

From Straight to Bizarre (2012)

The inside story on Zappa's two independent labels, made without the cooperation of most of the performers or labels.

Published on January 27, 2012



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Zappa, Beefheart, Alice Cooper and LA's Lunatic Fringe

Studio: Sexy Intellectual SIDVD568 [2/21/12]

Video: 4:3 full screen color

Audio: English PCM stereo

All regions

Extras: The Art of Persuasion – Jerry Lawson & Frank Zappa after Straight; Hunger! – the struggles of the Magic Band; Contributor Biographies; Beyond DVD

Length: 161 minutes

Rating: *½**

A fairly complete documentary probably of more interest to collectors of Frank Zappa's Bizarre and Straight record labels than to the ordinary listener whose knowledge of the freaky musical scene is small or non-existent. Zappa was unhappy with the control over his work exerted by the Verve/MGM label, and since he was basically a control freak he broke away and established his own Bizarre label (and later the Straight label) with his partner, manager Herb Cohen.

Zappa specialized in recordings not only of his own freaky band, The Mothers of Invention, but also of an array of other performers who were so weird that other labels probably were not interested in them. They included genuine schizophrenic Wild Man Fischer, the clearly eccentric Captain Beefheart, the all-girl group the GTOs (which

Zappa put together himself), the rock group Alice Cooper, and even controversial comedy recordings by Lenny Bruce and Lord Buckley. A few less freaky Laurel Canyon types also appeared on the labels, including Tim Buckley and the a capella gospel group The Persuasions. Zappa's crowd did not identify themselves as being hippies, mods or rockers—they were too busy being various varieties of freaks.

Zappa's musical oddities included some that had zero musical value, such as Fischer and the GTOs, but still stand as fascinating auditory historical creations of those years. The one album that is regarded today as the masterpiece of the whole chaotic effort is probably Captain Beefheart's *Trout Mask Replica* – about as avant as the rock genre could possibly be. The film interviews many talking heads who were involved in some of the recordings, including members of the Magic Band, the GTOs, various biographers of Zappa, and writers on rock and pop. It would have been interesting to have had Moon Unit Zappa as one of the talking heads, but none of those close to the late Zappa participated. The film reveals that one of the GTO girls was Moon Unit's baby sitter, thereby giving her a good connection to Zappa himself. A portion of the extra features goes into further detail on the Magic Band of Don van Vliet (Captain Beefheart), but I was already depressed enough from what was included in the documentary that I skipped that portion. (One example was van Vliet insisting his slavish band members go steal some cheese for him at a local Safeway. Naturally they got arrested and had to call Zappa to get them out of jail.)

—John Henry

<http://audaud.com/2012/01/from-straight-to-bizarre-2012/>