

# THE RONDO HATTON REPORT VOL IX

DECEMBER 21, 2011

## IN THIS ISSUE

As the winter solstice marks the end of **Zappadan**, our *ninth edition* rolls out a selection of *old friends and new* prepared to confess all for your celebratory pleasure. Still not enough of you stepping up to the *plate*, but the intake is broad enough to prove that we're a *catholic church*. So if you like what you see here -- and even more if you don't -- take some time out over your **holy-daze** to let us know how it is where you come from. 'Cos *that's the way we like it*.

As always, the texts are supplied as a single *pdf* file. Those wishing to *fondle & fetish* a paper version can download and print texts at their leisure; conservers of the carbon footprint can view online. Thanks to all who **contributed** this time. Content is alphabetic by *author*. Views are the opinion of the writer and the responsibility of the reader. *You is what you am*. Anyone wishing to correspond with a contributor may do so through the 'SUBMIT' page, and messages will be duly forwarded. You are **encouraged** to do so: please let the authors know that you appreciate their efforts - it will make them happy. *Hopla!*

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## 1. HATS OFF TO DWEEZIL?

Jim Beugh

A recently published biography of the veteran American senator Slade Gordon boasts of how he ‘faced off’ with Frank Zappa at the 1985 Congressional hearing on ‘porn rock’, telling Zappa that he might be held in contempt of Congress for his provocative attitude. But even his horny old Republican hide must still have smarted at Zappa’s defiant response: *“Go ahead – I already hold you in contempt.”*

That’s the fire in the belly that drives Zappa’s music. The savage snarl that is always lurking in the very tone of his guitar is just waiting to pounce on the slightest suspicion of hypocrisy, verbal or sonic, delivering a sharp tension that infuses every moment of his music. Contempt may not be the defining quality of Zappa’s work, but it is an essential ingredient.

As connoisseurs of his work, we know him to be one of the finest minds of his generation, his searing intelligence matched only by a capacity for compassion that exudes from every orifice – if you have the ears to hear it. Check out ‘St Etienne’ for example. Or ‘Ancient Armaments’. It’s this combination of intelligence and compassion that is the wellspring of the contempt. If you’re smart enough to see that things could be done better and have the heart enough to care that they’re not, contempt is the only sane response to those treacherous cretins in the political and commercial arenas who wilfully stand in the way of progress toward a better world.

Unfortunately, if this trait is genetic, it does not dwell in the share that he has passed on to Dweezil, and clearly nothing in the poor boy’s life has generated sufficient outrage to nurture an awareness of it. However much he may hold his father in reverence (and he obviously does) he just doesn’t seem to get what drove him. And whether or not he used to cut the grass, it’s the nice boy within him that stops him from cutting the mustard.

That said, it would be churlish to be anything less than in awe of his achievement in putting together such a band as the one he worked the Brighton Dome with on the last day of his UK tour. They are highly accomplished musicians and have worked hard and successfully to deliver unquestionably first-rate ‘classical’ performances of Zappa’s oeuvre. That much is certain, and if you go with that expectation, you will be more than satisfied. The mistake

some people make, and I include myself in this, is to expect more. This is not going to be – or at least, not any time soon – in any way a substitute for seeing his father play live. If there was any doubt about this, the clips of FZ in action that he bravely plays on the screen above him are sufficient testament to that.

And surely Dweezil can only be too aware of it. There is no way – is there? – that he could delude himself that he can do anything except be a high class tribute band. For in truth, given the calibre of his troops, it is he who is the weakest link. Although he has at last learned to reign in his Van Halen habit, and has become cannier at reproducing the cadences and tones of his father's guitar, he can't even get onto the baby slopes of his father's spirit when it comes to a solo slot. Whenever the occasion calls for fire (which is most of the time), he falls for a nodding-dog noodle, a competent-enough-but-bland-as-beige ambulation around the fretboard. Mediocrates of Pedestrium. He's stroking the hair of the poodle when he needs to be biting the head off the bat.

