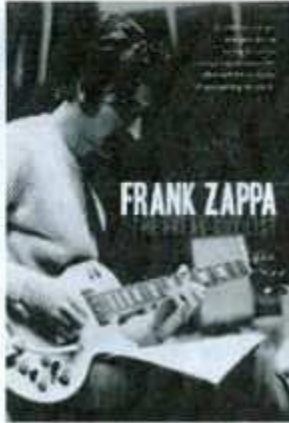


FRANK ZAPPA: The Freak-Out List (Chrome Dreams)

You gotta hand it to the folks at Chrome Dreams. Recognizing a good thing, they've come up with yet another "unauthorized" Zappa title (their fifth, including the recommended *Frank Zappa & the Mothers of Invention in the 1960s*, reviewed here last issue). This one's closest in concept to *Frank Zappa's Jukebox*; here we get 88 minutes of historical and critical examination of some of the key names on the 100-plus thank-you list included on the inner sleeve of the original *Freak Out* LP—hence the title.

It's a heck of a cool concept to hang a whole DVD on, but the opening remarks of some of the UK critics that the list represents a deep dive into Zappa's inner mystique is a bit much; I haven't seen the list in years, but it included, as I recall, Lord Buckley, PF Sloan, Kim Fowley, LA deejays like Bob Eubanks and any number of local yokels.

Still, this is a fun, first-rate package: really informative and (mostly) entertaining. There is some Mothers performance footage (all the more enticing because there's *only* some), but the approach is largely interview-and-analysis, accompanied by film and photos of the selected Zappa influences. The principal talking heads, each of whom contributes genuine insights into how the maestro worked and the way it affected them, are Don Preston, George Duke and Ian Underwood, and the content is divided between Zappa's classical, R&B and jazz inspirations.



I'd honestly never bothered to learn much about Edgar Varese, but *Freak-Out List* thoroughly and clearly explains him in the context of Schoenberg and Stravinsky and tells us just how the Mothersman became attracted to Varese's compositions. Zappa's at-times conflicted attitudes toward jazz are likewise addressed, and the Brit crits offer the unique opinion that *Hot Rats* and his collaborations with violinist Jon-Luc Ponty achieved a more credible fusion of jazz and rock than *Bitches Brew*, which to these ears makes much sense.

Best of all, there are frequent tidbits that reveal much about Zappa and his crew and how they worked. Preston, for example, avers that, despite the (seemingly contradictory) mixture of complex charts, turn-on-a-dime arrangements and mandated spontaneity, "A big part of our job was to make Frank laugh." He may have been a tough taskmaster, but one could surely find far worse job requirements from a potential boss. Duke, too, admits to being exasperated at his initial audition, where Zappa made the accomplished jazz keyboardist play endless piano triplets (he subsequently "got it" and stuck around for a dozen album projects), and Preston admits he hated vocal-group music until, after prolonged exposure to its syllable-twists and triplets, he realized, "There were some really weird moments in it" that compared to experimental classical music.

Freak-out List definitely belongs on the wish-list of anyone interested in Zappa or curious about what it was about the '60s that generated so much adventurous music-making (namely lots of open minds that, contrary to received wisdom, took much from their musical predecessors). Bonus material is thin (FZ's desert-island disc, contributors' bios), but that's moot.

Chrome Dreams' Zappa programs may be barrel-scraping, but they're imaginative, often brilliant barrel-scraping. If *I Would Give Everything Just to Sing the Songs That Was Turning Me On in High School: Interviews with the Musicians Behind Ruben & the Jets* is up next, I'm there. **(Gene Sculatti)**