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Frank Zappa

American rock singer, guitarist, songwriter, and classical composer

Zappa considered all aspects of his creative life—albums, concerts, books, interviews, and television appearances—as interrelated projects within the context of his overall output. His goal was to create virtuosic music that incorporated complex rhythmic structures, angular melodic lines, and tightly coordinated ensemble work.

Born: December 21, 1940; Baltimore, Maryland

Died: December 4, 1993; Los Angeles, California

Also known as: Frank Vincent Zappa (full name);

FZ

Member of: The Mothers of Invention

Principal recordings

ALBUMS (solo): *Lumpy Gravy*, 1967; *The Ark*, 1969; *Hot Rats*, 1969; *Freaks and Motherfu*#@%!*, 1970; *Two Hundred Motels*, 1971; *The Grand Wazoo*, 1972; *Just Another Band from L.A.*, 1972; *Waka/Jawaka*, 1972; *Apostrophe (')*, 1974; *Poot Face Boogie*, 1975; *Safe Muffinz*, 1975; *Zoot Allures*, 1976; *Studio Tan*, 1978; *Joe's Garage, Act I*, 1979; *Joe's Garage, Acts II and III*, 1979; *Orchestral Favorites*, 1979; *Sheik Yerbouti*, 1979; *Sleep Dirt*, 1979; *Shut Up 'n' Play Yer Guitar*, 1981; *Tinseltown Rebellion*, 1981; *You Are What You Is*, 1981; *Ship Arriving Too Late to Save a Drowning Witch*, 1982; *Baby Snakes*, 1983; *London Symphony Orchestra, Vol. 1*, 1983; *The Man from Utopia*, 1983; *Rare Meat*, 1983; *Boulez Conducts Zappa: The Perfect Stranger*, 1984; *Francesco Zappa*, 1984; *Them or Us*, 1984; *Thing-Fish*, 1984; *Frank Zappa Meets the Mothers of Prevention*, 1985; *Does Humor Belong in Music?*, 1986; *Jazz from Hell*, 1986; *London Symphony Orchestra, Vol. 2*, 1987; *Broadway the Hard Way*, 1988; *Guitar*, 1988; *As an Am*, 1991; *The Best Band You Never Heard in Your Life*, 1991; *Make a Jazz Noise Here*, 1991; *The Yellow Shark*, 1993; *Civilization, Phaze III*, 1994;

Strictly Commercial, 1995; *Lather*, 1996; *The Lost Episodes*, 1996; *Have I Offended Someone?*, 1997; *Everything Is Healing Nicely*, 1999.

ALBUMS (with the Mothers of Invention): *Freak Out!*, 1966; *Absolutely Free*, 1967; *Cruising with Ruben and the Jets*, 1968; *We're Only in It for the Money*, 1968; *Uncle Meat*, 1969; *Burnt Weeny Sandwich*, 1970; *Chunga's Revenge*, 1970; *Weasels Ripped My Flesh*, 1970; *Over-Nite Sensation*, 1973; *Roxy and Elsewhere*, 1974; *Bongo Fury*, 1975 (with Captain Beefheart); *One Size Fits All*, 1975; *Playground Psychotics*, 1992; *Ahead of Their Time*, 1993.

WRITINGS OF INTEREST: *The Real Frank Zappa Book*, 1989 (autobiography; with Peter Occhiogrosso).

The Life

Frank Vincent Zappa (ZAP-puh) was born in Baltimore, Maryland, on December 21, 1940. As the son of immigrants (of Italian-Sicilian and Greek-Arab descent), Zappa developed a sense of being an outsider at an early age. Due to Zappa's chronic health problems, the family moved to a warmer locale, eventually ending up in California. The family continued to relocate throughout the state, moving from Monterey to the San Gabriel Valley, El Cajon, San Diego, and Lancaster in the Mojave Desert northeast of Los Angeles. These constant relocations reinforced Zappa's outsider status, and he found himself associating primarily with other marginalized members of society—namely, the African American and Hispanic families who represented the fringe elements of the Lancaster community at that time.

