

Frank Zappa's Legacy: Just Another Hoover? L'héritage de Frank Zappa : juste un autre « Hoover »?

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Frank Zappa : 10 ans après

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Article abstract

In "Frank Zappa's Legacy: just another Hoover?", Ben Watson reveals that when Frank Zappa referred to his "oeuvre" towards the end of his life, he pronounced the French word like "Hoover", the world's most famous brand of vacuum cleaner. Watson's essay starts with the proposition that Zappa's oeuvre is indeed a Hoover, a critical manoeuvre appropriate for Zappa's Dadaist disdain for cultural values. Establishment critics currently praise Zappa's "genius" as a composer, but this removes the critical sting of his records. In fact, what made Zappa special was his recognition that both commercial commodification and the heritage industry (concepts of "genius") repress desire and suppress music. In a detour into literary and psychoanalytical theory, Watson's zappological algebra reaches the equation: Stéphane Mallarmé + Wilhelm Reich = Frank Zappa. After an art-historical examination of the Hoover motif in Zappa's oeuvre, Zappa's heritage is assessed today: Project/Object, the Muffin Men, The Simpsons and the improvising trio of Eugene Chadbourne, Jimmy Carl Black and Pat Thomas are singled out for praise.

Frank Zappa's Legacy: Just Another Hoover?

Ben Watson

Towards the end of his life, Frank Zappa referred to his back catalogue as "the *œuvre*". In keeping with his suspicion that art-world jargon creates a snobbish divide between high-class consumers and the great unwashed, he took no effort to pronounce the French word correctly. Indeed, he seemed to relish his own (mis)pronunciation: on his lips, *œuvre* became "oovrah" or even "Hoover". So, in Zappa's last days, his life's work assumed the name of the most famous brand of vacuum cleaner, as if it too were nothing but a commodity. Could this be the key to his legacy? That is what this essay proposes ...

Zappa instructed his family to sell off his back catalogue after his death. Having painstakingly re-acquired his master tapes and re-edited and re-packaged them as CDs, he wanted his family free of the responsibility of marketing them. In strict terms, then, and despite the Zappa Family Trust's attempts to confer "great composer" status on him, his legacy is now a set of commodities, a peculiarly cluttered and garish stretch under "wxyz" in the "pop/rock" section at Tower Records: a dada shrine at the end of a wailing wall of poop. Zappa's legacy gleams like one of Jeff Koons' Hoovers¹, an absurdity in the house of culture. But before we explore this theme further, perhaps we should look at a more traditional way of assessing his legacy.

To mark the tenth anniversary of Zappa's death in December 1993, veteran rock-critic Charles Shaar Murray, a fan of Zappa's group the Mothers of Invention in the mid-60s, presented three half-hour programmes on Radio 3, the BBC's "classical" radio station. Titled "Jazz From Hell", the broadcasts were in Radio 3's "Jazz File" slot, directly after "Jazz Record Requests", the longstanding Saturday tea-time programme of nostalgic memories and Home Counties dedications. A tepid controversy broke in the quality press about Zappa's credentials as a jazz figure. His anti-jazz remarks were exhumed and tested for political correctness. Actually, Zappa's quips ("it's dead"; "it's noodles") were mild indeed compared to the trashings of the term which have been voiced by Miles Davis, Ornette Coleman and Cecil Taylor. In fact, when Zappa underwent a blindfold test in *Melody Maker* in 1968, he groaned at the lack of funk in the pop and soul releases, but responded with enthusiasm to

1. As befits an artist whose *œuvre* culminated in a polychromed-wood *Poodle* (1991) and a penetration shot, *Ilona's Asshole* (1991), Jeff Koons was heavily into vacuum cleaners in the early 80s. He exhibited them housed in Plexiglas and lit with fluorescent strip lights: *New Hoover Convertible* (1980), *New Hoover Deluxe Shampoo Polishers* (1980), *New Shelton Wet/Dry Tripledecker* (1981), *New Hoover Deluxe Shampoo Polishers*, *New Shelton Wet/Dry 5-Gallon Displaced Quadradecker* (1981-1987).

the Elvin Jones Trio. However, the jazz angle (something of a change of heart for Murray, who'd panned *Waka/Jawaka* as a "tedious jazz-rock yawn"² on its release) did allow Radio 3 to pretend that Zappa is now "simply" great music. Apart from some jazzy instrumentals (a lot of *Waka/Jawaka*!) and guitar solos, most of what is actually on the records was avoided. Radio 3's listeners were therefore spared the inescapable *offensiveness* of Zappa's lyrics and musical shocks. Soundbytes of *alumni* saying how "great" he was (that curious, smarmy moment when praise sounds like a career move) made Zappa seem like something he never was — boring.

