

**THE RONDO HATTON REPORT VOL X**

**MARCH 21, 2012**

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# 1. STRAVINSKY'S INFLUENCE IN FRANK ZAPPA'S MUSIC, PART I

John Anthony

In mid-1950s, while American teenagers were tuning into radio stations and buying records of rock and roll artists such as Elvis Presley and Fats Domino, a young teenager named Frank Zappa was searching for a different sound. What Zappa found was the jagged rhythms and dissonant sound masses produced by twentieth century composers such as Edgard Varese, Anton Weber, and Igor Stravinsky. By studying these sounds and listening to an assortment of rock and blues guitarists, Zappa was able to create an entirely new form of art music that combined rock, classical, blues, pop, and jazz.

Igor Stravinsky had a particularly important influence in Frank Zappa's music. Zappa borrowed compositional techniques from Stravinsky, including Isomelism, Polymeter, Stratification, and Quotation. Also, I will be looking at particular melodies from *The Rite of Spring*, *Petrushka*, *Firebird Suite*, and *A Soldier's Tale* that Zappa specifically used in his music usually quoting the passage exactly (with some alterations usually occurring in the rhythm) or taking a melody and creating a completely new idea. Some of the music that I will be incorporating in this paper includes "Status Back Baby," from *Playground Psychotics* (1992) "Oh No," and "Toad of the Short Forest," from *Weasels Ripped My Flesh* (1970) and Echnida's Arf (Of You)" and "Don't You Ever Wash That Thing?" from *Roxy & Elsewhere* (1974).

## *Musical Quoting*

Igor Stravinsky was once quoted as saying "Good composers borrow; Great composers steal." Frank Zappa must have read that quote and took it to heart. Throughout his entire music career, Zappa stole many musical quotes by famous composers and pop musicians and either played the quotes verbatim in his music or took the quote and completely changed it into a new musical idea. Some fragments of songs he incorporated into his music include "Bolero" by Maurice Ravel, "Purple Haze" by Jimi Hendrix, "Theme From Bonanza," and "Theme from Piano Concert No.

3” by Bela Bartok. While these quotes have fascinated musicians and fans of Zappa for the last four decades, his biggest use of musical quoting came from Stravinsky.

The first example of musical borrowing comes from the song “Status Back Baby” off of the album *Playground Psychotics* (1992).<sup>1</sup> Halfway through the recording, Zappa and his group launch into playing the first thirty seconds of the “Petrushka.” The band sets up this quote by playing a pedal concert D while Zappa begins to play the opening flute part on distorted guitar. At this point, Zappa speaks to the audience:

“Of course we’ll play Petrushka!”<sup>2</sup>

Zappa would do that from time to time on many of his recordings and live concerts so that the audience, whether they are familiar with Stravinsky, or another composer Zappa borrowed it from, would understand that this is some sort of musical quote. It may be that Zappa would hope to also get his audience interested in different music that they may have never been exposed to.

After playing through the flute part, Zappa then quotes the violin part, cello part, and trumpet part of the Petrushka quote. Once these four ideas are performed, the entire group plays the unison rhythms to finish the Petrushka quote. At this point, the drummer plays a small fill and the band continues with the actual “Status Back Baby.”

*Musical Quote #1: “Petrushka” in “Status Back Baby” (transcribed by Andre Mount)*



<sup>1</sup> Mount, Andre. “Does Serious Music Belong in Pop?: Borrowings From Stravinsky in Zappa”: 6.

<sup>2</sup> Zappa, Frank. “Status Back Baby.” *Playground Psychotics*. Barking Pumpkin, 1992: 1:16 – 17.

Zappa incorporates the same technique of inserting a Stravinsky melody into a song on the 1988 album, *Make A Jazz Noise Here*. At the end of the song “City of Tiny Lights,” Zappa’s group segues to “Royal March” from *L’Histoire Du Soldat*. Trumpeter Walt Fowler plays a one minute excerpt while the rest of the band takes on the roll of the orchestra. The group performs this excerpt twice at a fast tempo compared to the actual Stravinsky piece. An earlier example of Zappa’s use of *L’Histoire Du Soldat* comes from the song “Soft Cell Conclusion” from the 1968 album, *Absolutely Free*. The song vamps mostly on two chords while Zappa speaks the lyrics over them. At the end of the song, the group abruptly goes into *L’Histoire Du Soldat* and then jumps to “Jupiter” from Gustav Holst’s *The Planets Suite*.<sup>3</sup>

Another song to feature a quote from Stravinsky was in the song “In-A-Gadda-Stravinsky” from the 1988 album, *Guitar*. This song was most likely an impromptu jam on stage where Zappa actually quotes the opening melody from the *Rite of Spring* through the use of improvisation.<sup>4</sup> The song opens up with the bass player playing the riff from Iron Butterfly’s “In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida” while Zappa begins to play a muted polymeter rhythm on his guitar. After this lick is performed, Zappa continues with his own improvisation.

*Musical Quote #2: “Rite of Spring” in “In-A-Gadda-Stravinsky” (transcribed by John Anthony)*



The last example of musical quoting is “Fountain of Love” off of the 1968 album, *Cruising With Ruben & the Jets*.<sup>5</sup> This album is very significant in Zappa’s catalogue because he was going for a neoclassical approach that was similar to what Stravinsky was doing through his neoclassical period. With four albums behind him in his music catalogue, Zappa is almost reacting to the complicated music he had been writing at the time by writing what seemed on the outside to be a simple doo-

<sup>3</sup> Borders, James. “Form and the Concept Album: Aspects of Modernism in Frank Zappa’s Early Releases” In *Perspectives of New Music*, Vol. 39, No. 1. (2001): 123.

<sup>4</sup> Mount, Andre. “Does Serious Music Belong in Pop?: Borrowings From Stravinsky in Zappa”: 7.

<sup>5</sup> Mount, Andre. “Does Serious Music Belong in Pop?: Borrowings From Stravinsky in Zappa”: 6.

wop album.<sup>6</sup> After listening to the album, fans saw that it was much more detailed than on its initial inspection.

“Fountain of Love,” the tenth track off of the album contains an ending vamp that Zappa put together by taking the opening bassoon part from “The Rite of Spring” and The Moonglow’s “Sincerely.”<sup>7</sup> Musical Quote #3 below shows the two musical passages that inspired the closing vamp to the song.

