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DVD Review: *From Straight to Bizarre - Zappa, Beefheart, Alice Cooper and LA's Lunatic Fringe*

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Author: [Jack Goodstein](#) — Published: Feb 16, 2012 at 6:53 pm

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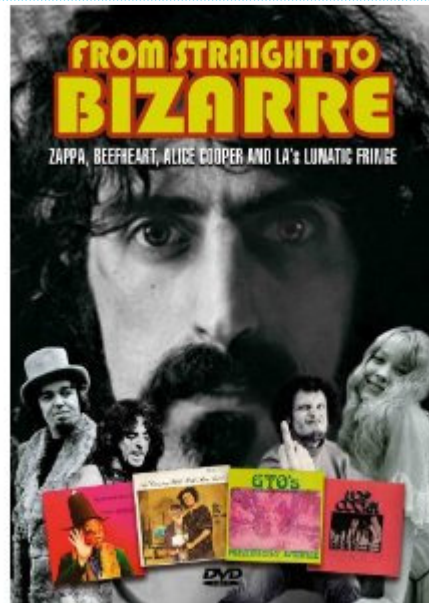
In 1968, [Frank Zappa](#) and the Mothers of Invention were under contract to Verve Records, but the controversial artist was unhappy. The record company was editing his albums without his permission, butchering his art with their commercial cowardice, and he wasn't about to stand for it. Getting together with music manager Herb Cohen he sought to remedy the problem by starting a record label of his own, a record company that would give him as well as other artists out of the mainstream, the kind of creative freedom that would they needed to pursue their visions. First they created the Bizarre Label, and that was followed very quickly by the Straight Label. *From Straight to Bizarre: Zappa, [Beefheart](#), [Alice Cooper](#) and L A's Lunatic Fringe* is a comprehensive history of the labels and the bands that recorded for it.

Taking the conventional documentary approach to a very unconventional subject, the film fills more than two and half hours with archival footage, still shots, and a gaggle of talking heads—mostly Zappa biographers and aging rockers. It uses snatches of videos along with examples of the music, but not as much video and certainly not as much music as you'd like. I would doubt there is one whole song from beginning to end in the whole film. Whether this is by choice or necessitated by copyright problems, I can't say. The DVD notes do acknowledge in all caps: "This program is not sanctioned by any of the performers or companies on which it focuses."

A denizen of the weird counter culture that had been developing in the sixties in and around L A, Zappa was attracted to the strange characters that like him saw themselves and the lives they lived as a radical critique of middle class bourgeois values. They were freaks; they were insane. They

were looking to scandalize by outlandish behavior. And some of them were artists, and it was from this "lunatic fringe," Zappa looked to recruit the talent for his new record company.

The first of his recruits Wildman Fischer was in fact insane, having been institutionalized in his teens. Known for prowling the LA boulevards offering to sing songs for a dime, Fischer was little more than joke. In 1969, Zappa produced a double Fischer album which is sometimes praised as a valuable sociological document, if not for its music. There are those who feel that Zappa was exploiting Fischer, but most all of the film's commentators seem to feel that Zappa was trying to make a sincere statement with the album.



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