Zappa did not relish the prospect of entering history. In *Them or Us [The Book]*, one character is Francesco Zappa, his Italian composer-cellist predecessor who, according to the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (1980), "flourished" between 1763 and 1788. Looking forward in time, Francesco asks :

Who'll be the "Mozart" of your century? David Bowie?

The people of your century no longer require the service of composers.

A composer is as useful to a person in a jogging suit as a dinosaur turd in the middle of his runway.

Your age is ugly and loveless, and when they eventually write you up in the leather book with the red silk thing hanging on the side, YOUR nasty little "Mozart" will be a sort of egalitarian-affirmative action non-person of indeterminate sex, chosen by a committee who will seek advice from a group of accountants who will consult a tax lawyer who will negotiate with a clothing manufacturer who will sponsor a series which will feature a simulation of a lipsynced version of the troubled life of a white boy with special hair who achieves musical greatness through abnormally large sales figures. The re-runs of this series will provide conclusive evidence to future music historians that the craft of composition did, indeed, reach the pinnacle of efficiency during the latter part of the 1980's.

Mozart was a shithead. All the other "big guys" were twerps. For real achievement, nothing beats TOTAL OBSCURITY.³

Although broadcasting *that* might have caused ripples in both the Home Counties and among the upper echelons at the BBC, Murray's programme did include a statement from Zappa about his legacy. In an interview with Nigel Leigh for a BBC-TV documentary in 1993, he was asked how he thought he'd be regarded as a composer after his death.

I don't think I'll be regarded at all. If my name comes up, it comes up in a non-musical context — I'm the guy who went to the Senate to argue about dirty record lyrics, or I'm connected with something else, but most of the people in this country have no idea what I do. I don't think there will be anything of what I do that will survive beyond my life span.⁴

The positivist (or "hardcore") fans who abhor speculation about Zappa's work, who only credit interpretations ratified by Zappa himself, are left high and dry. He's no longer there to interrogate about the "real meaning" of his songs. If anything,

2. *New Musical Express*, September 1972.

3. Frank Zappa, *Them or Us [The Book]*, North Hollywood: Barking Pumpkin Records, 1984, pp. 11-12.

4. Frank Zappa, interview recorded by Nigel Leigh for BBC-TV in 1993; broadcast by Charles Shaar Murray on BBC Radio 3, 6 December 2003.

his posthumous message was, don't "regard" him at all. Terrifying! We're out here on our own, without an instruction manual. However, if in keeping with the semantic playfulness which he exhibited at all times — the attention to the *sound* of words as much as to their official meanings — the notion of his *œuvre* as "Hoover" does suggest a definite line of enquiry.

Sold from door to door, the Hoover is the iconic 1950s consumer-society commodity. The young Zappa attempted to shift *Collier's Encyclopedias*⁵; the young Captain Beefheart, then named Don Vliet, sold vacuum cleaners. One day, working his way round Antelope Valley, Vliet found Aldous Huxley answering the door. He attempted to sell him a machine with the immortal line "Sir, this thing sucks".⁶ When Zappa presented his record-buying public with Vliet, now Captain Beefheart, on *Hot Rats* in 1969, he was portrayed in colour negative (reds for greens) holding an old-fashioned, rocket-shaped, 50s-style vacuum cleaner. He offers it up, his brow knitted like a priest distributing the communion wafer. This photograph was selected from the shoot of Beefheart and Magic Band by Ed Caraeff for the *Trout Mask Replica* album. Other shots⁷ had Bill Harkleroad ("Zoot Horn Rollo") riding the vacuum cleaner and brandishing it as a phallus, and Beefheart lowering it by its flex into his hat. The band were larking about being (they hoped) saleably "bizarre", but in-so-doing invoked potent anxieties about mass-produced commodities and nature. On the back of *Trout Mask Replica*, Beefheart holds a glass table-lamp against his chest, the electric flex dangling down past John French's ear. Outside the domestic environment, plug-in apparatus is so much useless clutter. Like the "mounds of dead consumer goods" stumbled over by Joe after he escapes from The Closet on *Joe's Garage Acts II & III* (1979), and the "mounds of dead appliances" of "Planet of My Dreams" on *Them or Us* (1984), Beefheart's vacuum cleaner casts a strange light on the technophilia evidenced by the many images of Zappa at work on multi-track tape-recorders and digital editors. One of these directly faces Beefheart and his vacuum cleaner in the *Hot Rats* gatefold: the technocrat faces the unplugged, back-to-nature weirdo.