*Musical Quote #3 “The Rite of Spring” in “Fountain of Love” (transcribed by Andre Mount)*

a. “Fountain of Love,” fadeout vamp (my transcription)



b. The Moonglows, “Sincerely,” background vocals (my transcription)



c. Stravinsky, *The Rite of Spring*, mm. 1-2 (bassoon)



*Compositional Technique #1: Isomelism*

The first compositional technique that Zappa borrowed from Stravinsky was his use of Isomelism, or just a set of pitches, are preserved (or transposed) while its rhythms are altered.<sup>8</sup> Brett Clement states that Zappa could have drawn the idea of

<sup>6</sup> Lowe, Kelly Fisher. *The Words and Music of Frank Zappa*. Westport: Praeger, 2006: 59.

<sup>7</sup> Lowe, Kelly Fisher. *The Words and Music of Frank Zappa*. Westport: Praeger, 2006: 62.

<sup>8</sup> Clement, Brett. "A Study of the Instrumental Music of Frank Zappa". Ph.D. dissertation, University of Cincinnati, 2009: 29.

Isomelism from many of Stravinsky's early ballets which Zappa was very familiar with.<sup>9</sup> For this part of the paper, I will be examining two specific examples.

The first example of Isomelism comes from the song "Oh No" from the 1970 recording *Weasels Ripped My Flesh*.<sup>10</sup> Example Phrase 1 occurs between 00:00 – 00:10, while Example 2 is followed directly from 00:11 – 00:24. Both Phrase 1 and Phrase 2's melodies are being sung by vocalist Ray Collins.

*Example 1: "Oh No" (Clement, Brett. "A Study of the Instrumental Music of Frank Zappa". Ph.D. dissertation, University of Cincinnati, 2009: 265)*

Phrase 1: mm. 1–6



Phrase 2: mm. 7–14



As shown from the example above, the twenty eight notes are being kept in the same order, while the rhythm is being completely altered. Another idea that is pointed out is that Zappa did not use transpositions from Phrase 1 to Phrase 2. Between notes nine and ten of the Isomelism, Zappa places a quarter note rest in between. This was to make the listener unaware of the exact pitch class being used over again. This was most likely done to give the singer an easier melody to perform. By doing this, Zappa is giving the illusion of a completely new melody in Phrase 2 with no recollection from the previous ten seconds (Phrase 1).

Another example of Isomelism is from "Jumbo Go Away" from the 1981 recording, *You Are What You Is*. This example is different from "Oh No" in that the examples of

<sup>9</sup> Clement, Brett. "A Study of the Instrumental Music of Frank Zappa". Ph.D. dissertation, University of Cincinnati, 2009: 29. Originally stated in David Carson Berry's "Stravinsky's Skeletons":22-26.

<sup>10</sup> Clement, Brett. "A Study of the Instrumental Music of Frank Zappa". Ph.D. dissertation, University of Cincinnati, 2009: 30.

Isomelism do not happen directly after each other. This example also differs from the first example because it incorporates a transposition. In example 2 (mm. 4-7), the pitches are set one half step lower and then moved backed into the original pitches for example 2c (mm. 13-15).<sup>11</sup>

*Example 2: "Jumbo Go Away" (Clement, Brett. "A Study of the Instrumental Music of Frank Zappa". Ph.D. dissertation, University of Cincinnati, 2009:266)*

(a) mm. 1-2, 1:31-1:36



(b) mm. 4-7 (at T11), 1:38-1:46



(c) mm. 13-15, 1:54-1:58

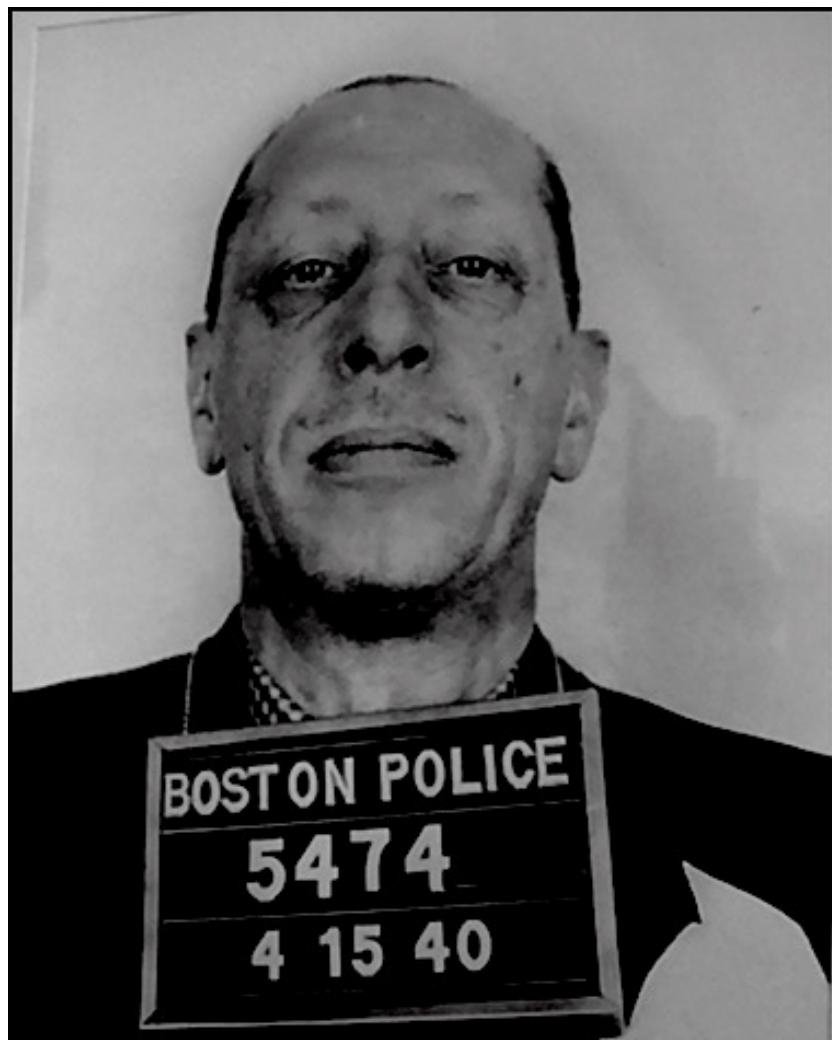


While Zappa used every note in the pitch class in "Oh No," there are two brief instances where he deviates slightly from the patterns he sets up. In example 2b, Zappa transposes every note in the pitch class in example 2a (mm. 1-2) a half step down except for the eighth note (concert F). As the Isomelism occurs for the second time in example three, the concert F at this point is transposed to concert F#. The second instance of deviation is between example 1 and 3. Very similar to the F being transposed to F#, Zappa takes the fourth note (originally a concert G) and transposes it down a whole step to concert F.

