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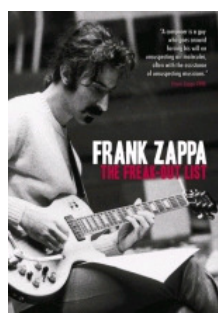
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## Frank Zappa: The Freak-Out List

Dir. Sexy Intellectual/MVD Visual

[Sexy Intellectual/MVD Visual; 2010]

by PAUL BOWER



STYLES: documentary, special interest  
OTHERS: 200 Motels, Leonard Cohen: I'm Your Man, You're Gonna Miss Me

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For most of his adult life, Frank Zappa spent nearly every day trying to create the most interesting music he could think of. For Zappa, genres were pointless, merely functioning as a way for marketers to bracket and compartmentalize an art form that he considered timeless and indefinable. With this in mind, the creators of *Frank Zappa: The Freak-Out List* conducted interviews with several academicians, biographers, and musicians to explore the influences that shaped Zappa's creative output throughout his groundbreaking career. When The Mothers of Invention's first album, *Freak Out!* dropped in 1966, the music world took particular interest in the liner notes, which included a list of 139 artists, both musical and otherwise, that Zappa considered his most important influences. What is interesting about this list, other than the often obscure artists cited, is the fact that Zappa's opinion of these artists did not change over the years, the artist continuing to draw inspiration from the likes of Miles Davis, Stravinsky, Johnny "Guitar" Watson, and The Cadillacs, to name a few.

*The Freak-Out List* accomplishes a partial exegesis on several of Zappa's mentioned influences that are arguably the most important, at least from a music theory perspective. The film plays out somewhat like a master's thesis, which is to say it has a tendency to become quite dry and academic in parts (though, this is partially remedied by the inclusion of footage from classic films by the likes of Stan Brakhage and Godfrey Reggio). It follows a more or less linear timeline, focusing at first on the musical experimentation of composers like Wagner, Schoenberg, and Stravinsky, all of whom played an integral part in the shaping of Zappa's ear as a young man. Through interviews with music historians and Zappa biographers, the film successfully points out techniques and theoretical devices employed by these composers that later informed his attitudes toward composition, most especially in his later neo-classical output. From there, the documentary shifts toward the 20th-century music that informed Zappa's quirky pop aesthetic, running the gambit from blues, R&B, and doo-wop to *musique concrète*, jazz, and fusion.

The influence who Zappa name-checked most frequently throughout his career was French composer Edgard Varèse, who stretched experimentation with rhythm to its breaking point, a hot-headed and arrogant mid-20th-century composer who uttered one of Zappa's very favorite aphorisms: "The modern composer refuses to die!" What makes Varèse so interesting in light of his influence on Zappa is the way in which he similarly dismissed the staid and rigid stylistic guidelines of classical music, a rejection which Zappa took to heart perhaps more than any other.

It becomes clear watching this film that Zappa's musical education was much more informed than many would ever give him credit for, an element that is touched upon a bit too briefly near the end of the film. Perhaps it was the fact that he considered doo-wop just as valid a form of musical expression as be-bop and atonal minimalism. But what was so refreshing about Zappa was his absolute refusal to ghettoize "low-brow" music, a refusal which in turn somewhat ghettoized his own music over the course of his career. *The Freak-Out List* is a thoughtful meditation on the influences that shaped the career of one of Western music's true savants, and as a piece of serious

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