

DVD Review: "From Straight to Bizarre" – Zappa, Beefheart, Alice Cooper and LA's Lunatic Fringe

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Like many successful musicians, Frank Zappa wanted to curate, and help expose other talented artists who might not otherwise get a chance to be heard.

The Beatles obviously attempted a similar thing around the same time with Apple's roster of Mary Hopkins, Badfinger, Billy Preston, and James Taylor, among others. A later example would be Prince and his mid-1980s Paisley Park, Minnesota fiefdom (e.g., Sheila E, The Time, et al).

From Straight to Bizarre, a captivating new documentary produced by the UK creative house Chrome Dreams and distributed by MVD Entertainment Group, sheds light on this little known aspect to Zappa's career, picking up at 1968.

A year after fighting with Verve over content censorship and lack of promotion for The Mothers of Invention 1967 double album, *Freak Out*, Zappa figured he could leverage some of his reach with disenfranchised youth by creating his own imprint. Whereas Zappa's own uncompromising music included fusion jazz, doo-wop and progressive rock, coupled with anti-establishment humour, the artists he sought were even more eclectic.

They include a 17-year-old female folkie, the better-known all-female GTOs who had a reputation for being groupies, and the Sunset Strip's favourite schizophrenic songwriter, Wild Man Fischer. While Captain Beefheart, Tim Buckley, and Alice Cooper eventually emerged as artists in their own right after garnering initial intrigue, the label never seemed to make serious money or gain much retail distribution.

A revelatory DVD highlight is the section dealing with Zappa's signing of the New York gospel group The Persuasions and their resulting *Acappella* album, perhaps the label's crowning achievement, albeit artistically.

What you get in *From Straight to Bizarre* are familiar tales of starving musicians, who seem to be ripped off by their label, obviously not Zappa's intention. Beefheart's drummer tells tales of how Don Van Viet instructed the band to shoplift from the supermarket. They do, get arrested and Zappa at least arranged

for their bail. Interviews with various experts detail the recording of *Trout Mask Replica*, which neither Zappa nor Van Vliet ever fully embraced despite its status by many critics to be an overlooked classic, perhaps even a masterpiece.

Despite his hippie appearance, Zappa abhorred drug use, especially around the recording studio, as one musician recounted him not being amused after the band came back stoned to lay down more tracks.

Zappa's Straight and Bizarre imprints, ironically distributed by Reprise/Warner Bros., with whom he would have his own legal battles, also issued recordings by Lenny Bruce and Lord Buckley (great footage here with Groucho Marx).

That Zappa fancied himself a record business impresario is somewhat ironic, given his non-commercial leanings, and it's not surprising the venture petered out after a few years considering the headaches and overhead of running a successful enterprise, as he somewhat selfishly concentrated on his own recording and performing. Alice Cooper eclipsed Zappa and became a superstar. Too bad we don't have any direct footage of Zappa explaining his aims of the labels.

By 1979 Zappa went truly independent with his own Zappa Records. A decade later, Zappa launched "Beat The Boots," an initiative to take on bootleggers at their own game, for which he partnered with Rhino Records (not yet owned by Warner) to reproduce with the same artwork on vinyl, cassette and CD several dozen of the Zappa titles on the back market.

One wonders what Zappa, who died in December 1993, would have made of the Record Industry Association's legal war on file-sharing. Zappa was no fan of the RIAA, but at the same time he vigorously defended artists' rights, including ownership of their masters.

Since he's not around to ask, I'm not about to surmise what side he would have taken on file-sharing. One of the best tales I ever heard about Zappa was how he was invited to speak at a music industry event – it was unusual for him to make such a public appearance. He goes to the podium to a standing ovation. When it quiets down, he says: "I have only one thing to say to you: Fuck you!" He walks off, and got another standing ovation.

Zappa's 1989 autobiography, *The Real Frank Zappa Book*, sheds some light on what a visionary he really was. In a chapter about his various attempts to start businesses with venture capital, he tells of his plan in the early 1980s – even before CDs hit the market – launch essentially a digital subscription music service not unlike Spotify – three decades ago.

Writes Zappa under the heading "A Proposal For A System To Replace Phonograph Record Merchandising":

"We propose the rights to digitally duplicate THE BEST of every record company's difficult-to-move Quality Catalog Items, store them in a central processing location, and have them accessible by phone or cable TV, directly patchable in the the user's home taping appliances, with the option of direct digital-to-digital transfer to F-1 (Sony consumer-level digital tap encoder), Beta Hi-Fi, or ordinary analog cassette (requiring the installation of a rental D-A converter in the phone itself ... the main chip is about twelve dollars).

"All accounting for royalty payments, billing to the consumers, etc., would be automatic, built into the software for the system. The consumer has the option of subscribing to one or more 'special-interest category', charged at a monthly rate, WITHOUT REGARD FOR THE QUANTITTY OF MUSIC THE CUSTOMER WISHES TO TAPE.

"Providing material in such quantity at a reduced cost could actually diminish the desire to duplicate and store it, since it would be available any time day or night..."

There's no doubt in my mind that if the RIAA for that matter had such a forward-thinking mind as Zappa's at the helm, it most likely would not have been asleep at the wheel as the Napster revolution passed it by.

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