The Words and Music of Frank Zappa

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THE PRAEGER SINGER-SONGWRITER COLLECTION

The Words and Music of Frank Zappa

Kelly Fisher Lowe

James E. Perone, Series Editor

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From *The Negative Dialects of Poodle Play* by Ben Watson. Copyright © 1995 by the author and reprinted by permission of St. Martin's Press, LLC.

For Richard Best Lowe (1943–1998), who would have delighted in the prospect of my writing a book about Frank Zappa, despite the fact that, whenever I would play Zappa records in my average middle class teenage bedroom, I was always told to "turn it down."

All you have to do is follow the example of the great masters of the world's literature, and deal with the facts of life frankly and honestly. That is what the . . . police call "obscenity."

—Upton Sinclair, "How to Be Obscene"

A person can only be offended by smuttiness if they believe in smut as a concept and believe in the concept of dirty words—which I don't. It's always something that bothered rock writers more than anybody else. I mean, who the fuck are these rock writers, anyway?

—Frank Zappa, interview in *Rolling Stone,* 1988

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Series Foreword

Although the term, "Singer-songwriters," might most frequently be associated with a cadre of musicians of the early 1970s such as Paul Simon, James Taylor, Carly Simon, Joni Mitchell, and Carole King, the Praeger Singer-Songwriter Collection defines singer-songwriters more broadly, both in terms of style and in terms of time period. The series includes volumes on musicians who have been active from approximately the 1960s through the present. Musicians who write and record in folk, rock, soul, hip-hop, country, and various hybrids of these styles will be represented. Therefore, some of the early 1970s introspective singer-songwriters named above will be included.

What do the individuals included in this series have in common? Some have never collaborated as writers. But, while some have done so, they've all written and recorded commercially successful and/or historically important music and lyrics.

The authors who contribute to the series also exhibit diversity. Some are scholars who are trained primarily as musicians, while others have specialized knowledge in such areas as American studies, history, sociology, popular culture studies, literature, and rhetoric. The authors share a high level of scholarship, accessibility in their writing, and a true insight into the work of the artists they study. The authors are also focused on the output of their subjects and how it relates to their subject's biography and the society around them; however, biography in and of itself will not be a major focus of the books in this series.

Given the diversity of the musicians who are the subjects of books in this series, and given the diversity of viewpoints of the authors, volumes in the series will

differ from book to book. All, however, will primarily be organized chronologically around the compositions and recorded performances of their subjects. All of the books in the series should also serve as listeners' guides to the music of their subjects, making them companions to the artists' recorded output.

James E. Perone
Series Editor

Acknowledgments

This project has been more than twenty years in the making. In fall 1983 my friend Dave Mechling brought me a tape of *Joe's Garage* to play in my car as we went to lunch. I have been a fan ever since. In fact, I did not quite realize what an ongoing obsession I had with the words and music of Frank Zappa until, in an exchange of e-mails during the planning stages of this book, my old college roommate reminded me that during much of my freshmen and sophomore years I subjected him to daily doses of Zappa.

The only problem I had with the book was that right smack in the middle of writing it, I quit my excellent job as an associate professor of English and director of American studies at Mount Union College and took an excellent job with the Ellbogen Center for Teaching and Learning at the University of Wyoming. As anyone who has ever tried to move an entire household, including a wife, a child, and a menagerie of pets, 1,300 miles across I-80 can attest, it is a chore, and not something that can be done simultaneously with the writing of a scholarly book on the words and music of the aforementioned Mr. Zappa.

Several people, at both Mount Union and Wyoming, have helped with the research and writing of this book. At Mount Union College, James Perone, series editor, golfing partner, colleague in American Studies, and friend, gave me the go-ahead and encouragement to start this project. My research assistant, Mr. James DeMonte, over Christmas Break 2004–2005, created the most amazing concordance of Zappa scholarship that I have ever seen. Ms. Debi Stears, reference librarian, helped me negotiate the increasingly virtual reference materials and introduced me to a number of marvelous resources for someone attempting to do musicology who has no formal training in

musicology. Gerry Wuchter, Rodney Dick, Len Epp, Andy Price, and especially Rudy Roggenkamp provided moral support above and beyond. Frank Tascone, Michael Olin-Hitt, and Bill Macauley, fellow writers and good friends, never failed to shake their heads in amazement that I was getting away with writing a book about Frank Zappa.