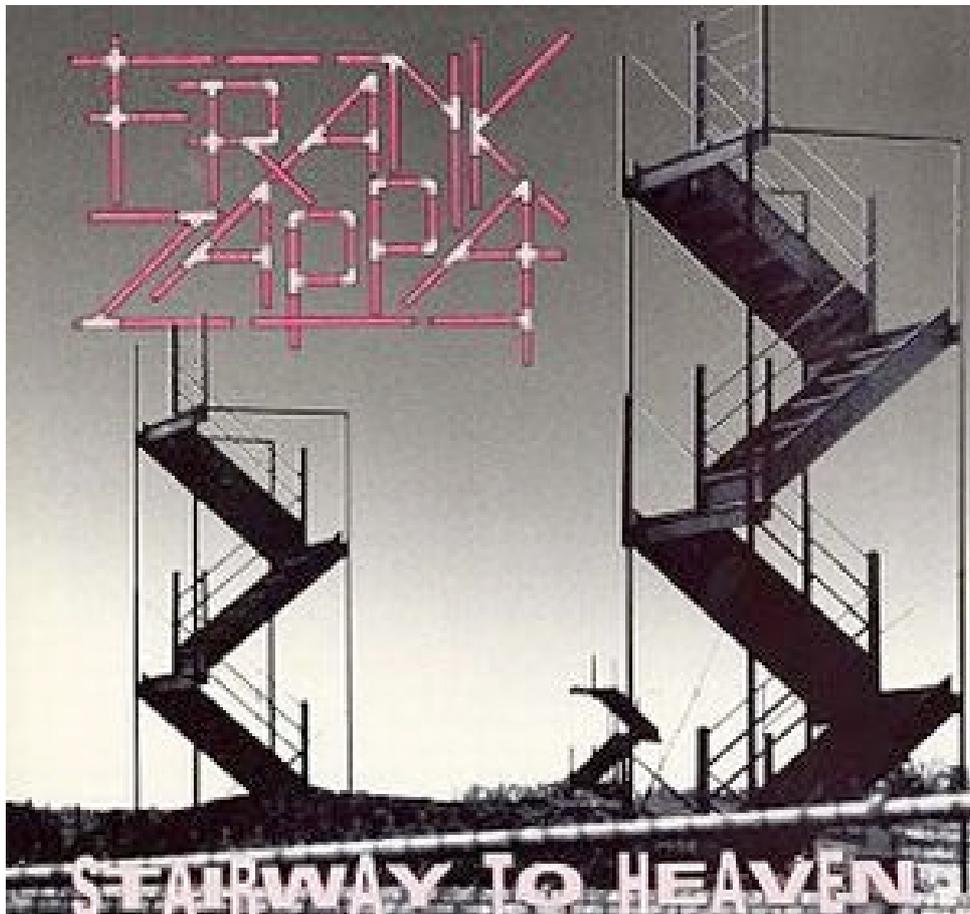
That's a tough call, of course. But part of the difficulty is that he's trying too hard to reproduce something that cannot, and probably should not, be reproduced in the way he is trying to do it. Zappa's music was a comment on its times, taking aim an ever-moving target of musical and social issues, fitting whatever there was to say to the talents of the players he had to hand. Only once did Dweezil venture into that territory, with a version of Chunga's Revenge that briefly let the band off the leash, lead singer Ben Thomas launching into a fabulous hip-hop version which brought a welcome contemporary edge to the music.

And that was more like it, because though there may be no one else who can deliver the precision and professionalism that ZPZ brings to the juke-box aspect of being a tribute band, in the case of his father's music, there's just so much more to it than that.



## 2. LINGUA FRANKA (Part V): *Who Was That Masked Man?*

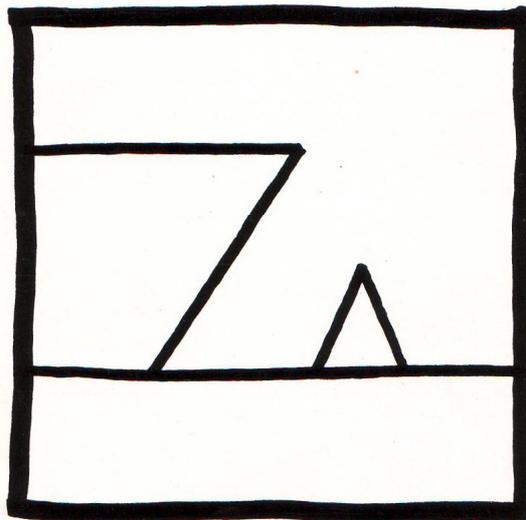
Arjun von Caemmerer



Whilst I love the musical content of this album of cover versions, **Stairway to Heaven/Bolero**, Zappa circa 1991, I cherish it just as much for the artworks of the other two covers, front & rear, their multiple levels of meaning, and heavy irony. **Bethlehem Steel**, Clarence Snyder's front cover photograph named after the now sunk ship-building steelworks of Pennsylvania, depicts stairways, metallic, unpopulated, and silhouetted against the blank empty space of the sky, ascending literally heaven-ward, but which abruptly, stop short. The several stairways appear abandoned and incomplete, a symbolic illustration of the doomed stupidity of attempting this quest w-e-r-e-i-n-g the wrong trousers. Or even the wrong smock. The juxtaposition of these structures with the disc's title implies additional levels of human delusion, the foremost, perhaps, the futility of attempting to strive for that, which by definition, is eternally outside grasping. Further, none of us are gwine *up* to hebben, because it just isn't up. The rungs ring wrong: wrong goal, wrong method, wrong

direction. Reinforcing this, the letters spelling 'STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN', despite their own internal deviations, little steps up-and-down, remain stubbornly and horizontally grounded. Zappa's name, bridging these useless stairways, tops this off: the construct of articulated letters, a darker pink riveted to a lighter pink, re-echo this earthly groundedness. Their overall shape, squat & rectangular, does not strive upwards or outwards, but connects across, within the landscape. And because the zigzag frames of these staircases hold, Doodle-like, the repeated suggestions of the letters' shapes which spell 'FRANK ZAPPA', their reach is not just across but also backwards and within — into Zappa himself and his own musical history: there is the unmissable echo here of the front cover illustration from the earlier album **Ship arriving too late to save a drowning witch**, where Zappa's own name is re-shaped by its proximity to Roger Price's recycled Doodle.

