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## FFanzeen: Rock'n'Roll Attitude With Integrity

Through the writings and photography of Robert Barry Francos, a view of the arts and culture, including everyday life.

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 20, 2012

### DVD Review: *From Straight to Bizarre*

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Images from the Internet



**From Straight to Bizarre: Zappa, Beefheart, Alice Cooper and L.A.'s Lunatic Fringe**

*Executive Producer: Rob Johnstone*

*Narrated by Thomas Arnold*

*Sexy Intellectual, 2011*

*161 minutes, USD \$19.95*

[Chromedream.co.uk](http://Chromedream.co.uk)

[MVDvisual.com](http://MVDvisual.com)

Frank Zappa (RIP, 1993) has always been known as bit of a lunatic, be it his diverse and non-mainstream musical directions, to his [meandering anti-censorship rants](#) during the whole '80s PMRC debacle led by Tipper Gore (Al's spouse).

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### About Me

[Robert Barry Francos](#)

Currently living in Saskatoon (email at RBF55@msn.com for address). From 1977-88, I used to publish a print version of a music magazine in New York called FFanzeen, which dealt with the wide-ranging independent music scene. I also photographed many bands from the period (and since). Now I write this blog, and have a column at [jerseybeat \(dot\) com](http://jerseybeat(dot)com) (slash) [quietcorner \(dot\) html](http://quietcorner(dot)html). And the beat goes on.

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However, it was this borderline behavior that made him able to land a foot on both sides of the line, appealing equally to those in the straight world (i.e., general audiences) and those on the bizarre periphery (i.e., the fringe of culture). Because of this, he became a mediator of the latter to bring them into the former, even if only in the representative form of a 12-inch oil-based black disc with their voices.

As a visionary living in the hills of the Los Angeles, Frank attracted groupies (including making them babysitters for then-young son Dweezil and -infant daughter Moon Unit), schizophrenics, control freaks, and rockers trying to find their direction. Obviously, Frank felt a bond with them, as he was usually seen as an “other,” or trickster character on the scene.

After finding some success with his own releases, such as the Mothers of Invention’s seminal *Freak Out*, Frank managed to get the record label to support his own vanity label, Bizarre, which he started with Herb Cohen; and after they were dismayed by the lack of sales and cancelled it, he started another called Straight (the DVD title has it backwards, y’see), until its collapse in 1973.

To paraphrase a song by the band Sparks, talent *wasn’t* a needed asset for those who joined in the Zappa stable. Rather, it was a collective of degrees, from very able to those whose personality and oddity weighed in more than culturally classical facility.

Despite being L.A.-focused, their first artist was actually New York singer-songwriter Sandy Hurvitz, who would later go more famously by the moniker Essra Mohawk. According to Mohawk, who is interviewed on this DVD, she had a *personal* relationship with Frank, which soured, resulting in him leaving her studio tracks unfinished as far as tweaking, and that was the reason for the lack of success of the product. Actually, that becomes the central theme here: Zappa was all gung-ho, something happened between him and the artist(s) with whom he was working, and he bailed on the final work. This was also true for the groupie/dancers-turned-singers collective known as the GTOs (Girls Together Outrageously, two of whom are interviewed here including the lovely Miss Pamela DesBarres), the Alice Cooper band, and Captain Beefheart (RIP, 2010), to name a few.

As for Larry “Wild Man” Fischer (RIP, 2011), the crack in their working relationship happened *after* his release, when he psychotically accused Zappa of not paying him royalties on records that he *believed* sold better than it actually did (see the recent film about Fischer, [\*DeRailroaded\*](#) for his entertaining-yet-sad side of the story), which led to his one Zappa-released album never to be reissued. Due to health reasons, both mental and physical, Fischer was not a part of this documentary.

While Captain Beefheart was a control freak who kept his Magic Band on a *very* short leash, Zappa (his ex-college roommate, apparently)

[Some of my photos](#)

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was equally prickly, which of course makes the story of the Bizarre/Straight labels all the more interesting looking back in the rearview mirror (as Marshall McLuhan may have put it).

Surely, Zappa is the more recognized name, but Cohen also has his cadre of artists that mostly went nowhere, that are also represented on this DVD, such as Tim Buckley (RIP, 1975), Jerry Yester (ex-Lovin' Spoonful) and his wife Judy Henske, and Harlem-based R&B a cappella group the Persuasions (lead singer Jerry Lawson tells some great anecdotes here), among others.

For nearly three hours, this Chrome Dreams documentary (this is the [second by them on Zappa](#) I've seen) keeps the attention level high, by relying more on the people who were there and directly affected, rather than only those who reported on it (though it's always a joy to see and hear music historian Richie Unterberger). While chock full of rare clips of the band - both visual and aural - it is these recent interviews that really put out tales from the past and make it not just academic, but palpably alive. There are two members of the GTOs (the aforementioned Miss Pamela, and Miss Mercy Fontenot, aka Judith Peters), two from the first lineup of the Nazz, aka the Alice Cooper Band (drummer Neal Smith and bassist Dennis Dunaway), two of the Magic Band (drummer John French, aka Drumbo, and guitarist Bill Karkleroad, aka Zoot Horn Rollo), Essra Mohawk, and scenester and ever creepy Kim Fowley. For the historians, along with Unterberger, there are the likes of Zappa biographers Billy James, Barry Miles and Ben Watson, and others who wrote extensively on the Los Angeles music scene.

