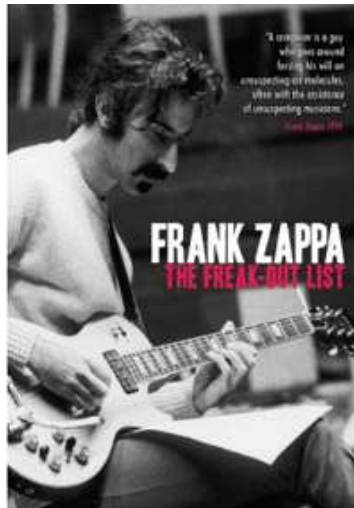


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## The Freak-Out List

### Frank Zappa



To truly understand the madness and motivation of Frank Zappa's musical ambitions is an impossible task; however, to learn more about the source of his inspiration, the figures who influenced his work, may offer more than a mere glimpse into how and why the composer, band leader, guitarist, satirist and father of four enjoyed such a prolific run. Referencing the infamous list from the inner sleeve of Frank Zappa and the Mothers' debut album, **The Freak-Out List** takes a fascinating and scholarly look at some of the characters — classical composers, guitar players, doo-wop singers and obscure artists from who knows where — who played a major role in shaping the music of Frank Zappa.

Documentaries like these often meander, without coming back around to the main point, but **The Freak-Out List**, in all its unauthorized glory, manages to stay on track for the most part, probing its subjects, sometimes in ridiculously minute detail, but nevertheless uncovering facts that undoubtedly cater to the scattered braininess of Zappa aficionados. At 88 minutes, there's plenty here to feast on — tracing the origins of the **Freak-Out** list itself, carefully pieced together with 23 names in each column, as pointed out by biographer Ben Watson, who seems to have great reverence for Zappa, right through the culmination of all these influences in one full swoop of mad creativity.

It would seem, as narrator Thomas Arnold states, Zappa embraced music that was both "difficult and silly, high brow and low brow at once." It would enable him to make music with "no contemporaries." At an early age, he fell in love with iconic classical composers from the first half of the 20th century, but it may have gone back even further. Professor David Nicholls, a classical and avant-garde music scholar, explains how the borders of music started to broaden in the mid 19th century when Richard Wagner was composing pieces like "Ride Of The Valkyries." This leads to two key figures on Zappa's list — Arnold Schoenberg, who explored such as concepts as atonality and the 12-tone technique (Nicholls says some of Zappa's orchestral compositions utilize this technique), and Igor Stravinsky, who was able to write in two keys at once, creating a sort colorful chromaticism (**Lumpy Gravy** is full of it).

While 20th century avant-garde composers like John Cage and Karlheinz Stockhausen would gauge his interest, a major component that aligned itself into Zappa's vision was Edgar Varèse. The film is keen to point out that not only is Varèse's name on the **Freak-Out** list, but a quote of his — "The present-day composer refuses to die!" — appears on the **Freak-Out** album, as well as other Zappa and the Mothers titles. Varèse's "Ionization," devoid of melody or harmony, is described as an "astonishing experience" for Zappa — in his teens and already developing his compositional skills. The "rhythmic and complicated" qualities of Varèse are later displayed in an old, brief Zappa clip called "Improvisation."

Indeed, Zappa's aspirations to become a modern-day classical composer are extensively examined, and the classical and avant-garde influences would find space in much of his music. But we are brought back to the realization that Frank Zappa was primarily known in the rock idiom; that he wasn't really taken seriously outside pop music circles, much less in any other circles. Views differ on how Zappa felt, but former Mothers

and accompanists Ian Underwood, Don Preston and George Duke all weigh in, speaking “frankly” about how the master drew on a myriad of styles. In the end, they agreed, it boiled down to rock and roll.

This is where Zappa’s interest in R&B and doo-wop receives an overview. Along with fellow Lancaster resident Don Van Vliet (aka Captain Beefheart), Zappa played in several early R&B bands. He was introduced to major blues figures like Howlin’ Wolf, but, as usual, was attracted to left-fielders like Richard Berry, best known as the man who wrote “Louie Louie,” and guitarist Johnny “Guitar” Watson. “Louie Louie” would make cameos at Zappa’ shows, and Watson eventually became friends with Zappa, making cameos on some of his latter-day albums.

Doo-wop would, of course, pop up on many of Zappa’s records, in particularly **Cruising With Ruben & The Jets** (which wrought an actual Ruben & The Jets band that Zappa produced). The film spends an inordinate amount of time on the genre, perpetuated by the various doo-wop detours in Zappa’s music. But it goes even further on the subject of Miles Davis and the birth of jazz-fusion. There is, in fact, a strong connection between Davis’ **In A Silent Way** and **Bitches Brew**, and Zappa’s own string of “jazz” flavored records, beginning with **Hot Rats** and continuing on such seminal releases as **Chunga’s Revenge**, **Waka/Jawaka**, **The Grand Wazoo**, **Over-Nite Sensation** and **Apostrophe (‘)**.

Zappa’s forays into jazz extended to his work with Jean Luc-Ponty, “a match made in heaven,” as Watson says, and the album they recorded together, King Kong. Zappa’s work with other jazz musicians, such as George Duke, is also tackled as whether or not his credibility gained any momentum from these sort of associations. Duke insists whatever it was that Zappa was writing at the time, it was unquestionably jazz (so much for rock and roll). Naturally, Zappa’s personal jazz favorites were atypical, extended to such figures as Eric Dolphy, a saxophonist and accompanist of John Coltrane. Other jazz musicians like Charles Mingus and Cecil Taylor made the **Freak-Out** list, but Dolphy was immortalized on “The Eric Dolphy Memorial Barbecue,” which appeared on Zappa’s 1970 album **Weasels Ripped My Flesh**.

In the end, the viewer is left to devise the sum of all the parts, stumbling upon the notion that all these styles and genres converged in Zappa’s brain and spilled out over hundreds of hours of tape without regard to commercial festering. Be it rock and roll, jazz, classical, whatever, Frank Zappa just plain loved music. Long-winded and tedious at times, **The Freak-Out List** is a mesmerizing look at the fuel that created this love in Frank Zappa — a unique master of the 20th century, an “oddy” whose own influence reaches the stars and beyond, and a present-day composer who refuses to die!

~ Shawn Perry




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