

31 AUG 1979

FRANK
ZAPPA
MUSIC
MAKER
BY
RIPAN

Zappa burst onto America's consciousness with a 1964 TV show, on which the skinny 22-year-old greaser played a bicycle by plucking the spokes and blowing through the handlebars while a jazz band made atonal white noise in the background. A year later a record company swallowed its reservations about this bizarre young man and signed his band, the Mothers. Zappa was forced to soften the connotations of the name by tacking on the "of Invention" part before the company agreed to market his first album, an iconoclastic blend of anti-establishment parodies and rock. *Freak Out* was greeted by howls of outrage, and Zappa was off on the eccentric path he's followed ever since.

While many of his megastar peers have succumbed to a flaccid, jet-set lifestyle, Zappa has survived with his credibility intact, even unquestioned. He's done so by maintaining an unrelentingly irreverent stance; *Freak Out* got him banned from America's airwaves and college campuses. Fifteen years later, the *Jewish Princess* track on his *Sheik Yerbouti* album drew a storm of protest and censorship demands from Jewish organisations. In his next album (see inset) he courts the wrath of L. Ron Hubbard's Church of Scientology and, just to prove he's not biased, takes on the Catholic Church in a song about the downfall of a chaste and pious convent girl.

Zappa's prodigious output (about 22 albums in 15 years) represents by his own estimate, only two percent of the material he's recorded. The rest occupies three warehouses and a storeroom in his home, stacked floor to ceiling with tapes. The bewildering flurry of Zappa releases in the past 18 months was the result of his desire to rid himself of contractual obligations to Warner Brothers Records. *Sheik Yerbouti*, his first effort for Zappa/Phonogram Records, was promoted enthusiastically and led to a dramatic upsurge in his popularity. It outperformed all Zappa albums since *Live At The Fillmore East* on the charts, and won him the allegiance of a whole new generation of rock fans, a loyalty he's out to cement with an upcoming triple-album rock opera titled *Joe's Garage*.

One of the reasons for Zappa's enduring credibility is his jealously guarded privacy. His tongue-in-cheek albums offer only oblique insights into his personality. He's a master at fielding questions with absurdities, which lends an air of guerilla theatre to his press conferences. Thus an interview with the man who not so long ago spurned the press as "worms" is both a rare plum and something to be approached with caution.

For a man who's savagely contemptuous of bourgeoisie America, Zappa lives in contradictory splendour in the ritzy Hollywood Hills. On the other hand, the Zappa mansion stands out like a sore thumb among the immaculate ranch homes on Woodrow Wilson Drive. It's a rambling, anarchic tumble of buildings set in an overgrown garden and painted a vibrant blue — in the halcyon days of the '60's, it was purple. A brace of suntanned kids (Dweezil, Bob and Moon Unit) answered the door, led me through a spacious kitchen where macaroni cheese was being prepared for breakfast and into a basement studio, where a brooding, silent Frank Zappa sat hunched over a tape editing machine.

Zappa has spent most of the past four months in this studio, creating Frankenstein monsters by splicing together tracks chosen at random from different recordings. He's pale and wiry, clad in a baggy white T-shirt and jeans. The mass of unruly hair has given way to a short, ragged cut. There's an overflowing ashtray at his side, and several empty coffee cups.

He ignores me at length. "Well", I demand finally, "how do you feel about doing this interview?"

"It's probably more natural to have sex with a sea urchin than to get involved in an interview. It's a preposterous situation. You don't know me. All you know is what's been merchandised to you by other journalists over the past 15 years. You've drawn your conclusions before you walk in the door, and subconsciously you're determined to ensure that by the time you leave you've thoroughly reinforced everything you already think about me. Anyway, who knows what will happen to this tape after you leave here? Editors modify things to suit the paper's editorial slant, like Rolling Stone did to me."

① SCANNED
24.11.02

under the keyboard walls: 'Ice Train' is built around repetitive base of drums and solidly recurring as bosskopf builds his organs over the top of them time getting only so far before they thaw.