<sup>11</sup> Clement, Brett. "A Study of the Instrumental Music of Frank Zappa". Ph.D. dissertation, University of Cincinnati, 2009: 31.

Another interesting idea that Zappa incorporates into this example that he did not use in previous was the incorporation of time signatures. From 1:54 – 1:58, Zappa changes the time signature from common time to 6/16. Once arriving at 6/16, Zappa bounces between 6/16 and 7/16. This idea was used to give sense of uneasiness to the listener (who had been listening to music in common time for a minute and a half) and also to have the listener assume that the exact same pitch class being used for the last twenty five seconds like a completely new phrase.

[Part II continues in the next edition of the Rondo Hatton Report]





## 2. SUCH A BEAUTIFUL GUY

Bille Barbour

The very first issue of the Rondo Hatton Report ran a piece by Sarah Moore which talked about Zappa in a very personal way. There's not been very much of that in subsequent issues; maybe the guys are too shy to confess it, but I'm sure she's not the only one of us, female or male, who has felt seduced by the man's presence as much as his music. Even without going as far as regretting that we can never be lovers, it's hard to resist the charms of someone so "original, witty and deep" especially with a voice like that: so sexy, suave and self-assured, and as she says, brimming with "command, leadership, humour and humanity..." It comes across not just on stage recordings but in interviews and other excerpts available on YouTube.

I recently ran across a clip I'd not seen before of him on Italian TV with a female presenter. It gives a rare glimpse of what it must have been like to interact with him on a personal level (even under the full glare of the TV lights, it feels spontaneous, intimate and uncontrived in all the ways that we have come to expect from his music.) You can see it here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0WjrH-gCUP8>. Apart from anything else it must be the strangest interview ever conducted on television – right from the start he subverts the situation by taking the initiative and refusing to play the usual interview game – of which he once claimed, in an endearingly odd metaphor, that it would be "probably more natural to perform sex with a sea urchin."

But despite his natural attractiveness and personable way with people (you can't help feeling that lucky Kay probably got lucky in more than one way that evening) it was definitely not something he ever flaunted, and in fact the scattered references to himself in his work and elsewhere reveal a man who did not consider himself to be beautiful. In part of course, he affected not to care – the famous "*Don't mind your make up, you'd better make your mind up...*" quote reveals a disdain for the lie of beauty and those who spend their time worrying about such matters, but there's a definite sense that he thought of himself as belonging on the ugly side of the fence. His warning to those who considered themselves beautiful to watch out because "there's more of us ugly motherfuckers than you are!" is a case in point, but he

makes many such self-deprecating remarks in interviews. But that only adds to his charm. And in any case, it's not his physical looks that make him so beautiful, though the beauty of his mind outshines anything that might have been unattractive about him, hard though it is for me to see anything. (Did he have a complex about being not 'properly' white, and looked down on for being of Italian stock?)

Finally, in trawling YouTube for new clips that there seem to be all the time, by chance I also found the interview with him where he was introduced on screen as 'National Treasurer' (see screen grab below). I remember reading about this somewhere and thought he was probably joking – I didn't really believe anybody could be so stupid. So it's nice to have it confirmed, even if the reality is deeply depressing. Presumably the person in charge of creating the title (or maybe just the person who asked him) had no idea what a 'national treasure' was or they could not have made such a stupid mistake. Surely nobody who gave the matter a moment's thought could have ever thought he was a treasurer, let alone a national one (even though his look in that suit is pretty severe!) But perhaps to someone unfamiliar with the concept of 'national treasure', the title 'National Treasurer' at least sounded vaguely plausible. I guess it just goes to show that the world divides into those who get him and those that don't, but those that do know that besides being a national treasure he was also a really beautiful guy. Where do they keep the rest of them?

