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INTRODUCTION

Frank Zappa is remembered as a habitual line stepper; a person constantly at odds with the mainstream. With his untamed mane and trademark facial hair, many criticized him for his distasteful and brazen lyrics. Even beyond his appearance and lyrics, his musical arrangements crossed boundaries other artists never even imagined existed. He drew from doo-wop, classical, and R&B inspirations to create his own genre in rock and roll history. He continually marched to his own tune, and never missing a beat, he was not afraid to express his opinions. Even adverse to his own generation, Zappa steered a different course from the one navigated by most of his countercultural contemporaries of the 1960s. He never involved himself with drugs and alcohol and declared himself apolitical in the period of protest songs and social revolution. Of course, he too was political. However, just as he differentiated himself in his musical career and personal life, Zappa’s political undertaking was not like that of his contemporaries.

Though it is known that Zappa made important political and social commentary throughout his life, he is not given the same reputation as artists such as John Lennon. He is largely overlooked in works that discuss music’s role in the social and political movements of the 1960s. However, his statements and actions provide insight on what it entailed to be a politically active artist in late twentieth century American society. Zappa believed in the ability of the artist to create political and social change. He did not view music as wholly separated from the political realm. His career amalgamated the two together, from trying to raise levels of individual awareness to setting up voter registration booths at his concerts. Zappa may not have agreed with the way the countercultural movement of the 1960s was trying to produce a political movement, but it was their method, not their goal, that bothered him. Rather than a political philosopher or youth movement leader, Zappa
considered himself an avant-garde artist. He thought that adversarial art, because of its ability to question established hierarchies and norms, was a type of educational protest through which people could learn to think for themselves politically and otherwise. He believed that if he could compel his audience to think critically about his work, he could galvanize them into thinking critically about other matters as well. Zappa hoped to encourage people to question what they were being told instead of accepting it blindly. He wanted Americans to be more astute and conscious about their country. He saw arts as crucial to democracy and vice versa. Not only were arts an indicator of the level of democracy of a country, but they also encouraged democratic participation.

My thesis looks past Zappa’s outlandish appearance and controversial lyrics, in order to gain a greater understanding of his political aspirations and motivations, and his understanding of the artist’s role in society. I chose not to undertake an in-depth analysis of his lyrics, because they are extensive in number and are subject to interpretation. Rather, along with his actions and statements, I focus on how his music is political as a whole. Zappa was a highly intelligent man even outside the musical realm. Both because of his intellectual skills and his lack of regard for social rebuke, Zappa’s comprehension and critique of American politics and society is worth exploring. Moreover, my paper argues that Zappa should not only be appreciated for his social and political commentary, but also for his effort as an artist to encourage his audience to develop a greater consciousness that would then enable them to think and act more critically both in politics and in their lives. Even beyond the sixties, Zappa continued to try to raise awareness of different issues. Whether his audience was a venue full of fans or a nation of skeptical prime-time television viewers, Zappa tried to invoke a sense of understanding, not only of the issues present at the time, but also of one’s ability to engage critically more generally.
Frank Zappa was not born with a guitar in his hand and a scowl on his face. There were events in his early life that shaped who he became politically as an adult. In the first chapter, I attempt to trace relationships between his early and later years. Relationships that will become more clear as the paper progresses. His early life provides insight upon his character. I avoid using the phrase “to understand him” because there is no definite way to know the motives behind his actions. After reading many statements by Zappa, I hardly believe he wanted to be understood, perhaps not even studied. In one of his last interviews, when asked what he would like to be remembered for, he answered that he does not see the purpose of being remembered. As this paper goes against his exact wishes, I'll try not to insult him further by delving into the banal details of his life. He denounced those details in his own autobiography, aptly titled “The Real Frank Zappa Book.” Instead, in this chapter, I have attempted to single out only the details I found most connected to the actions and opinions of his later life.

I begin the second chapter with a brief overview of the emergence of rock n' roll in the 1950s and 1960s as a subversive element of popular culture that could be used for political ends. I explore Zappa's start as a member of the Mothers of Invention under the influence of the “freak scene” of Los Angeles. Unlike a product of the San Francisco area, Zappa became focused on the concept of “freaking out” as a method of developing a greater consciousness of one's surroundings. Instead of dropping acid and crying peace like many contemporaries, Zappa spent the late 1960s in Greenwich Village performing strange on-stage theatrics to accompany his music. Rather than telling his audience he loved them, he regularly insulted them along with the rest of society. Rather than anti-war slogans, his music was soaked with satirical lyrics commenting on the inadequacies of society. It was avant-garde in its satirical content and its composition of combined doo-wop, R&B, and classical
music. He thought hippies were buying into a trend that had no real political capability. Instead, Zappa thought more change was possible on an individual level. He thought that by provoking people to think about the irony and outrageousness of his music, he could develop a more intelligent, politically active population who would not trust everything they heard. Instead of accepting someone else’s reality, which a mass-movement encouraged, Zappa urged his fans to think for themselves and come up with their own conclusions.

The third chapter begins with the end of the original Mothers of Invention and the start of a few new projects taken on by Zappa. Though Zappa acknowledged the failure of his music to really affect large numbers of people, he still held onto the avant-garde nature of his work. In 1971, his first movie, 200 Motels, is a testament to his attempt to stimulate individual thought through unusual imagery. He grew tired of making political commentary in music because it became too popular and was no longer new. Record companies began to purposefully produce and sell music with a political message. This corporate takeover led Zappa to look for new projects. In the late 1970s, artists stopped singing protest songs and began fundraising and holding large events to raise awareness about different issues, Zappa continued to work on the music that he enjoyed. He deemed artists that were trying to raise money on behalf of causes, such as “save the whales”, to be similar to the hippies of the 1960s. They gained a large audience, but aside from raising money, no one was really doing anything to change what they saw as wrong. According to Zappa, these artists and fans were mindlessly supporting a popular movement, instead of actively thinking about an issue they truly cared about. Still, Zappa was not too unhappy with the situation in the United States. He appreciated the freedom he was given to produce his music. Surely, he saw problems, but in any country they were expected to a certain degree, especially one as large as the United States. However, as the
1970s continued, Conservatism grew as a political movement with the support of the Christian Right. This would change Zappa’s mindset in the near future.

The fourth chapter begins with a brief overview of the rise of the Conservative Right and the election of Ronald Reagan as president, and then discusses Zappa’s reaction to it. Zappa believed the fundamentalist Christians yielded too much power in the United States. The money they acquired through televangelism and fundraising bought them influence over the presidency and too much political power. After being raised Catholic, Zappa decided at age eighteen that all churches were the same. He thought they tried to control how one thought and were only after money. In the 1980s, his belief that the church and government together were out to control a population of mindless, mediocre citizens came to the fore.

The last chapter deals with the actions taken by Zappa from 1985 until the end of his life. In 1985, when the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC) crusaded for record labeling in the name of parental consumer information, Zappa acted vehemently to stop their actions. He saw the matter as a scandalous collusion between the government, the record industry, and the fundamentalist Christians. He appeared on countless television and radio programs trying to create public awareness of the issue. He was one of only three artists to testify against labeling at a Senate Hearing held in September, 1985. Zappa set up voter registration booths at his 1988 tour in order to get more people registered and voting. He saw low voter-registration and the religious actors participating in politics as serious threats to democracy. In 1991, he offered his bid for the Presidency as a non-partisan candidate in order to get more people interested in voting. He saw that the American two-party system offered little choice. He saw education as failing to teach students to think critically. He
viewed the Gulf War as proof that Americans were now willing to buy into anything that provided the distractions of military parades and other fanfare.

Regrettably, Zappa was never able to make a run for the presidency because his health failed him. In 1991, it was announced he had been fighting prostate cancer. Zappa continued to work on his music and openly criticize American society and politics until the time of his death in 1993. Throughout his entire life as an artist, he never failed to understand and respond to current events.
CHAPTER ONE: THE RAISING OF A FUTURE MOTHER

Frank Vincent Zappa was born on December 21, 1940 in Baltimore, Maryland. Within a year of his birth, the United States entered World War II. During the war his family moved to a large military base in Opa-locka, Florida, where his father took a job in ballistics research. This was the first of many moves that the family would make throughout Zappa’s early life. It was also his father’s first job in the defense industry, an area in which he would work for the rest of his life. Although he was young, Zappa had memories of Florida during the war. Although most of them are of alligators, mosquitos, climbing trees, and the time his brother had a boil on his butt, Zappa also remembers “every once in a while we had to hide under the bed and turn all the lights off because somebody thought the Germans were coming.”

The family next moved back to Maryland, this time to Edgewood Arsenal. At this location Zappa recalls many details of his father’s work as a meteorologist, similar to that of Opa-locka in ballistics research. Edgewood Arsenal was the headquarters of the Army Chemical Center. At the start of World War II, Edgewood Arsenal was the only manufacturing installation that made conventional ammunition and toxic chemicals. “Workers developed gas masks and protective clothing, trained Army and Navy personnel and tested chemical agent dispersal methods. The Army had been manufacturing and testing poison gas at Edgewood since 1917 and by the forties the site was contaminated by various toxic agents including sarin, mustard and phosgene.” The proximity of the chemical testing is probably the reason Zappa spent most of his time in Maryland with poor health. His father’s career and his proximity to the Arsenal also opened Zappa’s eyes to government testing and spending from an early age.

