

Frank Zappa's record label went 'From Straight to Bizarre' with out-there artists

He signed Captain Beefheart, the GTOs, Alice Cooper and Wild Man Fischer

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Wednesday, February 29, 2012, 6:00 AM



Frank Zappa at the studio mixing board with the GTOs, in 'From Straight to Bizarre'

"From Straight To Bizarre"

Directed by [Tom O'Dell](#)

(Sexy Intellectual DVD, 166 minutes)

3 Stars

A twice institutionalized schizophrenic. A group of tone-deaf groupies. And the first male rock band to perform under a woman's name.

Such were the defining signings to [Frank Zappa's](#) honestly named Bizarre label, an imprint that brought in bucks financially, but which looms large in the annals of out-there musical history.

Of course, Zappa made a name for himself based on his contrarian attitude, satiric flair, and uncategorizable music starting with his 1965 debut with the Mothers of Invention, "Freak Out." He used some of the cash, and credibility, from the Mothers to start Bizarre in '68. (Due to legal issues, it later became known, ironically, as Straight). For the next five years, the imprint served as an asylum for freaks too strange even for most hippies to fathom.

DVD director Tom O'Dell faced a built-in dilemma trying to tell this tale here. Zappa died 18 years ago; the label's other key player, [Herb Cohen](#), is two years gone. More, in the last year, we lost Bizarre's most important artist, [Don Van Vliet](#) (aka Captain Beefheart). Even if Vliet lived, it's unlikely he would have consented to an interview. For the last quarter of his life, he lived in obscurity in a small California town, refusing to make music or even discuss it.

Even so, the utterly unauthorized "Bizarre" manages to piece together a relatively, er, straight story, using lots of wonderful archive footage, as well as key players from Beefheart's Magic Band, the GTOs (the amusical groupies in question) and the aforementioned, cross-dressing act, [Alice Cooper](#) (though, unfortunately, not Alice himself).

His band released two interesting albums for Zappa, though they lacked the focus and force of their breakthrough with "I'm 18."

Bizarre's first release wasn't even musical — it was a live album from [Lenny Bruce](#) — but it certainly fit the confrontational mold. The label courted extra controversy by promoting Wild Man Fischer, a mentally-troubled street musician whom many felt the label exploited. Fisher (also deceased) appears here in all his mad glory performing on, of all things, "Laugh-In."

While many thought such signings made the label little more than a preserve for the perverse, the filmmakers argue that Zappa earnestly believed in these folks as spokespeople for a legit outsider aesthetic.

No serious music listener would question the legitimacy of Bizarre's most lasting work: Beefheart's "Trout Mask Replica." The quotes from several Magic Band members reveal sad and fascinating details about the Captain's wild ego, and control issues, as well as his genius.

In its day, Bizarre/Straight did more than just release oddities. They also put out [Tim Buckley](#)'s folk-jazz foray "Starsailor," and signed several artists who conformed to the singer-songwriter mold of the day, if not enough to sell. Together, the music of all these artists makes its own case for Bizarre. It wasn't just a freaky stunt but a seminal forum for free thought.

Read more: <http://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/music-arts/frank-zappa-record-label-straight-bizarre-out-there-artists-article-1.1029162#ixzz1nxkxIRin>