



back beat

No Flies on Frank

"I never had any intention of writing rock music," said Frank Zappa shortly before he died of cancer in 1993. For Zappa, rock was just a genre he could use to make sure his provocative, satirical, experimental music got heard. He mocked rock'n'roll while celebrating it; he was as capable of writing a loving tribute to doo-wop as a neo-classical orchestral suite or "jazz from hell". His motto was taken from the early 20th century avant-gardist Edgard Varèse: "The present day composer refuses to die!"

Zappa was driven to create, releasing nearly 60 albums in a recording career of less than 30 years. The only consistent thing about them is their inconsistency – the musical ideas seem to change direction every 15 seconds – but a remarkable number of the albums have become enduring landmarks in the history of modern music. (Zappa's first album with the Mothers of Invention, *Freak Out*, is regarded as the first rock 'concept' album, and was an influence on the Beatles' *Sgt Pepper*.)

Zappa's output was vast, and his eclecticism extraordinary; he was always pushing the frontiers of music, with a sardonic smile on his face and a serious intent behind the humour.

The Zappa family estate have authorised the reissue of the complete catalogue through Rykodisc, with the albums being "tweaked and tweaked and sonically spiffed up", many by the master himself before he died.

The newly compiled **Strictly Commercial: the Best of Frank Zappa** is the tip of the iceberg, but as close as one could get to a satisfying single-album retrospective. "Kill Ugly Radio" was another recurrent motto of Zappa's – he was spouting it from the mid-60s – but these are the songs that somehow invaded that sterile, parasitic medium. It includes the jazz-rock piece 'Peaches in Regalia', which made *Hot Rats* a breakthrough LP in the UK, and the novelty song 'Don't Eat the Yellow Snow' which made *Apostrophe (')* from 1974 one of his most popular albums. 'Disco Boy' and 'Dancin' Fool' mocked the disco boom of the 70s, while the title track from his 1979 rock opera *Joe's Garage* makes scattershot references to a variety of pop genres. The three-act opera was about a government who bans music – ironic considering that towards the end of his life Zappa's most visible activity was campaigning against the PMRC music censorship lobby. Zappa was a serious man who refused to take himself seriously.

We're Only in it for the Money came out in the January, 1968. It wasn't just a take-off but

a put-down of *Sgt Pepper*, which the cover parodies. The naivete behind the 'Summer of Love' is derisively exposed using montage techniques that intersperse pop tunes with white noise and spoken sections. 'Who Needs the Peace Corps' lampooned the pretensions of the pseudo-hippies who flocked to San Francisco in 1967: 'Danced at the Fillmore, I'm completely stoned / I'm hippy and I'm trippy, I'm a gypsy on my own / I'll stay a week and get the crabs and take a bus back home. / I'm really just a phoney but forgive me 'cause I'm stoned.'

Lumpy Gravy also came out in 1968; it was Zappa's first album without the Mothers and a refinement of the "conceptual continuity" ideal he chased through his career. In the era of *Slacker* and Quentin Tarantino, this has aged particularly well, with banal conversations cut-up and sprinkled through a suite of music that uses a 50-piece orchestra, voices taped inside a piano, plus a few loose Mothers.

Overnite Sensation broadened the audience for Zappa in 1973, mixing satire with jazz-rock from a driving band which included Jean-Luc Ponty and George Duke. 'I'm the Slime' warned of the danger hiding in every living room: 'I may be vile and pernicious, but you can't look away / Have you guessed me yet? / I'm the slime oozin' from your TV set.'

Apostrophe (') from 1974 was Zappa's first gold album, thanks to 'Don't Eat the Yellow Snow' and the lascivious leer of 'Dirty Love' (does genius excuse sexism?), plus a melodic flow that was easier for addled-brain hippies to follow.

Does Humor Belong in Music? is culled from various live shows from a 1984 European tour. It includes many live favourites ('Cock-Suckers' Ball', 'What's New in Baltimore?') but its jazz-rock fusion teeters towards meandering indulgence. (Give me the satire and sound collages: thank God the mammoth 12-hour live set *You Can't Do That On Stage Anymore* wasn't among these review discs.)

The two-volume **London Symphony Orchestra**, originally released separately in 1983 and 1987, is the modern orchestral suite Zappa had been threatening since he was a teenager, and hinted at in his early 70s collaboration with classical conductor Zubin Mehta and the LA Philharmonic. It's an orchestral work of depth and creativity – and remarkably listenable for music heavily influenced by Webern and late Stravinsky. Recommended more for Composition 301 students than fans of *Freak Out!*, however.

JAMES BOOKER



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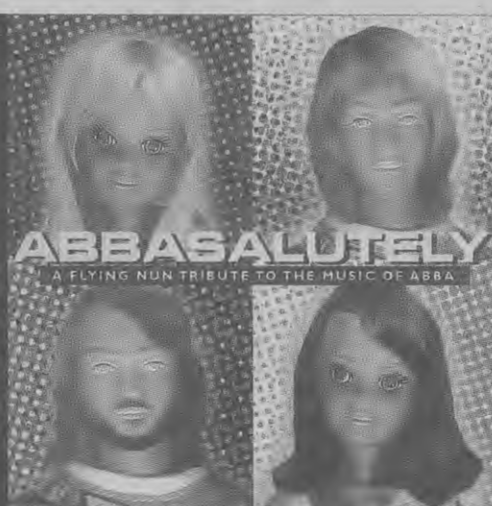
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