2 Barry Miles, Zappa: A Biography (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 9
In his autobiography, Zappa recalled “there were tanks of mustard gas within a mile of where we lived, so everybody in this housing project had to have a gas mask in the house, for each member of the family. Mustard gas explodes the vessels in your lungs, causing you to drown in your own blood.” This did not stop young Zappa from using his mask as a space helmet and playing with it outside. Due to his own curiosity, a characteristic that would stay with Zappa his entire life, he ended up rendering the gas mask useless by opening up the filter with a can opener one day. He did find out what was in it though—“charcoal, paper filters and different layers of crystals.” In his autobiography, Zappa continued to explain different chemicals used in warfare. He explained how chloropicrin, a dust that causes vomiting, was released before mustard gas in order to make soldiers take off their masks. A soldier would either die from drowning in his own vomit or blood. Zappa stated “I was always amazed that people got paid to do this stuff.” From an early age, he found it wrong that the government paid workers to research and manufacture chemicals with the intention of killing groups of people in the most efficient manner possible.

To supplement his wages, Zappa’s father also volunteered for ‘patch tests.’ The Army tested chemical warfare agents in a small area of the skin and covered it with a bandage the subjects were not to touch. Zappa remembered his father “used to come home with three or four of those things on his arms and different parts of his body every week” for ten dollars a patch. He wrote “I don’t know what the stuff was, or what long-range health effects it might have had on him.” Barry Miles, a Zappa biographer, found that “according to the department of Veterans Affair, an estimated 4,000 servicemen and civilian personnel participated in secret testing of nitrogen, sulphur mustard gas and

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4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
6 Miles, 10
8 Ibid.
lewisite at Edgewood and other test sites during the war. Later studies showed a relationship between exposure and the development of certain diseases for which veterans were entitled to financial compensation." This revelation would have come as no surprise to Zappa.

Zappa was always interested in chemistry, not only because of his father’s career, but also because of his interest in blowing things up. He admits boredom in school because he “grew up with poison gas and explosives – with the children of people who built these things for a living.” These things excited Zappa much more than subjects such as algebra. In any case, Zappa never forgot the ability of the government to test chemical agents on people without guilt, nor the money spent on figuring out ways to kill a large numbers of people. He would openly state theories on the Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome epidemic during interviews and in his book that held the government responsible. It is understandable how a man with Zappa’s World War II experience questioned government responsibility for the AIDS virus.

It is more than likely that Zappa’s father also influenced his worldview. Although Zappa and his father did not see eye to eye on many things, Zappa admits interest in his dad and indicates respect for him. In his autobiography, Zappa dedicated a chapter to him and titled it “A Chapter FOR MY DAD.” He began the chapter with a brief discussion of his relationship with his parents. He argued that, “The sooner you can say, ‘Okay, they’re them and I’m me, and let’s make the best of it,’ the better off you’re going to be.” He did not think that children should try to live a certain way in order to gain acceptance from their parents. He believed mental health the world over would improve if this step was taken. However, he dedicated the chapter to his father in an attempt to write the history his father had always wanted to, but could not: A history of the world with Sicily as the focal point. Zappa

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9 Miles, 10
10 Zappa, The Real Frank Zappa Book, 25
11 Ibid., 200
wrote that his father said to him, “All the old history was written for the amusement of the ruling classes. The lower classes couldn’t read, and their rulers didn’t care about remembering what happened to them.” Drawing from this piece of knowledge, Zappa wrote in the chapter his own history of the world – only with rock and roll at its center. It carried the same mentality: A history for a neglected population. Similar to his father, Zappa did not see why only history from a certain point of view should be recorded. Zappa stated that his interest in history had grown (by the time of his autobiography in 1989) “to the point” that he could “almost comprehend my Dad’s fascination with it.” By the end of his life Zappa realized that history mattered in the present day. How people and places were remembered affected current events. It can be speculated that his father’s mistrust of those in power went beyond their ability to shape history. It is very possible that his father’s Sicilian background informed Zappa’s skepticism toward the government and ruling elite.

Most of Zappa’s time in Edgewood was spent sick in bed because he was prone to severe colds, sinus trouble and asthma. His mother once stated to an interviewer, “The whole time he had to stay in bed and rest he would have all his books on the bed. He was always creating something or inventing: he never liked sports. Every month something new would come for him in the mail.” He also spent a considerable amount of time in the library, drawing, and sewing puppets. He had three good friends in Edgewood. He liked to entertain the class when the teacher had to leave for a moment. His third grade teacher noted, “If for any reason I had to leave the room, I could turn to Frank and he would hold the class enthralled with something...I don’t know that he liked the attention, but he liked what he was doing. I always had the feeling that he was doing it for himself. That it was

12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
14 Miles, 11
15 Ibid.
rather immaterial to him whether people really sat there and listened. But he was happy in what he was doing. From a young age Zappa developed a mentality that would stick with him for the rest of his life. Throughout his career, the driving influence in his music was not his audience, but himself. He played music that he enjoyed. If his music made people happy, then that was great, but it was not what kept him going. In his fictional book, Them or Us, Zappa’s character Francesco, a struggling eighteenth-century musician, states in a monologue: “When you’re obscure you just go write your stuff and have a good time. So what if nobody hears it? Who’s supposed to hear it? The Duke of York? Get off my face.” The greatest judge of Zappa’s music would always be Zappa. He did not need to be recognized or admired so long as he liked what he produced.

In December 1951, when Zappa was eleven, his family moved to Monterey California in the hope that the move to a warmer climate would improve his health. This was the first of six moves the family would make throughout the state of California before Zappa reached the age of nineteen. At that age, in 1959, Zappa moved out of the house for the first time. Six moves in eight years affected Zappa’s youth. He made friends in the towns in which he lived, but because he was never anywhere for too long he had few meaningful friendships. He did meet Don Vliet, who would later be known as Captain Beefheart, during High School. He would stay in touch with him throughout most of his life. Still, it can be assumed that Zappa’s reluctance for friendships and extra-familiar ties in his later life draws greatly on the experiences of his youth. In an interview in Progressive Magazine in 1986, when Zappa was spending most of his time experimenting on the Synclavier in the studio located in the basement of his home, he was asked if he ever felt lonely in that atmosphere of isolation. Zappa responded:

16 Mile, 12
17 Frank Zappa, Them or Us (Los Angeles: Barfko-Swill, 1984),
Try to imagine what the opposite of loneliness is. Think of it. Everyone in the world loves you? What is that? Realize that you’re in isolation. Live it! Enjoy it! Just be glad that there aren’t a bunch of people who want to use up your time. Because along with all the love and admiration that’s going to come from the people that would keep you from being lonely, there is the emotional freight you have to bear from people who are wasting your time, and you can’t get that back. So when you’re lonely and you’re all by yourself, guess what you have? You have all of your own time. That’s a pretty good fucking deal. Something you couldn’t buy any place else... Loneliness when you come to deal with it so that it is not an uncomfortable sensation, so it doesn’t feel like drowning or something, is not a bad deal. It’s a good deal.\(^\text{18}\)

As an adult, Zappa became very much a homebody. When fighting the Parents Music Resource Center in the mid-1980s he did so as an individual. He spent his own time and money in defending music lyrics. There were groups he could have joined, but he was more comfortable doing the work himself. Aside from his family, Zappa remained a solitary figure throughout his life. He was his most constant friend. He learned from an early age that being alone and being an individual was not something to fear.

Zappa also spent most of his youth drawn to music. He enjoyed R&B groups, readily heard on the jukebox and on the radio, but also avant-garde classical composers like Igor Stravinsky and Edgard Varese. Stravinsky was a Russian-born composer, noted for the diversity of his musical career. In the early twentieth century, Stravinsky wrote ballet scores that were marked by an emphasis on Slavic folk melodies and harmonies, and complex, changing rhythmic arrangements. Western listeners unaccustomed to Slavic traditional music found it incredibly dissonant and bizarre. In the 1930s, Stravinsky shifted from avant-garde work and began composing in a “neoclassical” style. Then in the 1950s, he dabbled in serial music, but disliked its exacting theoretical foundation.\(^\text{19}\) Even more than Stravinsky, Zappa was a lifetime fan of Edgard Varese. Varese created the method of “organized sound” that abandoned exact pitch and other conventional musical frameworks for different kinds of

musical congruity. Varese remained unacknowledged for most of his professional career.\(^\text{20}\) When Zappa first encountered his name it was through a magazine article about how Sam Goody’s Record Store in New York was actually able to sell one of Varese’s albums. The article applauded the store’s ability to sell records, pointing to the example of the sale of Varese’s album “The Complete Works of Edgard Varese Volume One”. The article even had the wrong title of the album. They had called it “Ionization”. When Zappa read this article he immediately set out to buy it in order to hear what people found so distasteful. Unfortunately, the obscurity and unpopularity of Varese made the album difficult to find in the San Diego area.\(^\text{21}\)

As a teenager and an avid music fan, Zappa saved up whatever money he could obtain throughout the week (occasionally as much as two dollars) so that on Friday and Saturday he could attend to searching the bins of unwanted albums at local record stores. One day, while walking to the cash register after picking through a sale on forty-fives and settling on a few Joe Houston records (a testament to his interest in rhythm and blues) he glanced at the LP bin to find on top of it a record with a picture of a guy that looked to Zappa as a mad scientist. Initially intrigued by the black and white image of the man with gray, frizzy hair, he went over to look at the album. It was Varese’s “The Complete Works of Edgard Varese Volume One”. Zappa would later describe the sensation of finally finding the album as so great that he nearly peed his pants. Zappa only had three dollars and eighty cents and the album was five dollars and ninety five cents. The salesperson let him have it though explaining that no one ever buys that album anyway.\(^\text{22}\) The album included Ionisation, a song written in 1931 that exemplified Varese’s innovation with new sounds and his departure from anything created musically before. The piece is entirely percussive and uses sirens, sleigh bells, brake drums

\(^{20}\)Ibid., 226  
\(^{22}\) Ibid.
and other non-musical sound makers with indefinite pitch. It follows his development of “organized sound.” Zappa, who was directed by his mother to only play the album in his room, played it for all of his friends to hear.