The uncanny thing about the vacuum cleaner is that it is a mechanical contrivance which sucks, a basic (even primary) human impulse. It thus becomes a symbol of the strangeness of the LP and CD, which give the appearance of life and expression, but are actually inert pieces of plastic. In commentaries to the songs on *Freak Out!*, Zappa's first album, he was at pains to shake his listeners out of the illusion that a record gives the listener unmediated access to the soul of the artist. He discusses "formal structure", "3/4 time" with "shifts in the accents", "four-part barber shop harmony", a ballet "in *tableaux*", divorce, censorship: considerations designed to prevent you gazing at the photo of the artist on the cover and dreaming of being in love. Nevertheless — and this is what makes Frank Zappa more interesting than artists who bask in the elitist cachet of "avantgarde" — the song "Wowie Zowie" was "carefully designed to suck the 12 year old listener into our camp". *Freak Out!* sucks just like one of Don Vliet's vacuum cleaners, an ambivalent caper on the rim

5. Frank Zappa with Peter Occhiogrosso, *The Real Frank Zappa Book*, New York: Poseidon Press, 1989, p. 40.

6. Quoted in Mike Barnes, *Captain Beefheart*, London: Quartet, 2000, p. 9.

7. As printed on slipcase, cover and book of the *Grow Fins* 5CD box set (Revenant, 1999).

of the mass commodity — a situation everyone who has to work for a living (and sell their labour power as a commodity) is actually in.

The “suck” theme makes a more explicit appearance on the back cover of *Burnt Weeny Sandwich*, as Ian Underwood prepares to sink his teeth into the rubber-tread of a shoe sole: “God!” his thought bubble reads, “This is a tasty little sucker!”. The idea of biting into something that also sucks at you encodes the dialectical idea of lines like :

(YOU THINK YOU KNOW EVERYTHING ... maybe so)

The song we sing: DO YOU KNOW? We’re listening⁸

Or the slime from the TV set saying

You will obey me while I read you⁹

This dialectical understanding of action from both sides — time as a spherical constant¹⁰ — reached a convenient consummation in the term “blow job” (more logically termed “sucking off”). In the early 80s, the Christian right persecuted rock bands for “satanic messages” they thought they could hear when spinning their records backwards. They attempted to make what they called “backward-masking” illegal. In response, Zappa released a track with an entire vocal track which had been mechanically reversed. On “Ya Hozna” from *Them or Us* (the 1984 album to which *Them or Us [The Book]* was a complement), Zappa’s daughter Moon, parodying an exercise record, instructs “OK, like, blow and blow!”. “Blow” comes out backwards as a new word, “Wolb”. Of course, the “retrograde” (writing a tune backwards on the staff) is a hallowed procedure in classical music, and literate poets have always relied on reversals and mirrorings of letters; only Zappa, with his awareness of the power relations of media, makes the procedure anti-religious, rebarbative and critical (“relevant”). Perhaps, in the zappological future, babies will be known as “wolbers”.

Records which listen, TV sets which read you, sandwiches as tasty suckers: Zappa challenged the one-way traffic which turns people into passive consumers. He outlined his programme in *Freak Out!*:

On a personal level, *Freaking Out* is a process whereby an individual casts off outmoded and restricting standards of thinking, dress, and social etiquette in order to express CREATIVELY his relationship to his environment and the social structure as a whole.

What made Zappa unique was the depth of his understanding of commodification, *i.e.* what capitalism does to people. In the United States, culture imported from Europe — whether classical or avantgarde — becomes a symbol of class status. This destroys the point of the avantgarde, which is resistance to capitalist social relations, a vision of a different way of doing things. It is no accident that avantgardes flourish in Europe only at times when social revolution threatens global capitalist interests (the 1920s and the 1960s). The “vulgar” or “adolescent” aspect of Zappa, which makes aesthetes and right-on politicians squirm, is actually an

8. “The Idiot Bastard Son” *We’re Only in It for the Money* (1967).

9. “I’m the Slime” *Overnite Sensation* (1973) — the lyric sheet reads “lead you” but I hear “read you”: *i.e.* market research bodies ascertaining the statistics which enable broadcasters to sell the “rights” of manipulation to advertisers.

10. Frank Zappa 1992, ed. Don Menn, *Zappa!* (a supplement from *Keyboard and Guitar Player*), 1992, p. 64.

attack on such snobbish appropriation of European art. Zappa never lost touch with his guiding star: awareness that commercialism creates passivity, conformity and stupidity — and consumers ripe for exploitation by religion and fascism.