At Wyoming, the staff of the Ellbogen Center for Teaching and Learning has had to listen to me beat my gums about Zappa since the day I arrived; the director, Jane Nelson, gave me a lot of time neither of us could afford to finish the book. Office associate Jennifer Wade put up with all of my complaining about there not being enough hours in the day, and my excellent assistant Jessica Willford (I have never had an assistant before, and she has set the bar pretty high) read the manuscript from cover to cover to help me find and accurately credit, all of the quotes. Despite all of the help I have received, ultimately, all of the errors in the book are mine.

At Greenwood/Praeger Press, my editor, Dan Harmon, learned to dread my e-mails asking for just a *few more days* to get everything right.

Other folks who need mentioning: Mike King, Dana Mellicker, Tony Pagliaro, and Keith Norris have withstood 20 years of Zappa (and my commentaries on Zappa, his music, lyrics, and politics); my mother, Mrs. Janice Craven, and her husband, Dr. Alan Craven, are both role models and friends; my daughter, Evangeline, has amazed her friends and alarmed her teachers with her encyclopedic knowledge of Zappa's music (although, to be honest, "Who Are the Brain Police?" is a pretty appropriate anthem for Junior High School).

My wife, Lori Van Houten, who disagrees with much of my reading of Zappa's lyrics, read every word of this book several times and made more quality editorial suggestions than I can count. Her support throughout the writing of this book and the move to Wyoming has been nothing short of heroic.

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Introduction: Why Study Frank Zappa?

> One of the traits of genius [is] the ability to recognize your intuition and make it real in the world naturally, effortlessly and flawlessly, and Frank did that every day.[1]

In a speech he once gave about Ernest Hemingway, longtime publisher and friend Charles Scribner Jr. argued that "From the time he was a boy to the day he died, he thought of himself as a writer and nothing else. That image of himself created his ambition, directed his will, supplied his greatest satisfaction."[2] In many ways the life of Frank Vincent Zappa can be spoken about in similar terms; Zappa, like Hemingway, was that rarest of people: the truly self-made man. Without much formal training in music theory, Zappa declared himself, at the age of 14, a composer and spent the rest of his life fulfilling "that image of himself." It is a truly American story—Horitio Alger with, as Zappa writes in the song "Joe's Garage," a "Stratocaster and a Fender Camp." Raised middle class in the desert in California, Frank Zappa soon came to be seen as the very image of the smart and sophisticated rock star.

Scope and Purpose of the Book

The question "why study Frank Zappa?" is, unfortunately, a good one; although many music and popular-culture scholars predict that his orchestral and ensemble works will more than likely be studied sometime in the future and that it is more than likely that Zappa will be considered one of the twentieth century's most important composers, his work as an American singer and songwriter presents a more difficult critical and cultural challenge.

It is precisely because of these challenges, however, that Zappa's work as a writer of pop and rock music is worth investigating. Although the rest of the book will look at these issues in depth, the challenges in studying Zappa are thus:

1. It is difficult to label his music. Stylistically, Zappa is all over the place; he is equally capable of writing the simplest blues shuffle and complex, multimodal art pieces, yet Zappa's stylistic complexity combined with a deep, varied, and extensive catalog of work, and an utter refusal to repeat himself musically while at the same time borrowing generously from his previous works (and thus creating a strange body of intertextual work), makes it difficult, especially for the novice, to access and appreciate his work. Because he was not a writer of hit singles (and indeed, he had only a handful of songs that could even be considered radio friendly), the new listener must actively seek out his work.[3] Below, I will make the case that much of Zappa's work should be considered "art rock." This distinction should, hopefully, give the novice listener a place to begin.
2. Zappa was, in one of the oldest Western artistic traditions, a master satirist. Satire is one of the most difficult of all art forms to pull off; the satirist's art is such that for every one who is amused or moved to think, another 10 are offended because they do not get the joke. And although Zappa seemed to hold little sympathy for those who did not get it, much of his professional career was spent defending himself from charges of sexism, elitism, racism, vulgarity, and just about any other -ism one can imagine. In reality, as I will argue, Zappa has had a complex and critical relationship with the American dream, and the argument that his songs make (satire is largely rhetorical in nature, and Zappa's form of satire, the rock/art song, is his vehicle for satire) is that many Americans had squandered both their rights and their responsibilities as citizens. The targets of his satire—feminists, unions, the government, and organized religion, that is, systems—seem to show, through their disapproval, that Zappa's criticism was right on the mark. Zappa, in interviews and in his autobiography, complained bitterly and at length about certain groups that seemed to be set up in order to preserve a certain image of a certain group of people (Italian Americans, unions, and so forth). It is Zappa's argument that true freedom means that one is free to screw up. That unions, for instance, for all the good that they have done, are also, especially in the postwar era, subject to corruption, dissension, and a pro-management bias that seems to be counter to their very foundational mission.
3. Although Zappa's biography is interesting in the sense that he knew, from a very young age, what he wanted to do (write music) and spent the rest of his life pursuing this dream, Zappa the personality is ultimately a frustrating subject for study because, unlike many of his peers and contemporaries, there is little scandal in his life story (thus the juicy biographical details that liven up the drugs, sex, and rock-and-roll biographies of bands like the Beatles, the Doors, the Who, the Rolling Stones, the Beach Boys, the Byrds, Buffalo Springfield, and Led Zeppelin, to name only a few, are absent in large part from Zappa's life story). In other words, Zappa lived a long and