Admittedly, he knew nothing about the mechanics of the music. When he read the liner notes included with the album, he did not understand them at all. He just liked the way it sounded. He listened to the album daily and tried to learn more about Varese. Regrettably, because he was not accepted as a major composer, there was not much information to be found on him at Zappa’s local library. When Zappa turned fifteen, his mother told him he would receive five dollars. Zappa had a better idea. He wanted to make a long distance phone call to Edgard Varese. Assuming that he lived in Greenwich Village because the record was made in New York and that particular area had a reputation for strange people (Zappa would live there in a little over a decade), Zappa got information for the New York phone book. Sure enough he found Varese’s number. The first time Zappa called, Varese’s wife answered and told him that Varese was in Europe, but to call back in a few weeks. Zappa did not remember exactly what he said to Varese when he did get to talk to him the next time he called, except that Varese was working on the piece Deserts. Zappa, who was currently living in the Mojave Desert, liked to think the piece was about his hometown (Lancaster, CA) even when he later read the liner notes and realized the title was more philosophical in meaning.

Zappa continued his quest for information regarding Varese all through high school. When he was eighteen, he was able to visit his aunt in Baltimore for a few weeks. Zappa had been writing music for four years by then without having heard any of it played. His aunt introduced him to a friend she had who had ties to the symphony in Baltimore. Zappa managed to impress the man, but did not

23 Kostalanetz, 226
have enough formal music instruction. Zappa related the conversation later. According to Zappa, his aunt said “This is Frankie. He writes orchestra music.’ The guy said, ‘Really? Tell me, sonny boy, what’s the lowest note on a bassoon?’ I said, ‘B flat... and also it says in the book you can get ‘em up to a C or something in the treble clef.’ He said, ‘Really? You know about violin harmonics?’ I said, ‘What’s that?’ He said, ‘See me again in a few years.’”

Zappa’s real plan for his visit to Maryland was regarding a visit to Varese that had been casually mentioned in their phone call. He wrote him a letter when he got to Baltimore asking to see him. Regrettably, Varese wrote him back to tell him he was leaving for Europe the next week not to return until the following spring. Ultimately, Zappa never met Varese, but he always kept an eye out for his work. In 1971, he wrote an article for Stereo Review, entitled “Edgard Varese: The Idol of My Youth”, urging his fans to listen to Varese for themselves. He wrote “I can’t give you any structural insights or academic suppositions about how his music works or why I think it sounds so good. His music is completely unique. If you haven’t heard it yet, go hear it.” In 1981, at his own expense, he arranged an evening-long concert of Varese’s music in New York.

Zappa liked Varese because his music was different. In Varese he heard “a guy who’s writing dissonant music and he’s not fucking around.” In comparing his favorite R&B groups and Varese he explained: “although harmonically, rhythmically, and in many other superficial ways it was different, the basic soul of the music seemed to me to be coming from the same universal source.” Zappa is famous for the way in which he blended together different styles of music that others thought impossible. His music was avant-garde in its compositional style and its social and political commentary. For part of his career, Zappa used his music to relate his own social critique on society.

26 Ibid.
27 Kurt Loder, Bat Chain Puller. Rock and Roll in the Age of Celebrity, (New York: St. Martin’s, 1990)
This was partly enabled by the influence of Varese, who opened his eyes to the possibilities of music. Maybe Varese’s music wasn’t famous, but he was doing it anyway. That, by itself, was a message to Zappa. He was living proof that music did not have to be accepted by the masses to be influential. In his later life, Zappa never shrunk from staying true to his beliefs, popular or not, both musically and politically. Throughout Zappa’s life, Varese remained a role model.

As Zappa’s appreciation for original and independent thought grew, his acceptance of and commitment to organized religion waned. Zappa had been raised as a devout Catholic by his parents. Zappa admitted that throughout his youth religion “felt right” to him. He never had a problem with his devotion until he began to really look at the organization of his church and of other religions. By the time he was eighteen, he claimed that he had seen enough instances of pretense and fraud even just at the community church level and had learned enough about other kinds of religions that he had had enough. Zappa still believed in feelings of religion, but he did not believe he needed any type of church to vindicate them. What he disliked about the church was that he believed it prevented people from thinking for themselves.28 Zappa stated:

But the more you get into the rigamarole and look at what the dogma is and see how the machinery of the Church shuts people’s minds off, and the more you learn about the business end of the Church and the history of the Church, from an objective point of view, then the more chance there is that you will decide that it is possible for a human being still to be quite fond of Jesus and wind up hating any church.29

Zappa did not like the authority organized religion held over him and others who believed they needed it to feel spiritual. At this point in his life, in his late teens, his disconnect from Catholicism came from his reluctance to follow others and his dislike of hypocritical and domineering authority.

28 Peter Occhiogrosso, Once a Catholic, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987), 334
29 Ibid.
Even before the rise of televangelism and the Christian Right in America, Zappa stated his contempt for the way the church dominated people’s lives. When the Christian Fundamentalists and other right-wing Christian groups began entering politics in the nineteen-eighties, Zappa would begin to really speak out against the power of the church over people’s thought processes. His distrust of Church authority and his like of unconventional musical composition remained with Zappa as he became a young adult.

Zappa’s interest in music had brought him to Cucamonga, California where by early 1964, after having been both married and divorced already, he moved into Paul Buff’s studio, Pal Studio. He soon renamed the place ‘Studio Z’ in Paul Buff’s absence. In July 1964, at age twenty-three, Zappa came into some money from a previous project and was able to purchase Studio Z. It was in this studio that Zappa really began experimenting with music and planning for the future. It was also here that his respect for authority really came to a crashing halt. The neighborhood of Cucamonga viewed Studio Z and its owner with suspicion. As Zappa describes in his autobiography, “T-shirts were considered avant-garde” in Cucamonga. Although his hair was still cut short at this time, his brightly painted studio offering kids the chance to record their own albums did not blend in well with the neighborhood. Furthermore, the studio drew attention because of some of its inhabitants. Among the people living at Studio Z was a white girl with a black baby who needed a place to stay. Across the street from the studio was a church whose congregation found the sight of the black baby playing outside the studio shocking. Their suspicions of Studio Z were confirmed by a feature story that ran in the California Ontario Daily Report about the studio and the film Zappa had been planning entitled Captain Beefheart vs. the Grunt People. The article described Zappa as weird and called him ‘the

30 Ibid.
31 Zappa, The Real Frank Zappa Book, 55
Movie King of Cucamonga.’ To the local police, this name inferred that Zappa was a pornographic film director.\(^{32}\)

The Cucamonga police department contacted the San Bernardino sheriff’s office about their belief that Zappa was a pornographer. At a casting call for one of his movies, which was still without funding, Detective Sgt Jim Willis of the sheriff’s office auditioned with the purpose of scoping out the studio. He left convinced that the studio was involved in making porn and had it put under surveillance. The police were so dead set on their conviction they even drilled a hole in the wall to spy on the studio’s events.\(^{33}\) Zappa blamed the affair on his white friend with the black baby and “an impending real estate development which required the removal of the tenants before Archibald Avenue was widened.” These circumstances he described as the “local political subtext.”\(^{34}\)

A couple weeks later, Detective Willis returned, this time disguised as a used-car salesman. He told Zappa that he was having a party and wanted a film made to entertain his friends. After discussing the price of a film, he decided it was too high and decided instead for an audio tape. The price was set at a hundred dollars and Willis told him all the sex acts he wanted recorded on the tape. Little did Zappa know that their conversation was being broadcasted through Willis’ wristwatch to a truck parked outside Studio Z. That evening, without any physical sex actually involved, Zappa and his friend seeking to make some money recorded thirty minutes of fake grunts and squeaky bedspring noises. Then he edited out the laughs and added background music. The next day, Willis came back and gave him only fifty dollars, at which time Zappa refused to hand over the tape. It did not matter though. Within seconds three police officers along with local reporters who came ready with blinding

\(^{32}\) Zappa, The Real Frank Zappa Book, 55 Miles, 84, 85  
\(^{33}\) Zappa, The Real Frank Zappa Book, 55 Miles, 85  
\(^{34}\) Zappa, The Real Frank Zappa Book, 55
camera flashes charged into the room. Zappa and his friend were arrested and every tape and piece of film in the studio was confiscated.\textsuperscript{35}

Instead of being charged with pornography, which is a misdemeanor under California law, Zappa was charged with conspiracy to commit pornography, a felony. A person in California can be charged with conspiracy if two or more people discuss the enactment of any crime, no matter how small. The police assumed Zappa had discussed the tape with his friend who had helped and therefore he was facing a maximum sentence of twenty years. It was the very definition of police entrapment. Zappa’s father, who had recently suffered a heart attack, had to take out a bank loan to help pay his bail for 1,500 dollars. Zappa then received an advance on a royalty payment for some of his material to bail out his friend for the same amount.\textsuperscript{36}

Hardly able to afford a lawyer, Zappa thought the ACLU might take an interest in his case and contacted their offices. They replied they could not help. Though they were aware of a number of illegal entrapment cases in that area, it was not an important enough issue for them. Instead, Zappa’s father managed to get him a lawyer, who then told Zappa his best bet was to plead no contest, or as Zappa put it, “I’m so broke I can’t even buy justice in Cucamonga, so I’ll just give a thousand bucks to this lawyer here and keep my fucking mouth shut, hoping you don’t give me the death penalty.”\textsuperscript{37}

Before his trial, his lawyer expressed surprise at Zappa’s naiveté in being tricked by Detective Willis. Apparently, Willis had a reputation for picking on innocents. The lawyer said to him “I thought everybody knew Detective Willis. He’s the kind of guy who earns his living waiting around in public restrooms to catch queers.”\textsuperscript{38} Zappa had never come into contact with so much dishonesty before.