The idea of nonconformist art as resistant to capitalist relations was first conceived by William Blake, but most cogently expressed by Stéphane Mallarmé. His essay "Concerning the Book" was an attack on newspaper consciousness quite as scornful as anything Zappa says in "Packard Goose"¹¹, "Society Pages"¹² or "Turning Again"¹³. During a crisis of over-production in the book trade, as the tables of the booksellers groaned with trash, Mallarmé distinguished between literary value and commercial success, and vilified the "grocers and shoemakers of the book".¹⁴ Faced with accusations of inaccessibility because he refused to flatter readers with clichés, Mallarmé retorted that some people are so resistant to innovation they would say "I don't understand!" even if he did something as innocent as blowing his nose.¹⁵ Zappa used the same image to make a similar point.

At this very moment on stage we have drummer A playing in 7/8, drummer B playing in 3/4, the bass playing in 3/4, the organ playing in 5/8, the tambourine playing in 3/4 and the alto sax blowing its nose ...

Zappa's commentary — don't be bamboozled by science, some things happening here on stage are pretty hilarious — during a version of "Toads of the Short Forest" played at Thee Image in Miami, and included on the album *Weasels Ripped My Flesh* (1970). This was not the only connection to Mallarmé on that album: *L'Après-Midi d'un Faune*, Mallarmé's poem from 1876, appears in the title "Prelude to the Afternoon of a Sexually Aroused Gas Mask". Zappa doubtless derived the reference from an LP of Debussy's famous ballet, itself based on Mallarmé's text, but alchemical use of cultural signs generates patterns beyond mere intent.

In "Poetry in Crisis", Mallarmé insisted that words mean, not the poet.¹⁶ This is the approach demanded by Zappa's experimental miscegenation of foreign elements. In "Concerning the Book", Mallarmé argued:

What is obscure is a reality, existing, for instance, on a leaf of paper, in some piece of writing or other — not in oneself.¹⁷

Traditional rock biography, which seeks to interpret albums by reference to the moral personality and expressive intent of the artist, cannot map Zappa's wild achievements. Reread the manifesto from *Freak Out!* cited above, and ponder this statement from Mallarmé's "Poetry in Crisis" (whilst also recalling the moment on *Uncle Meat* when Don Preston ascended to the vertiginous heights of the Royal Albert Hall and played "Louie Louie" on the majestic pipe organ):

The remarkable thing is that, for the first time in the literary history of any people, superseding the great general organs of past centuries where orthodoxy is exalted like a hidden keyboard, *anyone* with an individual approach and hearing can now make themselves into an instrument, as soon as they blow, touch or strike it with skill.¹⁸

11. *Joe's Garage Acts II & III* (1979).

12. *You Are What You Is* (1981).

13. *Meets The Mothers of Prevention* (1985).

14. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Quant au Livre*, ed. Anthony Hartley, *Mallarmé*, London: Penguin, 1965, p. 180.

15. *Ibid*, p. 198.

16. "L'œuvre pure implique la disparition élocutoire du poète, qui cède l'initiative aux mots", Stéphane Mallarmé, *Crise de Vers*, *ibid*, p. 171.

17. "c'est une réalité, existant, par exemple, sur une feuille de papier, dans tel écrit — pas en soi — cela qui est obscur", Stéphane Mallarmé, *Quant au Livre*, *ibid*, p. 197.

18. *Ibid*, p. 165.

Reacting against the hidebound nature of the neoclassical (Parnassian) poetry of Victor Hugo, Mallarmé anticipates the permanent revolution of Modern Art, where any expression is valued as long as it is not hypnotised by classical or other models. His words could serve as a manifesto for Free Improvisation, where expressive authenticity has nothing to do with the received tonality of the keyboard or academic mastery (witness the table-top improvisations of Adam Bohman¹⁹, or the dictaphone/brick duo T.H.F. Drenching and Sonic Pleasure²⁰), or at least demands a complete reinvention of ways of playing (Derek Bailey, Tony Oxley, etc). Mallarmé's words help explain Zappa's lifelong interest in "characters" like Wild Man Fischer and the GTO's and Motorhead and Al Malkin and Lisa Popeil: people who don't have traditional musicianly "skills", but who certainly have creative relationships to the social structure as a whole.

