

## Dweezil, I'm Cryin' Man

After 20 years of parenting, 8 job changes, and 2 emasculating marriages, and after having been lied to, cheated on, robbed, betrayed, deceived, ignored, and disrespected in my life, this old man's enthusiasm reached a stable, but very low, level years ago. I'm still an optimist, and see the good in everyone and in life, I just don't jump up and down about it anymore. The highs aren't as high and the lows aren't as low.

That all changed this week. My amazing daughter gave me tickets for Christmas to Dweezil Zappa's concert. Billed as *Zappa Does Zappa*, Dweezil has assembled a fine band of young musicians and three veterans to recreate the songs of his father, Frank Zappa, "as Frank would have played them." I was flying high all week. The late Frank Zappa is a man, and a musician, that I admire very much. I went to the show Saturday night and this old man was crying tears of joy. What a show.

More on the show in a moment, but first, let me tell you about Frank.

I discovered Frank Zappa late. He had been making music since the early '60's, but I bought my first Zappa album, *Sheik Yerbouty*, around '77. Like most people, my perception of Frank was simply what I heard in his songs on the radio. If you know of Frank, what songs of his can you name? Most people could only name two or three, if any. The music industry and media being what they are – even back then – most of Frank's work was not standard AOR format or content and little made it to pop radio. Those songs that made it to the radio all featured zany lyrics and Frank's unique voice. If those few songs were your only knowledge of the man, I would understand if you assumed he was a Weird Al Yankovic-like character – mostly zany humor and less musician. In truth, he was one of the best musicians and composers of our time – and, OK, he was a bit zany as well.

Dweezil cited a *Rolling Stone* magazine photo of Frank as being one motivation behind this tour. That photo showed Frank holding a large joint (marijuana). Lost in their reclamation of that old photo was its intent at parody. Frank absolutely did not do drugs and spoke against them on many occasions. Yet, the magazine gave a different implication. And it was a natural implication – if your only perception of Frank was those zany radio songs. Admittedly, a popular poster Frank printed and distributed probably did not help either. You can still buy old "Zappa Crappa" posters on eBay. His profile while perched naked on that toilet, with the wild, long black hair, was not completely unlike Charles Manson.

Frank is included on *Rolling Stone* magazine's Top 100 Most Influential Musicians list, and it was not because of radio hits like *Dancin' Fool*, or *Valley*

*Girl*. To describe Frank's music as eclectic would seem to diminish its breadth and creativity. I would classify it with jazz, rock, and orchestral. It is very complex, and I understand, very difficult to play. Most often the tempo is fast. Frank plays the guitar, but other guitarists were in his bands. In concert, Frank often acted as conductor and only played the guitar on a few select songs. His bands would include horns, keyboards, and lots of percussion. Frank was the only prominent rock musician of which I'm aware that included a xylophone in many songs.

I first fell for Frank's zaniness, and then his music. As I've learned more about Frank, I've come to admire his politics, ethics, wit, and devotion to his family. I would describe his politics as Libertarian, although I don't know that he ever did. He hated much about those governing our country, but I believe he respected America's ideals. In the '80's, he led the opposition from the music industry to Tipper Gore's campaign to implement a music rating system and require package labeling for "offensive music." He testified before Congress and appeared on several television shows, including "Crossfire."

The Zappa wit and his madcap antics are legendary. Although a number of musicians appear on many Zappa albums, the cast of characters changed often so that no two tours were the same. You never knew what to expect at a Zappa concert. Zappa concerts were very impromptu with frequent interaction with the audience. Many of his asides to the audience are preserved on his albums because almost all of his albums consist of pieced-together recordings from live performances. Frank was a leading innovator in music production and produced all of his own albums in a home studio.

Recurring themes in Frank's lyrics include politics, stereotyped people, societal hypocrisy, and sex. His lyrics were as bold, outrageous, and unmatched as his music. He jabbed at the government and the people. He challenged us to see other sides of issues, and other sides of ourselves – but not by preaching. Frank communicated his message much as a pervert communicates his depravity through the pale clammy skin flashed behind his raincoat. To say Frank was "in your face" ignores his affect on your other body parts.