Following graduation from high school, Zappa attended Chaffey Junior College but dropped out after one semester. This experience no doubt contributed to his lifelong disdain for formal education. After a stint producing and composing for a number of low-budget films (which ended abruptly when he was arrested on a trumped-up pornography charge—exacerbating his cynical view of the government), Zappa joined the band the Soul Giants, which under his leadership became

the Mothers of Invention. Following a brief period in New York City during the late 1960's, Zappa spent the remainder of his life in Los Angeles, where he lived with his wife Gail and their four children, Moon Unit, Dweezil, Ahmet, and Diva.

In addition to his varied musical pursuits, Zappa was an outspoken critic of political and religious figures, and he spent much of the 1980's taking his activism beyond the realm of his music. Perhaps most notable was his appearance before the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation in September, 1985, when he testified against censorship and efforts by the Parents Music Resource Center to label music albums that they perceived as having offensive content. Following the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989, Zappa became politically active on the international stage, befriending the newly elected president of the Czech Republic, Václav Havel. Zappa's potential run for the U.S. presidency was cut short by a diagnosis of prostate cancer in 1990. He eventually succumbed to the disease at his home on December 4, 1993.

The Music

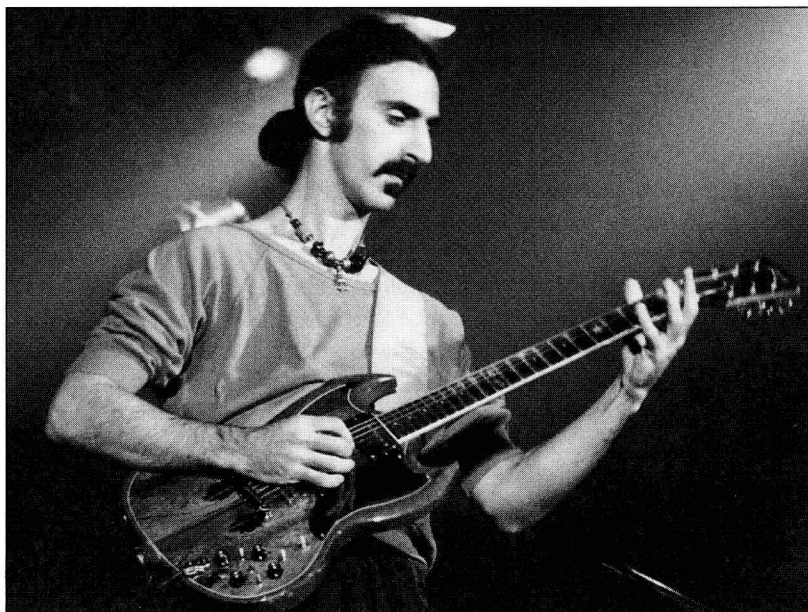
Early Years. Inspired by his growing interest in rhythm and blues, Zappa began his first serious musical pursuits at age fifteen, playing drums and later guitar in a number of ethnically and racially diverse bands. Around this same time, Zappa discovered the music of avant-garde composer Edgard Varèse—whom he later referred to as “the idol of my youth”—which eventually led him to discover works by Igor Stravinsky, Anton von Webern, Béla Bartók, and other important classical composers. Other influences were such rhythm-and-blues artists as Johnny “Guitar” Watson, Guitar Slim, and Howlin’ Wolf and the relatively sanitized doo-wop style of the 1950's—most prominently parodied in the album *Cruising with Ruben and the Jets*. Extramusical influences included such pop-culture detritus as science-fiction B-movies and television commercials.

The Project/Object and Conceptual Continuity. Zappa's artistic vision was unique in that he considered all aspects of his creative life—albums, concerts, books, interviews, and television appearances—as interrelated projects within the context of his overall output, the object. This approach re-

flects the influence of American composer John Cage, whose own philosophy blurred the boundaries between life and art. What Zappa referred to as the “Project/Object” was unified by a web of “conceptual continuities”—an encyclopedic array of musical and cultural references spanning the gamut from the profound (religious fanaticism, political corruption, racism) to the absurd (poodles, tweezers, chrome, vacuum cleaners). The extensive use of musical quotation, from classical repertoire (Stravinsky in particular) to popular music (as in the seemingly ubiquitous “Louie, Louie”), is characteristic of a quintessentially postmodern approach to composition.

