

Interview: Eric Drew Feldman

You may not recognise the name, but chances are that Eric Drew Feldman has played on some of your favourite albums.

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The musical polymath and studio wizard tells Bearded about his latest project **KNIFE & FORK**, and a career that's seen him collaborate with Captain Beefheart, PJ Harvey and Frank Black

Back in the 1970s, **Eric Drew Feldman** was studying at UCLA with electronic music pioneer Dr Philip Springer, when the legendary Captain Beefheart asked him to join his band. Not a bad way to start a career...

Ever since then, Eric has spent much of his life in the studio or on stage - whether it's on bass or keyboards, playing in his own bands or playing and producing for others. He's a busy man but, courteous and unflappable, he spares **Bearded** an hour of his time to fill us in on what he's up to right now – and talks us through a career that's seen him work with some of alt-rock's biggest names.

Right now he's fresh from a punk rock nostalgia trip, rehearsing and playing with newly reformed all-female San Francisco band Frightwig: "I felt quite honoured. I had to dust off some chops I never use any more!" He's also been recording a "petty loopy, unhinged Christmas record" by super-sized cult "symphonic rock" band The Polyphonic Spree, whose frontman Tim DeLaughter is an old friend of Eric's. Eric produced *Together We're Heavy*, the band's follow-up to the band's much-hyped 2002 debut album: "We all felt pretty good about it, but it was right at the time when record companies were starting to disintegrate. It was another record that I feel like I made, that didn't make a lot of impact. We enjoyed it though..."

He's also just released his second album as part of the duo **KNIFE & FORK**, a collaboration with his good friend, singer and lyricist Laurie Hall. *The Higher You Get the Rarer the Vegetation* (a Salvador Dali quote, fact fans!) mixes atmospheric textures with a more direct approach than on the pair's debut

album. Weimar-style cabaret, a spooky take on garage rock and bags of attitude make it a rewarding and many-layered listen.

It's taken the duo eight years to make a follow-up – though Eric argues that the band has always remained a going concern: “We've slowly worked on it but we've been doing other projects and we kept getting sidetracked... Everybody has schedules, and nowadays getting together takes a lot of negotiation... We actually started recording this album right after the other one. But a couple of years ensued, and about a year ago we took it up again. Whenever we do get together, though, we work quite quickly!”

Eric's ideas on production have changed between the two records, he admits: “As the years roll by, I seem to like things that are not necessarily psychologically simpler but sonically simpler. Nowadays, it's all about the song, and not so much about the string arrangement. When we're performing the album, we do it as a duo so it's really stark.”

The band hasn't got any British gigs lined up as yet, but he'd love to come over here and play to us Brits: “I'm just trying to work out how to do that. We've really liked playing together and it would be good to do – if we could find some people to help organise it...” Any promoters out there who fancy bringing the band to us discerning Brits, form an orderly queue!

Eric says that while the new record may have been unconsciously influenced by artists, listeners “wouldn't necessarily think of these people, from hearing the record. I don't try to duplicate anything. Some of the people I've respected, I've worked with – whether it be Mr Van Vliet [Captain Beefheart], Polly [Harvey] or Charles [Pixies frontman Frank Black/Black Francis' real name]... they're always in my thoughts. With some of them, I try and push the influences away harder, because I think people are gonna say I sound like them. People pick up on the Polly [PJ Harvey] thing a little bit, but that's OK as at some times and in some places I've been part of [creating] that [sound] anyway.”

Eric admits that, as a fellow musician, hearing something really good inspires mixed emotions: “With people like Howe Gelb [Giant Sand], Jason Lytle [Granddaddy], the late Mark Linkous [Sparklehorse]... when I first hear them, I know they're good because I feel jealous of them!”

He has been surrounded by musicians for most of his life. Eric grew up in the perfect neighbourhood for a music-crazy kid, and knew Captain Beefheart for years before he joined the Magic Band for the musical maverick's final three albums (1978's *Shiny Beast (Bat Chain Puller)*, 1980's *Doc at the Radar Station* and 1982's *Ice Cream For Crow*). Eric explains: “We grew up in the same town and I would go over to his house on a bicycle when I was 13 years old. We'd talk. Then he moved, and a good friend of mine, Jeff Moris Teper ended up living next door to him. That reintroduced us. Even a couple of years before that happened, if I went to one of his shows, at 16 years old, he'd acknowledge me and say hi. I was like, ‘wow’.”