What distinguishes Zappa from Mallarmé is his emphasis on the sexual. Whereas Mallarmé — a good, repressed, nineteenth-century schoolmaster — talked of a "*quelque chose d'occulte*"²¹ at the heart of his fascination for motifs on paper, Zappa continually compares creativity to arousal, sexual obsession and masturbation. Replacing the faun with a Sexually Aroused Gas Mask brings out something latent in Mallarmé: his faun was dreaming of taking Venus in his arms when he had a guilty start ("I'm holding the Queen of Love! O certain punishment ..."). It is not quite clear quite *what* "anyone with an individual approach and hearing" needs to blow, touch or strike with skill ("*avec science*") — it might even be themselves!

But I'm never really lonely

In my Excentrifugal Forz²²

Each soul is a melody which must be renewed; that's why the flute and viol of each of us are there.²³

Poetry is actually people finding themselves: far from being a high priest of occult poetics, Mallarmé was actually a radical democrat! Without indulging in the pre-tentious name-dropping of the NYC Beats and Punks — who preferred the individualistic histrionics of Rimbaud to Mallarmé's conscientious historical objectivism — Zappa understood the refusal of hierarchy, privilege and manipulation which drives avantgarde protest. Stéphane Mallarmé + Wilhelm Reich = Frank Zappa. Now where did we put that Hoover?

In 1970, Zappa made the Hoover theme explicit. The sound of Ian Underwood playing his alto sax through a wah-wah pedal on the title track of *Chunga's Revenge* suggested an image for a cover prose-poem, illustrated inside the gate-fold sleeve by Cal Schenkel: "a Gypsy mutant industrial vacuum cleaner dances about a mysterious night time camp fire". Zappa's taste for variegated percussion timbres — going back to his childhood infatuation with drums, and encouraged by Edgard Varèse's *Ionisation* (1931) — was reflected in the piquant image of "dozens of imported castanets, clutched by the horrible suction of its heavy duty hose, waving with marginal abandon in the midnight autumn air". Percussion is not conceived

19. Adam Bohman, *Music and Words* (Paradigm Discs, 1999).

20. Limescale, *Limescale* (Incus, 2003).

21. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Quant au Livre*, *Op. Cit.*, p. 197.

22. Frank Zappa, "Excentrifugal Forz", *Apostrophe*('), 1974.

23. "Toute âme est une mélodie, qu'il s'agit de renouveler; et pour cela, sont la flûte ou la viole de chacun." *Crise de Vers*, *Op. Cit.*, p. 165

as a four-square beat to which the rest of the music must conform, but as an infinitely divisible, chattering accompaniment which swarms behind the lead melody. This is precisely the role of drummers Vinnie Colaiuta and Chad Wackerman when backing Zappa's late guitar playing. As usual, the bizarre imagery of Zappa's packaging is instantly comprehensible if you pay attention to his *music*.

On the reverse of *One Size Fits All* (1975), Cal Schenkel provided a star map, every star and constellation renamed as part of Zappa's universe. Coma Berenices and Draco have combined to form the gypsy mutant industrial vacuum cleaner from *Chunga's Revenge*: Coma Bernice ("The Plumber") is the machine's body, Drano the suction tube. The cleaner has been redesigned to suck sewage from drains. There is nothing in the universe that Zappa's art cannot deal with. Zappa's *œuvre* was indeed a Hoover, sucking in all the flotsam and detritus of mass produced "civilization" — all those commodities, from "imported castanets" to the "t-shirt racks, rubber snacks/poster rolls with matching tacks" of "Poofier's Froth Wyoming Plans Ahead" (*Bongo Fury*, 1975) — and assembling therefrom a giant "junk sculpture" (as Zappa put it to Gary Steel in 1990²⁴). Once a word, image or object entered what he called "conceptual continuity", it immediately began to sprout extra connotations which link it to other themes. It's these semiotic tentacles which prevent the junk sculpture falling apart. This process is familiar to anyone who reads Freud on dreams and jokes: it's the way the unconscious works. So adolescent jokes about Hoovers — which naturally included their use as providers of suction relief to the ever-needed male organ — were bound to be applied to J. Edgar Hoover, especially when it was revealed after his death in 1972 that the director of the FBI and the scourge of un-American "filth" was a closet transvestite. The Hoover, preeminent machinery in the house of decorum, becomes sexual and ridiculous.

Zappa's *Sheik Yerbouti* (1979) satirised the disco phenomenon: the track "Dancin' Fool" was issued on vinyl 12", stretched from a mere 3m 43s to an epic 6m 15s. This was achieved by the crude insertion of a galumphing funk bass line at the beginning, showing utter contempt for dance-floor cool. The same bass line reappears in the middle of the song, along with some patented Zappa percussion overdubs (like "The Clap" on *Chunga's Revenge*). However, there's also a groaning sound, which may be a scraper, or some kind of exhalation, or even a vacuum cleaner: a derisory version of a Donna Summer "sex noise". It is certainly the sonic equivalent of the household machine which, by *sucking*, replicates an infantile human reaction and makes us laugh.