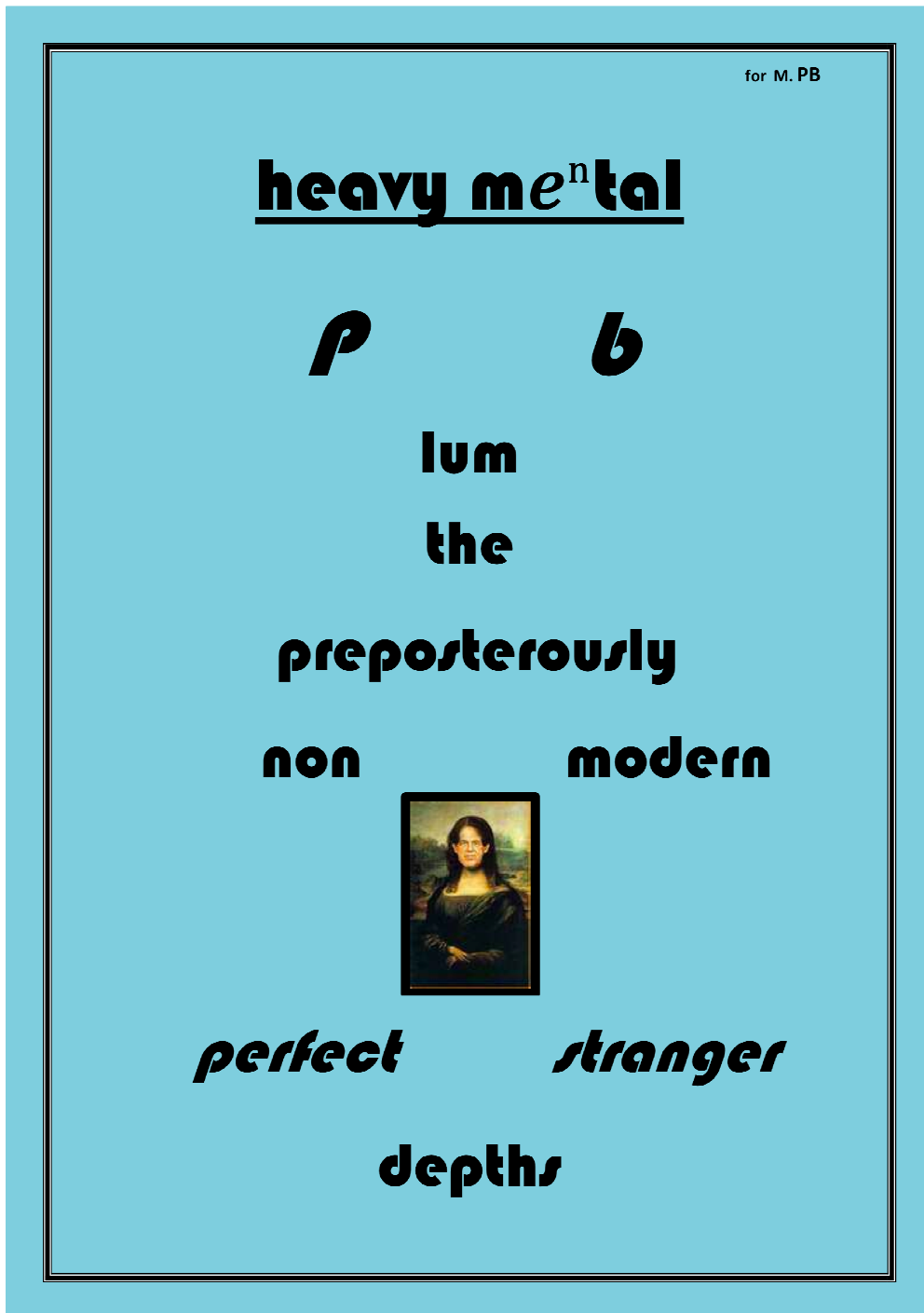


### 3. LINGUA FRANKA (Part VI): Opaque Melodies That Would Bug Most People

Arjun von Caemmerer

*A whole system of arithmetic  
died in your waves*

(Guillevic, **Carnac**)



When Frank Zappa was alive and living in Läther, what I looked forward to most with each new release — and these, after disbursement for low-budget shoes & trapdoor pojamás, came faster than I could then easily afford — was the complete unpredictability of the next Studio Tangent's direction. Zappa's chief criterion, it seemed (apart from that it be *astounding*) was to *give 'em what they don't expect*.

How right he was, lama. Even when there was an Approximate idea of the anticipated general content — say, for example, the Ensemble Modern playing *fine* new music in concerts in Germany — my actual initial encounter with Zappa's 'unfamiliar' music was often disorientating & flummoxing: the music of ***Times Beach II*** and ***Ruth Is Sleeping*** on first listening sounded so alien to my aural orifices that had I not been fortunate enough to have warmed up the right muscles of the body via acquaintance with Zappa's prior releases [from the relatively less Bizarre (***You Are What You Is***) to the relatively more Straight (the tongue in cheek New Age Versions of ***Francesco Zappa***)], there is a strong probability (calculable perhaps by Senior Zappa but not by myself) that in the very unlikely event that had I simply encountered these ditties on the Radio, I would not have had the faith and patience — let alone capacity — to listen and listen and listen again, until they coalesced into Hearing. Ditto for much of ***Guitar, The Perfect Stranger, LSO***, (in particular ***Mo'n'Herb's Vacation*** and ***Pedro's Dowry***), the music on ***Civilization Phaze III*** and the other posthumous releases: it took me several exposures to hear the inexorable and articulated logic of ***Good Lobna***, that single Zappoid thought, its convolutions unfurled.

In this regard, is both instructive and (in the ***We Are Not Alone*** sense) reassuring to read Peter Rundel's (modified) comment in ***The Yellow Shark*** liner notes on his history with ***Times Beach II***: *We had a very interesting experience with that piece. When we played it the first time, it was in L.A., and we thought it was a very, very abstract piece of modern music. I think we didn't understand it, or how it should be played. After all that work it came very late in the concert program. We had already prepared other pieces, but we needed something more. The musicians opposed it, but I said maybe we should try that again. Frank said, "Why Not?, let's do it", and it became very clear how to play it. It had no dynamics, no articulation – Just Plain*

**Notes.** Frank sang the phrases for us. Suddenly, it became very lively, and the character of the music came out. It was not an abstract kind of music anymore.

With Zappa's less immediately accessible pieces, such as **Times Beach** (or more recently with **Feeding The Monkeys At Ma Maison**) my listening process is accompanied by a now somewhat familiar arc of different responses: it starts with General Incomprehension, fragmentary apprehension glancing off the rapidly changing surface elements, the music perceived from the 'outside' as an object, opaque and foreign; on subsequent listening managing (perhaps) to isolate and hear a particular line weave its way through the piece; later, reduplicating this process, following other lines wend their various ways; later still, hearing the intersection and relationship of these lines, or, where there is not so much a single line, discerning finally the Calderian balance of whatever assorted dingle-berries have been thrown into the Muffin mix. Later that night it might suddenly happen: that mysterious movement in no time at all — where Time itself Beaches — from a necessarily fractional hearing (of parts in relation to some as-yet-undefined whole) to magically hearing the whole Musical Construct (and its component parts in relation to this). **200(0) Years Old**, Patanjali mapped this process more succinctly:

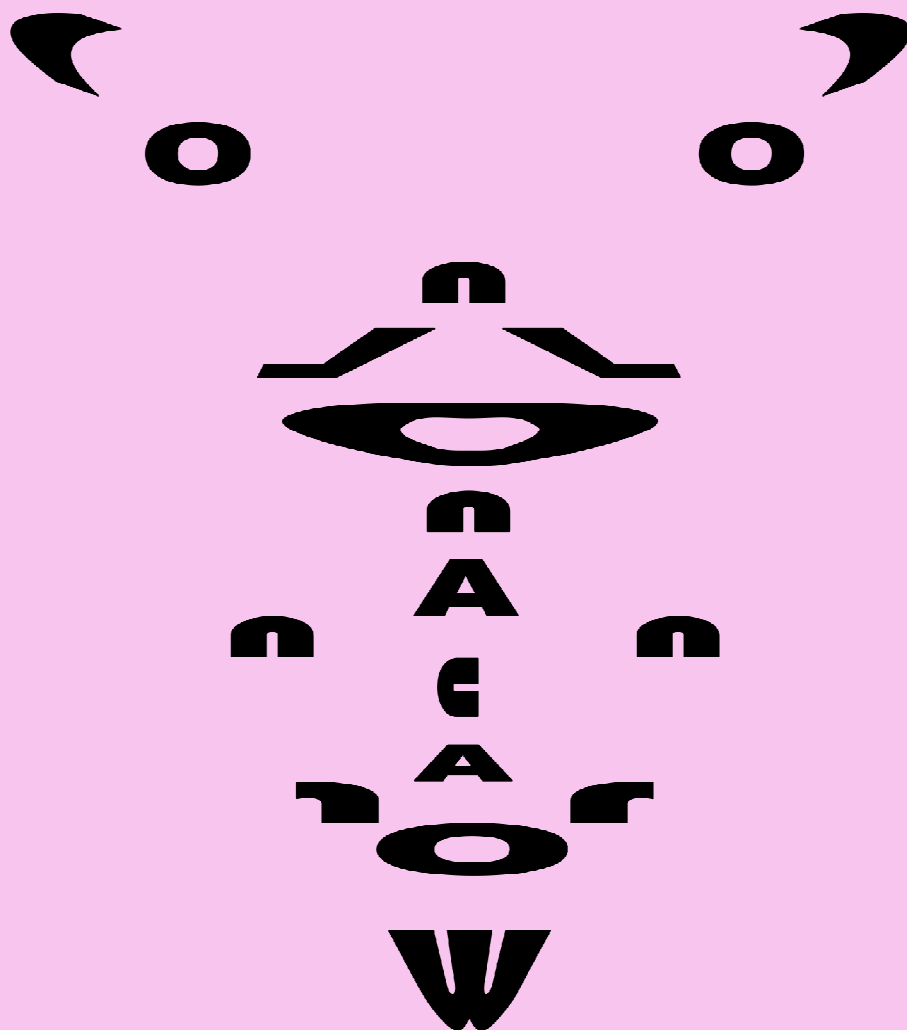
*vitarka vicara ananda asmitarupa anugamat samprajnatah*