> public life that, for the most part, was, outside of what he did on stage and in the recording studio, quite boring.[4]

What I hope to accomplish in this book, then, is twofold: In the first part I will offer two ways to look at Zappa's work. I will look at him as both a writer of art songs and a satirist on par with Jonathan Swift and Lenny Bruce, two writers who, through their humor, forced their audience to take a much more critical view of the world around them.

In the second part of the book, I will look at Zappa's work, especially his rock/pop songs, and offer a cultural and rhetorical analysis of his music that makes the argument that Zappa's music offers up a fairly caustic and prophetic critique of the American dream.

It is, to say the least, ironic to attempt to write a scholarly book on the words and music of Frank Zappa; ironic in the sense that Zappa himself would have more than likely scoffed at the project. In his interesting essay on attempting to get permission to use Zappa's lyrics in his book *The Negative Dialectics of Poodle Play*, Ben Watson makes the blunt argument that Zappa was simply and openly hostile to anyone who would dare to interpret or critique his (Zappa's) work. Watson later quotes Zappa to the effect that "his [Zappa's] lyrics are so packed with arcana that he [Zappa] is the only individual capable of understanding what they mean."[5] With all due respect, this is rubbish. If Zappa's lyrics were truly that inscrutable, there would have been no need to ever release them. Indeed, the question of why Zappa sought an audience for music he felt no one but himself could understand strikes me as a fairly absurd proposition.[6] In *The Real Frank Zappa Book*, Zappa argues that "the lyrics wouldn't exist at all if it weren't for the fact that we live in a society where instrumental music is irrelevant."[7] The analysis of Zappa's lyrics, then, depends upon a number of things, two in particular: a knowledge of American culture and history and an ability to overlook Zappa's own public statements about his lyrics.

This, of course, raises a number of questions, the primary being why, if Zappa was so opposed to writing lyrics, did he not attempt to make a career out of instrumental music? Indeed, as I will argue in the subsequent chapters, Zappa's very definition of *earning a living* is what drove him toward popular music. Many of his lyrics reflect this choice he felt he had to make. I would also like to argue that, contrary to the public persona Zappa created, he had a lot to say. One needs to look no further than his first album, *Freak Out!,* to see that underneath the strange and silly and hilarious lay deep concerns with the state of the American dream. Songs such as "Hungry Freaks, Daddy," "Who Are the Brain Police?," and "Trouble Every Day" offer a devastating critique of America's major cultural revolution. And it did not stop there. Zappa's caustic social commentary, which came, for the most part, in song form, looked at the social movements in the sixties, seventies, and eighties with equal passion. So, although I think it is important to acknowl-

edge that Zappa did not become a rock musician and songwriter/composer in order to comment upon society, the fact that his music does just that is undeniable.

A largely self-educated musician, Zappa had no real feeling for or relationship to academics, and although he seemed to understand that college towns were where some of his more loyal fans resided, he did not seem to have much sympathy for the contemporary world of academics. There is a double irony here—Zappa was very generous with his time: He seemed to know from the beginning of his career that even if he personally could not stand rock journalists and academic musicologists, for his kind of music to be heard, he would need to use both. This is the bind that all artists eventually find themselves in: the need to control the meaning of their own work while at the same time needing to get that work out into the marketplace of ideas, where it ceases to be controlled solely by the artist/author. Zappa's deep (and at least partially justified) cynicism about journalists and academics is somewhat sad (and misguided, and while I obviously have a bias here, his inability to tell the difference is a striking fact). In one of his final interviews, Zappa argued that his dislike of journalists was based on two premises: that a journalist, in general, "(a) doesn't know anything about what you do, (b) doesn't know about music in general and (c) has already made up his mind in advance before he comes to you what the answer ought to be to his precious little questions." Zappa then quotes himself as arguing that "Rock journalism is people who can't write interviewing people who can't talk in order to provide articles for people who can't read."[8]