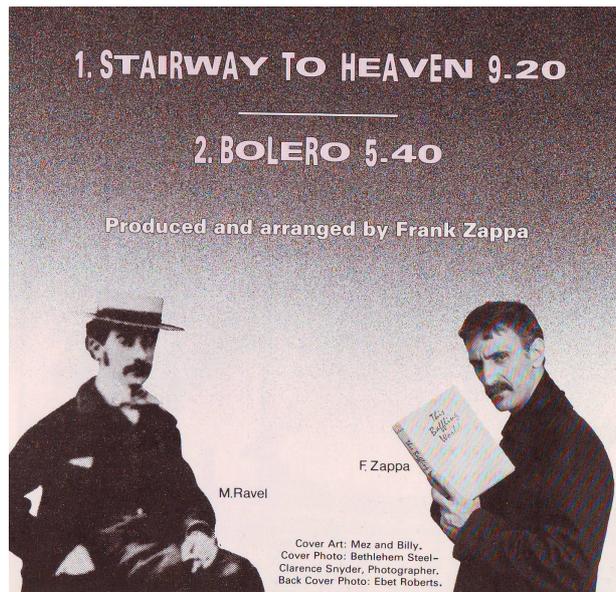
Z Δ ρ ρ Δ



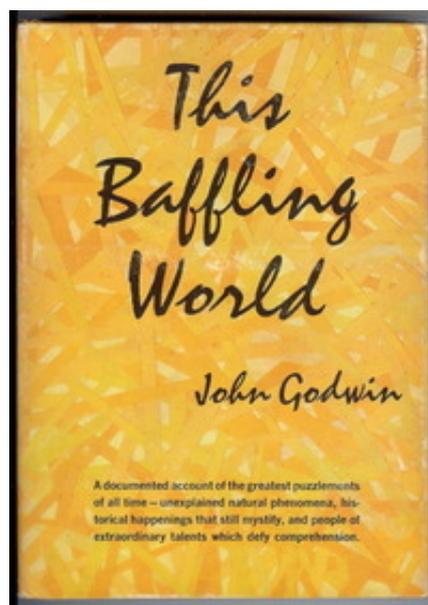
Ship arriving too late to save a drowning witch

*I am the Heaven, I am the Water* intones **Sofa No.2**, and here ZΔppΔ sits, sofa-like, both above the prow and the waterline, and also beneath the witch's hat, *under the water where the shark bubbles blow*. In both of these albums, **Stairway...** and **Ship...**, the visual construct of the front cover parallels Zappa relationship to his music: he does not float entirely outside the frame of his creation, nor can he be confined by its content, but rather — over here / outside now — he inhabits, simultaneously, both.

With Heaven above, and (This Baffling) World below, the back cover, featuring a pixilated Ravel and a furrowed Zappa, is a study in constructed symmetry:



Their first names have each been abbreviated to a single letter and the 5 letters of their respective surnames balance. Their joint gazes converge, each looking directly—Ravel coolly, Zappa somewhat quizzically— at the viewer. Each holds an object of succor: Ravel, a cigarette; Zappa, John Godwin’s book, ***This Baffling World***. The appeal of this particular book lies partly in its title and subtitle: *A documented account of the greatest puzzlements of all times – unexplained natural phenomena, historical happenings that still mystify, and people of extraordinary talents which defy comprehension*. That the author’s surname just so happens to be ‘Godwin’ serendipitously illustrates Zappa’s maxim that *sometimes you can be surprised that the universe works whether you understand it or not*.



But back to the symmetry: what strikes me most is that Ravel is sporting a configuration of facial hair, which, just like the imperial on the cow of **Läther** (and that which seems to have organically sprouted from the face of the buffalo on **Buffalo**), seems to have been added to match Zappa's trademark (& later trademarked!) style. In this I am happy to be corrected, but all the images of Ravel I have been able to unearth show him mostly as clean-shaven; in his younger years his particularly floribundant facial hair is quite unlike that pictured here. So, just as Zappa's name was altered by its proximity to the stairways of **Bethlehem Steel**, and by Price's Doodle, so in turn Ravel has undergone further modification by his sympathetic resonance with Zappa. The 2<sup>nd</sup> piece of Ravel's 5-part invention for piano **Miroirs** (1905), **Oiseaux tristes**, was apparently meant to recall a stroll through a forest on a stifling summer's day. Perhaps the forest echoed not just with bird-song, but also with laughter.

Because both Ravel and Zappa left the building in December, and Price on Halloween:

### **A Memorial Triptych**

Of Names and Mirrors, for Zappa/Ravel;  
Of Symmetry and Numbers, for Zappa;  
Of Facial Hair and Doodles, for Price/Zappa.

imm!  
F 7

Miroir Man

f	A
R	L
a	P
S	P
K	A

**FZ**

**52**

**04**

**12**

**3<sup>2</sup>3**

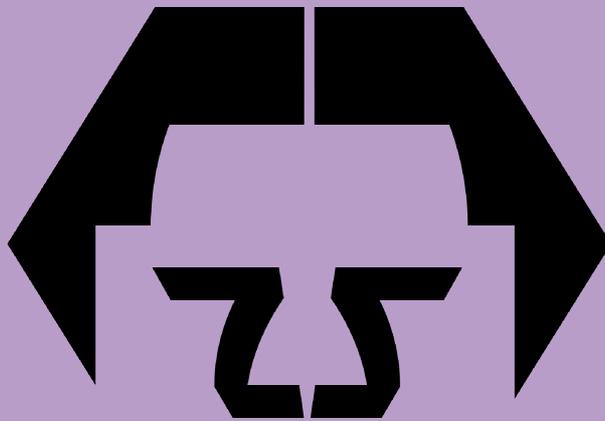
**21**

**40**

**DDD**

for Roger Price

## Imperial Habits



### 3. I AM A FRANK ZAPPA FAN

Joe Crawford

I don't remember how it happened.

I just woke up one day and I had dozens of Zappa records and half a shelf full of Zappa books.

But why is he a hero? He had a career of several decades, but was a marginal figure but for the single "Valley Girl" and notoriety for fighting for free speech.