In *Joe's Garage* (1979), the Catholic girls giving the road crew blow-jobs to save themselves the price of concert tickets are described as "performing acts of Hooverism". On the same album, L. Ron Hoover of the First Church of Applianceology (a grotesque fusion of J. Edgar Hoover and L. Ron Hubbard) tells Joe that far from "coming out of the closet", he "must go *into*/THE CLOSET/And you will have/A lot of fun!". Zappa's *œuvre*/Hoover promises bliss, but it also locks you in a closet where the only company is the zappologically obsessed.

24. "Way Down in New Zealand: FZ Talks to Gary Steel 5 December 1990 Part Two", *T'Mershi Duween* no 21, September 1991, p. 18.

But since we're here, here's another "coincidence" concerning the vacuum cleaner. When Verve issued *We're Only in It for the Money* in 1967, an etching of a strange piece of Victorian machinery appeared on the cover alongside the word "BIZARRE". Because he'd recommended Franz Kafka's short story "In The Penal Colony" (1919) in the sleeve notes, this apparatus seemed to picture a torture machine. In fact, it was a nineteenth-century *vacuum pump*. When Zappa left Verve to form a subsidiary of Reprise, he named his new label Bizarre, and the vacuum pump became its logo, printed on each release and on each inner sleeve. His (and graphic designer Cal Schenkel's) intuitive juggle with Dada and Pop imagery alighted on a perfect symbol for Zappa's art: in a mass-mediated commercial system which bombards us with messages and ideologies, Zappa indeed creates a *vacuum*, an empty space for the chance encounter of fragments of the external world, an objective frame in which we can make our own observations and discoveries. Yet this "vacuum" only exists courtesy record shops: as sublime as vacuum, as banal as a Hoover.

Are such observations legitimate? Did Zappa "mean" everything his clusters of imagery suggest? When I interviewed him at the end of October 1993, he agreed with me that artists deal intuitively with semantic materials without anticipating every implication. His wife Gail had coined a term for it. Frank invented a gypsy vacuum cleaner for the album *Chunga's Revenge* before having heard of the Flamenco singer La Chunga; Gail called this "prescience". But did Zappa have pretensions as a psychic, or had he developed a non-materialist view of the universe? No. Indeed, if we treat Zappa himself as a source of meaning — as do the positivist, "no-nonsense" fans — we receive the answer granted Dorothy in her visit to the Land of Oz: the apparatus of "revelation" is but smoke and mirrors. As L. Ron Hoover of the First Church of Applianceology tells Joe in *Joe's Garage*:

If you been *Mod-Ofied*
It's an illusion an yer in between
Don't you be *Tarot-fied*
It's just a lot of nothin'
So what can it mean?²⁵

25. "A Token of My Extreme", *Joe's Garage Acts II & III* (1979).

Meaning can only be supplied by the listener.

In January 1984, Pierre Boulez conducted three of Zappa's scores. When these were released later in the year, they were supplemented by pieces realised on the Synclavier, Zappa's digital music editor. Each track was conceived as a dance piece "with a story and built in 'sound effects'". The title piece, "The Perfect Stranger", was the longest of the scores (12m). It portrays a vacuum-cleaner salesman attempting to interest a slovenly housewife in his wares. Zappa's story ("the housewife's eyebrows going up and down as she spies the nozzle through the ruffled curtain") transforms high-art abstraction into cartoon music. As a representative of the "spiritual

qualities of chrome, rubber, electricity and household tidiness", the salesman sprinkles "demonstration dirt" on the rug before hoovering it up again. The fidgets, quandaries and rhythmic gear-changes of Zappa's music — Kandinsky redone in dayglo panels and fruit-machine cogs — are resolved through absurdity, for which the vacuum cleaner has become an all-embracing symbol.