It is in this cultural marketplace that the critic intervenes. The role of the critic, writes Barry Brummet in his book *Rhetoric and Popular Culture,* is that of "*meaning detectives*; their role is the explain what texts mean."[9] This, I know, is contradictory to Zappa's own wishes and the wishes of the Zappa family trust. In his autobiography *The Real Frank Zappa Book* as well as in the many interviews that he gave during his lifetime, Zappa argues that only he, as the artist/creator of his works, should get to decide what the meaning of his songs is. This is an argument I sympathize with, but it is one that is ultimately futile. Once a work enters the public domain—the concert hall, the record store, the art gallery, or the radio—it ceases to be under the complete control of the artist. Everyone who looks or listens or, indeed, experiences a piece of art brings his or her own feelings or experiences or understanding to the work, and once those existing emotions and ideologies absorb the work in question, the work becomes owned by the audience. That said, I do not intend to fix or provide the true meaning of the words and music of Frank Zappa. Instead, it is my intention to (1) engage in as direct a way as is possible the rock and pop recordings of Frank Zappa and (2) offer a particular *reading* of these works, a reading grounded in the traditions of rhetoric and cultural studies. The outcome of this engagement, and the subsequent purpose of this reading, is to argue that Zappa was, like Mark Twain and Lenny

Bruce before him, not just an entertainer, but one of this country's foremost social and cultural critics.

My real hope for this book is that it will get people to listen to Zappa's music and, in doing so, get them to ask the many questions that his music brings up: What is the role of the composer in contemporary America? What is the role of the government in the lives of its people? What is the proper relationship between church and state? Why are sexually aggressive women considered sluts by our culture? Why, in a democracy, do we have such a deeply class-based society? Why are the privileged so afraid of gay people, black people, and feminists? Zappa repeatedly asked all of these questions in his music and his lyrics.

In writing this book, I also understand that it exposes my own biases: toward literary analysis (I am much more at home working with lyrics than I am working with music), toward American cultural critique, toward the absurd. One of the things that has always attracted me to Zappa's work is that I understood, in hearing his music, that he loved his country enough to bother to expend the energy to try to make it a better place to live. That takes some doing. As often as he appeared to be criticizing America it was not, as might appear at first glance, because he hated it; it was because he saw the possibility of what it could become and was dismayed that so few people understood these potentials.

Visionary is a word that is used too often in our culture (as is *awesome*, but that is another book), but Zappa truly fits this definition. His extraordinary range of influences—blues, R&B, doo-wop, classical, jazz, and Eastern European folk music—led him to create music that is wholly unique in the history of American popular song.

1

You Call *That* Music?

> Frank Zappa embodies perhaps the recording world's most radical amalgamation of popular and classical interests in a single composer.[1]

> The single most important development in modern music is making a business out of it.[2]

What makes Zappa's music so interesting is that it is, according to musicologist Christopher Smith,

> explicitly and intentionally situated in a referential context. It is targeted at a certain group of listeners with some range of musical experiences held in common, and it presumes that such listeners will hear allusions and make sonic connections.[3]

In other words, Zappa wrote music for people who were careful listeners. The more you listened to his music, the more you got it. The more you got it, the more in you felt. The more in you felt, the deeper your bond with Zappa. It is an intellectual project that is not an unfamiliar one: write for yourself and your friends. If they get it, great. If they do not, too bad. Zappa was, perhaps, better than anyone at this (and certainly the least willing to compromise on the matter). In this chapter, I would like to make some remarks about Frank Zappa's music (the rest of the book devotes a considerable amount of attention to his lyrics). I would like to look at a couple of intersecting ideas about his work that revolve around the same theme: that Zappa was a composer in the most traditional sense and that what he composed is easier to understand

when broken down into some identifiable elements and given a vocabulary with which to discuss these elements.

