Beefheart and his clear spot
by Moray Dewhurst

Clear Spot - Captain Beefheart and the Magic Band (Reprise)

There are few contemporary musical artists who can write, arrange, and perform (on record and on stage) their own music to an equally high standard, as well as being creatively original. Captain Beefheart is one of the very best of these few. His new album, Clear Spot, should serve both to underline that fact, and to make him more accessible to the public.

In the past, Beefheart's commercial success has been limited by several things. Frequent personnel changes have required time to train new members to the standards demanded of the Magic Band. Producers and re-mix engineers (without Strictly Personal) have tried to alter the unique Beefheart sound, and have ended up making a mess of it. However, the release of The Spotlight Kid and the involvement of Ted Templeman in the production aspects, helped correct this difficulty, and introduced his music to a lot of people who had never heard of him, before Clear Spot, together with the increasing sophistication of record-buyers, should continue this trend.

Yet another personnel change has been made in the Magic Band, for this album. Winged Bel Fingertong has spread his wings and gone, leaving Zoot Horn Rollo with lead, glass-finger, and steel-appendage guitars. Rockette Morton moves from bass to rhythm guitar (though since the album was recorded he has been using a double-neck six-string/horn) and his place is taken by new member Orejon. Ed Marimba continues to play drums and all manner of percussion, while Don Van Vliet, Captain Beefheart himself, plays mouthhorn, horns and performs the vocals.

The Magic Band is even better than before (especially Zoot Horn Rollo), though Orejon's rendering of the bass lines is not as full and rich as Rockette Morton's was. However, this is a minor fault which will probably improve with time. Otherwise the Magic Band is truly phenomenal. They are the longest-standing members of the band, and their experience is very much in evidence.

The Magic Band are so good that one almost tends to overlook the man who first started them (which in itself says how good they are), and who will always be the focus of the band. Don Van Vliet probably has the most remarkable vocal voice anywhere today. His vocal range stretches from notes that make people run far to find a clear spot, but thanks to him we don't - just as far as the nearest record store.

...and it is relatively "normal" mouthhorn work, which works out well-balanced, with a brief but effective guitar solo. The title tells what it's about: Nowadayz a woman has to heel off and hit a man To make him know she's there.