“Through absorption the object is understood: first, at an analytical, superficial level; then, in reflective synthesis; finally, in the blissful state: the individual indivisible from the object.”

**(The Yoga–Sutra of Patanjali 1.17)**

Once heard, Zappa's Music brings with it the collateral (and differently perplexing) impossibility of subsequently being *unable to unhear* it: it existed all along, as Frank had sang. And (as if that weren't enough) with each new accretion, not just **Building a Girl**, but a perpetually reconfigured corpus, each newly absorbed piece not only changing the context of what has been pooted forth in the past but also what is yet to be heard on Broadway in the Futchum. Thus Zappa educates: raising not just Dental Floss in Montana, but also  $e^n$  and The Eyebrows of Nancarrow.

## **Piano Player Study No.52**



#### 4. TAKING THEMSELVES SURREALIOUSLY: Paralloiac Worlds in FZ and Dali

Tom Demonay



*"One day it will have to be officially admitted that what we have christened reality is an even greater illusion than the world of dreams."* Salvador Dali

*"The illusion of freedom will continue as long as it's profitable to continue the illusion. At the point where the illusion becomes too expensive to maintain, they will just take down the scenery, they will pull back the curtains, they will move the tables and chairs out of the way and you will see the brick wall at the back of the theater."* Frank Zappa

There is much about Zappa and Dali that is extremely dissimilar. Their personal lives and political inclinations could hardly be farther apart – Dali the secretive sexual deviant, born-again Catholic and monarchist, Zappa the openly sexual celebrant, 'devout pagan' and republican (with a small R). But much of this is really just the background radiation, the product of the very different traditions they grew up in. What's much more striking is the remarkable similarities that can be seen in their approach to their work, despite the different mediums they were working in.

First of all, they were both showmen, cultivating images of themselves that were simultaneously highly memorable and distinctively odd. To be sure, Dali worked on his air of eccentric madness with a relish that Zappa neither really matched nor even aspired to. Dali's outlandishness was often for its own sake, whereas Zappa's was always usually in the service of some greater point, such as the cover of *We're Only In It For The Money*, or the infamous Phi Zappa Crappa images, clearly carefully posed if circulated without his consent.

But the effect of this was that they were – and are – both too easily written off as weird and/or crazy, and their work not given the attention it deserves as a result. And work they certainly did. Zappa has more than 1200 copyrighted compositions to his name, and Dali is supposed to have produced over 1500 paintings. It's the obsessive quality of their devotion to perfection in the service of absurdity that is so astonishing. I remember the first time I saw an actual painting by Dali and my shock at the complete absence of brushmarks, the almost photographic, hyperreal attention to detail in creating the most absurd of dreamlike fantasies. Zappa would likewise spend days without sleep in the studio getting the finest of sonic details correct in the service of a seamless production. The title of the album *Studio Tan* was not bestowed without reason.

Both were dedicated professionals and masters of their art who worked consciously within a tradition and were fully aware of what had been achieved before their time, often referencing the work of past masters in their own work. Like Zappa, Dali could have been a highly successful conventional artist. The quality of his work as a miniaturist alone shows how much purely painterly talent he possessed, and had he not chosen to paint absurdities on such a bold scale he would have been recognised much more widely as a 'serious' artist. But like Zappa, he was not interested in such recognition – it was absurdities behind these preconceptions that were his real target.

It's this apparent absurdity that puts people off – what they fail to take into account is the absurdity of what they persist in seeing as 'normal'. Both Zappa and Dali are on a mission to show us that it is the normal that is absurd, and that once we liberate ourselves from that, everything and anything is possible. Though the seeming



oddness of their work makes it difficult to approach it because you have to question why it is the way it is, once you penetrate the method behind the madness it quickly becomes more rewarding than taking comfort in the familiar. Both Dali's conscious exploitation of dreams and the full-spectrum maximalism of Zappa's work have psychedelic overtones that suggest a heavy use of drugs, but again like Zappa, Dali never used them (famously saying "I don't do drugs. I am drugs.")

One can only guess (and regret that the chance was missed) at what might have happened if Herb Cohen had in fact been able to persuade the Balloon Farm nightclub to allow the Mothers to rehearse there with Dali in attendance. With their shared love of Dada (Dali is of course credited in the list of influences on *Freak Out*) there could have been an interesting creative collaboration. For just as Zappa was not just about 'rock' music, Dali was not just about 'surrealism'. Their work transcends conventional genres and confounds expectations. And yet the apparent craziness was the product of extremely hard work. The famous Dali Atomicus photo was the result of 28 takes over 6 hours with repeated buckets of water, thrown cats and exhausted assistants. Zappa could only have approved.



## 5. IF THEY ONLY COULDA HEARD IT

Andy Hollinden

Since 1996, I've taught a course for the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music called Z402 - The Music of Frank Zappa. On the final exam, I always ask students this question: *"How has your opinion of Frank Zappa changed over the course of this semester?"* Aside from being a good way to fish for compliments, it's always nice to be reminded that once they start to pay attention, most students really do find that FZ starts to speak to them. Here's a selection of comments from the class of 2011. Hope you enjoy them as much as I have.

DAVID J - Prior to taking this class, I was a novice Zappa fan. I knew a handful of songs but was primarily interested in him through watching interviews and reading his autobiography. Taking this class exposed me to the varied side of his artistic and socially aware genius. Zappa's willingness to put forth his entire effort and being into his work is deeply admirable. Yet, taking this class offers insight into the contextual circumstances of successes and failures (if either really exists) in Zappa's career that bring him back down to the level of any human being. We are all caught in the same systems, and Zappa exemplified the way that art can bridge the gap between reality and possibility, giving humans a place, even for a moment, where they can conceive different worlds.