In *Value and Economy* (1962), the Danish painter Asger Jorn argued that since World War II, the global power elite have so organised society that even they have become "slaves of their own perfect apparatus", "incessantly demanding novelty from hour to hour".²⁶ Even the fine art the elite buy is hollow: the "isms" which appeared in relentless succession after the War — Existentialism, Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art, Op Art, Auto-Destruct Art, etc. — have none of the social significance of artist-controlled movements like Cubism, Dada and Surrealism. Rather than court the "attention of the public, which has been rather been gathered around a number of superficial pseudo — isms", true artists retreat into "more or less closed circles".²⁷ This is the hermetic resistance to commercial values inaugurated by Mallarmé. As Jorn and the Situationists showed in 1968, avantgarde artists can relate to wide social movements, but only when these challenge the hegemony of the market. The importance of Frank Zappa's *œuvre*/Hoover is that he understood the difference between "abnormally large sales figures" and artistic value (and the chasm which separates real musical communication from pompous twaddle about "greatness" after the event). During his life he held two powerful forces in remarkable tension — commercial success, plus knowledge that social recognition has nothing to do with artistic inspiration, which must make its own connections and pursue its own path. This is what gave Zappa's music its unique spike — and why Mark E. Smith of The Fall would like to emulate Zappa's combination of a "resolutely uncommercial attitude with an uncanny knack of shifting units".²⁸

For the last fourteen years, ever since the collapse of Communism in East Germany, the Arf Society of Bad Doberan (Mecklenburg-Vorpommern) has been organising an annual rock festival called the Zappanale. In 1993, between 24 July and 27 July, Zappanale #14 hosted fifteen bands, a play and two illustrated lectures for a paying audience of four thousand people. The enthusiasm of the participants and the uncommercialised nature of the festival (the Communist regime did not allow the growth of a capitalist rock "industry" in the 60s; the Arf Society was set up by a diehard fan who used to import Mothers of Invention LPs hidden inside the door-frames of his car) make it invidious to draw comparisons between the bands who play there. However, although it's fun to hear a German punk band tear through "Zombie Woof", or ex-Zappa *alumni* recreate "Inca Roads" from *One Size Fits All*, what I look for are musicians who respect Zappa's appreciation of unknown, unregarded, "unsexy" musical forces like Edgard Varèse, Alois Haba, Conlon Nacarrow, Lord Buckley and Ewan MacColl; who aren't trapped in "powerful" renditions of known genres, but understand Zappa's attempt to hoover up every music under the sun, and delight in the absurd connections made by incongruous juxtaposition. Not simply as some "downtown" exercise in postmodern eclecticism which carries the "smart", sterile air of easy-

26. Asger Jorn, *Value and Economy* (1962); Asger Jorn, *The Natural Order and Other Texts*, translated Peter Shield, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002, p. 202.

27. *Ibid*, p. 203.

28. Simon Ford, *Hip Priest: The Story of Mark E. Smith and The Fall*, London: Quartet, 2003, p. 168.

to-use software and class condescension²⁹, but musicians making genuinely brave collisions of lived musical traditions. Zappa did not simply combine the *results* of rock and avantgarde classical; he was *productive* in both areas.

The two pre-eminent Zappa cover bands today are Project/Object (US) and the Muffin Men (UK). "Cover bands" is a misnomer, implying some pantomime troupe like the Bootleg Beatles or the Australian Doors. Zappa's music is so technically challenging that it constitutes repertoire rather than opportunities for *Stars in their Eyes*-style burlesque.³⁰ When Project/Object back Napoleon Murphy Brock singing "Trouble Every Day" or "Love of my Life", you are — as leader André Cholmondely said on-stage at Zappanale #13 — transported back in a time machine. The Muffin Men are not such a technical monster, but their frontline, derived from a Cardiacs-inspired³¹ group called Wizards of Twiddly — Carl Bowry (guitar), Andy Frizell (sax, flute) and Martin Smith (trumpets) — play solos with an engagement and zest which makes most British jazz sound insipid. However, grateful as one is that these two outfits keep Zappa's music alive, that very mission prevents them creating his surprises and incongruities. In their hands, Zappa *becomes* a genre, when his whole plan was to overthrow submission to genre.³² The legacy is not just music to be played, it's also a politics, a plan of action, a grasp of the possibilities of mass media.

Of course, one inheritor of Zappa's legacy whose output everyone appreciates is Matt Groening: those familiar with Zappa's Hoover know how dependent *The Simpsons* is on his example. However, the formula necessary for a weekly show — despite the invention on display — means *The Simpsons* can never deliver the jolts of Zappa's career, where attachment to a particular musical genre was subject to devastating attacks (releasing *Fillmore East June 1971* after the Mothers of Invention: "vaudeville from the ex-Turtles about groupies!"; *Thing-Fish* after *The Perfect Stranger*: "politically incorrect monologue over old backing-tracks!"; or *200 Motels* after *Hot Rats*: "squealy avantgarde symphonies with atonal operatic sopranos!" etc etc). Zappa destroyed music-listening as "identity"-formation (according to academic studies, the sole value pop music can confer). He replaced it with music-listening as *experience*.

