

# Frank Zappa

## Revolt against mediocrity

BY BATYA FRIEDMAN AND STEVE LYONS

**F**rank Zappa is a rock musician who seems to defy categorization. He writes symphonic music, deplors drug use, and champions individual rights. Last year, almost alone among musicians, he stood up against the Parents' Music Resource Center, a group of prominent Washington women who objected to the sexual content of popular music and demanded that records be rated just like movies. Opposing this attempt at censorship, he testified before a Senate committee and toured the country debating the issue on radio and television.

Zappa, a self-taught musician, has always followed his own set of rules. In 1966, he and the Mothers of Invention released their first album, *Freak Out*. Instead of easy harmonies and sappy love songs, the group came out with such titles as "Wowie Zowie," "Who Are the Brain Police?" and "The Return of the Son of Monster Magnet." An executive at Columbia Records made this assessment: "no commercial potential."

One year later, Zappa and the Mothers of Invention released *We're Only in It for the Money*, which mocked the sacred Sergeant Pepper album and ridiculed nearly all aspects of the alternative youth culture, calling hippies phony and drugs stupid. And when Zappa was honored in 1968 with an invitation to perform before all the big-wigs of the music industry at the Grammy Awards, he didn't mince his words: This must be the least enjoyable night of the year for you because you have to sit there and endure the crap you perpetrate on the American public the rest of the year. Then the Mothers played their selection for the evening: a demented version of Duke Ellington's "Satin Doll," complete with pig noises.

Few artists can match Zappa's productivity. He has released more than forty albums, including several double albums, and he has produced a score of records for other musicians. He has written thirty-two compositions for choral and orchestral groups, four ballets, two feature-length films, and two television specials.

We talked with Zappa about art in America, the music industry, and his current work. The interview took place in his studio from 11:00 one night until sunrise the next morning.

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MARK MAREK

**Q:** You have said that "art is dying in this country." What do you mean?

**ZAPPA:** Much of the creative work I find interesting and amusing has no basis in economic reality. Most decisions about what gets produced and distributed are made strictly on a bottom-line basis. Nobody makes a move without talking to an accountant first. There will always be people who will take a chance, but their numbers are dwindling. Those who are crazy enough to spend money on some unusual object or event are an endangered species. The spirit of adventurousness at any level of American society has been pretty much legislated away.

In the 1980s, with a repressive, Republican, Yuppie-oriented Administration installed and ready to perpetuate itself with Supreme Court appointments that will keep us in trouble for the next half century, the prognosis is not good for things which differ from the viewpoint of the conservative Right.

**Q:** Do you think anything can be done to reverse the trend?

**ZAPPA:** Perhaps. I tend to view the whole thing as a conspiracy. It is no accident that the public schools in the United States are pure shit. It is no accident that masses of drugs are available and openly used at all levels of society. In a way, the real business of government is the business of controlling the labor force. Social pressure is placed on people to become a certain type of individual, and then rewards are heaped on people who conform to that stereotype.

Take the pop-music business, for example. Look at the stereotypes held up by the media as examples of great accomplishment. You see guys who are making millions of dollars and



MEADOW LANE

**Frank Zappa makes beautiful music on the 'Steve Allen Westinghouse Show,' 1963.**

selling millions of units. And because they are making and selling millions they are stamped with the seal of approval, and it is the millions which make their work quality. Yet anyone can look at what is being done and say, "Jesus, I can do that!"

You *celebrate* mediocrity, you *get* mediocrity. People who could have achieved more won't because they know that all they have to do is be "that," and they too can sell millions and make millions and have people love them because they're merely mediocre.

Few people who do anything excellent are ever heard of. You know why? Because excellence, pure excellence, terrifies the fuck out of Americans, who've been bred to appreciate the success of the mediocre. People don't wish to be reminded that lurking somewhere there are people who can do some shit you can't do. They can think a way you can't think; they can run a way you can't run; they can dance a way you can't dance. They are excellent. You aren't excellent. Most Americans aren't excellent, they're only okay. And so to keep them happy as a labor force, you say, "Let's take this mediocre chump and we say, 'He is terrific!'" All the other mediocre chumps say, "Yeah, that's right and that gives me hope, because one day as mediocre and chumpish as I am, I can. . . ." It's smart labor relations. An MBA decision. That is the orientation of most entertainment, politics, and religion. So considering how firmly entrenched all that is right now, you think it's going to turn around? Not without a genetic mutation, it's not!

