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## From Straight to Bizarre

narration by Thomas Arnold

### starring Alice Cooper, The GTO's, Captain Beefheart, Sandy Hurvitz

#### Sexy Intellectual

The mid-1960s scene in L.A. was full of many powerful musicians, from Arthur Lee to the Doors. Lizard Kings and petty mayors populated the scene, folk and blues and rock filled the air, but Frank Zappa carved out a Kingdom of the Weird. While Zappa was a unique talent and made tons of money, most people have forgotten about the protégé bands that he signed to his twin labels Bizarre and Straight. This two-and-a-half-hour documentary explores these lesser lights, most of which were lucky to get airplay on the *Dr. Demento* show. Mr. Zappa is gone, and I doubt he would have consented to an interview for this documentary, but the people who do talk (Sandy Hurvitz, Ritchie Unterberger, Kim Fowley) were on the ground or at least close enough to it to give us a good look at why Zappa picked these bands, and what he did with and to them.



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His first signing was Suzan Hurwitz, a folk singer with a possible romantic relationship with Zappa that ended when he impregnated his other girlfriend. Hurwitz's album *Sandy's Album Is Here at Last!* was never really finished and was released into immediate obscurity. Wild Man Fischer was the next project: Fischer was a street singer with mental problems, and this film implies that Zappa exploited him in the tradition of exhibiting the deformed. Whatever his real intentions were, Zappa spent more effort on this man than any of his other projects, yet Fischer hated the resulting album because it didn't make him sound like the Beatles. Next, Zappa signed a dance/performance-art troupe, the GTO's, then Easy Chairs, a black a cappella group called The Persuasions, and Don Van Vliet, an experimental artist you might know better as Captain Beefheart. All of these groups languished as Zappa toured and recorded his own material, and his enthusiasm for these various artists faded if there was any sort of backtalk, or if his own projects took precedence. The only band he signed that did well was Alice Cooper, and its success came after changing management and moving from the spacey hippy sounds of the '60s to the rising hard rock sound that defined the '70s.

Most of these groups are completely forgotten, although I've run into some of them on old Warner Promo discs that I bought in the '70s. The surviving artists offer a generally positive view of their Zappa experience, and the vibe of this film is quite positive. While this documentary is "unauthorized" there's plenty of material here that you'd be pressed to find outside the Rhino/RYKODISC labels. It's a history of a short but pivotal time, and shows that no matter how weird you think your concept is, someone has already done it. And it may well have been Zappa or one of his protégé.

MVD: [mvd2b.com](http://mvd2b.com)

Carl F Gauze

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