

ROCKTOBER

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Frank Zappa - The Freakout List DVD

GUEST REVIEW by Gary Pig Gold

Long before the Valley Girls, Jewish princesses, mud sharks, dental floss, yellow snow and, tragically, the cancer which claimed him in 1993, there was simply Francis Vincent Zappa, a young kid with an above-eclectic record collection who escaped the confines of Lancaster, California to arrive in Hollywood with his rockin' teen combo The Mothers of Invention in 1965. His career on stage and disc thereafter caused countless unsuspecting youngsters such as myself to immediately set aside their Monkees albums in order that we could join our newest mentor upon this most adventurous of all, as it turns out, musical paths.

But exactly how did this seemingly unassuming composer/guitarist with a penchant for sinister footwear become one of the most musically and socially iconoclastic participants of the 1960s? A fascinating new documentary from Sexy Intellectual, *Frank Zappa: The Freak-Out List* uses the 179 names listed within the original 1966 issue of the Mothers' debut album *Freak Out!* as a guide to explaining, well, why the music therein sounded the way it did.

As in, sounded like NOTHING ELSE released that year ...or ever since, for that matter. Setting aside the litany of Zappa's friends, teachers, business associates and various showbiz personalities (such as Lenny Bruce and John Wayne) to concentrate instead on the seventy-one musical figures listed (which Frank said at the time "have contributed materially in many ways to make our music what it is; please do not hold it against them"), *The Freak-Out List* and its superb cast of interviewees – including three former Mothers and the University of Southampton's Professor of Music David Nicholls – duly cite the connections between, for example, Bob Dylan and "Trouble Every Day," not to mention *The Cadillacs* and the *Cruising with Ruben and the Jets* album ...yet I'm still not exactly sure why Frank dedicated one of *Freak Out!*'s most alarming numbers, "Help I'm A Rock," to Elvis Presley (though I have my theories).

It is in its detailed examinations of the classical composers and rhythm 'n' blues musicians however, who first awoke young Frank to the possibilities of a life and career submerged in musical exploration, which truly give this film the meat of its matter. Of course the quote "The present day composer refuses to die!" will be familiar to anyone who read the fine print inside the Mothers' key early albums. But as *The Freak-Out List* explains, the man who first uttered those defiant words in 1921, French composer Edgard Varèse, remained a major influence upon, and inspiration to, Frank Zappa throughout his life.

Since first reading his name in a 1953 Look Magazine article and subsequently unearthing his Complete Works Volume 1 album, Zappa took to Varèse's above-free-form, percussion-based experimental/electronic work, referencing and returning to it often for the remainder of his life. In fact, so utterly besotted was he with the man, the young Zappa convinced his parents to allow him a long-distance phone call to the composer as a fifteenth birthday present. (Most unfortunately, the two never actually met: Edgard passed away just months before the Freak Out! album was released).

Likewise we learn of, and actually hear via side-by-side audio/visual clips, the above-obvious influence of Arnold Schoenberg's "Accompaniment to a Film Score" on Zappa's very own film scores, and precisely how snatches of Holst and Stravinsky end up weaved into the Mothers' Absolutely Free album of 1967. Why, as Frank himself told the likely bemused readers of Hit Parader that year, "buy everything that you can by Igor Stravinsky and dance to it." Hotcha!

Zappa biographer Ben Watson rightfully warns us, however, that such "spot-the-musical-quote" playing misses the point. One should instead concentrate on "how Frank makes you think about classical music" while you're trying to get jiggy with, say, "Invocation and Ritual Dance of the Young Pumpkin."

Now, on the all-important flip side of The Freak-Out List lie the many doo-wop and r'n'b artists Frank was also seriously grooving to, as he mastered drums then guitar in his very first Lancaster desert garage bands (...when he wasn't locked in his room composing film scores, that is). For instance, it is impossible to hear any of Zappa's multitude guitar solos, recorded or otherwise, without being directed straight back to the magnificent Johnny "Guitar" Watson, and The Freak-Out List presents joyous, yet ultimately heartbreaking footage of the two's final musical get-together chez Zappa. Elsewhere, we're shown how no less a kindred musical spirit as Miles Davis, and his In A Silent Way album in particular, helped create a context for Zappa's landmark "jazz-rock" (as it would be pigeon-holed today) Hot Rats. Yes, although he once (in)famously claimed "Jazz isn't dead; it just smells funny," Frank obviously kept his fair share of Eric Dolphy records alongside the Varèse, and co-operated so fully – and so successfully – in jazz violinist Jean-Luc Ponty's King Kong project that Ponty ended up as an actual Mother himself for two entire tours.

So, then: Dozens of albums, hundreds of compositions, and thousands of performances later, we still may not be able to get a sufficient grip around the art, or as some would say artifice, of Frank Zappa. But ever since leaving on what was called his final tour, just before 6 pm on Saturday, December 4, 1993, all we have left are his dedicated scholars, followers, and now films such as The Freak-Out List (plus Sexy Intellectual's companion DVD *Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention In The 1960s* to guide us towards our understanding and appreciation of a figure so prolific, so public, yet so baffling. In an interview with Jazz & Pop magazine in 1967, Zappa explained "that whole Freak Out! album is to be as accessible as possible to the people who wanted to take the time to make it accessible. That list of names in there, if anybody were to research it, it would probably help them a great deal."

As always, however, just don't hold it against them.