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From Straight to Bizarre: Zappa, Beefheart, Alice Cooper and LA's Lunatic Fringe DVD Review: A Must for Zappa-philes

They called Frank Zappa “The King of the L.A. Freak Scene,” and it was definitely a title he enjoyed. After running into difficulties almost immediately upon being signed to the Verve division of MGM Records, Zappa and his manager Herb Cohen decided to form their own label. With typical humor, Zappa decided to call the label Bizarre Records. Due to some distribution contracts (which were apparently ridiculously complex), a companion label (of sorts) was also created, which was called Straight Records.

From Straight To Bizarre is a lengthy (160-minute) DVD chronicling the whole story. Beginning in 1966 with the release of *Freak Out!* and ending in 1973 with the dissolution of Bizarre/Straight, it is quite a tale. This being a film which was never officially sanctioned, there are no interviews with any Zappa family members, but there are still plenty of survivors of the era who were willing to cooperate with the producers. There is also a fair amount of live material, not only of Zappa and the Mothers, but (among others) of Captain Beefheart, Wildman Fischer, The Alice Cooper Band, and The GTO's (which stood for Girls Together Outrageously).

It probably comes as no surprise that former GTO Pamela Des Barres is interviewed quite prominently. She has never been particularly shy about her desire for the spotlight. The story of the GTO's is mildly interesting, but the tale of the recording of Captain Beefheart and the Magic Band's *Trout Mask Replica* is unbelievable. Out of all the various Bizarre/Straight releases, *Trout Mask Replica* is the one which has

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proven to be the most celebrated over the years, and the story behind the recording of it is something else indeed.

Apparently, Zappa himself did not really know what was taking place at the house the band had rented to live and rehearse in, but when he found out later he called it “cult-like.” Former Magic Band members Zoot Horn Rollo and Drumbo are on hand to tell the tale, and it definitely sounds like a “Drink the Kool-Ade” situation. These guys were like 19 and 20 at the time, and while excellent musicians, they simply had no frame of reference for the types of manipulations Don Van Vliet engaged in.



For someone as “straight” as Zappa, the fact that he let the Alice Cooper Band slip through his fingers is an odd one indeed. The conjecture is that he just had too much on his plate at the time “I’m Eighteen” broke out - which sounds pretty plausible. The members of the original Alice Cooper Band have nothing but good things to say about the way they were treated by Zappa, although there are some questions about the production techniques he employed during the recording of their debut, *Pretties For You*. It hardly mattered though, the record didn’t sell and the follow-up, *Easy Action*, did even worse. But with the right producer, and enough practice, the band hit it big with *Love It To Death*, and the lead track “I’m Eighteen.” They then signed directly to the Warner Bros. label and became one of the biggest bands of the early seventies.

Wild Man Fischer was a Sunset Strip character that Zappa took a strong interest in. From the music presented, it is hard to know why, but he did. Then there is the story of the very first Bizarre Records artist, the young Sandy Hurvitz - who later changed her name to Essra Mohawk. Evidently when the personal relationship between her and Frank broke down, so did the production of her album. She describes it as

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“unfinished,” which seems an accurate description based on the snippets of it included on the DVD.

All in all, the early days of Frank Zappa the recording artist/entrepreneur/King of the Freaks is a fascinating one, and this DVD does a thorough job of discussing all of the various elements that came into play at the time.

There are two major bonus features, one discussing the a-cappella Persuasions, who Zappa recorded. And one simply called “Hungry” in which we are introduced to one of the methods Captain Beefheart kept his band “in line.” He kept them so starved and broke that they turned to stealing from the local grocery store to eat. Zappa once even had to bail them out of jail after they got busted.

The whole story of Bizarre/Straight and the events of those years is pretty incredible. *From Straight To Bizarre* is probably something of a must for Zappa-philes, for the live footage alone. It is hard to believe that a lot of this stuff went on, but it did. The DVD is well worth checking out.

BY GREG BARBRICK

Posted on Wednesday, January 25, 2012, by [Greg Barbrick](#)

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