The Mothers of Invention. Knowing that there was little chance of supporting himself as a composer of avant-garde music, Zappa formed the Mothers of Invention primarily as a means to support his concert music projects. In spite of this apparent concession, Zappa managed to bring his avant-garde sensibilities to his work as a bandleader. From the beginning, the Mothers of Invention's work was unlike that of any other musical group of the time, their distinctive sound a combination of technical complexity and Cageian indeterminacy. Entire albums and even individual songs were characterized by sharp juxtapositions of unrelated musical styles, perhaps most evident in “Brown Shoes Don't Make It” (*Absolutely Free*). Their live performances were more like Dadaist happenings that incorporated audience participation and an abundant use of props. Zappa's inclusive approach to music may be summed up in his own words: “You can't always write a chord ugly enough to say what you want to say, so sometimes you have to rely on a giraffe filled with whipped cream.” While not as technically proficient as later manifestations of the band, the early Mothers of Invention brought a raucous edge to Zappa's music, culminating around 1971 in the absurdist and sexually explicit vaudeville version of the band that featured front men Mark Volman and Howard Kaylan (also known as Flo and Eddie), formerly of the pop band the Turtles.

Zappa University. Throughout the 1970's, the Mothers of Invention's lineup changed constantly, because Zappa had taken sole artistic control of the band and became increasingly interested in creating virtuosic music that incorporated complex



Frank Zappa. (AP/Wide World Photos)

rhythmic structures, angular melodic lines, and tightly coordinated ensemble work. Because of the incredible demands placed on his musicians, a stint in one of Zappa's bands was often referred to as Zappa University, and many of his band members went on to lead impressive careers in their own right. Among the most notable were violinist Jean-Luc Ponty, keyboardist George Duke, guitarists Steve Vai and Adrian Belew, and drummers Terry Bozzio and Vinnie Colaiuta.

The Studio as Instrument. Zappa used the recording studio as yet another instrument in his arsenal, adopting the musique concrète techniques developed by such postwar composers as Pierre Schaeffer and later used by Varèse. These techniques included tape manipulation (reversing tape direction, overdubbing, altering tape speed) as well as a technique Zappa called xenochrony (experimental resynchronization), whereby recorded material from completely unrelated sessions was combined to form an entirely new work. Notable examples of this technique include "Friendly Little Finger" (*Zoot Allures*) and "Rubber Shirt" (*Sheik Yerbouti*).

Zappa as Guitarist. While Zappa's guitar technique does not compare to the pyrotechnic shredding of such guitarists as Yngwie Malmsteen or Vai, he considered his guitar solos as purely func-

tional, a means to an end—namely, the unfolding of a musical composition. His sound is easily identifiable, incorporating the sharp twang of Watson's style with a propensity for long, elegantly spun lines that mimic natural speech patterns rather than following regular metrical structures.

Independence. By the end of the 1970's, Zappa exerted an increasing degree of independence as an artist and entrepreneur, eventually abandoning the name the Mothers of Invention and breaking with Warner Bros. Records to form his own company, Barking Pumpkin. In the early 1980's Zappa acquired a Synclavier, an early digital keyboard

that allowed him to create complex musical structures beyond human possibility. The Grammy Award-winning album *Jazz from Hell* was almost entirely realized on this instrument. His use of the Synclavier forced Zappa to confront a paradox within his own work: While a machine was able to reproduce to perfection any degree of complexity that the composer desired, it lacked the ability to react to situations that arise in performance, the latter often resulting in transcendent musical experiences.