'Club Cannibal' is a tropical and stomp, again with the recurring bottom organ with exotic bird-call organ synthesizer flying from

'Phantasm', a tury Schizoid that settles into 'Correlator' be taken seriously everlasting music. It isn't.

Rather it is extremely ab musicians together a fun as background full volume lea

FINDS HIS VOICE Property from the west ute and laid aside reports from New York

sounds — a nice round sound all of overtones. A lot of layers never get to that; it's like the sauce, but without any heat below the sauce, you now.

"The range of the flute is three octaves, and when I think of the range of timbres and different colours and volumes and qualities, it's as wide as the universe. If you can be musical with it, you might as well use it all, depending on what's needed. I might use my voice if there's violence there, or other things depending on what the music is depicting."

Newton is planning on buying one of Douglas Ewart's wood-flutes once he gets another shipment of bamboo in. Ewart's flutes have a high reputation among AACM members and Ewart himself believes in diversifying his creativity in woodcarving, leatherwork and instrument-making as well as playing.

"I have to learn some more about bamboo flutes first," said Newton. "I try to stay open and check things out, because there's always something to learn. Shakuhachi music, for example, is phenomenal. There's a piece of Takumitsu's called 'November Steps' for shakuhachi and orchestra that is a great piece of music. Then I listen to the pygmies and a lot of South Indian and Peruvian music — anything that has a flute on it."

Had he come across "Sacred Flute Music From New Guinea" on the Quartz label? He hadn't, and he was genuinely thrilled to learn that those flutes were used to invoke and render accessible

flute that is can't describe feel it. It touches I see it touch You know he say, I don't the instrument at the other spectrum, I. An absurd but you run never heard can't stand

"I think it in part of the of the instrument goes to some in all of us. try to tap it

"I think that God is gave us to create the Music should scream-up music, but life, and all the diff

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Music Maker: "Then why are we doing it?"

Zappa: "It may serve a useful social function, if you quote me correctly. You may come up with questions that point a finger at a social issue I have something to say about. I might have a chance to sneak some cynicism in on the American public at a time when they really need it."

MM: "Okay. There seems to be a sense of disgust with the American way of life and materialism in your work."

Zappa: "I feel plenty of disgust at just about everything but it's tempered by the knowledge that there's not very much an individual can do to alter it, so let's just laugh about it."

MM: "That's pretty cynical."

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MM: "So that's why you don't write love songs?"

Zappa: "Americans aren't qualified to discuss love. Love is merchandised in the U.S. It's just sex thinly disguised by some cute drapery."

MM: "And you react to that by writing songs about sexual deviance?"

Zappa: "Well, you have to realize that I may want to do an album about quantum economics, but I don't think many people will get off on that. I have certain interests in common with regular people. So long as it doesn't infringe on my aesthetic considerations, I'll tailor the subject to a zone people identify with."

MM: "Do you set out to shock America?"

Zappa: "Why bother to shock America? You can't, anyway. If America could be shocked, it'd be in much better shape."

MM: "South Africans were certainly shocked by songs about, say, doing a nasty on the White House lawn."

Zappa: "You led a sheltered life. What can I say? I think there's nothing bizarre or extreme about that song. It's probably nowhere as nasty as what gets done inside the Oval Office."

MM: "What do your children make of your lyrics?"

Zappa: "I don't think they give a damn. As a matter of fact, *Jewish Princess* was my daughter's favourite song for a while. Bob likes *Why Does It Hurt When I Pee?*, and Dweezil's got a strong affinity for *Bobby Brown Goes Down*, which is about a transsexual and the things he does with a spiny dildo. He's nine years old. He took the lyric sheet to school with him, because he and his friends couldn't understand the lyrics on the record."

MM: "Well, you seem to have a happy family and you live in an American dream neighbourhood, yet you're bitterly critical about some aspects of the American way of life."

Zappa: "You sure make a lot of assumptions. I'm an all-American boy, myself. I've had a chance to look at other people's cultures and the way they live, and I'm happy to say I'm an American. We're not doing it RIGHT, but they're doing it WRONG. It's boring over there. You can still have laughs here."

MM: "Well, in that case who are your enemies?"