**Q:** What are the issues that the music of the 1980s can address?

**ZAPPA:** What can music address today? It can address anything that it wants to, but it will only address those topics that will *sell*. Musicians will not address topics that are controversial if they want to have a hit. So music will continue to address those things that really matter to people who buy records: boy-girl relationships, boy-boy relationships, boy-car relationships, girl-car relationships, boy-girl-food relationships perhaps. But safe. Every once in a while somebody will say *WAR IS HELL* or *SAVE THE WHALES* or something bland. But if you talk about pop music as a medium for expressing social attitudes, the medium expresses the social attitude perfectly by avoiding contact

with things that are really there. That is the telling point about the society that is consuming the product. If society wanted to hear information of a specific nature in songs, about controversial topics, they would *buy* them. But they don't. You are talking about a record-buying audience which is interested in personal health and well-being, the ability to earn a living, the ability to stay young at all costs forever, and not much else.

**Q:** How about the role of music in society? For example, Kent Nagano, who conducted the Berkeley symphony, said, "A composer has a job to do within a culture. Which is not to say a composer should write what the public already wants to hear, but rather that the public is employing the composer to lead them, to show them a direction." What do you think of that?

**ZAPPA:** I don't think a composer has any function in society at all, especially in an industrial society, unless it is writing movie scores, advertising jingles, or stuff that is consumed in industry. I respect Kent; however, I think he takes a very optimistic and naive attitude toward what it takes to be a composer. If you walk down the street and ask anybody if a composer is of *any use to any society*, what kind of answer do you think you would get? I mean, nobody gives a shit. If you decide to become a composer, you seriously run the risk of becoming less than a human being. Who the fuck needs you? All the good music's already been written by people with wigs and stuff on.

**Q:** If the public doesn't need composers, do composers need a public? Milton Babbitt, an electronic music composer, has advocated the virtual exclusion of the general public from modern music concerts. What is your opinion on that?

**ZAPPA:** That's unnecessary, they're already excluded; they don't go. Have you been to a modern music concert? Plenty of room, isn't there? Come on, Milton, give yourself a break. I hope you're not going to spend money trying to exclude these people. What are you going to do, have it legislated in Congress like those assholes who wanted to make it a law that you couldn't put anything backwards on a phonograph record?

**Q:** What do you think art will be like in twenty years?

**ZAPPA:** I don't think anything that a reasonable person would describe as art is going to be around. Not here. I'm talking about art in terms of valued, beautiful stuff that is done not because of your ego but just because it is beautiful, just because it is the right thing to do. We will be told what is *good* and it will be *mediocre*. There's always the possibility that an anomaly will appear—some weird little twisted thing will happen and there will be somebody who's doing it. But who's going to know? In the dark ages there was art, but who knew?

**Q:** How do unknown music groups attract the attention of record companies?

**ZAPPA:** Today record companies don't even listen to your tape. They look at your publicity photo. They look at your hair. They look at your zippers. How gay do you look? And if you've got the look, then it really doesn't make a fucking bit of difference what's on the tape—they can always hire somebody to fix that. And they don't expect you to be around for twenty years. The business is not interested in developing artists. They want that fast buck because they realize that next week there's going to be another hairdo and another zipper. And they realize that the people are not listening, they're dancing, or they're driving, or something else. The business is more geared toward expendability today. That's because merchandising is so tied to "visuals" now.

**Q:** How is music selected to be heard on pop radio? Is it



**Frank Zappa, surrounded by one of many incarnations of the Mothers of Invention.**

determined by the taste of the listener or does the public listen to whatever the industry feeds it?

**ZAPPA:** A little of both. Radio is consumed like wallpaper is consumed. You don't concentrate on the radio, you turn it on while you're working, you turn it on while you're driving. It's not like the old days when families sat around and looked at it. So the stations are formatted to provide a certain texture and ambience that will be consumed by people who view themselves in a certain way. Are you a Yuppie? Well, you're going to listen to a certain texture because that reinforces the viewpoint you have of yourself and the viewpoint you want to project to other people of who and what you are. It's the same thing as what you leave on your coffee table for people to discover when they come to your apartment. It's not a musical medium, it's an advertising medium. If you have a nation of people who refuse to face reality about themselves, about the rest of the world, about anything, they want reinforcement for the fantasy that they're living in. And these consulting services that format the station know that. Market research will show you that. Obviously you want to deliver to the public things that will reinforce that. A station loses money when somebody turns it off the air. So as long as your station sounds like the kind of swill that the Yuppie needs to consume, you got it.

**Q:** How does a record become a hit?

**ZAPPA:** It's simple. It's called "payola." You pay somebody to play your record. Hits are okay. I think they're wonderful for people who want them. They're wonderful for people who like to listen to them. But then, hits shouldn't be the sum total of music history. Let's face it, Mozart had hits. Beethoven had hits. Did you ever look in *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians*? There are thousands of names of people who wrote music throughout history, yet we haven't heard one line they ever wrote. That doesn't mean it is bad music; it just means they didn't have hits. In the old days, if the king didn't like you or the church didn't like you or whatever, you didn't have a hit. As a matter of fact you might even be dead. So now you can have a hit if you are willing to pay. So who's the new king? Who's the new church?

