FRANK ZAPPA

Frank Zappa deserves admission to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame as a great guitarist, songwriter, creator of concept albums, comedian, talent scout, doo-wop expert, social critic and avowed misanthrope. The Hall has already honored several of each, but Frank Zappa stands unique as the first inductee who also had a substantial career as a composer and performer of "serious" modern music.

His greatest importance to a composer and performer was in bringing all these talents to bear at once. Not content to create a rock band with the chops and discipline to play 12-tone rows, he also created modernist works that incorporated "Louie Louie." Early in his career, Zappa wrote the Penguins' "Memories of el Monte," a classic West Coast doo-wop record and an evocation of an entire period in pop history.

Still, it would be wrong to imagine that Zappa "worked his way up" to larger-scale compositions that built on his interest in composers like Satie, Stravinsky, Schoenberg and, of course, Varèse. Zappa had worked on all these kinds of music simultaneously, from his high school years until his premature death from prostate cancer late in 1993. His cultivated misanthropy, his gift for coining acerbic epigrams (notably defining rock journalism as "people who can't write interviewing people who can't talk for people who can't read") and his demands for perfectionism from associates, band members and audiences (not to mention himself) give Zappa the image of a snob. But in fact, Zappa, a composer who trained himself at the public library, believed profoundly in the possibilities of democracy and individual self-expression.

Zappa grew up in Baltimore and then in an assortment of towns in California, most notably the desert shrine of Lancaster. It was in this arid, isolated atmosphere that he came to appreciate culture of all kinds, distrust conformity and spot and nurture kindred souls. The son of a scientist, he developed a wickedly rational and skeptical turn of mind, which combined in volatile fashion with his acidly satiric wit and distrust conformity and spot and nurture kindred souls.

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mind, which combined in volatile fashion with his acidly satiric wit and mind, which combined in volatile fashion with his acidly satiric wit and mind, which combined in volatile fashion with his acidly satirical-popular ensembles of the next three decades. (Zappa used the Mothers of Invention moniker for years, but the band's personnel varied; he remained the only constant, and his personality dictated the group's point of view.) Zappa really took off on his own with the orchestral album Lumpy Gravy and Cruising With Ruben and the Jets, a loving hommage/parody of doo-wop. This all happened in 1967 and 1968. Blistering through the burgeoning of jazz-rock fusion with Uncle Meat, Hot Rats and Burnt Weeny Sandwich took about another year. By the time the '70s began, Zappa had established himself as an unpredictable iconclast: difficult, intense and unignorable. His albums didn't sell freight-car loads; he didn't have a Top 10 album or a hit single until 1974, with "Don't Eat the Yellow Snow," from Apostrophe. But he filled large theaters, and even arenas, with shows that challenged the boundaries of musical, theatrical and social propriety.

Various legal, personnel, technological and artistic problems led Zappa off the road and into the studio nearly full time by the late 70s. His later work used rock & roll and R&B elements almost exclusively as coloration while maintaining a horrified stance toward what was going on in American culture. The post-'60s narrowing of musical diversity and political perspective was the subject of his 1980 anti-censorship rock opera, Joe's Garage. Yet it was in the early '80s, when he was running his own Barking Pumpkin label, that Zappa scored his biggest hit ever, "Valley Girl," with his daughter Moon Unit doing a ditzy consumer-crazed rant she'd picked up from teen-age shopping-mall denizens.

Soon an even ditzier group arrived on the scene: the Parents Music Resource Center, "the Washington wives," crusaders for the purity of America's youth against the satanic depredations of rock & roll. Zappa spoke out against this witch hunt more boldly than any other figure in the music world. This led to a minicareer as a public pundit, Senate-hearing witness (a riotous event musically immortalized on Frank Zappa Meets the Mothers of Prevention) and author of one of the few truly serious rock-star autobiographies, The Real Frank Zappa Book.

Zappa treated everything except his work as a massively annoying distraction. His focus remained on music, and he increasingly relied on such studio devices as the Syndavier to allow him to voice his ideas without human intermediaries. His work grew more and more respectable. Boulez Conducts Zappa: The Perfect Stranger and Other Works, from 1984, achieved that rare feat of a modernist work — success on Billboard's classical-music chart. Pierre Boulez and Zubin Mehta found several of his pieces intriguing enough to perform them with "real" orchestras. Zappa lived to see a generation of Eastern Europeans name him as one of the guiding stars of their revolution.

For millions all over the world, wherever the idea of freedom is associated with the idea of rock & roll, his name will always be hallowed. The association that begins tonight is an honor for the Hall of Fame and for Frank Zappa. — DAVE MARSH

Frank Zappa and his daughter Moon Unit in his New York City apartment, 1968