So why am I a fan? What is it about this iconoclastic, cynical person that compels me? His music is usually impenetrable and obtuse - filled with in-jokes and odd references. He usually isn't even doing the singing, but a Zappa song is always clearly a work by Zappa. Whether it's a song whose lyrics are the words on an immigration form, or an ode to bodily functions, his music dares you to neglect or embrace it.

His ethos is exemplified by this quote: *The crux of the biscuit is: If it entertains you, fine. Enjoy it. If it doesn't, then blow it out your ass. I do it to amuse myself. If I like it, I release it. If somebody else likes it, that's a bonus.*

He's clearly a musician and entertainer, but he seems to genuinely not be very interested in mass adulation.

One working theory I have is that I want to be more like him. Zappa drove himself and all around him relentlessly. Could it be that that is the simpatico I have with him?

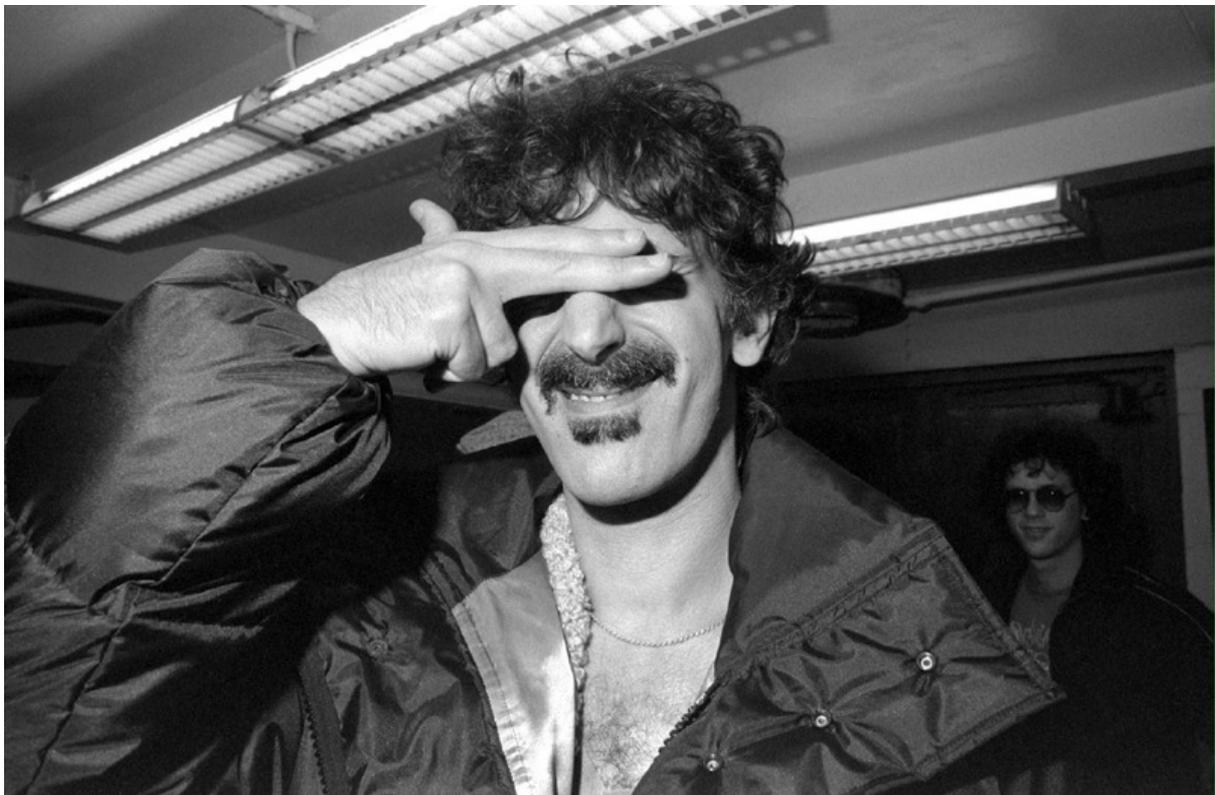
Or perhaps it's the endless restlessness and invention? FZ was always trying new technologies and attempting to push the limits of music. One of the great pleasures he had was programming his Synclavier - pushing the device to produce compositions that would be impossible or close to impossible for human beings to play.

It could be that he never shied away from speaking his mind on any and all subjects - and enjoyed deflating the egos of the powerful - in the music business, on Capitol Hill. I know I

can be a windbag at times. I am always trying to figure out the world - and see it in as true a light as is possible. Questioning assumptions -- not doing what is done because it's the orthodoxy, is something I prize above the safety of previous methods.

Or maybe I just like the music? Much of it is great fun - particularly the recordings made live. You can hear the fun being had by musicians pushing themselves and having a wonderful time. There are also times when the wild changes in tempo and tone defy what people think of as music. Moving from several bars of Stravinsky to Baby Love within the same performance is clearly pushing on the limits and boundaries popular music places on itself. The endless variation and inventiveness are a great joy to listen to.

Or is the enigma? Given the number of biographies that are out one might come to the conclusion that people have Frank figured out. The truth is, that the man was distant from those who worked with him, always with barriers between his public persona which he cultivated, and his true self which seemed available, but was ultimately cryptic.



#### 4. VINYL HYGIENE DILEMMA

Andy Hollinden

The tables are turning. Just yesterday, I bought *Francesco Zappa* on vinyl. Oddly enough, you could count on one hand the number of times I've listened to my *Francesco Zappa* CD, but that's not the point. The point is I'm buying LPs again.