**Q:** As you compose, are you primarily guided by how you

want the music to affect a listener's spiritual, emotional, intellectual, or physical state, or by the musical structure—melody, harmony, and rhythm?

**ZAPPA:** None of the above. It's more like, how did it turn out? Does it work? And if it works you don't even have to know why it works. It either works or it doesn't work. It's like drawing a picture. Maybe there are too many fingers on one hand, and a foot is too short over there. Or you could apply it to a recipe; maybe you've got too much salt over here. Or you could apply it to the design of a building. Did you forget to put in a toilet, or are there enough windows on the second floor?

**Q:** Those are examples of pragmatic considerations as opposed to aesthetic considerations.

**ZAPPA:** I don't know how to explain it. I just do it. It's not based on any academic regulations. If you take a blank piece of paper and pencil and just start sketching, it doesn't necessarily have to be a house and a tree and a cow. It could be just some kind of a scribble but sometimes those scribbles work and they are the right thing for that blank piece of space and you can enjoy them. Or you can say, "That's not a house, that's not a cow, that's not a tree, and so I don't like it; it's just a scribble." It depends on what your viewpoint is.

**Q:** Is your view truly as subjective as you are painting it to be? So, if I look at an image and it appeals to me, then all I can say is that it works for me and I can't say any more about it.

**ZAPPA:** What else do you have the right to say? If you go beyond that, you become a critic. Who needs those fuckers?

**Q:** Other people might say that there's something universal, some sort of consensus on what works and what doesn't.

**ZAPPA:** People are free to agree. If you want to join a committee and feel the warmth and reassurance that other people's opinions will provide to reinforce your own, then go for it. I happen to not care for that. It's not something that I aspire to, nor do I want to live my life in accordance with that ideal. In fact, I despise it. But it's okay for other people. There's no reason why I should inflict my point of view on somebody who really enjoys being part of a group consensus.

**Q:** What about the relative merit of various human pursuits? For example, do you consider jogging or playing ice hockey to be of equal value to, say, creating art, on some cosmic scale?

**ZAPPA:** No.

**Q:** Why? What's the scale?

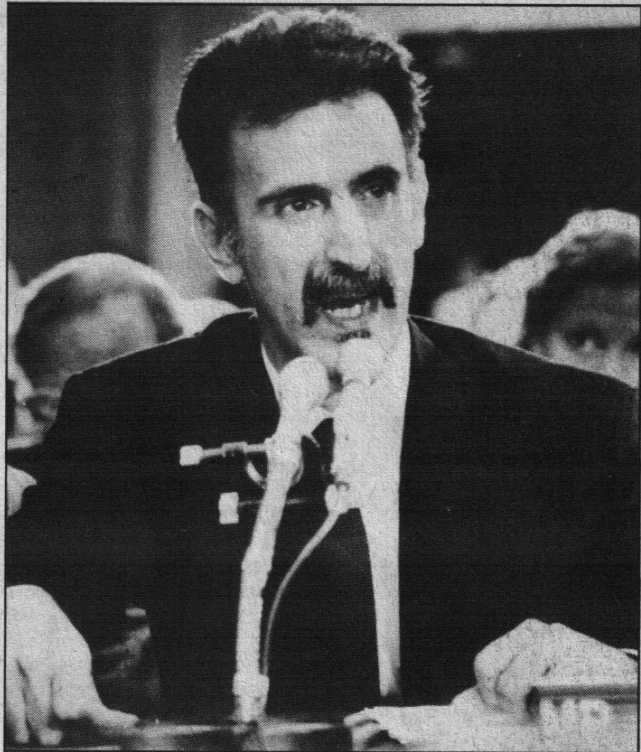
**ZAPPA:** What is it that survives from an ancient civilization that characterizes that civilization? What do you find? Not their jogging! The music doesn't survive, but things that are related to art do. The beautiful things that the societies do is what survives. Let's look into the future. Let's look at the remnants of the American society.

**Q:** Wait a second, ugly things survive too.

**ZAPPA:** Yep. That's what will survive the American society!

**Q:** You seem to admire the raw emotional energy of some music, yet you have little tolerance for emotional love songs.

**ZAPPA:** It's quite a challenge to reach somebody emotionally without using words that have literal connections. To perform expressively on an instrument, I have respect for that. To get to the level of performance where you are no longer thinking about operating a piece of machinery and can just project something emotional through the machinery, that is worthy of respect. Writing a song about why somebody left you, that's stupid.



