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MCN Columnists

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### Frank Zappa: From Straight to Bizarre

From his rise to prominence in the mid-1960s to the announcement of his premature death, in 1993, Frank Zappa truly enjoyed confounding everyone who thought they had a handle on him as a musician and man. Although he looked as if he'd just stepped off the bus from the Haight-Ashbury and Fillmore auditorium, Zappa was a SoCal boy influenced as much by composers of avant-garde classical music as traditional R&B, doo-wop and rock. His lyrics spoofed hippie clichés and mainstream culture equally. Instead of puffing marijuana and gobbling down LSD, Zappa smoked and enjoyed cigarettes until his death was imminent. As a band leader, he was a tough taskmaster, not always willing to share the spotlight with his wonderfully talented colleagues. As a producer, he embraced independence and even encouraged musicians who were certifiably insane. That's the Frank Zappa we meet in **"From Straight to Bizarre."** Along with an impressive amount of biographical material and archival footage, the documentary describes how he made the uneasy transition from musician/composer to label executive, however atypical the companies were. While the major labels attempted to follow trends and showcase proven commodities, Straight and Bizarre discovered such unique, er, talents as the GTOs (Girls Together Outrageously), comprised of groupies and other wild women; Wild Man Fischer, a paranoid-schizophrenic who composed songs in exchange for loose change on Sunset Boulevard; experimental rocker Captain Beefheart; the original Alice Cooper; and doo-woppers, the Persuasions. Hipster comic Lord Buckley and Lenny Bruce found home there, as well. The companies didn't have the financial backing to succeed in the long run, but they still managed to make a small dent in the record-industry status quo. At 161 minutes, the MVD Visuals documentary may be too encyclopedic for newbies and casual fans. Diehards, though, will relish every second of it. – *Gary Dretzka*