Like most people, I switched from vinyl to compact discs in the 1980s. At the time, I was an audio salesman, and I happily ushered many consumers down the digital highway. I demonstrated how you could drop CDs and not worry about damage, showed how you could carry CDs around on your index finger, and boggled people's minds with the shocking fact that each player contained a *real laser*. The CD's lack of surface noise usually convinced customers to reach for their wallets. Why, they'd jump out of their skins when music came blasting up from sonic nothingness. CD players practically sold themselves. And, yes, I worked on commission.

Back then, there was much concern about which LPs would make the transition to compact disc. I worried some titles would fall between the cracks and fade into oblivion as CDs replaced LPs in music store bins. Questions like "Will Captain Beefheart's *Clear Spot* make the cut?" occupied my mind. Every time a Zappa LP was released on CD, I was relieved, and I soon had CD *and* LP copies of everything he'd done. In many cases, I ended up paying for the same music more than twice. For example, I first got the individual mail-order only *Shut Up 'n' Play Yer Guitar* series. Then, when I saw it as a 3-LP box set in the import bin, I bought that. Then, I purchased it all again with the original 2-CD set. Lastly, when it was re-released as a 3-CD set that matched the three original LPs, I bought it again!

Here's the problem, though – a lot of the Zappa CDs didn't sound right. I knew I was in for trouble when I bought *Hot Rats* and first heard the "Peaches en Regalia" drum intro. *Uncle Meat*'s "Mr. Green Genes" was particularly offensive – the weird kick drum and primitive 1980s digital reverb were all wrong. And why add a bunch of extra reverb to *Zappa in New York*? It's a live record for-crying-out-loud! The *Studio Tan* CD re-mix of "The Adventures of Gregory Peccary" made me want to cry. You get the idea. I shouldn't even have to mention the *We're Only in It for the Money*, *Cruising with Ruben & the Jets*, and *Sleep Dirt* CD tragedies. God!

So, my trusty old turntable became something I used primarily to hear Zappa music the way it was originally released – the way it had imprinted on my brain. If I wanted to hear *Cruising with Ruben & the Jets*, I had to break out the vinyl. Eventually, though, my turntable stopped working. I resigned myself to only listening to Frank’s CDs since I figured these were the versions that would live into the future. I hoped my mental LPs would fade if I concentrated solely on the digital mixes, but it didn’t work out that way. I got used to the CDs, but I was aware they weren’t right. There was always a nagging cerebral tension.

What I’ve since had to admit to myself is this: I never really loved my Zappa CDs the way I loved my Zappa records. On some level, I’ve always considered a CD to be a shiny token “good for one album’s worth of music.” I never committed a CD to memory like I did LPs. I can still tell you what songs are on side three of *Uncle Meat* (in order), no problem, but I could never recite *The Yellow Shark* track listing. Song titles became numbers, as people would say, “I like tracks 1, 4, and 8.” I oftentimes didn’t know the higher-numbered CD cuts as well as the earlier ones; with no side-A and side-B, it was less common to start with the second half. If I wanted to go straight to “Project X,” I had to consult the CD booklet. “Oh, yeah, track 26...”

Which brings me back to getting the *Francesco Zappa* LP. I recently bought a new turntable – a nicer one than I’ve ever owned – and started listening to Zappa LPs again. It’s a pleasant mode of time travel to sit and listen to records like I did when I was young. Cerebral tension has been replaced by lovely familiarity. It’s not only nostalgia at work either. When fans howled at the original *We’re Only in It for the Money* CD with new bass and drums, Frank accused them of being vinyl and cardboard fetishists. But they were right, and he was dead wrong. If there’s a difference, I’m entitled to a preference, and often the original records simply sound better than their shoddy CD counterparts. Gone is the bothersome “1980s digital reverb on a 1960s recording” anachronism. Yes, I prefer the 22-minute chunk of time that constitutes an LP side. Yes, I like the big album covers, and I like the physical contact while placing LPs on the table and dropping the needle.

Face it, CD sales have been falling steadily for years, and vinyl sales are consistently rising. From what I see, the music lovers who are still willing to shell out cash to buy and cherish music are most often buying LPs.

So now the LP/CD question has been reversed. While I used to wonder if I wanted to purchase a CD copy of an album I already owned, I now find myself asking if I want to buy a vinyl copy of a CD I already own. Do I really need the *OK Computer* LP? In many cases, the new LPs are of such high quality that the answer is “Yes!” In the case of Jimi Hendrix, for example, I now have new vinyl to replace the CDs that replaced the original vinyl. While this may seem comical, I think it’s worthwhile. Sony Legacy’s hefty 180-gram vinyl Hendrix releases are fabulous. If the Zappa Family Trust would re-release all of Frank’s LPs again, they would cultivate a new fan base – a generation of young, loyal fans who would love Frank’s music the way I did.

Here’s the new problem: As CDs fade away, I catch myself worrying about what titles will make the transition back to vinyl. And so it goes...

The turntables are turning.



## 5. WHAM BAM, THANK YOU SHAZAM

Simon Prentis

Those of us whose aging is now no longer so slow, and whose hipness may be more in the realm of hip-replacement than anything resembling cool (and who could certainly no longer be accused of being ‘young people’) will probably be starting to notice that our recall of song titles in the FZ oeuvre is not quite as pin-sharp as it once used to be. Unless it’s just me. I still have almost instant recognition that any given snippet of FZ music is a Zappa piece (one-two seconds is usually enough) but from a standing start I’m increasingly struggling to remember the name of the album it might be from – let alone the title of the track. Scary stuff, this brain oxidation.