The only force in quite the same league of genre-savaging today — despite claims from all and sundry — has to be Eugene Chadbourne. Matt Groening supplied the art work for one of his key albums, *Country Music in the World of Islam* (Fundamental, 1990). Groening and Chadbourne come from the same place: a post-Zappa culture that combines freakdom, punk and satire on American idealism. Chadbourne's Edgard Varèse is Derek Bailey, guitar supremo and founding father of Free Improvisation. Varèse gave Zappa access to a European avantgarde tradition totally at odds with the industrial processing of blues, soul and country which constitutes American rock. Bailey freed Chadbourne from the notion that making money for a record label is the only thing which confers "seriousness" on a rock artist (even if it destroys the meaning of the culture which has produced you, and leads to your death, as with Kurt Cobain). Chadbourne's politics — opposition to war as consistent as Zappa's, a leftism less tainted by petitbourgeois cynicism — is

29. Honorable exceptions: Mike Patton and Paul Minotto.

30. A British TV series where ordinary people dress up as their favourite stars and sing their most famous hit.

31. One of the most careful, analytical and charming "tributes" to Zappa has been issued by the Cardiacs guitarist Jon Poole, who in 1994 re-created his favourite tracks using a Fostex 4-track, a DX7 and an Alesis HR16 drum machine: *What's the Ugliest Part of Your Body?* (Organ Art, 2003). See www.organart.com.

32. This limit has been acknowledged by the proliferation of side projects: André Cholmondely's improv/polemic duo Jfk's Lsd Ufo (see www.ufomusic.com), Don Preston's Akashic Ensemble with Project/Object musicians, and the Muffin Men's *Kamikazi* and *Ape-Shit* CDs, which consist solely of improvisations (see www.muffinmen.cu.uk).

expressed through adherence to a Woody Guthrie/Tom Lehrer/Phil Ochs tradition of direct address which no one thought of mixing with Free Improvisation until Chadbourne did it. A genuinely innovative player, Chadbourne is the only guitarist (apart from Jef Lee Johnson) to honour Hendrix with spontaneity, lightness and freedom, rather than metal slavishness and turgid bombast.³³ In the 80s, Chadbourne's band Shockabilly showed that he understood the American idea of punk as sonic onslaught. In a trio with Jimmy Carl Black, original drummer for the Mothers of Invention, and English improviser Pat Thomas, Chadbourne's currently tours playing originals, Zappa, Beefheart, Dolphy, Bill Evans and the utterly unexpected (Slim Harpo? Black Uhuru?). Chadbourne resists the way some celebrated exponents are turning Free Improvisation into a stagy form of art music. Instead, he uses it to spike rock performance with extraordinary musical extrapolations. Chadbourne was invited to perform at an avant festival dedicated to Bach. He practised *Sonata and Partita #1 for Violin* on his banjo for a year (transposing notes which couldn't fit the banjo's restricted range), and came up with an astonishing 73 minutes of music which sounds like some ethnic tradition hitherto undiscovered.³⁴ All the other performers at the festival resorted to the postmodern (easy?) devices of sampling and DJing old Bach LPs. It is this kind of "unnecessary" labour (at least, from a gig — or contract-signing point of view) — real work on the nuts-and-bolts of music — which makes Chadbourne's releases so strong. Like Zappa, his very existence is a reproach to the candyass compromisers and republicans who have seized rock's media crown, or pontificate about "avant" in the monthly press (or both).

Apart from the different generations they represent (Chadbourne's teen turn-on was the Beatles, not doo-wop), and the divergent attitude to musicians dictated by a composer's ethic (Zappa) and that of a jazz/improv player (Chadbourne), the ability to transform musical truth into a polemical weapon is common to both, as is their cartoon-fuelled aversion to the gloopiness of mass-marketed emotion. The symbolic distinction between Zappa and Chadbourne is that the latter favours a garden implement — a contact-mic'd and super-amplified metal rake, which he scrapes on a venue's walls and furnishings, causing alarm and laughter — rather than a Hoover (whether that's progress or regression, doubtless a Grove Dictionary of the next century will decide). What's certain is that Zappa's legacy is only safe with those who are as brave and intelligent — and entertaining — as he in rejecting the embrace of the entertainment industry.

33. *Reflections and Experiences of Jimi Hendrix* (2002) by The Jack and Jim Show featuring Black Paddy (i.e. Chadbourne, Black and Thomas) is a stone-cold masterpiece: available from www.jimmycarlblack.com.

34. See Eugene Chadbourne *Bach: German Country & Western* (Volatile, 2002).