Zappa: "Rampant stupidity. Even in a democracy such as we have here, the stupidity quotient is so high. Some stupidity, like the Three Stooges hitting each other over the heads with a rubber hammer, is kind of funny. But the other kind of stupidity we have here isn't so funny."

MM: "For instance?"

Zappa: "The kind of stupidity that breeds injustice. The stupidity of having a bureaucracy so large all it does is perpetuate itself and doesn't perform the functions it was created to do. I'm not the man to change it. But perhaps someone sitting at home listening to one of my records is on the borderline, and I'll kick him one way or another off the fence. I'm a communicator and an entertainer. Music devoid of humour is too laid back for my taste. I can't buy it if it's totally serious."

MM: "When your records first hit South Africa, people reckoned you were a total acidhead. I was really surprised to learn that you're strongly opposed to drug use."

Zappa: "Never touched the stuff. Americans have been so brain-washed. Anybody who is — I hate to use the word — intellectual is ostracized. Americans love to pretend they're stupid. They'd rather be good guys and groovy girls than have anyone know they're intelligent. They learn in high school that you don't have friends if you're different. So anything which shows initiative or ingenuity can't be attributed to ingenuity alone. There has to be a *chemical* reason for things I do. You're sitting at home, getting ripped. You hear something that you like, so you presume the person playing it must be doing the same dope you are."

MM: "Another misconception; I always thought you were Jewish."

Zappa: "Well, I'm not. I could have been Jewish with a bit of luck, and then I could have written about headblocking and haberdasher humour like Woody Allen. I would have made an excellent Jewish person."

MM: "While we're on the subject, do you think the fuss over *Jewish Princess* boosted the sales of *Sheik Yerbouti*?"

Zappa: "If you think having the Anti-Defamation League after me for one song accounted for the large sales, you're crazy. It was merchandising that did it. There was a lot of good music on the final Warner Brothers albums and at least one masterpiece, *Greggory Peccary*. But they didn't sell because nobody heard of them."

MM: "So *Sheik* wasn't intentionally more commercial?"

Zappa: "No. People bought it because the new company (Zappa/Phonogram) promoted it enthusiastically."

MM: "The ever-changing roster of your band has been the spawning ground for some great talent. People like Lowell George of Little Feat, Aynsley Dunbar of Jefferson Starship, Jean Luc Ponty, Flo and Eddie and so on were all once Mothers. Where do you find such talented unknowns?"

Zappa: "They call up and ask for auditions."

MM: "Do you pick them for their studio expertise or for stage work?"

Zappa: "Well, in Hollywood you can get anybody to record for you if you can pay. If you want Jesus to play tambourine on your record, just call up the union and he shows up with his tambourine. Sometimes I pick people with a jazz background who read well, but you can't get them to play R&B. Or I might choose guys who can play R&B and the funkier stuff but they're not too suave with jazz. I usually have a few of each type — it's mix and match."

MM: "What's your favorite Mothers album?"

Zappa: "*Lumpy Gravy* was, but *Joe's Garage* is really special. I think it's the best thing I've done."

MM: "Do you listen to other bands?"

Zappa: "When I'm home I never go out or listen to the radio. I get up at six or 8am, come down here and work, go to sleep when I'm tired and do it again. But when I'm on tour I sometimes go out and see bands."

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MM: "What do you make of the New Wave?"

Zappa: "Some of it is good, some is boring. I heard a couple of songs by The Stranglers that I liked, and I saw the B-52's in New York. I thought they were great, especially their song *Rock Lobster*."

MM: "Do you see yourself as a jazz or rock musician?"

Zappa: "Both. I'm a sociologist too. When I started playing the guitar I was interested in R&B. But about ten years ago I got hold of an album called *Folk Music of Bulgaria*, on Nonesuch Records. You must have heard of it? I listened to it and thought, God, that sounds like me. All that time I was playing Bulgarian music and didn't know it."

MM: "When I came in you seemed to be transplanting tracks from one song onto another."