HALEY M – My opinion has changed drastically. I always looked at him as a weird, drugged-out eccentric before this class, hearing the Mothers of Invention years and not caring for it as much. However, after these 16 weeks of information about FZ's life - him being drug-free, his dedication to music, and hearing EVERYTHING else (such a wide variety of styles) – I LOVE HIM as a musician, an artist, a free-thinker (whom I can relate to on SO many levels about religion, politics, life in general). He is great, and I'm so happy I had the privilege to take a class about an American icon who actually matters in my book (a lot of the others are too straight-laced, they don't flow like Zappa). I'm going to continue to listen to and enjoy his music. Thanks for teaching us about an eccentric, beautiful person.

MICHAEL S – My opinion has definitely changed favorably over the course of this semester. All of his music is brilliant, and his performances are astounding. His bands were so well rehearsed that they could stop on a dime. Aside from his music, I really respect Zappa as a humanitarian. He really wanted to change the world, and for the better. He used his music as a vehicle to exploit the problems of society. It's no shock that the man was chosen to speak out against the PMRC in front of congress. So overall, I respect Zappa as composer, musician, and activist more than any figure in popular culture.

KATIE K – Coming into this class, I knew almost nothing about Frank Zappa. I had heard some of his music, but that's it. Finishing this class, I can definitely say that Zappa is in my top 5 favorite musicians. I had no idea how prolific he was or that he was absolutely a genius. I think Zappa for president is exactly what this country needs. He experimented with every kind of music and did it well, and I have so much respect for him that I never even knew I could have. As much as I love Jimi Hendrix, I can still confidently say that I love Frank Zappa more. Thank you very much for a great semester. This was an incredible course. I am pleased to say that I lost any negative (misunderstood) feelings I had toward Frank Zappa.

JULIA B – I honestly did not know anything about Zappa when I signed up for this class. It fit my schedule, my friend took it and liked it, and I needed another music class for my minor. I'm so glad I did take it. At first, I thought this music was really strange and didn't really like it. Through the course, I have discovered what a genius and talent Frank Zappa was. Although I do not always agree with his music, I have great respect for him and his work. He was extremely misunderstood and was a unique musician. His music has inspired me to look at the world differently. I'm very glad I took this class and will be recommending it to others!

DAVID C – I came in thinking Frank was a genius, and now I leave knowing he was in every sense of the word. This class inspired me to stick with music for the rest of my life. I honestly can now tell people that this strange avant-garde musician is my biggest influence during this point of my life. He had techniques for composing that

honestly need to be discussed. In every sense of the word, Frank was truly an original. I'm gonna carry his music with me forever. Thanks for everything.

FRANK M – Well, I came into the class knowing little more than the name, a few songs, that he was a classical composer, and he was vulgar as hell. I have to say the man went from just a normal rock 'n' roll type icon (in my mind) to an absolute genius by the first week, and it only got better from there. He had a great sense of humor and really got things done. Makes me wonder what sort of world this would be if he did make it into some form of government power. I have great respect for this man and wish that he was still around so that I could support him in person.

AARON S – Initially I thought Zappa was just some rocker who made crazy music. But that idea vanished right away. I now have such an appreciation for this man's brilliant career. He was able to morph with the times, but you still always knew a Zappa song when you heard one. He is an amazing human being, and I can definitely say he is one of my favorite artists of all time.

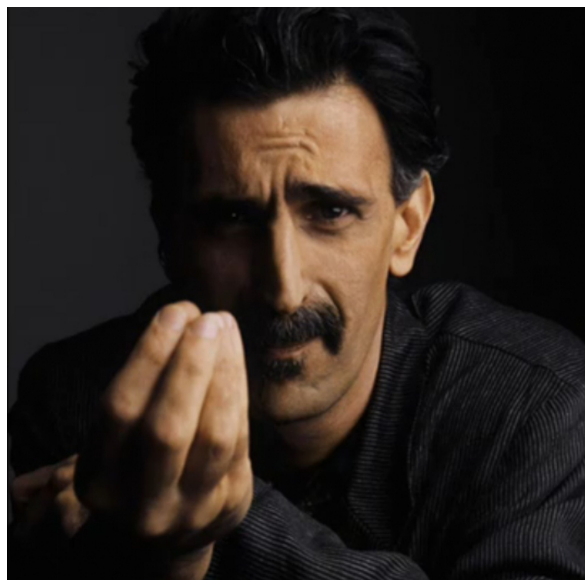
MAX Q – I signed up for this class having never listened to any of Zappa's music. I'd heard the name thrown around before, but I never investigated him any further. I was pleasantly surprised when I first started listening to him to find that I actually liked the music, as opposed to being totally turned off to it. My opinion only became more positive with each listening section, as the music became more and more interesting with each album. I am most impressed with his prolific career and work ethic; it is something to aspire to be. I can safely say that at the end of this semester I am a Frank Zappa fan and found great pleasure in studying his life, music, and career.

DANIEL T – I came into this course not knowing anything about Frank Zappa. I will be leaving with a genuine appreciation of Zappa, along with a love of atonal music, perverted rhythms, and musical experimentation. While I may not have a love for everything he's done, I understand that is because he has done SO MUCH. This class has made me want to apply Zappa's experimentation, hard work, and out-of-the-box thinking to my own life and art. I am leaving this class convinced not only of

Zappa's musical genius, but also of the importance of his contributions to movie-making, thinking, political awareness, and commitment to freedom of speech.

STEPHEN O – Growing up, Zappa was always a curious character to me. I heard his name thrown around a little and I knew he was prolific, but I just never knew anything about him. After reading the FZ book and taking this class, I understand really a lot more about what Zappa's music means (his lyrical satire and compositional choices). I feel like even when I was beginning to get acquainted with Zappa, I understood him. Nothing that he ever did surprised me or shocked me (or offended me). I always knew there was a reason for everything he did. I guess throughout the semester, Zappa went from being some sort of enigma to being a real life person who I could very much relate to on many levels. Even though I didn't agree with everything he ever did, I am thankful for Zappa's having written, performed, and recorded all that he did. I deeply admire his work ethic, and some day can only hope to accomplish a fraction of what Zappa did.

DAN T – I entered this class thinking Frank Zappa was just some crazy guy who made funny music. Leaving, I know this is possibly the most ignorant thing to say about Frank. He was a pure genius. His musical ability is incomparable to anyone I've ever heard. He lived without barriers. He made the music that he wanted to, no matter what kind it was. He wrote music that classically trained musicians could not play. Frank Zappa, as I know now, is a musical genius. Bottom line.