Later Years. During the last decade of his life, Zappa continued his prolific output with projects that included symphonic works (*London Symphony Orchestra, Vol. 1* and *London Symphony Orchestra, Vol. 2*), a musical (*Thing-Fish*), transcriptions of classical works (*Francesco Zappa*), collections of solo guitar improvisations (*Shut Up 'n' Play Yer Guitar*), a world tour with a twelve-piece big band in 1988 (ultimately canceled mid-tour because of personnel problems), and an ambitious project to digitally remaster all of his earlier albums for compact-disc release. Perhaps the culmination of his entire musical career was the collaboration, beginning in 1991, with the German-based Ensemble Modern, resulting in *The Yellow Shark*, an evening-long performance of Zappa originals and transcriptions that was eventually released as an album of the same name.

Musical Legacy

Because of his extensive musical, cultural, and political impact during his lifetime, Zappa's influence on future generations is already being felt. His contributions to popular music were recognized by a posthumous induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award. Zappa's iconoclastic persona, provocative music, and antiestablishment views continue to inspire people worldwide. He has been memorialized by a bronze bust in Bad Doberan, Germany; a monument in the town of Vilnius, Lithuania; and the dedication of Frank-Zappa-Strasse in Berlin.

Zappa's legacy would be controlled primarily by his widow Gail and the Zappa Family Trust, which would release posthumous albums from Zappa's extensive archive of recorded documents, adding to the more than sixty albums released during his lifetime. Ensembles devoted to his music include the Zappa Family Trust-sponsored Zappa Plays Zappa touring band, formed in 2006 and led by Zappa's son, Dweezil; Project/Object and Banned from Utopia, both formed exclusively to cover Zappa's works; and Ensemble Modern (Germany), the Ed Palermo Big Band (New York), and the Baroque Ensemble Ambrosius (Finland), which have released entire albums of Zappa's works. Given the continued interest in Zappa's concert music, it is conceivable that some of these works may find their way into the classical canon. With the increasing amount of scholarly research relating to Zappa's work, there is little doubt as to the significance of his contributions as a cultural icon and postmodernist composer.

Joseph Klein

Further Reading

Kostelanetz, Richard. *The Frank Zappa Companion*. New York: Schirmer Books, 1997. A collection of writings from authors as varied as Ben Watson, Nicholas Slonimsky, and Havel, this book provides an excellent introduction to Zappa's work and clearly demonstrates the breadth of his influence as a musical and cultural figure.

Lowe, Kelly Fisher. *The Words and Music of Frank Zappa*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2006. A detailed study of the lyrical and musical content of Zappa's work through a chronological survey of his albums. Considers Zappa's role as a satirist and his importance as a social and cultural critic.

Miles, Barry. *Zappa: A Biography*. New York: Grove Press, 2004. While the majority of this book covers familiar ground, the author often provides a degree of detail not found in comparable books.

Sheff, David. "Playboy Interview: Frank Zappa." *Playboy* (April, 1993). One of the last interviews Zappa gave before his death later that year, including discussion of the collapse of the Soviet Union and Zappa's life following his cancer diagnosis.

Vai, Steve. *The Frank Zappa Guitar Book*. Milwaukee, Wis.: Hal Leonard, 1982. Amazingly precise transcriptions of Zappa's most significant guitar solos provide unique insight into the complexities of the composer-performer's distinctive musical language.

Watson, Ben. *Frank Zappa: The Negative Dialectics of Poodle Play*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993. Written by a foremost Zappa authority, this book is impressive in the depth of its coverage. Although the author's strongly held political and philosophical convictions are prominent, it is nonetheless an important and recommended source of information.

Zappa, Frank, with Peter Occhiogrosso. *The Real Frank Zappa Book*. New York: Poseidon Press, 1989. Entertaining and informative autobiography provides the composer with a platform to air his views on a wide variety of topics, including music (rock, jazz, classical, electronic), capitalism, marriage, fatherhood, politics, and religion. Also includes the obligatory chapter on crude road stories detailing the exploits of various band members and groupies.

See also: Bartók, Béla; Cage, John; Howlin' Wolf; James, Elmore; Sting; Stravinsky, Igor; Varèse, Edgard; Waits, Tom; Webern, Anton von.