

# Frank Zappa

1940-1993

**Born:** December 21, 1940 in Baltimore, Maryland, United States

**Died:** December 4, 1993

**Occupation:** singer, songwriter, musician

## BIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY

Zappa's fiercely uncompromising brand of music--which ran the gamut from **rock** to classical compositions--and social commentary made him a figure who garnered large measures of both praise and criticism.

"I don't want to spend my life explaining myself," Frank Zappa once said. "You either get it or you don't." Zappa's prolific career as a songwriter and musician has at times been eclipsed by his outspoken persona. Many Americans learned of him only after he emerged as a highly visible and articulate defender of freedom-of-speech issues during the mid-1980s. But to followers of his career, Zappa's outspoken testimony before Congress came as no surprise, for Zappa had often directed outrageous and perceptive volleys at American institutions and their imperfections in his records. In 1993 Zappa died at the age of 52 from prostate cancer, a death that silenced one of the music world's most unique artists. He left behind a vast catalog of recordings, however, as noted by *Entertainment Weekly* contributor Tom Sinclair: "Esoteric, genre defying, pornographic, scathingly satirical, and often downright bizarre, the late composer-guitarist Zappa's oeuvre will be pondered by musicologists and sociologists alike for years to come."

Francis Vincent Zappa Jr., the oldest of four children, was born in Baltimore, Maryland, on December 21, 1940. When he was nine years old, Zappa's family moved to Monterey, California. Once there, Zappa made his first tentative explorations of the world of music. "Around the age of twelve I started getting interested in the drums," Zappa recalled in his autobiography, *The Real Frank Zappa Book*. "I guess a lot of young boys think the drums are exciting, but it wasn't my idea to be a **rock** and roll drummer or anything like that, because **rock** and roll hadn't been invented yet. I was just interested in the sounds of things a person could beat on." By 1956 Zappa was playing in a high school rhythm and blues band called the Ramblers. He discovered the guitar around this time as well, and subsequently formed his first band, The Black-Outs.

## Early Individualism on Display

Even during high school, Zappa's strong sense of individualism was on garish display. He admits that his classmates found him to be a pretty strange guy. "I would refuse to salute the flag; I would wear weird things to school; I would get in trouble *all* the time, and get thrown out of school. I did things that were pretty notorious," he told *Musician* writer Dan Forte. "They threw me out [of the marching band] because they caught me smoking under the bleachers with my maroon uniform on."

Shortly after graduating from Antelope Valley High School, Zappa met Kay Sherman. "I had gone to Antelope Valley Junior College in Lancaster and Chaffey Junior College in Alta Loma for the express purpose of meeting girls. I had no interest in higher education, but after finishing high school it occurred to me that if I wasn't in school, I wasn't going to meet any--so I `reenlisted,'" Zappa said in *The Real Frank Zappa Book*. He met Sherman at Chaffey, and the couple promptly dropped out of college and got married (they divorced a few years later). Zappa then embarked on a series of unlikely jobs that culminated with a grim stint as a door-to-door encyclopedia salesman, work which he later described as "truly wretched."

By the early 1960s Zappa had immersed himself in music, playing at cocktail lounges, scoring music for B films, and recording Don Van Vliet's first Captain Beefheart album. In 1964 he scraped together enough money to buy a five-track recording studio in Cucamonga, California, while at the same time shaping a band that came to be known as the Mothers of Invention (originally known simply as The Mothers).

## The Mothers Freak Out

In 1966 noted producer Tom Wilson signed the band to Verve/MGM and the Mothers of Invention released their first album, *Freak Out!* The first double album in **rock** history, the album was a feverish fusion of pop satire, social commentary, and diverse musical styles, and the album and accompanying concert tour immediately established the band as one of the most outrageous bands of this (or any) era. As Zappa indicated in his autobiography, "the very first Mothers of Invention tour took place in 1966, at a time when hardly anybody outside of L.A. and San Francisco had long hair. We were all ugly guys with weird clothes and long hair: just what the entertainment world needed." It was around this time that Zappa met Adelaide Gail Sloatman, whom he described in his autobiography as a "fascinating little vixen." Gail would eventually become his second wife.

