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## Frank Zappa- Straight To Bizarre Reviewed By Dr. Wesley Britton of Bookpleasures.com

By [Dr. Wesley Britton](#) | Published February 10, 2012 | [Music Audio CDs & DVDs](#) |



**Dr. Wesley Britton**

**Reviewer Dr. Wesley Britton:** Dr. Britton is the author of four books on espionage in literature and the media. He is also co-host of the online radio program, *Dave White Presents*, for which he interviews authors, musicians, and entertainment insiders. His website is [www.spywise.net](http://www.spywise.net); the radio program is archived at <http://www.audioentertainment.org/dwp>. Dr. Britton teaches English at Harrisburg Area Community College.

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Frank Zappa

ASIN: B006HGXH3I

The story of the twin record labels, *Straight and Bizarre*, is one of the most intriguing chapters in the Frank Zappa saga.

It all began in 1968 when Zappa, frustrated with not having creative control of his product while recording for MGM/Verve, decided to create his own label. Hooking up with manager Herb Cohen, Zappa not only wanted to be able to have final authority over the music of his Mothers of Invention but also provide a venue for off-beat artists he liked and wanted to champion. As a result, as made clear in the generous 161 Minutes of this exhaustive history, Bizarre and Straight records documented a slice of alternative California iconoclasm that was as varied as it was, well, bizarre.

The output of Zappa's brain-child wasn't always musical. For example, 1969 releases included albums from comics Lenny Bruce and Lord Buckley. Zappa invested considerable energy in a two-album set featuring Wild Man Fisher for whom Zappa edited together a string of songs, street conversations, and

taped dialogues in the studio. In the end, An Evening with Wild Man Fischer was described as "social anthropology" more so than artistic performance. Likewise, a quintet of groupies dubbed the GTOs (Girls Together Only, Girls Together Outrageously, any O they liked) created an album that was part music and part taped conversations which the members now call "performance art," a term not yet coined in 1969.

As revealed in extensive interviews with many of the musicians involved, two bands weren't Zappa creations but rather artists seeking a means to market their work. While Captain Beefheart himself--Don Van Vliet--wasn't interviewed for this disc, veterans of his "Magic Band" were, and they share the extraordinary circumstances of rehearsing for and producing the innovative, primal albums Trout Mask Replica and Lick My Decals, Baby. Without question, the most successful alumni of Straight Records was Alice Cooper. For this documentary, founding players Dennis Dunaway and Neal Smith discuss how they introduced themselves to Zappa by setting up in his house at 9:00 in the morning while Zappa was still in bed. As a result, the rough-edged Pretties For You and its follow-up, Easy Action, were released before the band went their own way to become major players on the rock scene without the mentoring of Zappa.

In a chronological flow, the documentary blends the stories of these acts, and a handful of other hopefuls, demonstrating that Zappa often began projects with intense interest before one circumstance or another removed him from the production booth. By the final years of the labels, partner Herb Cohen was at the helm, signing musical adventurers like Tim Buckley and Jerry Yester. Still, Zappa brought on one more act, one quite different from his array of non-commercial properties--the a cappella singing group The Persuasions. Then, by 1973, Zappa and Cohen closed down the shop, started another, but the original vision had disapated into myth and legend.

What distinguishes this history is the detailed, often intellectual analysis of the story by the participants and observers like Ben Watson, Barry Miles, Mark Paytress, Billy James and Ritchie

Unterberger. While Zappa is shown as the master mind for his projects, we see him only in archival footage and little attention is paid to his own releases--and there's no need to do so. This disc is a tribute to forgotten faces and voices whose work, as with Wild Man Fisher, is hard to come by. Therefore, along with the historical footage, it's good to hear samples of the music few heard then and fewer have heard in recent years. This DVD is worthy of any rock collection if your taste includes the avant garde, the experimental, the simply freaky.

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