

## FRANK ZAPPA

**F**RANK ZAPPA DESERVES ADMISSION to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame as a great guitarist, songwriter, creator of concept albums, comedian, talent scout, doo-wop expert, social critic and avid misanthrope. The Hall has already honored several of each, but Frank Zappa stands unique as the first inductee who also had a substantial career as a composer and performer of "serious" modern music.

His greatest importance to rock history was in bringing all these talents to bear at once. Not content to create a rock band with the chops and discipline to play 12-tone rows, he also created modernist works that incorporated "Louie Louie." Early in his career, Zappa co-wrote the Penguins' "Memories of el Monte," a classic West Coast doo-wop record and an evocation of an entire period in pop history.

Still, it would be wrong to imagine that Zappa "worked his way up" to larger-scale compositions that built on his interest in composers like Satie, Stravinsky, Schoenberg and, of course, Varèse. Zappa had worked on all these kinds of music simultaneously, from his high school years until his premature death from prostate cancer late in 1993. His cultivated misanthropy, his gift for coining acerbic epigrams (notably defining *rock journalism* as "people who can't write interviewing people who can't talk for people who can't read") and his demands for perfectionism from associates, band members and audiences (not to mention himself) give Zappa the image of a snob. But in fact, Zappa, a composer who trained himself at the public library, believed profoundly in the possibilities of democracy and individual self-expression.

Zappa grew up in Baltimore and then in an assortment of towns in California, most notably the desert shire of Lancaster. It was in this arid, isolated atmosphere that he came to appreciate culture of all kinds, distrust conformity and spot and nurture kindred souls. The son of a scientist, he developed a wickedly rational and skeptical turn of mind, which combined in volatile fashion with his acidly satiric wit and matter-of-fact acceptance of scatology. In the lairs of Middle America, from the police precincts of Lancaster to the boardrooms of recording corporations, this combination was a certified guarantee for getting its possessor into all sorts of scrapes — a guarantee honored many times.

Zappa first spun into full public view with his quintet, the Mothers of Invention, whose 1966 double-disc debut album, *Freak Out!*, immediately established his determination to fuse all his interests. It contained some of the most elaborate and densely electronic experiments any rock band had yet created — plus hilarious social satire, a dead-right political blues, allusions to a half-dozen three-chord bar-band standards and assorted odd angles applied to R&B harmonies.

*Absolutely Free* and *We're Only in It for the Money* followed in the same spirit. Around this time, the Mothers came up with a series of groundbreaking stage shows, notably those at the Garrick Theater, in Greenwich Village, during which the Mothers invented the form for all the

surrealist-derived pop-music ensembles of the next three decades. (Zappa used the Mothers of Invention moniker for years, but the band's personnel varied; he remained the only constant, and his personality dictated the group's point of view.) Zappa really took off on his own with the orchestral album *Lumpy Gravy* and *Cruising With Ruben and the Jets*, a loving *homage*/parody of doo-wop. This all happened in 1967 and 1968. Blistering through the burgeoning of jazz-rock fusion with *Uncle Meat*, *Hot Rats* and *Burnt Weeny Sandwich* took about another year. By the time the '70s began, Zappa had established himself as an unpredictable iconoclast: difficult, intense and unignorable. His albums didn't sell freight-car loads; he didn't have a Top 10 album or a hit single until 1974, with "Don't Eat the Yellow Snow," from *Apostrophe*. But he filled large theaters, and even arenas, with shows that challenged the boundaries of musical, theatrical and social propriety.

Various legal, personnel, technological and artistic problems led Zappa off the road and into the studio nearly full time by the late '70s. His later work used rock & roll and R&B elements almost exclusively as coloration while maintaining a horrified stance toward what was going on in American culture. The post-'60s narrowing of musical diversity and political perspective was the subject of his 1980 anti-censorship rock opera, *Joe's Garage*. Yet it was in the early '80s, when he was running his own Barking Pumpkin label, that Zappa scored his biggest hit ever, "Valley Girl," with his daughter Moon Unit doing a ditzzy consumer-crazed rant she'd picked up from teen-age shopping-mall denizens.

Soon an even ditzier group arrived on the scene: the Parents Music Resource Center, "the Washington wives," crusaders for the purity of America's youth against the satanic depredations of rock & roll. Zappa spoke out against this witch hunt more boldly than any other figure in the music world. This led to a minicareer as a public pundit, Senate-hearing witness (a riotous event musically immortalized on *Frank Zappa Meets the Mothers of Prevention*) and author of one of the few truly serious rock-star autobiographies, *The Real Frank Zappa Book*.

Zappa treated everything except his work as a massively annoying distraction. His focus remained on music, and he increasingly relied on such studio devices as the Synclavier to allow him to voice his ideas without human intermediaries. His work grew more and more respectable. *Boulez Conducts Zappa: The Perfect Stranger and Other Works*, from 1984, achieved that rare fate of a modernist work — success on *Billboard's* classical-music chart. Pierre Boulez and Zubin Mehta found several of his pieces intriguing enough to perform them with "real" orchestras. Zappa lived to see a generation of Eastern Europeans name him as one of the guiding stars of their revolution. For millions all over the world, wherever the idea of freedom is associated with the idea of rock & roll, his name will always be hallowed. The association that begins tonight is an honor for the Hall of Fame at least as much as it is for Frank Zappa.

— DAVE MARSH

*Frank Zappa and his daughter Moon Unit in his New York City apartment, 1968*