Beefheart didn't operate like most people – either as a musician, or in his everyday life – and Eric's audition for the Magic Band was typically eccentric: “I played for about a minute and he was like: ‘yeah, that's OK, do you wanna play?’ He just uses an instinct, he has to see somebody that he thinks he can sculpt in the image that he wants. He needs willing participants... He pretty much breaks down anything that sounds like you know what you're doing.”

Beefheart's former bandmates have told horror stories of the treatment they suffered at his hands – including being kept virtually imprisoned while they created the band's avant-garde masterpiece *Trout*

Mask Replica. Luckily for Eric, his experience was more benign – and from his tone of voice, you can tell that Beefheart (who died aged 69 in 2010) still means a lot to him today.

He admits: “I read all these complaints [the stories of old Magic Band members] and I figure that a lot of it is accurate. There were times like with anybody that you hang around with - they can be kind of a jerk. But it was usually impersonal, like ‘let me make this person get in a certain kind of mood so that the music will sound a certain way’. It was always based around the music. Some of the previous incarnations [of the band] would talk about stuff and say it got really unpleasant. But I never really experienced that. It was a different time, they were younger, they lived in a house together. I was definitely happy to leave and go to my own house after working with him all day!”

After recording three albums with Beefheart, Eric was forced to fend for himself when the great man retired from music, to become a highly successful expressionist painter. He confesses: “At the time, I was disappointed because I was about 25 and ambitious. When I was in the band we were playing 300- to 400-seat clubs... but after *Doc at the Radar Station* came out, he was being offered much more prestigious shows – like Carnegie Hall. But he was done with it and wasn’t interested. It seemed crazy to me at the time. But in retrospect he was already starting to suffer from some of the early effects of his illness [Beefheart suffered from multiple sclerosis in his final years].”

With the benefit of hindsight, Eric sees his mentor’s difficult behaviour in a different light: “I used to say that ‘he’s really out there, he has a hard time relating to the world’, which I still think is true, but his illness was contributing to it at that point. It was difficult for him to walk, get off the stage without falling down... I thought he was an old guy but I realise now he was only about 39, 40 years old”

Despite their difference in ages, the pair stayed in touch after Beefheart had moved out to the desert to paint: “We shared two or three phone calls a year. It was always very pleasant... He used to talk to my father. He really liked my dad! The conversations were very peculiar – but somehow he decided my dad was someone he could really relate to.” Eric feels honoured to have worked with Beefheart, a man he clearly misses deeply to this day – and the kudos it gave him meant that he was never short of work offers. He muses: “I’ve been pretty fortunate... [although] after starting off with that sort of pedigree, it took a while for me to figure out what I should be doing. But I seemed to just roll into the right things...”

What does he feel is the secret of his career longevity – how come he’s still in demand after all these years? “It beats me! What I think I’m doing is just reacting to the environment I’m involved in, very spontaneously...” A calm, unflappable temperament also comes in handy in the studio, he admits: “People always think ‘you’re so chilled’, but I don’t know if I really am! I feel like my role is to not have much of my own ego in it. But I’m not as good at making things sound ‘normal’. If someone wants a really good Elton John piano sound, I’m not the man to go to – though I can do it and I think he’s great, actually! But it’s not where my brain, or my fingers, naturally go.”

After Beefheart, the jobs kept rolling in. Eric worked with cult heroes The Residents and Pere Ubu, and backstage at a gig with the latter, he met the impressively monikered Charles Michael Kittridge Thompson IV – aka Pixies frontman Black Francis/Frank Black. His band blew Eric away: “I thought they were great... I started looking at songs in a whole different way. A few months later, Charles rang and said ‘I’m in town, do you wanna come to the show?’ I said I’d love to, and he said ‘what time do you want me to pick you up?’ I was flabbergasted... I obviously could have made it over there on my own, and it made me think ‘this guy’s kinda special’.” Not exactly typical rock star behaviour, that’s for sure.