\textsuperscript{35} Zappa, The Real Frank Zappa Book, 56 Miles, 85
\textsuperscript{36} Zappa, The Real Frank Zappa Book, 57 Miles, 86
\textsuperscript{37} Zappa, The Real Frank Zappa Book, 57
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid.
He had “never dreamed that scum like Willis existed, or that somebody in the government set aside tax dollars to provide guys like him with a salary and a ‘research budget’.”

During the trial, the judge took Zappa and his friend, along with all the lawyers, into his chambers in order to listen to the tape they had made. The tape was so ridiculous and clearly not sexual that the judge began laughing. Infuriated by the judge’s laughter, the prosecutor, who was a twenty-six-year-old assistant district attorney, insisted that Zappa should go to jail ‘in the name of justice’ for his appalling crime. In order to appease the district attorney, the judge found Zappa guilty of a misdemeanor and sentenced him to six months in jail, with all but ten days suspended. Afterwards he would have three years’ probation, during which time he could not violate any traffic laws or be in the company of any woman under twenty-one without the presence of a competent adult. It was also decided that after one year his record would be expunged, cleared of the history of his jail sentence. On the bright side, as biographer Barry Miles noted, his time in jail freed him from military service.

While waiting to be transported, Willis entered the holding area where Zappa was located. He told Zappa, “‘If you’ll give me permission to decide which of those tapes we confiscated are obscene, we’ll give you back all the rest of them, erased.’” Zappa was appalled at the idea that the Detective was acting as judge over his own tapes. The case was closed and legally the tapes should have been given back to Zappa, however only 30 of 80 hours of tape were ever returned.

The ten days Zappa spent in the San Bernardino County Jail changed his perception of the legal system for the rest of his life. In the jail Zappa met a Mexican kid, who he guessed to be about

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39 Ibid.
40 Miles, 86
41 Miles, 87
42 Zappa, The Real Frank Zappa Book, 58
43 Miles, 87
nineteen years old. The kid had been kept for three weeks in the jail, awaiting extradition to Beverley Hills on only a jaywalking ticket. The conditions of the jail were terrible. During the day the temperature reached about 104 degrees. The lights were kept on at night to keep the prisoners from sleeping. Zappa did not shave or shower the entire time he was there out of disgust of the bathroom facilities. There was only one shower stall for forty-four men and “the scum on the shower basin was about four inches thick.”\textsuperscript{44} In his autobiography he also reports, “I found a giant cockroach in the bottom of my cream o’ wheat.”\textsuperscript{45} He tried to send it in a letter to Motorhead’s mother, but the jail censor found it. The warden told him if he ever tried anything like that again he would be sent to solitary confinement. He wrote in 1988 that his experiences in the jail gave him “a real good whiff of California law, California lawyers, and an inside look at California’s penal system in action. I have never seen anything since then to change my opinion of how poorly the system works.”\textsuperscript{46} In his biography of Zappa, Barry Miles wrote:

Frank was a different person when he came out. He no longer believed anything the authorities told him. As far as he was concerned the American education system had failed him; it was a lie from start to finish, the reality was America was a corrupt, grubby little fascist state. He was determined never to be duped again. Tank C [His jail area] traumatized him for life and in many ways he spent the rest of his career shoving his pornographic tape down America’s throat, time and time again. He was determined to show Americans what their country was really like.\textsuperscript{47}

The blatant sexual references present in his lyrics cannot be taken solely as revenge for his arrest. It should also not be assumed that this event in his life was the only reason he wanted to open the eyes of his listeners. In his later life he would take up issues that reached beyond the legal and penal system. However, it should not be taken lightly that up until this point in his life Zappa led a fairly

\textsuperscript{44} Zappa, The Real Frank Zappa Book, 60
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{47} Miles, 87, 88
average life. He wanted to make absurd movies, but there is no proof they would have been so packed with social and political commentary. His arrest and sentencing marked a major change in his life. He lost his studio by the time he managed to get out of jail. It was then that he really began playing gigs and forming the band that would become the Mothers of Invention. At age twenty five, Zappa was broke, frustrated, and if music hadn't already been the major driving force in his life, it certainly was now.
CHAPTER TWO: COUNTERING THE COUNTERCULTURE

The majority of the post-World War II American youth were far better off than the generation before them had been. Well-fed, they were more accustomed to the products of mass media and having money to spend than doing physical labor. However, with these new privileges came an awareness of a new set of limitations. Music became a major outlet of this frustration.\textsuperscript{48} Rock ‘n’ roll emerged in the 1950s as “liberation from the dullness of American and British life.”\textsuperscript{49} It appeared to be an escape from the formalities and constraints of daily life because of the new chances at self-expression it provided. Rock was seen as oppositional to authorities who protected the status quo. Music as popular culture established itself as inherently political because of the way it challenged traditional values and social norms. In the 1960s, the idea of rock as a major force of opposition grew, especially as artists became more involved in political action towards the end of the decade. Through methods of consciousness raising, artist activism, and agitation, artists tried to affect the political realm without joining it.\textsuperscript{50}

Frank Zappa’s music went farther than standard rock ‘n’ roll in being oppositional because it introduced avant-garde elements, naturally subversive to mainstream culture. The avant-garde nature of his music challenged his listeners to be self-reflective. Zappa tried to raise the consciousness of his audience to their surrounding world and to agitate his audience into political action. Zappa would argue he did both these things, not only through his lyrics, but also through the music itself. From his insistence on “freaking out” to his performances at the Garrick theatre in New York, a hot spot for such avant-garde artists as the Fugs and later John Lennon and Yoko Ono, Zappa’s career in the 1960s pushed his listeners to question the world around them. Unfortunately, by the 1970’s the

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid.
\end{footnotesize}
original Mothers of Invention went their separate ways and Zappa lost some of his original vision. There was not a large enough following that would understand and support what he was trying to accomplish. He was also dismayed by the commercial hijacking of political music by the end of the decade by those who were trying to sell ideas of love and peace. However, Zappa’s career with the original Mothers of Invention still stands as an important testament in the search for a successful political movement through the use of music.

Shortly after getting out of jail, Zappa joined the band, the Soul Giants, which after a few line-up and name changes would become the Mothers of Invention. The Soul Giants originally included four members that would make up the future Mothers of Invention: Zappa, Ray Collins, Jimmy Carl Black and Roy Estrada. The Soul Giants had a weekend gig at a bar playing standard covers like ‘In the Midnight Hour’ and ‘Louie Louie.’ Zappa realized they would never go anywhere playing cover songs. He proposed to the band that they play some of his original music. Jimmy Carl Black remembers Zappa saying “If you will play my music, I will make you rich and famous.” After getting kicked out of almost every bar they played at with Zappa’s strange material, Zappa realized it was a time to make the move to Hollywood. He thought the band was talented enough to go far; it was only a matter of gaining an audience. Zappa had been unable to make his mortgage payments on Studio Z and was soon evicted anyway. He managed to salvage some of his possessions before his move to Hollywood where he would find a more open-minded audience in the Los Angeles ‘freak’ scene.

