mean*.

Opening my clothes bag, I discovered that I hadn't packed my stage clothes and had to wear an old pair of overalls that I wore to protect my clothes when setting up. So, I did my tap dance dressed like a car mechanic that evening.

Page 651 CHAPTER 36; The Tailor Doesn't Measure Up

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