Subsequent releases such as *Absolutely Free*, *We're Only in It for the Money*, *Weasels Ripped My Flesh*, and *Burnt Weenie Sandwich* did nothing to diminish the band's eccentric reputation. Indeed, while Zappa's lyrics and the group's outlandish appearance and performances attracted many fans, critics dismissed their songs as tasteless and vulgar. In typical Zappa fashion, the songwriter-guitarist shrugged off the barbs.

Internal strife and other factors, though, spurred the creation of countless variations of the Mothers of Invention. "No matter what the other guys did, and they abused the shit out of me, I wouldn't fire them," he told *Creem*'s Ed Naha. "I kept on bringing in new people to make the musical end of things more proficient. But the band was always down on me because I was their employer. If I'm the guy who's paying the bills, how can I be a human being? I've had the problem

with all of the bands. It's strange. Finally it got to the point where I just said 'Fuck it.'... I want musicians who ... have the same range of [musical] interest as I have. Those guys didn't want to do ANYTHING."

As the roster of musicians surrounding Zappa changed, he continued to explore different areas of music. His fledgling Bizarre Records and DiscReet labels produced several albums (including works by Tim Buckley and Alice Cooper) during the early 1970s, while his encyclopedic knowledge of music, from **rock** to classical, continued to grow. "He wanted to learn," recalled trombonist Bruce Fowler in *Musician*. "He was the kind of guy who didn't stop learning at the age of 25 like everybody else." One-time Mothers of Invention percussionist Ruth Underwood agreed, remarking that Zappa "just devoured music; that was all he thought about. We listened to his music on the bus; we rehearsed it at sound checks; we played it that night; we analyzed it the next day. I've got some original sketches, pieces he composed for me sitting in an airport waiting to board! ... Everything was music."

## Zappa Shuns Major Labels

By the late 1970s Zappa was weary of his incessant battles with controversy-averse record company executives who were forever up in arms over his scathing (and often scatological) lyrics. Determined to attain a level of autonomy, Zappa secured the rights to nearly all of his master recordings and decided to extricate himself from his troubled relationship with Warner Brothers, his label at the time (Zappa's decision to hang a huge banner reading "Warner Brothers Sucks" at his concerts made his view of the company fairly clear).

Once free of Warner Brothers, Zappa formed his own record company. (His various business enterprises—including albums, videos, T-shirts, and music publishing—were eventually folded into a company that Zappa called Barfko-Swill.) He continued to churn out records at a dizzying pace, and while few of the albums contained any hit singles—"Don't Eat the Yellow Snow," "Dancin' Fool," and "Valley Girl" were probably his biggest hits—Zappa fans snapped up his new releases as soon as they hit the record bins. His passion for classical music became more apparent in the early 1980s as well, and in 1982 he recorded six orchestral compositions with the London Symphony Orchestra. National Public Radio news analyst Daniel Schorr recalled in *Musician* that when he first met Zappa, they conversed at some length about musical philosophies. Schorr disliked **rock** music, and he was initially skeptical of Zappa's musical knowledge. "I began asking him about music and what relationship he thinks his work has—as politely as I could put it—to the great tradition of music. As we got into talking about it, I realized this man knew an enormous lot about Bach, Mozart, and the classic tradition."

In the mid-1980s Zappa's views on social issues—and his willingness to voice them in his usual blunt fashion—thrust him into the national limelight. In 1985 the Parents' Music Resource Center (PMRC), a group founded by Tipper Gore and other parents concerned about the sexual and violent content of some album lyrics, began to lobby the recording industry and Congress. The PMRC called for the institution of a rating system for records, and as publicity over the issue mushroomed, civil liberties groups, industry executives, parents and educators, and politicians all argued over the issue.