## 6. FRANK ZAPPA'S WORST NIGHTMARE

DJ Pangburn



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In a 1986 episode of CNN's "Crossfire," Frank Zappa appeared alongside hosts Tom Braden and Bob Novak, as well as The Washington Times's writer John Lofton to discuss censorship.

In many ways, "Crossfire" was the prototype for Fox News punditry. Aired from 1982 to 2005, "Crossfire" paired a Liberal and Conservative guest pundit with a Liberal and Conservative host. In 1986, Robert Novak was the conservative host, with Tom Braden on the left. Shouting, interruptions, hyperbole, etc., always ensued.

At issue in the Frank Zappa episode was the controversial and reactionary PMRC, founded by Al Gore's wife Tipper and a bunch of other politicians' wives. (PMRC advocated for parental advisory warnings, if you can remember such labels.) Zappa had testified before the US Senate Commerce, Technology, and Transportation committee on September 19, 1985, noting that PMRC's efforts put the country on a path toward censorship, stating, "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 do not like."

On “Crossfire,” Lofton, invoking the federal government as only a “less government” conservative could, stated that “we’re entitled to use the force of our civil government to help protect our families” who are “under attack.” The word “force” is no longer used by conservatives to describe their moral crusades, especially given the 24-hour news cycle. This, of course, does not mean it has completely vanished from the conservative thought process. It is all subtext now—they still believe they are under attack, and people who hold a belief in the First Amendment are the collective Emperor Nero.

It’s also worth noting that Lofton agrees with Zappa’s belief that parents are the “first line of defense,” adding, however, that they shouldn’t have to “stand alone.” (Once again, the conservative who makes of himself an island in America’s free market, trumpeting his social mobility through self-reliance, without the help of government, now calls for government’s assistance.)

In the segment (which can be viewed here [www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ISil7IHxzc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ISil7IHxzc)) Zappa waits patiently as Lofton pontificates. Then, when it is his turn, he is interrupted first by Lofton, then by Novak. Again, he waits patiently. Finally, he is able to express his opinion on censorship, Christianity and fascist theocracy.

Conservatives will accuse people like Zappa, and those on the Left in general of imposing a moral ideology on Christians by allowing Americans to watch, read and listen to whatever they like. No, Americans are free to believe whatever pleases them. Since America is also a (relatively) free market, anyone is free to not purchase products they find individually offensive. As it turns out, the perfect free market—divinely-gifted by Jesus Christ himself—is not so perfect after all.

Zappa finally makes a comment: *“Could I make a statement about national defense? The biggest threat to America today is not communism, it’s moving America toward a fascist theocracy. And everything that’s happened to the Reagan administration is steering us right down that pipe.”* Lofton and Novak nearly lose themselves to paroxysms. Braden then asks Zappa, “Give me one example of a fascist theocracy,” to which Zappa responds:

*“When you have a government that prefers a certain moral code derived from a certain religion, and that moral code turns into legislation to suit one certain religious point-of-view; and if that code happens to be very, very right wing, almost toward Attila the Hun—”*

Zappa, naturally, is not allowed to finish the thought, but we can see where he was headed. Lofton resorts to an ad hominem attack by calling Zappa an “anarchist.” Earlier in the interview, however, Zappa noted: “We are talking about words, and I don’t believe that there is any word that *needs* to be suppressed. There is no scientific or realistic reason why you should keep people from hearing certain words.”

Braden, perhaps out of a certain generational residue, or maybe as an attempt to balance Zappa’s reasoned responses, states, “There are certain words that you use to describe an act of fornication that are brutal.” Zappa’s response is sublime—“So?”

The response is sublime because it strikes at the very heart of the matter: the use of a word, even one that might make the Marquis de Sade or Comte de Lautreamont blush (though this probably wouldn’t have been possible), doesn’t cause the unraveling of a person. It only demonstrates to the offended individual that there is a deviation from Christian morality; and that is why Lofton and legions of right-wing, Evangelical Christians would like to censor such words.

Zappa was right to point out that the Christian moral crusade, the effort to legislate their morality, began to bloom under Reagan. But, the crusade didn’t begin with the Republicans’ dear leader. Barry Goldwater saw subversion of conservative, Republican politics by fundamentalist Christians as far back as the late 60s. As we all know, it didn’t disappear with Reagan, but only intensified in the last 24 years.

Though Rick Santorum, the would-be GOP candidate, is Roman Catholic, he believes in the religious right’s moral crusade, which he recasts as a “spiritual war.” Santorum is not simply fixated on words, though, as Lofton, Christians and the



PMRC were in the 1980s. He and the faithful, who drown out more reasonable religious folk, want a complete revolution or, rather, regression: no gay civil rights (marriage), sex used only for reproduction (of little Christian automatons), no female soldiers on the front lines (back in the kitchens, dames!). Indeed, he and his followers would love to set up shop in all the vaginas of the land to keep penises out (unless making children) and the dividing cells in. As Santorum stated when asked about contraception, it's "not O.K. It's a license to do things in a sexual realm that is counter to how things are supposed to be."

Zappa would be awe-struck if he were here to witness such a reactionary figure within a hair's breath of the GOP candidacy. That such a man could be viewed as more "electable." Indeed, he would see the crystallization of that movement toward "fascist theocracy" into a single point: Rick Santorum. Mitt Romney, on the other hand, worships money and his hair—Mormonism is merely his birthright. Newt Gingrich, while no doubt on the religious right, relishes every opportunity to pander to Christian fundamentalists. The only candidate who stands in direct opposition to the legislation of morality, aside from his pro-life stance, is Ron Paul. In his view, government should be reduced in all its various permutations, whether it be taxes or the defense budget.

Santorum may be still hanging on, or surging, because of his economic views and Mitt Romney's lack of a likability index. Make no mistake, though: Rick Santorum is a religious fanatic.



## 7. THE MONSTER WHO NEEDED NO MAKE-UP: Frank Zappa and Ugliness

John Riley

*"At one period in American film history Rondo Hatton was the classic ugly guy. Somebody had to carry on the tradition." FZ*

During the 70s, Zappa would often introduce himself on stage as Rondo Hatton, the namesake of this journal and the infamous "creeper"; a man inflicted with a pituitary disorder that meant he could act in horror film roles with no make-up, and who was apparently once voted handsomest boy in his high school class. On the surface this could be considered just another ludic reference to a piece of pop-culture detritus, but as always with Zappa, a seemingly offhand reference is in fact linked to a dense conceptual continuum. In what follows I'll link Zappa's citation of Rondo to Zappa's interest in ugliness, and make some suggestions about how this ugliness works in Zappa's music. Zappa's chunkiest meditation on this theme is his intended off-broadway musical **Thing-Fish**, the outline of which bears a very quick recap: Biological experiments covertly conducted on black and gay people result in grotesque mutations which resemble cruel ethnic caricatures. The Mammy Nuns, as they are known, are portrayed as the heroes, liberated, hedonistic and quick witted, against the sexually repressed and duplicitous Reaganite yuppies, who become drawn into the story when they visit a Broadway theatre, reasoned to be the natural home of black and gay people. Zappa's appeal to the ugly recalls his stage banter on **Tinseltown Rebellion**:

"I have an important message to deliver to all the cute people all over the world. If you're out there and you're cute, maybe you're beautiful. I just want to tell you something: There's more of us UGLY MOTHERFUCKERS than you are - So watch out!"