In the early 1960s, while Zappa had been attempting married life and working at Studio Z in the upright town of Cucamonga, there was an entirely different scene happening only forty miles east

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51 Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention in the 1960s, DVD
52 Miles, 90
in Los Angeles. In 1962, Vito Paulekas joined the rock ‘n’ roll scene at the age of fifty two. With his Beatle style haircut, Vito started dancing at a club on the Los Angeles Strip every two weeks with Jim Doval and the Gauchos. His house was the first crash pad in Los Angeles. Many runaways, especially young female ones, came to live at his house. His wife, Zsou, was only sixteen when she met him.\textsuperscript{53}

Zsou and Vito, along with his best friend Karl Franzoni, who joined him in 1963, led a dance troupe of about thirty-five people. They were known as Vito and the Freaks. Zsou owned a dress shop with clothes that had a 1920s, thrift shop look and it attired most of the Freaks. Karl Franzoni explained, ‘She [Zsou] became, in the sixties, THE person of elegant things for Freaks to wear. They all bought their clothes from her and when we went out dancing, you would see all these bright colored people. Women all wore see-through, no panties, no bras – and that was it. She just wore a dress – you could just look right through her – and that was it – (with) high heels or whatever.’\textsuperscript{54} Franzoni, himself, wore red tights, flashy shirts, and a cape. With his tight greasy curls surrounding a bald crown, he was very sexually aggressive. Similar to a Gila monster, he would often lick the faces of unassuming girls.\textsuperscript{55}

In March 1965, Vito encountered the band, the Byrds, who he allowed to practice in his home when they had nowhere else to go. Upon hearing them play he decided they would be perfect for the anti-Vietnam War dance he was planning. The Byrds’ music turned out to be very well suited for the free-form dance style of the Freaks and from then on they performed together. When the Byrds played at Ciro’s, a club with one of the best dance floors in Hollywood, Vito and fifteen of his dancers joined them. After that performance, the Freaks were welcomed into Clubs for free because they drew a crowd wherever they went. The Freaks went on tour with the Byrds even after the band

\textsuperscript{53} Miles, 98
\textsuperscript{54} Miles, 99
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid.
achieved a Number One hit, but eventually the band outgrew them. Fortunately, the Mothers of Invention would soon enter the LA scene and provide the Freaks new dance music.\textsuperscript{56}

Zappa became attached to Vito and the Freaks not only because the thirty-five member dance group provided an instant audience, but also because he found their lifestyle curious. Characteristics of the Freaks, outlandish outfits and spontaneous performances, would stick with him for most of his career. Although the Mother’s music was less ideal for free form dance because of its spoken parts and abrupt changes in the number of beats per measure, the Freaks began to show up at the Mothers’ gigs. Zappa named them ‘the Mothers’ Auxiliary.’ Franzoni, especially, shared a mutual attraction with the Mothers of Invention. He can be seen in many pictures of the early Mothers of Invention.\textsuperscript{57} In one interview Zappa was asked about what the Los Angeles scene was like at the time. The interviewer asked, “It’s around ’65 now, the Beatles have already splashed down, LSD is pretty hip and the Mothers of Invention moved to L.A. Could you detail the stream of L.A. consciousness around that era?”\textsuperscript{58} Zappa replied:

Most of the people that were into the freak scene in Los Angeles were getting their costumes together, dancing a lot. The real freaks weren’t using any drugs at all. Then there were the -weekenders- who used to come in and stick anything in their mouth that they could find. And you were hearing about people freaking out on acid all over the place. And it was quite colorful. The real estate speculators who had something to do with Sunset Boulevard, which is where all the freak-outs took place, started complaining that the accumulation of all these weird people on their street was bringing their property values down. So they induced the police to make illegal roundups of all these people.\textsuperscript{59}

\textsuperscript{56} Miles, 98, 99  
\textsuperscript{57} Miles, 99, 100  
\textsuperscript{58} Barbara Salvo and Patrick Salvo, Melody Maker, January 4, 1974  
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid.
When asked if Vito and Carl were more extraordinary than the rest of the freaks, Zappa explained, “Um hm, well, Vito was about 60 years old married to a 20-year-old ex-cheerleader, and they used to have this place down by Cantors delicatessen and he would train people in how to be a freak.”

Zappa admired the Freaks for their self-expression and viewed them as more authentic than the hippies of San Francisco. He always kept with him a disdain for the more LSD-induced, love scene happening in San Francisco. In an interview in 1967 with Frank Kofsky, Zappa stated “We’re definitely a product of our environment. That whole band grew up in L.A. I don’t see how people can lump us in with the San Francisco bullshit scene, because it doesn’t sound like San Francisco music to me, no matter how objective.” In Zappa’s view, the Freaks did not need drugs because they got found more exhilaration in dancing and “freaking out.” Their experiences were not chemically induced and that made them more real. In an interview from 1966, Zappa defined “freaking out” as “a process whereby an individual casts off outmoded and restrictive thinking, dress and social etiquette in order to express creatively his relationship to his immediate environment and the social structure as a whole.”

For Zappa, to “freak out” was to play his music.

In June 1966 the Mothers of Invention released their first album, which was aptly titled Freak Out!. This record is arguably the first concept album. “Before the Beatles’ and the Beach Boys’ albums, the interjection of the performative of ‘freaking out’ rendered Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention’s Freak Out! conceptual.” The theme of “freaking out” was visible throughout the entire album. Inside of the double album cover, Zappa gave a definition of “freaking out” for his listeners:

On a personal level Freaking Out is a process whereby an individual casts off out-moded and restricting standards of thinking, dress, and social etiquette in order to express CREATIVELY

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60 Ibid.
63 Miller, 125
his relationship to his immediate environment and the social structure as a whole. Less perceptive individuals have referred to us who have chosen this way of thinking and FEELING as “Freaks” hence the term: freaking out. On a collective level, when any number of “Freaks” gather and express themselves creatively through music or dance, for example, it is generally referred to as a FREAK OUT. The participants, already emancipated from our national social slavery, dressed in their most inspired apparel, realize as a group whatever potential they possess for free expression. We would like to encourage everyone who HEARS this music to join us... become a member of the United Mutations... FREAK OUT!64

Zappa sought his listeners to, first as individuals, understand and react to their environment, and then as a group express themselves openly in such a way that would challenge established society. Zappa wanted his listeners to be awakened to the problems facing society. When interviewer Frank Kofsky compared Zappa to Berthold Brecht because “it just seems that his idea was that you could use art to galvanize people into some kind of action,”65 Zappa replied,

I hope that once we get on a footing where we can reach more people at once, more mass-media exposure, then we’ll be able to get more of that happening. Some of the stuff we get for fan mail, although it’s not huge in quantity, what those letters are saying, no other group in the world is getting. We get fantastic letters from anarchists, nineteen years old: “Help me in my town,” and all that stuff.66

Zappa’s fans were the individuals who were more conscious of their environment and in some cases felt more disconnected with mainstream society. He wanted his music to help develop a greater consciousness within society by making people think about what they were listening to and actually respond to it. Instead of fostering a mindless absorption by people like most music, Zappa wanted his music to create a reaction among listeners.

In 1966, although there had been protest songs against the Vietnam War by this time, there was not a large market for political sentiment in such a satirical form as Zappa presented it. Zappa

64 Ibid, 126
66 Ibid.
was not only criticizing the war or the government, but most aspects of society. In many instances, especially at live concerts, he insulted his audience. No one was saved from his criticism:

Kofsky: Sometimes when you insult the audience, as in “You’re Probably Wondering Why I’m Here,” and in the notes to the first album—this is all part of the thing of stinging them into action, isn’t it? You’re trying to arouse them and make them angry instead of apathetic.
Zappa: Yes, yes, I think that it’s easier to make somebody mad than to make somebody love. And seeing as how hate is the absolute negative of love, if you can evoke hate and it’s really there, you can polarize it, and then you really could have love.67

To Zappa, all the discussion of free love and flower-power distracted from the real situation. It was not realistic to believe that everyone could love each other. Putting time and energy into that goal was a waste. People needed to be faced with the truth and he believed his music could accomplish the task.

Kofsky: Don’t you think that this emphasis on love that we see among hippies really reflects not so much their ability to love at the moment, but their desire to create the kind of society where it will be possible to love?
Zappa: No, I think that what they do is a definite indication of their inability to love, because the whole hippie scene is wishful thinking. They wish they could love but they’re full of shit, and they’re kidding themselves into saying, “I love! I love! I love!” And the more times they say it, the more times they think they love. But like it doesn’t work, and most of them don’t have the guts to admit to themselves that it’s a lie.68

Part of the reason Zappa insulted his audience was in order to denounce this feeling of “love”. He did not believe for one moment that artists such as the Beatles actually loved their audiences. He criticized the Beatles hit, “When I’m Sixty-Four”, which enquires whether or not the listener(being the love interest) will still love him at age sixty-four even when he is older and without many material possessions, as actually enquiring if the listener(being the consumer) will still buy his records when he

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67 Ibid., 256
68 Ibid.
is that old. Zappa describes it as “a humorous treatment of what happens when a rock and roll gets old.”

The Mothers of Invention’s third album, released in March 1968, openly ridiculed the Beatles’ album Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band. Mockingly titled We’re Only in It for the Money, the album made fun of the counterculture of the 1960s. Without going into a detailed analysis of the lyrics of the album, one can understand the satirical nature of the work simply through the song titles and the album art. The songs included in the album are “Who Needs the Peace Corps?” and “Flower Punk”. The album art includes one piece that mirrors the album cover of Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band, except for a few marked changes. First off, all of the Mothers are wearing dresses. Secondly, instead of having people of great importance and admiration in the background of the picture, the Mothers’ album includes a random selection of both good and bad characters. This would have been their album cover had they been able to receive copyright permission from the Beatles.

