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Music DVD Review: Frank Zappa - The Freak-Out List

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The death of Frank Zappa on December 4, 1993 at the age of 52 cut short one of the most creative, eccentric, brilliant, and prolific careers in modern music history.

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He released his debut album *Freak Out*, in 1966. On the inside cover he listed his favorite musicians and performers who had been his most important influences, all 179 of them. *The Freak-Out List* DVD explores those influences.

This DVD is a serious look at a number of styles and artists who provided the foundation upon which Zappa built his music. Archival footage and extended interviews with Mothers Of Invention's Ian Underwood, Don Preston, and George Duke help to shed light upon many of the Zappa myths.

The film is divided into sections and each covers one style of music.

Section one explores classical influences. While mainline performers such as Richard Wagner and Igor Stravinsky appear, it is the eccentric

artist Edgard Varese, who probably most influenced Zappa's musical and song writing style. He used a chromatic method with many odd and dissonant notes. He also paid no attention to the past or tradition but only looked to the future. Zappa would take these lessons and incorporate them into his own style of writing. Frank would always be his own man and care little for what preceded him as well. He would have a life long affection for classical music but on his own terms.

Rhythm and blues would be an early influence in his life. Howlin' Wolf, Matt Murphy, Guitar Slim, and Richard Berry — who was the original composer of "Louie Louie" — provided rhythms and guitar playing which would stay with him the rest of his life. His own guitar style was probably most patterned after that of Johnny "Guitar" Watson who plays a prominent role in this film.

Doo-wop music plays a central role in the DVD and his life. It seems that this music of his youth was a style he truly enjoyed. Groups such as The Cadillacs, The Penguins, and The Moonglows may have been an odd delight but they were a part of his formative years and stayed with him. His *Ruben & The Jets* album was an acknowledgement of this musical form.

The jazz section was the least organized. While his music certainly had jazz influences, they are not as apparent as the other forms. A lot of time is spent exploring Miles Davis' *Bitches Brew* which was released several years after *Freak Out*. Davis may have been an influence but certainly not this release and while interesting, makes no sense to the story of his development.

Frank Zappa's place in music history is secure. While it is impossible to know what actually went on in a mind such as his; *The Freak Out List* is an interesting exploration of some of the influences who made him what he was.

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