The pair hit it off straight away: “We discovered we both knew [Pixies producer] Gil Norton. Then he

asked me if I'd like to produce his solo record with them. Then he asked me to play with the band [The Pixies]! I played a bit on their last record [*Trompe le Monde*] and tour. They did some US shows where Pere Ubu supported, so I played both sets! Then we did this tour which was pretty miserable, opening for U2."

Unfortunately for Eric, he got involved with the band just as they were falling apart, and good vibes were conspicuous by their absence: "When I played on their last record they were hardly ever in the same room! On day one, when I turned up to play some live shows, nobody seemed to know who I was. The crew too... I felt like a party-crasher. They're a peculiar lot."

Luckily, getting along with their frontman was a lot more straightforward. "I don't think it was Charles' initial intention to end the band at that point, he wanted to make solo records and he just couldn't get taken seriously. He wanted a hiatus from The Pixies for a year, but he soon realised 'nobody's going to take me seriously unless I leave the band'." Eric and Charles played together in a trio a while back: "we did a couple of records a couple of years ago. It was fun... I'm still encouraging him to do more ..."

While Eric says his career has mostly been a succession of happy accidents, with little conscious planning, he admits: "The only time I ever chased a project was when I heard Polly Harvey was putting a new band together. I wrote a letter to her management, being a bit pompous, and they rang me back, asking me to audition in London. Normally if you write a letter like that to an artist, they'll think you're a crazy person! Probably get a restraining order..."

However, he'd been inspired to do so after a mutual acquaintance of him and Harvey's brought his name up. Eric continues the story: "Both she and [regular collaborator] John Parish were curious about me. They were working on this record, were going to tour, and the old trio wasn't going to exist anymore. I'd heard her music and found it interesting. I'd noticed what I felt like were homages to Don [Beefheart]. Usually I find that stuff, when it's obvious, a bit offensive but it seemed really respectful."

"We met, and it was a bit like when I auditioned for Don. I only played a bit of a couple of songs, it wasn't much. I went back to my hotel room thinking 'I guess that didn't go very well'. Then I got a note under my door saying it was great to meet me, and if I wanted to do it, it would be good." Eric was relieved, as "auditions have always been tough. I try not to think very much in advance what it's going to be like. I play like I produce - I try to react to what's happening. As Don would say, I try to breathe with all my holes open!"

Eric loves being in the studio with Harvey: "Before, she used to know that she didn't like something. Now she knows what she wants. That's always great. The hard part of that is that sometimes you have a hard time delivering it. But [if we have any disagreements] it's not personal..."

And apparently, Harvey is mellowing with age: "I hear on the last record [*Let England Shake*], which I wasn't involved with, that she was becoming much more open. On the last one we worked on, *White Chalk*, which I was quite proud of, I think it was a personally difficult time for her and the record was very personal. She went so inside there that she's [lyrically] gone the other way now – using her position and influence to raise issues rather than looking in." While working with Harvey, Eric "ended up living in Bristol which I enjoyed. Polly's mom introduced me to scrumpy!"

Even in-demand musicians get the odd moment off work – and when it comes to kicking back at home, Eric likes to listen to the old masters: "when I need to recharge my batteries it usually ends up being stuff like [old blues legends] Howlin' Wolf, Muddy Waters or Son House. Thinking of the more

contemporary music that I like, like Sparklehorse or Granddaddy, there seems to be a certain shared spark, somehow, even if I don't know whether they listen to that stuff [old blues]. People pick up on that molecule [of shared influence] even if they don't know it... Others aren't sensitive to it. And that's the stuff that goes over my head sometimes. If I can't feel some of that [the influence of the old bluesmen and the like], I don't really get it."

One senses that Eric would be happy to talk music until the cows come home. But Bearded has kept him quite long enough, so we end our epic chat. Let's hope that he manages to get over this side of the pond with KNIFE & FORK – if so, Bearded has a pint of scrumpy with his name on it...