In a remembrance of Frank Zappa published in *Rolling Stone,* Trey Anastasio, lead guitarist for the band Phish, describes watching Frank Zappa perform live:

> He would leave his guitar on a stand as he conducted the band. He would get the keyboard player doing a riff, get him in key while he was smoking cigarettes and drinking coffee, pacing around as he got this groove going. And he would not pick up the guitar until everything was totally together. There would be this moment—this collective breath from the audience—as he walked over, picked it up and started playing the most ripping, beautiful solo.[4]

Watching Zappa compose live, in other words, was not your ordinary rock show experience; indeed, for anyone more than a little familiar with Zappa's work, much of his live concert was in itself a satire on the modern (i.e., post–Led Zeppelin) rock concert experience (more on that later). Zappa brought to his live shows a mixture of vaudeville, Led Zeppelin, and Leonard Bernstein that is hard to describe. Beyond performing live, however, Zappa worked hard and consistently to defy expectation and categorization. This makes encountering his compositions, especially for the novice, somewhat difficult.

What kind of music does Frank Zappa make? It is a difficult and interesting question because there is no real easy answer. Zappa made just about every kind of music one could make: country, pop, punk, funk, reggae, blues, rap, techno, swing, doo-wop, and surf music. This, of course, leaves out jazz, art/progressive rock, jam band music, and orchestral music (all admittedly big and messy categories). To make matters even more complicated, Zappa often combined these various genres of music within the same song (and occasionally, as demonstrated on his various live albums, at the same time).

I would like to make the twin arguments that the category that Zappa's music falls most neatly in to is that of progressive rock and that Zappa should be considered more than a writer of pop songs; one should consider him a composer of orchestral music that happens to be made with a rock band. The reason for this distinction becomes clear as one listens to Zappa's music. Most rock or jazz or country artists have an identifiable style, and most stay with or in that style throughout their careers (thus Pink Floyd always has a Pink Floyd sound, and even a band as consciously experimental as the Beatles had, from their first album to their last, a sound that makes it easy to identify certain music as Beatles music). It is much harder to do this with Zappa's music. Much like a composer of orchestral music who might go from symphony to sonata to concerto to opera to film score, Zappa, although always working with the basic tools of the rock musician, would vary his music so wildly from one album to the next that it becomes easier to understand his work by identifying him as a composer and not just a songwriter.

I undertake these arguments with the full knowledge that Zappa himself would more than likely have me beheaded for putting such labels upon his life's work—in part because Zappa delighted in his defiance of easy categorization, in part because progressive rock, of all the excesses of the sixties and seventies, has, perhaps, the worst reputation, and declaring oneself a composer has more than a bit of arrogance associated with it. That said, there are many scholars who find that Zappa's rock and jazz work fits easily into the genre of progressive rock. For instance, in the "Preface" to the special edition on progressive rock in *Contemporary Music Review,* the editors, John Covach and Walter Everett, argue, "Though he would never have been comfortable being lumped in with progressive rockers of any kind, Frank Zappa was also a composer who carefully blended rock music with art-music techniques and sensibilities;"[5] or, put more succinctly (and more specifically), in a longer piece in the same issue,

> Zappa's ambitions were already evident in *Freak Out!* [his first major label recording], which encompassed within its four sides various "flavors" of R & B as well as white-based pop and doo-wop, combined with more experimental material (rudimentary *musique concrete,* bursts of electronically generated noise, vocal free-for-alls, imitation cool-jazz interludes, collage-style layerings and accumulations) ranging from brief interjections without the frame of fairly conventional-sounding songs . . . to more extensive "interference" with songs already quote unconventional in both formal structure and content . . . to extended pieces which could take up as much as an entire LP side.[6]

Be that as it may, if one separates the reputation of progressive rock (summed up best, perhaps, in the infamous *Rolling Stone Album Guide* entry on the band Yes: "Pointlessly intricate guitar and bass solos, [and] caterwauling keyboards") from a more scholarly / objective definition of progressive rock, a listener can begin to see that much of Zappa's pop and jazz music fits neatly inside this genre.

There are a number of interesting definitions of progressive rock. Perhaps the best way to consider it is to discuss, briefly, how musicologists have defined it and how Zappa's music might fit into this academic definition.

In the book *Progressive Rock Reconsidered,* editor and author Kevin Holm-Hudson offers the following definition of progressive rock:[7]

- Songs predominantly on the longish sides, but structure rarely improvised.
- A mixture of loud passages, soft passages, and musical crescendos to add to the dynamics of the arrangements.
- The use of a Mellotron or string synthesizer to simulate an orchestra backing.
- Extended instrumental solos, perhaps involving some improvisation.
- The inclusion of musical styles from other than a rock format.

- A blending of acoustic, electric, and electronic instruments where each plays a vital role in translating the emotion of compositions which typically contain more than one mood.
- Multi-movement compositions that may or may not return to a musical theme.
- Compositions created from unrelated parts.

Once one boils down progressive rock into these constituent parts, it becomes easier to see how Zappa's music might fit into this category.