This is possibly one of the best of the Chrome Dreams series I've been fortunate to see, and I've seen quite a few now. By wisely focusing on the musicians and those there, and keeping the music biographers / historians / critics as more of a Greek Chorus rather than the core, they have produced a document that is much more first hand reporting, and thereby making the story more than just second-person circumstantial.

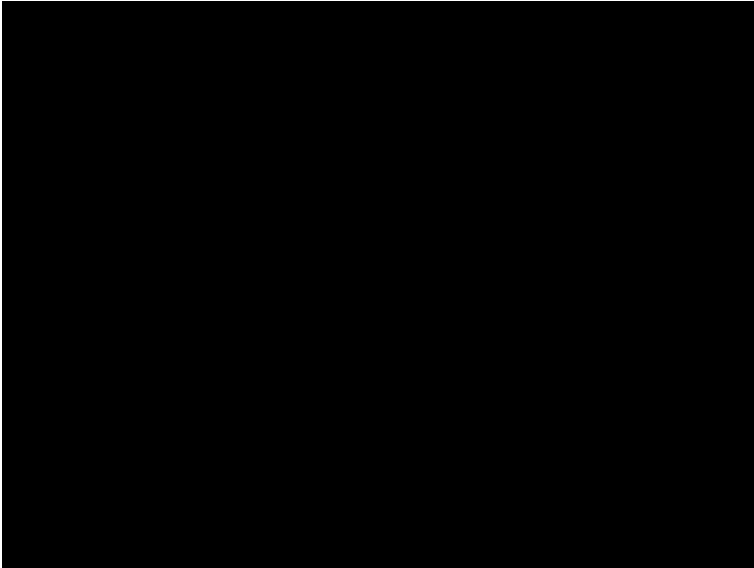
There are two extras (along with the usual contributors bios and an online link): First up is "The Art of Persuasion: Jerry Lawson and Frank Zappa After the Straight Label." During its 5:40 length, Lawson discusses his band's contribution to the Frank Zappa tribute album, *Frank*, after his passing. They did "The Meek Shall Inherit Nothing," which we hear in a clip.

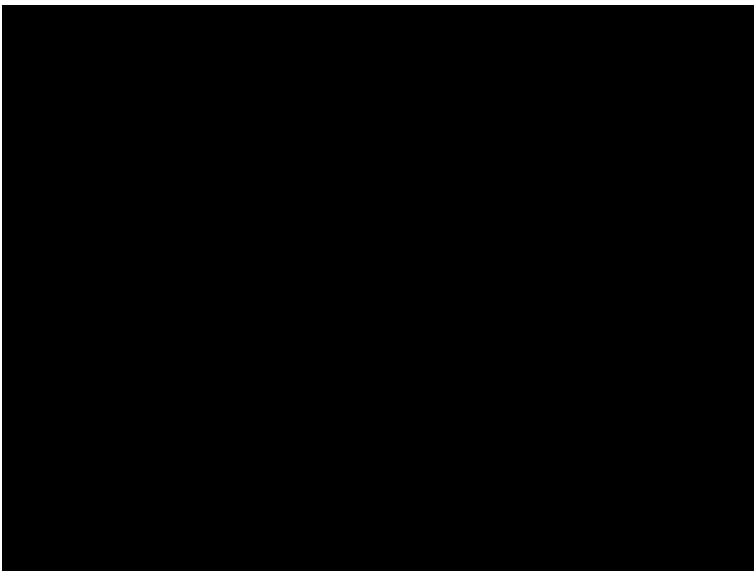
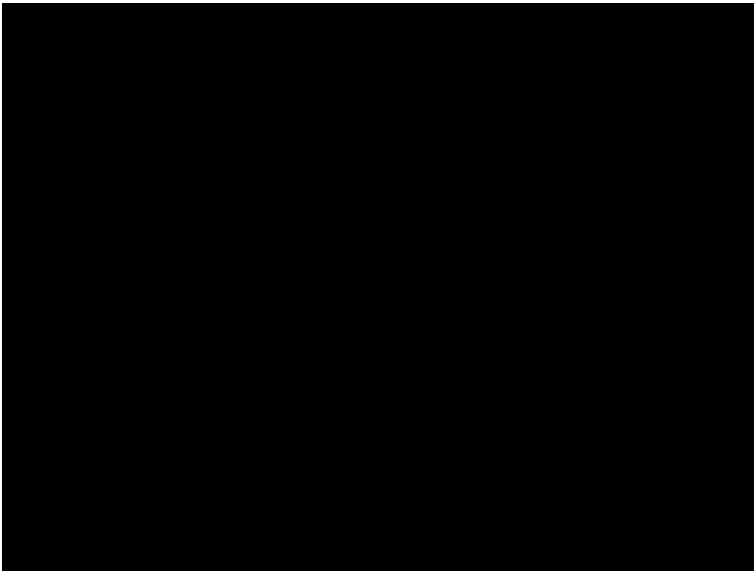
Second is "Hunger!: The Struggles of the Magic Band," which describes the diets (minimal, mostly veggies, due to lack of funds) forced on the band by Beefheart, and how this resulted in the band getting arrested for stealing food.