Zappa always wanted to be a serious composer, but if he was going to make a living in music he knew he had to do it through rock. He stated in an interview “Rock is the only living music in America today. It’s alive. I’m bringin’ music music [serious or classical concepts] to rock arrangements. Stravinsky in rock is like a get-acquainted offer, a loss leader. It’s a gradual progression to bring my own ‘serious’ music.” If he was going to play rock music, he was going to do it the way he wanted. Zappa approached rock in a new way. His music was avant-garde in part because of its incorporation of serious composers such as Stravinsky and Varese with more contemporary blues and doo wop music. Zappa was not afraid to use aspects of both high and low culture. This flexibility made some

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69 Ibid., 262
people feel uncomfortable. Zappa realized that people enjoyed the romantic desires present in
doo-wop and the powerfully sexual demeanor of blues. His music provided people the sexual appeal
they wanted in music without the hypocrisy of love songs’ lyrics. His music amalgamated blatant
sexual references, serious composition music, and more common blues and doo-wop music. He
never thought twice about it, either. Matt Groening, creator of the television show The Simpsons and
devoted fan of Zappa, commented on his ability to create both pop and classical music, stating “Who
other than Frank Zappa would have thought of combining Varese with doo-wop?”

Zappa’s music was also avant-garde because of its satirical and ironic nature. Zappa used
irony in order to critique American society without reducing himself to the same seriousness he was in
fact critical of. In a way, he was afraid of his own seriousness. Because Zappa packed humor into his
work, he was able to scrutinize more serious aspects of American culture and politics without
becoming the figure of authority he mistrusted. From the beginning of his musical career, his work
was compared to that of Dadaists. Dadaism was a movement that developed an absurdist reaction
to political opportunism and cant. Like the Dadaist Erik Satie, Zappa disliked the overly sentimental
music of his time and used humor and sarcasm to comment on it. Zappa did not want to write songs
that screamed with emotion. He wanted to write what he saw, what was real to him.

In November 1966, the Mothers of Invention began to reside at the Garrick Theatre in New
York’s Greenwich Village. Around the corner was the Players Theatre where the New York Fugs
played. It was an area of musical experimentation and countercultural lifestyles. The Mothers’

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71 Kevin Courrier, Dangerous Kitchen: The Subversive World of Frank Zappa (Toronto, Ontario, Canada: ECW Press, 2002), 10
72 Ibid., 14
73 Ibid., 10
272-273
76 Kevin Courrier, 8,9
residency was longer, and they spent more time rehearsing and playing shows than any other band on that scene. Each show was different than the one before. There were two names given to the show: “Pigs and Repugnant” and “Absolutely Free”. On stage, they would perform absurd stunts. They “performed marriages onstage, goosed young virgins, and spat” at their audience. Zappa said there was one fan that “came back twenty-six or thirty times and his idea of a good time was to be allowed up onstage while I was singing, grab the microphone away from me, screaming at the top of his lungs, hurl himself to the floor collapse still screaming and have me spit Coca Cola all over him...I mean that’s an art statement, isn’t it?” These kinds of performances with audience participation were common at the Garrick Theatre.

One well-known story is about the participation of a few marines in one of the Mothers’ shows. After a marine had been stabbed in Greenwich Village, a rumor spread around that marines were going to come to the Village and hurt a bunch of hippies. It was during the time of this rumor that three marines in uniform showed up at the Mothers’ rehearsal. Zappa let them watch. Afterwards, Zappa talked to them and, realizing they were not there to threaten the band, invited them to sit in with them at the show that night. They spent the rest of the afternoon at a bar across the street. When they came back later they sang “House of the Rising Sun” by the group The Animals and Bob Dylan’s “Everybody Must Get Stoned” still in their full uniform. The audience enjoyed this performance and so Zappa decided to ask them to demonstrate some of their combat techniques on stage using a doll about four and half feet tall that he had had in his apartment. Asking them to show whatever it is they do to “these people in Vietnam,” the marines proceeded to rip the doll apart as music accompanied their actions. When Zappa held up the dismembered parts of the doll to the audience,

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78 Ibid.
79 Ibid.
he realized that people in the audience were crying. When it was over, people applauded the marines as Zappa introduced them. The marines then spoke into the microphone. The first said, “Eat the apple, fuck the core,” the second said the same thing, “Eat the apple, fuck the core,” and the third said “Eat the apple, fuck the core, some of us love their Mothers more.” It was a dramatic performance.

Although Zappa was not about to start singing protest songs in the belief that he could stop the war, he wanted to allow those marines to express themselves as he had let others who took part in his shows. Just because they were marines does not mean they were necessarily different from the hippies. They were just following the orders of their authority figures.

At the Garrick, Zappa was able to incorporate staged theatre acts into his musical performances. The Mothers became adept at putting on more than musical shows for their audiences. It was part of the avant-garde scene at the time to create an atmosphere of absurdity not only through the music, but the performances as well. The avant-garde nature of his work made it intrinsically political, even if sometimes Zappa did not want it to be that way. Avant-garde art is the “opposite pole of culture in capitalist society.” Its goal is “to make the audience self-reflexive — to make it discover its own discontent.” In contrast, pop music’s aim is to help people escape the harsh realities of their life and feel more content.

In discussing the later career of John Lennon, Jon Weiner discusses the potential of pop music as a medium of social and political change. He argues that if “capitalist colonization of youth culture could be broken, immensely powerful resources for challenging ideological domination would become available.” If musicians with a real social, political message could reach the mass audience

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80 Ibid.
82 Ibid.
83 Ibid.
of pop, there could be a movement for change. If the critical and alternative views that are generally kept out of pop music could be brought to the top ten charts they could challenge the hegemony of mainstream thought.\textsuperscript{84} Pop music is dominated by big record companies whose financial support most artists need to produce records and obtain radio airtime. They prefer hits with emotional, rather than political themes.\textsuperscript{85} Even rock, which was seen in the 1960s as a challenge to the capitalist control of music, was not able to break the trend. The top ten records of the 1960s in order from number one were: “Hey Jude,” “Theme from ‘A Summer Place,’” “Tossin’ and Turnin’” (Bobby Lewis), “I Heard it through the Grapevine” (Marvin Gaye), “I Want to Hold Your Hand,” “I’m a Believer,” “Let the Sunshine In,” (Fifth Dimension), “Are You Lonesome Tonight,” “In the year 2525” (Zager and Evans) and Elvis’s “It’s Now or Never.”\textsuperscript{86} These were not songs with striking political and social commentary, but emotional songs that did not challenge any kind of authority.

According to Jon Wiener the attempt was made by John Lennon and Yoko Ono to bring together pop and avant-garde music in order to overcome the barriers of the pop industry.\textsuperscript{87} Their path, similar to Zappa’s, was not successful. John Lennon, of course, was popular as a Beatle first. His move to the avant-garde did not happen until the late 1960s. In many ways Zappa was trying to overcome the barriers of pop and introduce avant-garde music to a mass audience from the start of his musical career. However, Zappa was not trying to become the leader of a political movement. Zappa added freaking out, strange time signatures, and the music of such artists as Varese and Stravinsky, not because of some formulated plan, but because that’s what he was interested in. He

\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., 3  
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid., 1  
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., 2  
\textsuperscript{87} Ibid.  

was aware of the possibilities of his music in making people more conscious, but his primary goal was not political power over a movement:

Kofsky: I didn’t mean that you personally wanted to take power, but I do think that you meant that you wanted to undermine the power of those people who have it now—the power to control people’s minds.
Zappa: It’s like this. A person likes to feel useful in the society; people have certain things that they can do. I happen to have a knack for doing that sort of thing, and if I can apply it to good use, it gives me satisfaction just to know that I’m functioning. Where normally, you know, I wouldn’t have a chance to use my trade, because what I can do is spread out over a broad range of activities. I like to do them all because it feels good to do that. If I can help at the same time, that’s groovy. If it works, fine. If it doesn’t work, at least I kept myself occupied for a while.
Kofsky: So in other words, this isn’t some rigid prescription that you’re trying to force on people?
Zappa: No! If I thought it was like that, I’d be wearing armbands or be out there with a costume on—the robe—and doing it with some showmanship. But we’ve taken our time about presenting our case and the scene itself has been developing at a rate—it seems like its developing slower than I wanted it to. But, I am not in a position of where I can govern the growth rate.  
He did not want to control what people thought or how they acted. He wanted them to think for themselves. Question the music they are listening to, the arguments Zappa makes, the ridiculous lyrics he writes, and then question the world around them. He believed when people became more aware of their surroundings, they could better participate in society, especially politically. Instead of focusing on theories of revolution like those of the New Left or of the hippie counterculture, Zappa had a more realistic perception of political change. When an interviewer asked him what he wanted to do about the system of government, Zappa replied:

I want it modified to the point where it works properly. A lot of people think that a new political movement, the ideal new political movement, is to bust it all up and start all over again with tribes and feathers in your hair and everybody loves everybody else. That’s a lie. Those kids don’t love each other; they’re in that because it’s like another club—it’s like the modern-day equivalent of a street gang. It’s clean pachucos, a little hairier perhaps. But it’s

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not right. First of all, the idea of busting it all down and starting all over again is stupid. The best way to do it, and what I would like to see happen, what I'm working towards, is using the system against itself to purge itself, so that it can really work. I think politics is a valid concept, but what we have today is not really politics. It's the equivalent of the high school election. It's a popularity contest. It's got nothing to do with politics—what it is is mass merchandising.  

Frank Zappa discussed creating a third political party once he was able to get a larger audience. He decided he would call this party the "Interested Party" and unlike other political parties it would be effective.  

Throughout his career, he wanted people to take an interest in politics. He saw this as the most effective way to create change. He saw the political activity of the youth wasted on movements that were not capable of creating the change they promised and were, therefore, illegitimate. They were pretending to create change they could not bring about.  