So anyway, having recently downloaded the music-recognition app SHAZAM on my wannabe-hip shiny new iPhone, and having been deeply impressed by its ability to identify vaguely familiar background music in bars and restaurants where my aged ears struggle to hear over the hubbub of noise and conversation, I thought I’d give it a whirl with my Zappa collection. As those of you who already use Shazam will know, it ‘listens’ to about 10 seconds of music, runs it through a database, and within about another 10 seconds either tells you what the track is, or comes back empty-handed.

I thought I’d start with something easy. Not. A random segment from the babblings on *It Can’t Happen Here*. No problem, though. 20 seconds later, a positive identification, even if it comes up with the version on *‘Tis The Season To Be Jelly* from the *Beat The Boots* series. Jeez, that’s good. Not to say pretty damn *recherché*. I’m not even sure I’ve heard that version myself. And how many people outside of the hard-core audience would have even known that it was Zappa in the first place?

Curious as to what it’s going to make of a ‘signature’ tune, I try it out next with *Black Napkins*. Easy enough, but again, I’m offered a bootleg version, from *As An Am*. Heck, it even comes up with an audio clip, reminding me that I haven’t heard this wonderful version in a while. And not only that, it appears to be offering a download. *Mother of Mary and Joseph*. OK, let’s get serious. The title track from *Weasels Ripped My Flesh*? That’s not even music to most people’s ears. But moments later, it’s bang on the money. What the fuck? How the hell does that work?

It turns out that Shazam has a database of some ten million songs. Ten million. Assuming an average length of 3 minutes per song, it would take almost exactly the length of my life so far to listen to all that music in real time – and that's on a 24/7 basis, without any time for sleep or any other activity. And yet, it can scan that huge database on the basis of its brief sample and tell me the correct answer within just 10 seconds – because that's apparently all the time it takes to retrieve the information from my phone, rinse it through the entire 57 years' worth of music stored in their server in a secret location under the Sahara Desert (or wherever) and send it back to my phone. Scary? That's downright spooky. What hath man wrought?

Of course, the song has to be on the database in the first place. Someone (or something) has clearly taken the trouble to load up all the albums Zappa released in his lifetime (Shazam is unfazed by even the hardest-to-identify passages from *The Yellow Shark*), but the posthumous releases are not on its radar – even the arguably still prehumous *Civilization Phaze III* and *Trancefusion*. But it's fine with, say, *Trout Mask Replica* – and even more recondite wonders like The Shaggs and the fabulous Valentin Clastrier, although it stumbles over Conlon Nancarrow and Cecil Taylor. But then again, it doesn't even recognise Ravel's Bolero.

So it still has a trick or two to learn. But oxidise, it won't. And as my short and long term recall continues to deteriorate, I'm going to continue to need a silicon beef-up in the memory department. And why not. *Love myself better than I love myself?* If only.



## 6. LARRY TAUGHT ME TO GO MERRY-GO-ROUND:

Wild Man Fischer and Phonography

John A. Riley

Wild Man Fischer's death in June 2011 probably surprised only those who assumed that he'd passed on years ago. Hyperactive, attention-seeking vagrants probably don't last long in a mean city like Los Angeles, at the seedy end of Sunset Boulevard. But news of his death moved me deeply. I'd been a huge fan of his for the best part of a decade, my appreciation of his work reaching apex with the release of the documentary **Derailroaded** in 2006. In this piece I want to offer some reflections on the album that the two men made together, and to consider what Zappa's use of Fischer might tell us about Zappa's own project/object.

Fischer was stone cold crazy, that's the most important thing to remember. It wasn't an act. When in the late 60s, Zappa was looking for bands and artistes to fill the Bizarre records roster, the schizophrenic Fischer, who had spent his life in and out of institutions and sang to anyone who'd listen in the Hollywood area, was picked out. Fischer possessed no discernable musical finesse. He simply bellowed, at the top of his voice, either about his own tortured life or about Blue Meanies, dance crazes or seemingly whatever came into his head. Zappa produced an album that was part sound collage, part straightforward spoken word and part daft pop songs.

Zappa was becoming increasingly interested in "field recordings" – It was his plan to do **Trout Mask Replica** in this way, hence the nonsensical spoken word interludes and the "bush recording" of Beefheart's awkward conversation with two terrified teenagers. **An Evening with Wild Man Fischer** was, at that time, Zappa's most long-form attempt at fashioning an album out of field recordings. The backed songs seem like short interludes, while much of the album is taken up with recordings of Fischer's monologues in the street and the studio.

I link this idea of field recordings (a term used in anthropology - Zappa often used the argument of "anthropology" when batting away accusations that his prurient interest in possible variations on a basic theme were pornographic) to the concept of phonography. Phonography was the title of the first proper album by R Stevie Moore (like Zappa a fan of

the discordant aboriginal rock of The Shaggs), released in 1977 recorded at home on a reel to reel tape recorder, the tape worn thin from the continual overdubbing of guitars. Since Moore used the term to characterise his own brand of low-tech, eccentric Anglophile pop, the term has been taken up by others to describe an interest in sound recording rather than creation or playing. Isaac Sterling offers the following definition:

*The simple answer is that phonography (literally “sound-writing”) refers to field-recording. This entails the capture of any event that can be reproduced and represented as sound. Auditory events are selected, framed by duration and method of capture, and presented in a particular format and context, all of which distinguishes a recording from the original event during which it was captured. In this respect, phonography is analogous to any other form of recording. It is distinct from recording in general only to the extent that the capture of sound is privileged over its production. This bias reflects an attempt to discover rather than invent. (<http://www.phonography.org/whatis.htm>)*

“To discover rather than invent” might be the motto of John and Alan Lomax, the musicologists who documented the traditional music of the American South, and indeed folk music of much of the rest of the world, lugging an unwieldy phonograph recorder round in the trunk of a Ford sedan.