Zappa aligns himself and his fans as bearers of a particular kind of cultural ugliness, as opposed to the dull perfection of "perrier-breath yuppies." But more than this, the specific ugliness of the Mammy Nuns is racially coded; a white person's idea of blackness that recalls the blackface tradition and it's most famous exponent Al Jolson. This is hardly surprising coming from Zappa, who was once arrested on a

charge of vagrancy (yet another form of ugliness?) in an attempt by local law enforcement to prevent a mixed-race dance Zappa was organising from going ahead.

Al Jolson, real name Asa Yoelson, came to America from a Lithuanian shtetl. Racial assimilation allegories were common in America in the first half of the twentieth century: Think Superman (co-created by another Lithuanian Jew) a character has to conceal his outsider status with a WASP-ish milquetoast exterior, and who observes his ancient traditions in secret in a "fortress of solitude."

The real "weird" Al's tale is similar, and is indeed in keeping with our theme. Blackface minstrelsy had been a convention of vaudeville and burlesque since the 1840s. But the tradition was in decline, and Al's career began without make-up, and only took off when he started to black up (as well as being the decade that saw Jolson's ascendancy to the role of "the world's greatest entertainer, the 1920s were also a high point in the popularity of the Ku Klux Klan).

The 1940s biopic **The Jolson Story** portrays Al as a pioneer, who hears the exciting jazz rhythms and has an idealistic dream to bring this music to the masses rather than as a buccaneer hijacking someone else's cultural currency, leading the music close to cultural bankruptcy in the process. Ultimately, Yoelson became quintessentially American by becoming black, just as Kal-El becomes an ordinary, apple-pie American by being Clark Kent.

Personally speaking, I find a sincerity (bordering on urgency) palpable in Al's voice that the Zappa paradigm would likely overlook. Then there are those who would defend Al on a more ideological level, pointing out that he had black friends and that he campaigned for racial equality. That may be, but the blackface tradition itself harbours a number of rank traditions, portraying slaves as lazy, stupid and sexually immoral. Basically it's a strategy of displacement; Behind a mask of mint juleps, Tom Wolfe white suits and chivalry, that's exactly how the slaveowning class behaved.

In **Thing-Fish**, the transformation to a monstrous parody of racial otherness is accompanied by an equally grotesque transformation in language that mimics the 19th century minstrel convention of the stump speech (a cursory glance at some of

these monologues will prove that Zappa did his research into the minstrel tradition). Rather than seeing dialect and slang as a corruption (exemplified by British historian David Starkey's response to the London riots last year) Zappa believed that "without deviation from the norm there can be no progress" and, I infer, he believed that this is true for language too. But he also understands language's capacity to "signify nothing" as exemplified by the logorrhoea of "Valley Girl."

Other forms of transformation are seen by Zappa in sexual rather than racial terms - Zappa documents teenage worries about body-change in numerous songs, perhaps most notably in "For The Young Sophisticate" in which worries about excessive hair-growth become absurd, to the point of lycanthropy. The Werewolf has long been deliberately mobilised as an image of the transition to biological adulthood (Michael Landon, Michael J Fox, Christina Ricci). This tradition reached its apex (or is it nadir? The point at which the trope begins to buckle under the weight of its own self-awareness) with Michael Jackson, and his "Thriller" video.

Viewed today, Jackson's take on the werewolf has ever more sinister connotations - it prefigures his own transition from black man to a stepford bachelor, a synthetic imitation of a white rock star. It's Jolson all over again, so it's no co-incidence that Zappa lampoons both (though Jolson indirectly through **Thing-Fish**). It's also significant in that it portrays Jackson as a predator, pre-echoing media hysteria about Jackson and child abuse. Although he is a predator so naive that he adds a disclaimer to his video: "Due to my strong personal convictions, I wish to stress that this film in no way endorses a belief in the occult." (Imagine if Zappa had trailed "The Illinois Enema Bandit" with a similar disclaimer.)

Sadly Zappa's lampooning of Jackson doesn't plumb this rich vein of imagery, it's merely an alteration of "Tell Me You Love Me" with typically scornful lyrics portraying Jackson as a spoiled brat in a petulant frenzy, rather than the complex mixture of victim and predator that he most likely was. Zappa's lazy Jackson lampoon was performed on the 1988 tour, along with "Jesus Thinks You're A Jerk." As the last song on **Broadway the Hard Way**, it functions as Zappa's valedictory farewell to live rock music, and is indebted to the music of minstrelsy (Zappa, with typically infuriating contrariness, included hardly any music that parodies the conventions of

minstrelsy or of Broadway in **Thing-Fish**), and in the process of baiting televangelists such as Jimmy Swaggart and Jim and Tammy Bakker, it links the uneasy but mutually beneficial alliance between the peculiar institution of old-fashioned lectern-thumpers and cut-throat Reaganites.

Zappa's critique of the "boring, miserable life" that most of us lead has always pitted "white ugliness" (of which the ugliest part is the mind) against an ugliness that is free-spirited and unashamed ("I'm not black, but there's a whole lot of times I wish I could say I'm not white"). But, despite accusations of self-indulgence (which still stand – three records and two CDs of nothing but guitar solos!) there's an awareness in Zappa's music of who *might* be listening (not an assumption or affirmation) and so the use of ugliness also reflects on the teenage body, erupting into spotty, hairy and yet exuberant life. Some of Zappa's best instrumental music mimics this: The only word with which I can describe the opening few minutes of "RDNZL" is *spurts*. Then the guitar solo unfurls, like something hairy, growing, captured by time-lapse photography. Puberty as Bruce Bickford movie.

What links Zappa's portrayal of racial and sexual transformation is a celebration of the unruly, the spontaneous and the creative. In this age of both airbrushed, photoshopped beauty and studied hipster scruffiness, aren't the characteristics that Zappa highlights worth celebrating? Or does it not make a heck of a lot of difference to ya?