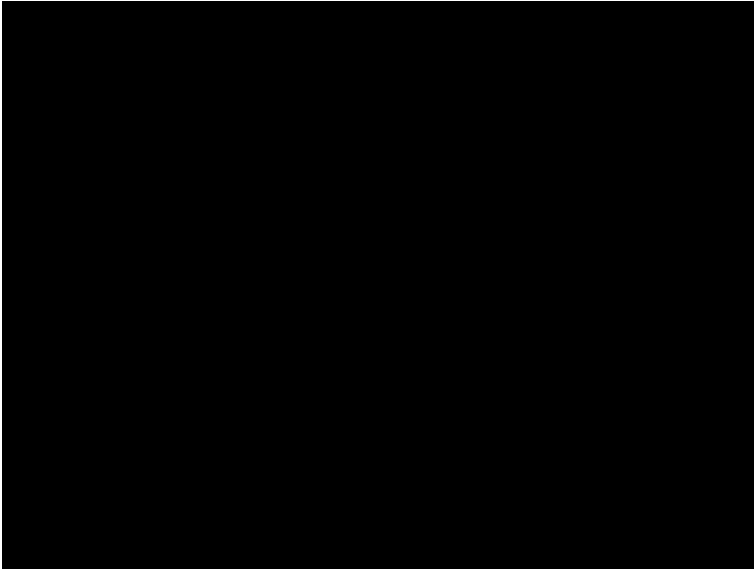
Both of these are fun, and just the right length.

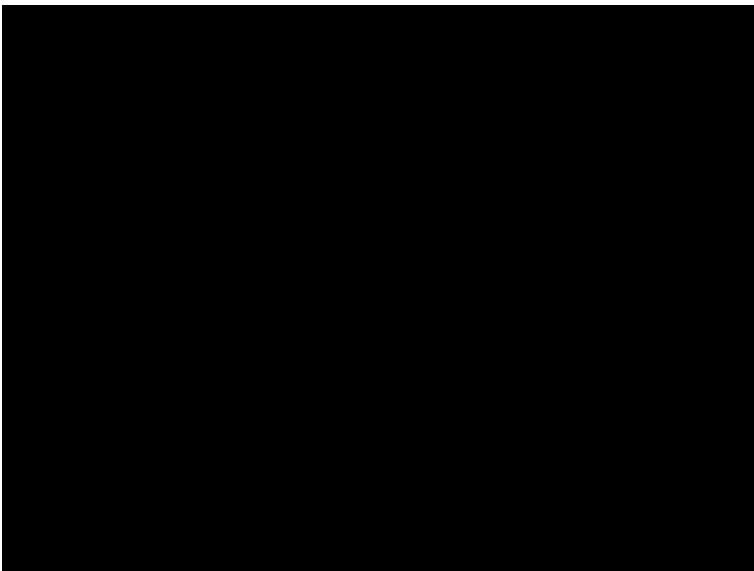
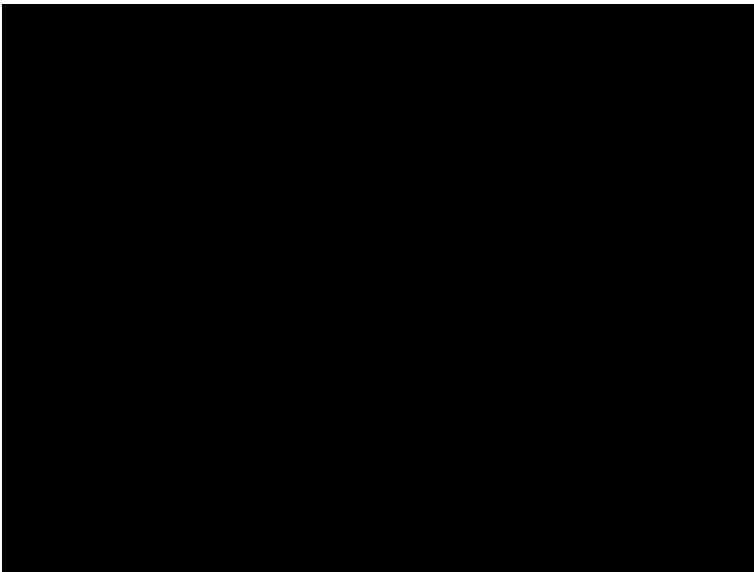


**Bonus Videos:**









Posted by [Robert Barry Francos](#) at [12:01 AM](#) 

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