Listening to many of the Lomax recordings now, there’s the inevitable naïve innocence that the present day onlooker always ascribes to the past. This quality is easily exploited by new age tyrants such as Moby, whose reification of Alan’s 1959 field trip recordings on **Play** was executed with the combination of truculence and kitsch sincerity that characterises many a totalitarian dictator.

Zappa, though dictatorial in his own way, at least dispenses with the hand-wringing, and the obsession with some edenic, prelapsarian era or pure Platonic origin. The search for this mythic spring has sent many a bloated rock star lashing out with a roots album/collaboration with a musical elder statesman (see the documentary **It Might Get Loud** and the Foo Fighters’ album recorded entirely on analogue equipment for instructive, if unimaginative examples). Zappa’s phonographic use of Fischer is interesting precisely

because it attempts to situate this much-fetishised innocence (Fischer as the Kaspar Hauser of rock) within a teeming, carnivalesque - but most of all cynical – reality.

The first track “Merry Go Round” is a simple childish song backed by toy percussion that sounds like it belongs in the room of clockwork musical tunes from Pink Floyd’s **Piper at the Gates of Dawn**. But the mood of childish innocence quickly changes as we move to a seven minute sunset strip field recording, with atmospheric percussion adding a menacing, fractious atmosphere. The most chilling moment is when a girl passing by yells at Fischer that he’s insane. His hysterical response, the almost inevitable “I’M NOT INSANE!” is unsettling in its wrongheaded sincerity.

Later, LA svengalis Kim Fowley and Rodney Bingenheimer (their presence perhaps testifying to Zappa’s aspirations to being *part* of a scene, rather than the stubborn self-distinction of the 70s and 80s) recite a parodic biblical prophesy about Fischer, while low piano notes rumble behind them. The text they read is deeply sarcastic - “*Somewhere a young homosexual boy gets ready to burn his red silk underwear because he has just seen the sweatshirt and jersey of Wild Man Fischer*” – with a chanted refrain of the singer’s name punctuating each of these pronouncements. As well as a sardonic counterpoint to Fischer’s freewheeling, surreal sincerity, the track, in its creation of an occult atmosphere of incantation, reminds us of the eerie obverse of being a Hollywood “face”: the fogged-out psychotic savagery of Charles Manson (like Zappa an erstwhile Laurel Canyon resident) who, three months after the release of the Fischer record, would attempt to unleash his “helter skelter” war on an unsuspecting Hollywood glitterati.

The next side of vinyl documents unaccompanied versions of Fischer’s songs, complete with Zappa’s echoing voice from the control booth. Fischer attempts to bait Zappa with the lyrics “*I ask you, Mr. Zappa / I ask you very clear / You didn't state in your Freak Out album / Which way the freaks went!*” but of course Zappa does not deign to respond from the booth. “Federal Bureau of Narcotics” is a bouncy tune that chimes with Zappa’s sudden interjection on Plastic People: “There’s this guy from the CIA and he’s creeping around Laurel Canyon” – testifying to the prevalence of government mistrust (and the drug-fuelled paranoia that Zappa witnessed but claimed never to have participated in) in the late 60s that Zappa would provocatively document in the song “The Downtown Talent Scout.”

“Who Did It Johnny?” is a bouncy tune with a 50s doo-wop progression, the tale of a murder suspect being interrogated. Fischer frequently breaks off from singing to deliver histrionic asides. This is nowhere more apparent than on Fischer’s magnum opus “Jennifer Jones”, a chilling tale of mass murder delivered with a childish – and belly-laugh inducing - sense of glee.

On the next side, subtitled “some historical notes”, Fischer’s songs are coupled with recordings of him explaining their origin. Only “The Taster” is backed by a full band, and the percussion on “Serrano Beach” does smack of a weariness with the project. Fischer’s delusions about his songwriting ability and, more painfully, his faith in that mainstream success that’s just around the corner gesture towards music business callousness in a way that intellectuals might call a “structuring absence.” Is Zappa implicating himself in this? There follows another lengthy field recording from the strip that adds little to the first one, except to imply that bellowing out his songs in public was what Fischer did *all the time*.

The sheer density and unstoppable flow of “Why I Am Normal” make it the spoken word equivalent of Zappa’s “black page” compositions, though this time the page is cluttered with words, demonstrating a bizarre mixture of vulnerability and egotism. This leads into one of Fischer’s signature tunes, “The Wild Man Fischer Story”, with him recounting his woeful life story cartoonishly, including a stereotypically highly-strung Jewish lady voice representing his mother.

The album’s conclusion is twofold – “The Circle” is billed as “Larry’s first psychedelic hit” and was actually released as a single, and is basically a loose jam with Fischer really pushing his lunatic delivery to the limit. Zappa’s contempt for the uncritical excesses of the counterculture rubs up against Fischer’s sincerity to un-nerving effect. Is Zappa conflating the two?