A quick look at this definition with references to specific songs might help one see how Zappa fits into this definition. For instance, progressive rock features *songs predominantly on the longish side, but structure rarely improvised*. Looking at Zappa's catalog at the number of songs more than six minutes long, you find dozens. From "King Kong" to "Truck Driver Divorce," Zappa would have at least one or two extended pieces on almost every album. These songs were highly structured musically, although, in a difference from the preceding definition, they often allowed a lot of room inside the structure for improvisation, especially by Zappa himself.

A mixture of loud passages, soft passages, and musical crescendos to add to the dynamics of the arrangements. The work that Zappa did in the mid-seventies with band members George Duke, Chester Thompson, Ruth Underwood, and Napoleon Murphy Brock, especially on the album *One Size Fits All,* is perhaps best representative of this facet of Zappa's music. The songs "Inca Roads," "Andy," and "Po-Jama People" all feature multiple sections or parts of varying tempo and intensity. Zappa was especially fond of massive tempo variation, and in nearly all of his work, from beginning to end, one can see a composer who thought rhythmically as well as melodically.

The use of a Mellotron or string synthesizer to simulate an orchestra backing. Check out the keyboards on *Sheik Yerbouti* and *Tinsel Town Rebellion*. The hilarious "chorus of angels" effect on the song "I Have Been in You," for instance, both pays homage to and mocks contemporary rock music at the same time.

Extended instrumental solos, perhaps involving some improvisation. Although this one goes without saying, it is interesting to note that Zappa was a fairly generous bandleader; from the various sax solos on "King Kong," through the big band solos on *The Best Band You've Never Heard in Your Life* and *Make a Jazz Noise Here,* Zappa's songs often featured live soloing of a fairly extreme nature. Also, for some incredible examples of Zappa's soloing techniques, investigate the 52 guitar solos excerpted on the *Shut Up 'N Play Yer Guitar* and *Guitar* albums. As Zappa writes in the liner notes to *Guitar,* "none of them [the solos] are perfect, but I hope you enjoy them anyway."

The inclusion of musical styles from a format other than rock. As I discuss at length later, Zappa included musical forms distinct from rock in his music

and included many musical allusions that come from the classical or jazz world. Zappa should be considered a composer who worked with a rock band and not an orchestra as his primary musical entity.

A blending of acoustic, electric, and electronic instruments in which each plays a vital role in translating the emotion of compositions that typically contain more than one mood. The makeup of Zappa's bands was always incredibly interesting. Except for one brief moment in the seventies, Zappa always had a number of folks in his band who played instruments not expected in the classical rock band format (guitar, bass, drums, and, occasionally, keyboards). Zappa often had a percussionist or two drummers (one to play the beat and one to play against or across the beat), one or more woodwind players, multiple guitarists (at one point his band featured Ike Willis, Ray White, Steve Vai, and Zappa all playing guitars), multiple keyboard players, and, in several instances, a violinist (Don Harris and Jon-Luc Ponty were members of Zappa's bands). And this does not even account for what was on Zappa's studio recordings; everything from harps to kazoos to a full orchestra was liable to show up on a Zappa album.

Multimovement compositions that may or may not return to a musical theme. This happens in a number of ways in Zappa's work. A song like "Andy," for instance, features multiple parts of sections, including an introduction, a section where the lyrics are sung, a guitar solo, and a dramatic bridge that has little to do with the rest of the song. In other instances, Zappa would write suites of songs, like the "Don't Eat the Yellow Snow" suite (on the *Apostrophe (')* album) that included "Don't Eat the Yellow Snow," "Nanook Rubs It," "St. Alfonzo's Pancake Breakfast," and "Father O'Blivion." These four songs are very different, yet they are played together without a space between them on the album (and, as can be heard on *You Can't Do That on Stage Anymore, Vol. 1,* as one continuous song when played live). It is obvious that Zappa felt that these were to be played as one piece.

Compositions created from unrelated parts. This takes on a special meaning in Zappa's work because he often constructed songs (and then deconstructed and reconstructed songs) from disparate parts. Toward the end of his career, he was taking the beginning of one song, the solo from another song, and the ending of a third song and releasing it on an album as one song. As well, his multipart songs or suites were often unrelated songs (occasionally written years apart) that were put together because Zappa had discovered a narrative that would tie them together (see especially *Joe's Garage* and *You Are What You Is* for examples of this).