## Zappa Testifies before Congress

For his part, Zappa was horrified at proposed PMRC solutions, and he made several highly visible appearances before national and state congressional committees to protest the efforts of the PMRC. "Taken as a whole, the complete list of PMRC demands reads like an instruction manual for some sinister kind of `toilet training program' to housebreak all composers and performers because of the lyrics of a few," Zappa said in his congressional testimony. "Because of the subjective nature of the PMRC ratings, it is impossible to guarantee that some sort of `despised concept' won't sneak through, tucked away in new slang or the overstressed pronunciation of an otherwise innocent word.... The establishment of a rating system, voluntary or otherwise, opens the door to an endless parade of moral quality control programs based on `Things Certain Christians Don't like.'" Later, in a radio interview with KUSC, the radio station of the University of Southern California, Zappa pointed to the basic fear he had of censorship in general. "Anytime you see someone seeking to control the arts or commentary, you should get suspicious; history is full of examples of how other people have tried to do this and where it led." As the 1980s unfolded, Zappa continued to follow his musical muse, turning out classical, **rock**, and jazz albums with equal facility (he won a Grammy award for *Jazz from Hell*, an instrumental album in which he played all the parts on a Synclavier). Looking at Zappa's vast and sprawling body of work, Harry Sumrall of the *San Jose Mercury News* called it "the oddest, weirdest, most idiosyncratic and eccentric body of music created in this or any other century. And one of the most inspired."

Ironically, while some of Zappa's music was among the most controversial issued over the past three decades, his personal life was much more sedate. He and Gail, who had long since emerged as her husband's business partner, had four children--Dweezil, Moon Unit, Ahmet Emuukha Rodan, and Diva. Family friend Pamela Des Barres recalled in *Musician* that the Zappa household "wasn't what you'd call normal, but it wasn't what people thought either. It was a very free-form household--loose, but very loving and warm. He was very much a family man." Former Mothers bandmate Mark Volman, meanwhile, noted in *Musician* that Zappa was "such a caring father, and with Gail ... they gave their kids room to be themselves and to speak their minds. And they are all very articulate and very generous about their love for their father." Volman went on to note that Zappa's daily routine reflected the value he placed on his family. "He didn't care about going out and making the scene. A big night for Frank was a pot of espresso, a pack of cigarettes and a pizza--delivered. And to have his 24-track studio in the house and his family upstairs." Addressing the issue of parenting, Zappa wrote in *The Real Frank Zappa Book* that "as far as rearing children goes, the basic idea I try to keep in mind is that *a child is a person*. Just because they happen to be a little shorter than you doesn't mean they are dumber than you. A lot of people make that mistake, and forget how much value there is in *raw intuition*--and there's plenty of that in *every* child."

## Diagnosed with Cancer

In January 1990 Zappa was diagnosed with prostate cancer. Still, he continued to pursue his musical, business, and political interests, and in 1990 he traveled to Europe, where he met Czechoslovakian President Václav Havel, a big Zappa fan. Once he returned to the United States, Zappa redoubled his efforts to complete the myriad unfinished projects that he was

working on. But as Rip Rense wrote in *LA Weekly*, "time and energy were undependable, inadequate allies for Frank; he made do with them, ever stretching their limits through insomniac nights with the only drugs he ever abused: caffeine and nicotine. He would sit, often until dawn ... working with an urgency that became terrible and poignant as his health declined." Prior to his death, Zappa and his wife began negotiations with Rykodisc to sell his master recordings, and the label subsequently re-released nearly thirty years' worth of Zappa music on seventy CDs. Zappa died on December 4, 1993, leaving behind a huge and provocative catalog of music. Numerous fans, friends, and fellow musicians weighed in to express their appreciation for the artist and the music he created. *Santa Cruz Sentinel* columnist Tom Long wrote that "Zappa was an original, and originality is prized less and less these days. Still, if anyone believed in the undeniable force and passion of art, and its ability to overcome all obstacles, it was Frank Zappa." Guitarist Steve Vai, one of many musicians who worked with Zappa over the course of his career, commented in *Aquarian Weekly* that "in Frank I saw an artist of uncompromising approach and flawless integrity in his art. One hundred years from now when many popular bands will mean little more than funny names from the past, Frank will be revered and celebrated for the true genius that he is." His daughter Moon Unit, meanwhile, simply called him "the truest person I have ever known."

In 1995 Zappa was posthumously inducted into the **Rock & Roll** Hall of Fame, an ironic honor considering the recording industry's long history of ambivalence (and occasional hostility) toward the artist during his career.