The final exchange between Fischer and Zappa, entitled “Larry Under Pressure” is especially poignant:

*WMF: Don't forget, Frank, despite how happy I was in '61 and '62 I was committed to back-to-back mental institutions - I was raised with the fact that I was crazy, I was raised with the fact that I had to sleep with old men who pissed and shit in the floor ... Are you ready for that? I'm trying to get myself back to where I was in '61 and '62 if I can.*

*FZ: Start by smiling.*

Uncharacteristic of Zappa, who of course rarely smiled. What are we to make of the inclusion of this exchange? Sincerity or provocation? **An Evening With Wild Man Fischer** is both. With the album, Zappa showcased not only the wrought unpredictability and energy that he needed from his sidemen, but also his interest in phonography and his interest in unusual juxtapositions created through overdubbing (the way Zappa adds Art Tripp's percussion to the field recordings recalls the way he later added synthetic-sounding bass and drums to the dry, room-tone of **We're Only In It For The Money**).

Although the Zappa family are unlikely to give this record an official re-release, it's significant in more than just its portrait of a man "under pressure." You can hear echoes of this album in the field recordings of **Playground Psychotics**, the nonsensical density in the dialogue on **Civilization Phaze 3**, and in Zappa's continued love of doo-wop chord progressions. Whatever you think of Zappa's ethics in giving Fischer a record deal in the first place (when he probably needed professional help), the album is a valuable document of a marginal character, and of a time and a place just before Richard Nixon brought back the tango times again. Now how's that for a prelapsarian myth?



## 7. FREAK OUT

Hank Woods

It was 1968, I was 12 years old and I can remember so clearly the Truck Stop off Interstate 84 near where I lived in Portland, Oregon. What I remember even more is the 4-Track tape I had found inside. The cover of the tape had the words "FREAK OUT" on it, with a photo of some rock band I had never heard of. I had to have that tape. Now my hard work of delivering newspapers and cleaning yards was about to pay off. Along with my money, I laid down the tape with the front side up.

"FREAK OUT" it shouted! I had just been introduced to Frank Zappa. Now forty three years later, I am still a Frank Zappa fan.

I saw Frank Zappa only once, at the Portland Paramount Theater on March 29, 1980. It was a Saturday night show at 10:30pm, the price \$8.50 according to the ticket stub I have encased in the frame on the wall. To be honest, I do remember being there, although not much of it other than being there with my brother Mike and being somewhat inebriated.

I met Ike Willis at a Project-Object show in Lake Tahoe, California back in June of 2002. This day I remember well. I was sitting on the crapper at my ex-wife's house, down from Portland for my daughter's high school graduation. Sitting there reading the local newspaper and what do I see?

A band named Project-Object that includes ex-members of Frank Zappa band fame will be playing the music of Frank Zappa! I get on the phone, call my friend Curt who happened to be a Zappa fan as well and asked him if he knew anything of this. Yes, was his reply and at that moment I knew I was going to my first Project-Object show.

It was the first time seeing Project-Object. Along with Ike Willis was Napoleon Murphy Brock. What more could be asked for, here I was listening to the music of Frank Zappa along with two of the most distinct Zappa alumni voices ever. It was wonderful, the show rocked and the band was spot on! I could hear Zappa's music right there, live in front of me! After the show, I was able to meet Ike and the rest of the band. After some conversation with Ike, he mentioned that he lived in Portland, Oregon at the time. Wow I said! I also live in Portland. I have known Ike ever since that day.

Back in Portland one day while at Ike's house fixing a computer for him, I remember the look on his face as he walked into the room. He had just had a conversation on the telephone with his manager. He said his manager was moving on and was no longer able to help out. I look at Ike and say I would be happy to help, how hard can it be. Since then I have been the webmaster of IkeWillis.com and help Ike with things like CD sales, gig bookings and more. What an honor it is.

My greatest moment ever with Ike, I think is the time Ike and I are in my car driving with Joe's Garage on the CD player; Ike is singing his part in the seat next to me! OMG! It was so great!

Working with Ike I have been very fortunate to meet some great musicians and listen to some great music. The cast of characters that have played with Zappa are a unique group. From what I can tell they all have been at one time and/or still are, amazed by the works of Frank Zappa. Like Zappa himself, these musicians have one thing in common. A true love for music.

Many would say that some Zappa alumni have been riding on the coattails of Frank, playing Frank's music for their own monetary gains. This notion in my mind is false. I have seen, talked and discussed this with Zappa alumni and others who continue to play the music of the late great Frank Zappa. These great musicians play Zappa because of the undying love they have for the man who wrote the music they play.

The Zappa Family Trust should embrace these folks, instead the Zappa Family Trust continues with a constant barrage of useless lawsuits and intimidation. Without the tribute bands, the festivals and hard work of the folks who do play Zappa, who the hell would even know who Frank Zappa is anymore!

My hope would be that the Zappa Family Trust can come to the realization that every time one of the many fine bands that play Zappa music is playing it because they love the music, they admire the man which wrote it. They continue to spread the joy and love for this one

man and his funny music. They continue to expose a new generation to an older generation's music. I believe Frank Zappa would be proud.

I am privileged to be a small bit in a large picture. That large picture is the world of Frank Zappa. As a fan of Frank Zappa, we can all be a part of said picture by continuing to listen, continuing to share this abstract sound from a man whom was a musical genius.

My thanks to Ike Willis, Project-Object, the folks at Zappanale, Zappa alumni and all the other bands and fine musicians who continue to bring the sound of Frank Zappa to the masses. I have to also thank the Zappa Family Trust for the effort shown in releasing more unheard and unreleased Zappa music from the Zappa music vault.

As Ike would say, Uncle Frank would be happy.

This December 2011 marks 18 years since the passing of Frank Zappa, hard to believe it has been that long. This month on the 21<sup>st</sup> also marks his birth. So to commemorate this great musician, composer, break out that old vinyl copy of "Freak Out", turn up the volume and get your Frank on.

Thank you Frank!