Although Zappa himself makes no real statement for or against progressive rock (and if I had to guess, I would say that he probably liked it better than the top 40 or corporate rock of the late sixties and seventies), others within the progressive rock community have either tried to adopt Zappa's work or tried to distance themselves from it.

For instance, Joseph Byrd, the main composer for the short-lived progressive rock group The United States of America, claims that, contrary to art rock, Zappa was a "cynical genius" whose musical project could be defined largely as "offend the parents." Although Byrd gives Zappa credit for outgrowing this "planned outrageousness," he (Byrd) does not feel Zappa became the musician he could have been.[8]

This is a pretty significant misunderstanding of what Zappa was up to. One only has to make a quick glance at his catalog to understand that Zappa was always trying to push the boundaries of music—both lyrically and harmonically. His earliest musical experiments on *Freak Out!* are audacious for a first album (including "Hungry Freaks, Daddy," a song that includes a number of structural changes beyond the typical verse-chorus-verse change found in most pop songs, and "The Return of the Son of Monster Magnet," a 12-minute piece of musique concrète / art rock / noise that took one look at the future and anticipated everything from Neil Young's feedback / noise explorations to Tom Waits's sound collage experiments to the New York sounds of Sonic Youth and John Zorn.

Writing about his compositional style, Zappa argued, "Composition is a process of organization, very much like architecture."[9] One of the unique features of Zappa's music is that he often borrowed extensively from himself (à la Wagner or Mahler), taking a melody from song A and a solo from song B and perhaps placing that song (call it C) in a context of other songs and creating a meaning that can be called D. This is a highly constructed piece of art. It also indicates that although Zappa thought of songs as constructions, he was also interested in the larger product, thus many of his albums feature either suites of songs (many songs addressing various aspects of a cultural or political issue; *You Are What You Is,* for instance) or entire albums of songs strung together in a narrative (*Joe's Garage, Acts I, II & III*). This aspect of Zappa's music is often the most jarring for people who have not encountered his music (or have only encountered his few radio-friendly singles, such as "Don't Eat the Yellow Snow," "Dancin' Fool," or "Valley Girl").

Toward the late seventies and through the end of his career, Zappa engaged in what has been termed *xenochrony:* the melding together of various performances to make a complete piece of music. The most jarring thing about xenochrony is the way the music sounds. Take, for instance, the song "On the Bus" (originally named "Toad-O-Line"), from the album *Joe's Garage, Acts I, II & III.* The song comes at the end of the wonderfully melodic "Wet T-Shirt Night" and is an extended instrumental break. Although the music continues in the vaguely Latin / disco theme of the previous song, the solo is from a completely different song (in this case from the song "Inca Roads") that has a different beat and different melodic structure. The solo, pasted as it is into / on top of the music, is jarring the first time one hears it, but it is such an interesting musical issue (the first time I heard it, the solo sounded wrong to me, but I could not understand how or why it was wrong and thus

was forced to confront the ideas of right and wrong as they apply to basic pop song structure) that it forces you to listen all the more carefully.

Zappa biographer Barry Miles quotes Zappa in discussing his compositional ideas as saying that he liked to compose works "according to [Edgard] Varese's principles of composition with unrelated themes following in free succession."[10] This is a fine way to describe Zappa's compositional technique. Songs like "Billy the Mountain" (*Just Another Band from L.A.*) and "The Adventures of Greggry Peccery" (*Studio Tan*) show this technique to its best advantage; they are long (more than 20 minutes) songs that contain narratives that are driven by sudden shifts in structure: different beats, melodies, and instrumentation. More complex are shorter songs along the lines of "Inca Roads" (*One Size Fits All*) or "Easy Meat" (*Tinsel Town Rebellion*) that feature vastly different melodies and time structure shifts within the confines of a relatively short space. These more whiplash changes are one of the things that can make approaching Zappa's music a daunting task (one is often left asking "where is the song?" because most Americans have been trained since at least the fifties to expect very certain things from a pop song).

This idea or technique of mashing together different musical ideas is, of course, one that descends from both classical composition and progressive rock. The one thing, compositionally, that Zappa does not do that many progressive rock bands do is provide some sort of musical segue between ideas. Take the Yes song "Close to the Edge." This multipart song is full of a number of musical ideas. The difference is that "Close to the Edge" is written in typical sonata form, a musical idea that goes back at least to the work of Bach and Mozart. Sonata form is one of the most recognizable of all classical music tropes, so when Yes uses it in "Close to the Edge," it is easy to see how the song contains, "two themes, a development, and a nice stable return."[11] Zappa's songs seldom, if ever, contain these elements. One of Zappa's greatest achievements is that his songs often contain multiple parts that, musically, do not have much to do with one another; they are songs, in large part, because Zappa says they are. Zappa has repeatedly argued that one should compose largely for oneself, going so far as to tell the music journal *Telos,* "I think that if you write music, you should write for your own taste, whatever you like to hear and whatever style you want to write it in for whatever reason."[12] Although that is only feasible up to a point (the missing part of Zappa's argument is "if you want to *get paid* for what you write"), there is a sense, with Zappa more than any other popular artists, that he is willing to risk the alienation of the paying public in order to make his music his way.