Unfortunately, Zappa never gained the large audience he had hoped for. Nor did he believe his audience was being reached the way he wanted them to be. They found humor in his lyrics and were weird enough, but according to Zappa they were not understanding of his message. In discussing the break-up of the original Mothers of Invention in 1969, he stated "I like to play, but I just got tired of beating my head against the wall. I got tired of playing for people who clap for all the wrong reasons. I thought it time to [give] the people a chance to figure out what we've done already before we do any more."  

In later interviews after he assembled a new line up for the Mothers of Invention, he would speak more rationally of the break-up. There were economic reasons. The lack of a mass audience not only hurt his political goal, but it also hurt his wallet. Especially because a lot of the music he recorded required more recording time in the studio and more musicians than usual. He was never one to skimp on the quality or quantity of his records. The band members were also ready

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89 Ibid., 254-255  
90 Ibid., 255  
91 Jerry Hopkins, "Mother's Day Has Finally Come," Rolling Stone, October 18, 1969.  
to move onto different projects. Most of the original members, notably Captain Beefheart, went on to other successful music projects. Lastly, Zappa wanted to continue to try new things. By the end of the decade he noticed that social and political commentary in music was being used by record companies to make more money. It got old for him once he saw others doing what he did before.

Zappa explained in 1972 to interviewer, Martin Perlich:

“The things that I talked about in those songs were things that meant something to me. And when it became fashionable for other groups to make socio-political commentary in their material, and when I saw the results of the work that they had done in that vein, and I saw how superficial it was, and I saw that it was turning into a trend, and I also saw that the audience that was buying records listened to that stuff and said “Yeah, that’s really great.”, I said “I don’t need to tell them anything anymore, they don’t need to hear that from me, they got all these other groups that are going: ‘Kick out the Jams’, etc. etc.”, y’know and everybody’s going “Yeah, that’s Heavy”. So, I have some musical interests that I’d like to take care of.”

At the time of the break-up, Zappa already had plans for his time apart from the Mothers of Invention. As early as 1968 he had the idea of having his own TV show with interviewers. He mentioned the plans he had had in a June 1983 interview on NBC’s Late Night with David Letterman many years later. He wanted to be the host of a show where he could have politicians and musicians meet and discuss different issues. Zappa could not imagine a better host than himself. His inquisitive nature and his straightforward personality would have been able to cut right through the rhetoric and claptrap of the politicians. Unfortunately, he was never given his show, presumably because networks were too scared of what Zappa would say on television. They were too wrapped up in his “bathroom talk” to realize his intellectual capacity.

In an October 1969 article from Rolling Stone entitled, “Mother’s Day Has Finally Come,” the journalist pinpoints Zappa’s future ventures. Captain Beefheart vs. The Grunt People, the film he had already completed the script for back in Cucamonga in 1964, finally looked as though it could be
completed. Three major studios had made offers to financially support the film. Zappa partially thanked Easy Rider and the Woodstock Music and Art Fair for the change of heart experienced by the studios because they were “two of several things finally showing the youth market really means business.” Zappa was referring to the realization made by the entertainment industry about the lucrative nature of youth business ventures. The journalist reports that Zappa also said he would never have played rock and roll, if anyone had shown interest in the film back in 1964. Again, Zappa makes clear that he does not consider rock music the ultimate medium of his choosing. He preferred other mediums of art and music, such as film and classical composition, but settled on rock music as the best medium readily accepted by a mass audience. For Zappa, rock was not an end in itself, but a means to another end. His career as a Mother thus far had opened up new doors for him. He now had a loyal fan base and more financial resources at his hands.

93 Jerry Hopkins, "Mother's Day Has Finally Come," Rolling Stone, October 18, 1969.
94 Ibid.
CHAPTER THREE: SOMEWHERE BETWEEN HIPPIES AND YUPPIES

Already by June 1970, Zappa was working with a new Mothers of Invention line up. It included Howard Kaylan and Mark Volman, the two lead singers from The Turtles, a band most famous for their hit song “Happy Together”, Jeff Simmons, a bass player who had released an album on Straight Records, George Duke, a jazz pianist from San Francisco, and Ian Underwood on saxophone and keyboards, who had joined the original Mothers of Invention in 1968. When asked on a German TV show in June 1970 whether or not this line up meant that the line-up for his last album had been temporary, Zappa responded:

The new format I’m working with now is that if I want to form a group, I’ll stick anybody in it I want to, because whoever happens to be right for the type of work that we’re doing...like for instance if I’m going to do a concert with a symphony orchestra, and don’t necessarily want to do a lot of vocals, I won’t bring the Turtles along. Or I’ll add some brass players to the group. If I have occasion to play a job with smaller group like four or five pieces where I’m just going to play the guitar I’ll bring along an instrumentation like Hot Rats. It just gives me a little more artistic flexibility.

Zappa had more freedom to create the music he was interested in. He would continue to tour and produce albums under different variations of the moniker, Mothers of Invention, until 1976.

In December 1971, at a London concert, Zappa was pushed into the orchestra pit by a crazy concert-goer. In a February 1974 interview, the interviewer was under the impression that the fan had been jealous of his girlfriend’s attraction to Zappa. Zappa responded that he had no idea what had transpired. “I just knew I was in the orchestra pit,” he stated. His leg and ribs were broken. There was a hole in the back of his head and his neck was almost broken. Along with his chin being caved in, he claims his band members thought him dead because his “head was completely bent over on the side of his shoulder. He spent most of 1972 recuperating from the event, but in September that year he

96 Ibid.
premiered a new band at the Hollywood Bowl, an outdoor amphitheater with a seating capacity of 17,376. He performed with a 19-piece ensemble that was shortened to 10 pieces for touring.

Also in 1971, Zappa released his first movie, 200 Motels. In the original press-kit of the movie, Zappa described it as a “surrealistic documentary” as it is “at once a reportage of real events and extrapolation of them.” Somewhat of an autobiography in its content, it also “includes ‘conceptual by-products’ of the extrapolated ‘real event’.” Overall, the movie depicted life on the road as Zappa understood it. The movie dealt with topics such as groupies, their relationship to their audience, how the group got along, and “macrobiotic food and tie-die shirts.” Among the different members of the band, Ringo Starr was also featured in the film. Zappa claimed he agreed to play the role of Larry the Dwarf in order to shed some of his “good-guy image.” The plot of the movie was based off songs Zappa had written in motels throughout their tours. He wanted to get these songs played so he decided to match the music to certain events that took place on the road. Unfortunately, the budget of the film cut the movie short. He had a budget of 679,000 dollars. The film was shot 8 hours a day for seven days coming to a total of 56 hours for the entire shooting. At the end of the seven days, only about a third of the plot was actually complete. Zappa had to spend time editing the movie to make sense in some chronological way. Originally Zappa filmed the movie with four video cameras and video tape. It took eleven days to edit the tapes, not only reworking the plot but adding in effects. Eventually the tape was converted to thirty-five mm film and subjected to another three months of editing, supervised by Zappa between different concert tours. 200 Motels was the first full-length feature film that used a video-tape-to-film process and Zappa saw promise in the new electronic technique that allowed for new optical effects. In 1974 an interviewer discussed the movie
with Zappa, telling him “A lot of people came out of the theatres scratching their heads.” Zappa responded:

Well, they come out of concerts the same way, but at least I’ve given them the chance to go in and see something that will allow them to scratch their heads instead of letting them sit in front of a television set and scratch their balls and know in advance what everybody is going to say and what everybody is going to do.

Therefore, his first movie reinforced the idea that he had presented in his previous music compositions. Again, he wanted his work to be able to make people think and reflect, so that they would bring that ability to other aspects of their life.

In 1973, he released Over-Nite Sensation, which became Zappa’s first gold disc at a half-million sales. The next year, he released the album “Apostrophe(‘), his first gold album. In 1975, he conducted a 37-piece orchestra in his symphonic compositions at Royce Hall, UCLA, an augury of his future career. His music was certainly becoming more financially successful by this time. When asked in August 1974, whether the success of Over-Nite Sensation was due to his own efforts to try to “please the people more,” Zappa answered with a discussion of what it meant to please people. He implied that clearly more people are pleased, but that it is not a result of any effort on his part.

Zappa’s albums were as laden with explicit references to sex and bodily functions as ever before. His song “Don’t Eat the Yellow Snow” on Apostrophe(‘), which was a huge underground hit, demonstrates that while he may have experimented with different musical styles over the years, but his mentality for lyrics never changed. Zappa was still writing and producing the music that he found most appealing.