## PERSONAL INFORMATION

Born Francis Vincent Zappa Jr., December 21, 1940, in Baltimore, Maryland; died December 4, 1993, of prostate cancer; oldest of four children; married Kay Sherman (divorced); married Adelaide Gail Sloatman, 1969 (four children--Dweezil, Moon Unit, Ahmet Emuukha Rodan, Diva). *Education*: Attended Antelope Valley High School, Antelope Valley Junior College, and Chaffey Junior College.

## CAREER

Formed first band, the Black-Outs, in high school; recorded soundtrack for *The World's Greatest Sinner*, 1960; founded the Soul Giants, 1964, which soon evolved into the Mothers of Invention (original members included Elliott Ingber, Roy Estrada, Jimmy Carl Black, and Ray Collins); signed to Verve/MGM, released first album, *Freak Out!*, in 1966; formed Bizarre Records, 1968, with manager Herb Cohen; produced poorly received *200 Motels* film, 1971; 1970s European tour ends after band equipment is destroyed in fire and Zappa is attacked on stage; "Don't Eat That Yellow Snow" makes Billboard's Top 100 singles chart, 1974; testifies before Congress on censorship issues, 1985; Grammy award, 1988, for *Jazz From Hell*.

## WORKS

- **Selected discography**

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- *We're Only In It for the Money*, Verve, 1967.
- *Lumpy Gravy*, Verve, 1967.
- *Cruising with Ruben and the Jets*, Verve, 1967.
- *Uncle Meat*, Bizarre, 1969.
- *Hot Rats*, Bizarre, 1970.
- *Burnt Weeny Sandwich*, Bizarre, 1970.
- *Weasels Ripped My Flesh*, Bizarre, 1970.
- *Chunga's Revenge*, Bizarre, 1970.
- *Fillmore East, June 1971*, Bizarre, 1971.
- *Just Another Band from L.A.*, Bizarre, 1972.
- *Waka/Jawaka*, Bizarre, 1972.
- *The Grand Wazoo*, Reprise, 1973.
- *Over-nite Sensation*, DiscReet, 1973.
- *Apostrophe*, DiscReet, 1974.
- *Roxy & Elsewhere*, DiscReet, 1974.
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- *Bongo Fury*, DiscReet, 1975.
- *Zoot Allures*, Warner Bros., 1976.
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- *Studio Tan*, Warner Bros., 1978.
- *Sleep Dirt*, Warner Bros., 1978.
- *Sheik Yerbouti*, Zappa, 1979.
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- *Tinsel Town Rebellion*, Barking Pumpkin, 1981.
- *Shut Up 'n Play Yer Guitar*, Barking Pumpkin, 1981.
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- *You Are What You Is*, Barking Pumpkin, 1981.
- *Ship Arriving Too Late to Save a Drowning Witch*, Barking Pumpkin, 1982.
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- *Thing-Fish*, Barking Pumpkin, 1986.
- *Francesco Zappa*, Barking Pumpkin, 1986.
- *Frank Zappa Meets the Mothers of Prevention*, Barking Pumpkin, 1986.
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- *Guitar*, Barking Pumpkin, 1988.
- *Broadway the Hard Way*, Barking Pumpkin, 1988.
- *The Best Band You Never Heard in Your Life*, Barking Pumpkin, 1991.
- *Make a Jazz Noise Here*, Barking Pumpkin, 1991.
- *Playground Psychotics*, Barking Pumpkin, 1992.
- *Ahead of Their Time*, Barking Pumpkin, 1993.
- *The Yellow Shark*, Barking Pumpkin, 1993.
- *You Can't Do That on Stage Anymore*, (6 vols.), Barking Pumpkin, 1988-1992.
- *Strictly Commercial: The Best of Frank Zappa*, Rykodisc, 1995.
- *The Lost Episodes*, Rykodisc, 1996.

## FURTHER READINGS

### Books

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- Zappa, Frank, with Peter Occhiogrosso, *The Real Frank Zappa Book*, Poseidon Press, 1989.

### Periodicals

- *Aquarian Weekly*, October 25, 1995.
- *Billboard*, October 29, 1994; May 6, 1995; May 13, 1995.
- *Creem*, December 1974.
- *Guitar Player*, October 1995.
- *LA Weekly*, November 3-9, 1995.
- *Musician*, February 1994; July 1995; October 1995.
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