In the same interview, Zappa disagrees with the author's argument that Zappa has blurred the boundaries between high and low art. Zappa responds, "Or any art at all?"[13] This rather cryptic sentiment (it is not really an answer to the stated question) is one of the keys to understanding Zappa. In framing what he does as progressive rock compositions, I am trying to reinforce the fact that for Zappa there is no difference between his orchestral works and

his rock works. To call his work progressive rock is helpful in an attempt to understand what it is he is trying to accomplish, but it is not a label that is particularly comforting given the number of things Zappa has said over the years about composition in general and his compositions in particular.

One of Zappa's greatest musical techniques is that of allusion. There are two types of allusion at work in Zappa's songs: the first is direct allusion. In a song Zappa would quote another song, either one of his own, a popular song of the time, or a historical song. For instance, Zappa would often include the music from the song "Louie Louie" in his own work. He does this for a number of reasons, the primary one being that "Louie Louie" is representative of a whole set of meanings—in this case the early history of simple, dumb rock songs. Later in his career, Zappa would take to quoting popular songs of the time in order to force his audience to make extralyrical associations. The song "Tinsel Town Rebellion," for instance, often contained quotes from bands as disparate as Devo and the Scorpions. The lyrical theme of the song was, ostensibly, the decline of the popular music industry; the musical allusions then help to illustrate the argument that Zappa is trying to make. By making part of his argument musical (instead of lyrical), Zappa is increasing the likelihood that people will get the joke (and, at the same time, making the joke more complex).

The second type of allusion Zappa often worked with was the hidden allusion. He often, for instance, hid bits and pieces from his favorite classical composers inside his rock songs. In the song "Amnesia Vivace" on the album *Absolutely Free,* Zappa includes quotes from *The Rite of Spring* and *The Firebird* (Stravinsky) as well as the classic doo-wop song "Duke of Earl." These types of allusions helped Zappa build a different kind of bond with a different kind of audience; Zappa includes these works in his songs to see if anyone else can hear them, and the ones who can then become part of the in-group. Zappa's fan base was particularly fanatical and willing to follow his musical explorations wherever they might lead. To be part of his fan base was to be in the know about the various musical quotes.

Zappa would also do this kind of allusive work on a different scale, taking a texture or a tone from a certain recognizable figure in rock or pop or jazz and constructing his own music out of this generic texture. In the song "On the Bus" (discussed previously), Zappa begins the solo by directly quoting the first few notes from Toto's big hit "Hold the Line." On the song "Variations on the Carlos Santana Secret Chord Progression" (from the album *Shut Up 'N Play Yer Guitar Some More*), Zappa builds a solo around a bass and keyboard riff that sounds like the background to the Santana hit "Black Magic Woman" (itself a cover of the original Fleetwood Mac song by the same name). To make matters even more interesting, the song "Variations on the Carlos Santana Secret Chord Progression," is really an excerpted guitar solo from a performance of the Zappa song "City of Tiny Lights" and thus does not really exist as a piece of music in and of itself, except for the fact that

Zappa says it does (and he does this by excerpting it, giving it a name, and putting it on an album). Whew! Or take another, more amusing example: the song "In-A-Gadda-Stravinsky" from the album *Guitar*. This so-called song, which is really an excerpted solo from the song "Let's Move to Cleveland," taken from a November 1984 performance, features bassist Scott Thunes playing the bass line from the old protometal song "In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida," while Zappa solos (the solo is played almost entirely against the bass line); the drummer works with both Zappa and the bassist, following Zappa but not working against the very recognizable bass line. Then, partway through the song, the bassist switches and starts playing parts of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*. It is a mad hybrid that works in a certain sense by defying all expectations of a contemporary song. Indeed, this is the best way to listen to Zappa—as someone who was constantly trying to defy expectation. In both his music and his lyrics, Zappa seemed comfortable in working against expectation. It is confounding, but it is also what makes him so interesting.