In my initial experience of Frank, I was unaware that parody and satire were his favorite tools. I mistook Frank for some of the behaviors he sang about. While, undoubtedly, there was a generous portion of randy behavior on the Zappa tour bus, I came to know that he parodied more than he partied. I came to admire Zappa the father and husband. He met his wife, Gail, at a Los Angeles club where she worked. They were married until he died of prostate cancer in '93. Their four children are all very creative and successful in their own right. Gail still manages Frank's music portfolio.

Frank Zappa was a guitar virtuoso, a uniquely American composer on par with Copeland, Ellington, Joplin and Berlin. He was an innovative music producer.

There are 75 Frank Zappa albums (I have 22). If you want a greater understanding of the man, I would cite two must-have albums. *Strictly Commercial* is a greatest hits compilation that includes his most popular songs and a very diverse selection. *We're Only in It For The Money* was released a few months after the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper* album, and its parody of that album's cover is classic. But it was the music's satirical slap at everything "hippie" that made it one of *Rolling Stone* magazine's all-time most influential albums.

The concert Saturday was amazing. Dweezil has his father's talent on the guitar and the band he assembled is equally adept. There have been a few "tribute" concerts to Frank, and at least one tribute album, but those artists sought to "interpret" Frank's work in their style. Dweezil wanted people to hear the music as Frank wanted it played, and the band did a great job.

Three veterans from Frank's bands participated. Napoleon Murphy Brock brought his tenor sax as always, and a flute. He sang most of Frank's parts in the lyrics and exhibited some zaniness. Terry Bozzio was the madman on drums. He has a set that literally surrounds him in a cocoon and appears as a blur of arms and legs. Steve Vai stopped just short of stealing the show with his guitar – just as he always did. Think of the guy in the movie *Back to the Future* to whom Michael J. Fox hands the guitar after tearing up the stage playing *Johnny B. Goode*. It is astonishing to comprehend what Steve just did to that guitar.

They played three or four songs that I had never heard, although I recognized the titles of a couple, *Inca Roads* and *Black Page*. Otherwise, he covered most of the favorites including *Montana*, *Don't Eat the Yellow Snow*, *Zombie Woof*, *The Slime*, *Peaches en Regalia*, *I'm so Cute*, and *Baby Snakes*. It was a three-hour, non-stop show and I've obviously left off a few of the songs. Midway through the concert, Dweezil asked how many of the parents in the audience had brought their children. I leapt to my feet and screamed sufficiently to embarrass my two children, and my daughter's boyfriend, who had come with me. It is really important, in my opinion, that we pass down our musical heritage – especially the Frank Zappas of our generation. Too much music today is computer-generated pabulum. I know my children had never seen a guitar or drums or sax or xylophone played like they saw that night. Of course, they had heard many of the songs around our house, but seeing it played is different.

The concert was not perfect however. For some reason, a video of Frank performing *Montana* was not shown at the Dallas concert although I had read of it in reviews from other cities. I had read of Dweezil playing along with his father's video at some shows. Except for the T-shirts available in the lobby, there was a definite absence of Frank's image in the show. He was everywhere in the room spiritually, but he was not to be seen anywhere. I think that had his distinctive image, even a blackened profile, been flashed on the screen, the crowd would have gone nuts.

And as much as Steve, Terry, and Napoleon did cavort and show-off, the show lacked Frank's zaniness. Dweezil is an accomplished musician and has a wonderfully confident, yet modest, demeanor. I have read that his brother, Ahmet, while not quite as musically talented (although very good) as Dweezil, does have more of his father's showmanship. Ahmet has joined the tour in some venues but did not appear in Dallas.

Dweezil expressed a desire to make these shows an annual event. If so, I think the fans will respond next year and, with a little encouragement from Dweezil, create that Zappa atmosphere for the show. I few tried at this event.

Definitely catch *Zappa Does Zappa* if it comes to your town. Learn more about Frank at the official web site, [www.zappa.com](http://www.zappa.com). I have read two Zappa books: his biography, *Electric Don Quixote, The Definitive Story of Frank Zappa*, by Neil Slaven, and Frank's response, a quasi-autobiography, *The Real Frank Zappa Book*.