WIDE WORLD PHOTOS

**Frank Zappa scoffs under oath at a U.S. Senate hearing on the naughty lyrics of rock music.**

The performers and composers don't necessarily believe in what they're saying or what they're doing, but they know that if you write a song about love, it's got a 3,000 per cent better chance of going on the radio than if you write a song about celery. It's a buy and sell. And so the value system builds up from that. What I think of as the emotional content of music is probably a lot different than what you think of. Since I write music I know what the techniques are. If I wanted to write something that would make you weep, I could do it. There's ways to do it. It's a cheap shot.

**Q:** Would you say it's sentimental?

**ZAPPA:** It's not just sentimental. There are certain harmonic climates that you can build. There are certain notes of a scale that you can play within a harmonic climate to "wreak pathos," and it's very predictable. The average guy doesn't know how predictable or easy it is to do that stuff; if you just look at it scientifically, you can do it. For example, you've got the key; it's A minor, right? And you're going to play a lot of Bs in the key of A minor and that's going to give you that little twinge. Well, that music played on an accordion is not the same as the exact same notes and the same melody played and the same rhythm played on six bagpipes. It's a different story. So the timbre is involved, too. And the amplitude is involved. And if that A-minor chord is very quiet and the Bs are just smoothly put in there, that's one attitude. If it's being played by a high-school marching band and it's being jammed in your face, it's sad all right, but it's not *that* kind of sad!

In different cultures there are also different norms for how certain sound combinations are perceived. That's why if you listen to Chinese classical music, everything sounds like it's being played on a kazoo and it's thin and weird, but to a Chinese person it's lush. I don't know why a person would think that the tone quality of Chinese classical music was really a warming sensation. The Chinese are different though. They've got 7,000 years behind them. Maybe after 7,000 years we're going to think that stuff sounds pretty good, too.

**Q:** Any plans for more of your own rock-'n'-roll?

**ZAPPA:** You know, I'm so involved with the Synclavier [a computer-based synthesizer] and what it can do and being able

to hear compositions played exactly, that I'm not even interested in writing any other kind of music. I don't get a charge out of even thinking about it. I'm really interested in music and I always have been. Now that I'm in the stage where I can have the seemingly *most* impossible things performed *exactly* right, that's worth devoting some time to.

**Q:** You have a very prolific output. Do you have any special methodologies for getting things done?

**ZAPPA:** Just keep working, a little sleep, a lot of work. That's probably one of the best-kept secrets in America. I think there are a lot of people afraid to work that way because they are afraid somebody will say they are workaholics. It's not as bad as having somebody call you a "communist," but if you are in a jogging suit, you don't want to have that label attached to you.

**Q:** What do you see as your greatest accomplishment and your greatest failure?

**ZAPPA:** I would say that my entire life has been one massive failure. Because I don't have the tools or wherewithal to accomplish what I want to accomplish. If you have an idea and you want that idea to be done a certain way and you can't do it, what do you have? You have failure. I live with failure every day because I can't do the things that I really want to do. I can do some other stuff. I can do whatever my budget will allow me to do. Unfortunately, I have these ideas that are just too fucking expensive. In realistic terms, you're looking at a genuine daily failure syndrome. I have no fantasies about what the odds are that I'll be able to do what I want to do. It's not going to happen. Once you realize what your limitations are and realize that even if you "achieve" something it doesn't make a fucking bit of difference anyway, then you can be "okay." I enjoy sitting down here [in the studio] all by myself typing on the Synclavier. I can do twelve hours and love it. And I know that ultimately it doesn't mean a fucking thing that I did it. It's useless. That's okay; it makes me feel good.

**Q:** It seems that for most people that kind of isolation would lead to loneliness.

**ZAPPA:** Try to imagine what the opposite of loneliness is. Think of it. Everyone in the world loves you? What is that? Realize that you're in isolation. Live it! Enjoy it! Just be glad that there aren't a bunch of people who want to use up your time. Because along with all the love and admiration that's going to come from the people that would keep you from being lonely, there is the emotional freight you have to bear from people who are wasting your time, and you can't get that back. So when you're lonely and you're all by yourself, guess what you have? You have all of *your own time*. That's a pretty good fucking deal. Something you couldn't buy any place else. And every time you're out being sociable and having other people be "nice" to you so that you don't feel "lonely," they're wasting your time. What are you getting for it? Because after they're done being nice to you, then they want something from you. And they've already taken your time!

Loneliness, once you've come to deal with it so that it is not an uncomfortable sensation, so it doesn't feel like drowning or something, is not a bad deal. It's a good deal. It's the next best thing to solitude. I'm not talking solitary confinement. Solitude. If you're sensitive to loneliness, you're going to be in trouble, because then the loneliness turns into something really painful, a horrible depression and then you die. One way or another, you just die. So who needs that shit? ■