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Zappa: "I've been doing a lot of that this spring. I created a couple of real Frankenstein monsters. I was curious, and being crazy enough to spend money on studio time, I tried it. I can play you an example of a bass track from one song, a guitar track from another and drums from a third. The drums are in waltz time and the instruments are in different keys, but you'll swear everyone was playing at the same time." (Zappa gleefully played one of his "monsters", and while I would never have guessed that the musicians weren't playing at the same time, I would certainly have doubted their sanity. The world at large will have a chance to hear this wierd material in about 18 months, when the track will be released on an album of guitar solos.)

MM: "I believe there's a song called *Catholic Girls* on the new album. Is that to atone for *Jewish Princess*?"

Zappa: "No, it was written long before *Jewish Princess*."

MM: "How did the concept of *Joe's Garage* evolve?"

appa: "I went into the studio in April, intending to record just two tracks, but we ended up staying there for days and putting 17 songs down. I thought there should be some continuity, so I went home over the weekend and wrote an opera that held them all together. It'll be finished in a week or two and released by September."

MM: "Have you ever considered touring South Africa?"

Zappa: "We were invited to go there at one time to do an outdoor concert. We insisted that it be an integrated event, but the promoter — I forget his name — said it couldn't be assured. So we refused to go. This was at a time when we had Napoleon Brock, Georg Duke and Chester Thompson in the band. It was a mixed band, so there was no reason why we shouldn't play to a mixed audience."

MM: "Some integrated shows are allowed now. Might that change your mind?"

Zappa: "I wouldn't hold my breath on it."

With that, Zappa returned to his tape editing. "See, I'm a little wierd", he said as he escorted me to the door. "My idea of a good time is hearing things. Some people like to put things up their nose. I like to stick things in my ears. I like musical notes, organized noise, sound effects, drum tones. I don't like movements. I don't like organized religion. I don't like parties. All I like is music."

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THE SAGA OF JOE'S GARAGE

(Synopsis of Zappa's upcoming rock opera)

Frank Zappa's forthcoming rock Opera *Joe's Garage* is set some time in the future, when the American government is moving to outlaw music — "and if you think that's farfetched," says Zappa, "Just check out the news. Western music is now illegal in Iran." The opera is narrated by the Central Scrutinizer, a character whose approach recalls the lectures narcotics agents give American high school students on the dangers of drug use.

At the outset Joe and his buddies are getting a garage band together. They play too loud and the lady next door calls the police, who warn the boys to stick closer to church-oriented social activities. Joe joins the neighbourhood Catholic Youth Organization, where he meets a girl named Mary who holds hands and thinks pure thoughts.

But one night Mary doesn't turn up at the CYO because she's making out backstage at a local rock club, trying to get a free pass to see a famous band. The roadies recruit her as a crew slut and take her to Miami, where they dump her because she won't do their laundry. In order to get back to Los Angeles, she enters a wet T-shirt contest, which happens to be hosted by the priest who used to counsel her at the CYO. He's been defrocked because he failed to meet his conversion quota.

When Joe finds out what Mary's done, he is crazed with grief. After a series of wild escapades he contracts an unspeakable disease, and seeks help from L. Ron Hoover of the First Church of Applimentology. Hoover tells Joe he's a latent appliance fetishist, an appliance fetishist being a person who refuses to admit that true sexual gratification can only be achieved with machines. Joe has to learn to speak German and dress like a housewife, because the best machines come from Germany and you have to be able to speak their language to pick them up.

He picks up an industrial vacuum cleaner with marital aids stuck all over its body, takes it home and plucks it to death. He's in big trouble. He doesn't have money to pay for the nuclear-powered pansexual Roto Klooter, so he's thrown into a special prison reserved for record company execs and musicians. They snort detergent all day and sing a song called "Keep It Greasy so it Goes Down Easy". When Joe is finally freed there are no musicians left in the world. Totally crazed, he wanders around playing imaginary guitar solos against the loading zone announcements at L.A. International Airport.

In the end, his spirit broken, Joe gives up and get a day job in the Utility Muffin Research Kitchen, putting little green rosettes on the muffins as they come by on a belt. And so, concludes the Central Scrutiniser, he has at last become a productive member of society.