As late as 1973, an interviewer for Finnish National Television asked Zappa questions about the social commentary present in his first three albums that had been released in the 1960s. Zappa

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97 Ibid.
98 Ibid.
explained how there had been no real political music in America when the Mothers got started as a group and how many people did not like to hear it because they would rather hear songs with “a few baby babys in them.” The Finnish interviewer makes the observation that Zappa found a new field and audience, and Zappa agreed, though not without commenting on the audience’s small size. When asked if he decided to “leave those political and socially critical things totally”, Zappa replied “No, not necessarily. I’d say the commentary is still there in the music.” He just no longer felt it “was necessary for me to do it anymore in an obvious way” because other musicians had begun to do the same thing. His music was not handing out social and political criticism as directly as before, but he was still pushing the boundaries of society through his explicit references to sex and bodily functions, and the composition of his music itself. There was still an avant-garde influence in his music and performances that challenged people to think outside the box. Over-Nite Sensation was given a bad review by Downbeat Magazine, a jazz magazine, because jazz experts disliked the combination of jazz music and rock lyrics. It is clear that into the 1970s, Zappa was still poking and prodding his contemporaries to push the limits of what was socially and aesthetically acceptable.¹⁰⁰

As the Vietnam War gradually came to an end in the 1970s, so did the protest songs and movements that were so prevalent in the 1960s. In an August 1974 interview, Zappa was asked, “Considering the apathy everywhere, do you think there will be a revolution in the United States?” To which he replied, “What kind of revolution? Do you mean people wandering into the streets with pitch forks and stuff, screaming? No. I do think that Richard Nixon’s a criminal, though. He is not a crook. He is a criminal. If the apathy seems new to you, it’s because you haven’t been on the scene long enough.”¹⁰¹ Of course there had been outrage at the Watergate Scandal uncovered in 1972, but no

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.
¹⁰¹ Ibid.
longer was American youth under the impression that political change was possible under the auspices of musicians. Zappa had long questioned the real political commitment of those crowds of hippies and protesters who he believed did not really care for real change, but who were following a popular trend. There was no surprise the social unrest of the 1960s came to an end even before the Vietnam War was over. When asked if he thought one could say the anti-war movement got the United States out of the Vietnam War, Zappa scoffed at the idea: "We didn't get out of there because some jerk was walking around the street with a peace sign. It was not economically feasible to continue it... It's got nothing to do with how many people hate the war. But if it converts into money, then the people who really operate things will take that into consideration."102

By the end of the 1960s, many artists had already lost interest in writing protest songs. They realized their music was not gaining a larger audience. Their fans were the same people as they had been. They were people who already believed in the message the artist was trying to send. There was no point to continue if the people they were reaching already agreed with them. Bob Dylan had declared his artistic independence from movements and issues as early as 1965. He stopped writing protest songs of any kind upon the realization that he was becoming what he disliked the most, a preacher. Still, folk-rock songs, such as Bob Dylan’s “Tambourine Man” and Paul Simon’s “Song of Silence” were ambiguous to the point that they could be given many different purposes. Because the songs were not specific in their meanings they were put to use by different movements in the 1960s and 1970s. After 1975, with the lack of movements to tie them to, this became more difficult. It was

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102 Clark Peterson, “Frank Zappa: He’s Only 38 and He Knows How to Nasty,” Relix, November 1979.
becoming clear by the end of the 1970s that while music was still of great importance to youth culture, protests songs were less fashionable.\textsuperscript{103}

Artists that emerged in the late 1970s who did have protest songs in their repertoire, such as Bruce Springstein, only had a few. Most of their songs were emotional songs about love and other topics. By the 1980s, popular political music became more rooted in satire than blatant lyrics of protest.\textsuperscript{104} Of course, satire was no new concept to Zappa. He also had never written protests songs in the same way that John Lennon or Bob Dylan had. Even though he had continually changed his line-ups and experimented with new instruments and music, little had changed externally according to Zappa.\textsuperscript{105} Even in 1976, when he was forced to change his moniker to simply his name without the use of the “Mothers of Invention” due to a lawsuit against his former manager, Herb Cohen, Zappa continued to produce music. This is not to say he was stuck in the 1960s. In fact, he grew tired of interviewers asking him about that time period.\textsuperscript{106} However, he was able to remain relevant in American music. This can be partially accredited to his ability to stay true to himself as an artist. Because Zappa never followed music trends, he continued to produce music long after many of his contemporaries faded into the background.

In an interview in May 1978, Zappa was asked “There's a lot of talk about the mellowed-out '70s--how the world's falling asleep. Do you miss anything about the '60s? Was there an urgency to making music then that doesn't exist now?” Zappa simply replied, “I don't miss the '60s at all. I don't

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\textsuperscript{104} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{106} Clark Peterson, “Frank Zappa: He's Only 38 and He Knows How to Nasty,” Relix, November 1979.
\end{flushleft}
Zappa expanded his answer to explain that external changes had occurred, but they had not affected his own work. In fact when asked if his audience was more jaded, Zappa replied:

They're more enthusiastic. They're more alert because there's less acid being used - which is not to say they don't use other things. But the type of drug that is popular with the audience has some bearing on the way in which they perceive things. There was so much acid during the '60s that it was very easy for large numbers of people to think they had seen God as soon as the Beatles went boom, boom, boom, you know?

Zappa’s fans were more perceptive about his music now and although he had become less idealistic with the passing of time, he remained consistent even as his contemporaries from the 1960s changed direction. When asked in the same interview whether “Things haven’t changed that much?” Zappa replied, “Well, they do change, but I feel those changes are external to the way I do things.”

Zappa still practiced caution at becoming part of a movement for any type of cause. While musicians became interested in playing benefit shows and fundraising for various causes, Zappa was wary of these maneuvers. Though Rock Against Racism had success in Great Britain in the late 1970s and Bob Marley’s popularity created worldwide awareness of the Rastafari movement and social problems facing Jamaica at the time, Zappa still remembered the hypocrisy behind the 1960s counterculture movement. Zappa stated in November 1979 on causes:

The biggest thing wrong with causes is the people at the head of them. They’re like writers because they’re not involved with the cause itself but to make themselves more grand. Student leaders used to get up in the ‘60s and rant and rave. It was pathetic. These people weren’t prepared to lead or make wise decisions if they had achieved their goals. If they had been able to take over, the world would have been a lot worse. They’re totally incompetent.

Zappa questioned the effectiveness of joining a cause. It was not so much what they wanted to achieve, but how they were going about achieving it and the legitimacy of their interest in whatever

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108 Ibid.
109 Ibid.
110 Clark Peterson, “Frank Zappa: He’s Only 38 and He Knows How to Nasty,” Relix, November 1979.
cause they chose. He believed there were alternative means for achieving social and political objectives. When he was asked how he would further the means of a cause, he did believe in he replied,

I would try to find something that was efficient in achieving the result desired, and something more suited to the abilities I have as a person. I'm not a rank-and-file guy. I don't go to a meeting and say, 'Yeah!' when a guy makes an inflammatory statement during a speech. I don't carry placards around in the street, and I don't send two bucks in to get a sticker for my car. It doesn't do anything. People are being sucked into this stuff. They're assuaging their consciences by sending in a few dollars. Every time someone says, "Whales," they get a tear in their eye. This is stupid. Meanwhile, money is going to the cause, and who knows where it goes? Give me an example of any cause in the last twelve years that achieved its ends using the methods that causes use.\textsuperscript{111}

Upon this answer, the interviewer asked, if then to support a cause he would write a song about it, since he assumed “that’s what you’re best designed for.” Zappa retorted, “No. I’m designed to write music and not to put it in the employment of political action.”\textsuperscript{112} Zappa maintained the difference between trying to lead a political movement wherein he tells the followers what to think and how to act and trying to evoke a higher level of general social and political awareness in people’s thinking, which was his objective as an artist. As he stated in 1972 in an interview with Martin Perlich, “No, I don’t have a political stance I would like to talk about because I don’t wish to unduly influence anybody else’s political stance.”

While Zappa was not spouting political rhetoric, he was also not shy about making observations about the political condition of the United States. An interviewer asked him in 1976, who he though the next president was going to be. He answered quite cynically, “It’s all the same. They are all fools and crooks. I don’t believe in political leaders. The people always get only propaganda and talks. How many citizens have personally met your president, for instance, and really know him? All

\textsuperscript{111} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid.
information is filtered through the media." At the same time, Zappa often told his audiences to go out and register to vote. He assumed that more voting by the youth would lead to greater attention paid to the needs of the youth and a greater choice in candidates. In 1968, after being asked if the voting age should be lowered to 10 or 12 he responded:

"I don’t think it should be lowered to 10 or 12, but it’s got to be down to at least 18. I think the voting will take care of itself this way: let’s say the voting age is lowered to whatever age you can imagine, or even where it is now. Only the people who are interested in voting are going to vote. If a person’s really a shmuck, no matter what his age is, he’s not going to vote. If the voting age is lowered, there are still those kids who are disinterested and just don’t have time to vote. In national elections, the way they’re run by so-called ‘adults,’ the candidate is not sold on his merits as a candidate, but sold on some sort of personality package, etc. Who’s to say that the kids would be more susceptible to this kind of hooking than their parents? I think they would be less susceptible because kids haven’t grown up, and they haven’t gotten to the point where they’ve learned to be dishonest. A lot of them are still honest. It would be a lot harder to get somebody elected if he’s just sold on the corny level that they’re doing it now."

Zappa had considered the value of lowering the voting age to eighteen, not because it was the drafting age as many of his contemporaries argued, but because it would help decrease the number of dishonest politicians elected. He maintained a belief in democracy, freedom of expression, and freedom of the individual as a basis of democracy. Ironically, Nixon was elected the same year Zappa made that comment about honest politicians. Zappa thought of Nixon as a crook. When he was asked in 1978 about how conscious he was of the outrageousness factor in his performances and music, he smartly responded:

"Wait a minute, let’s examine what outrageous is. That means something deviates so far from the normal contemporary accepted standard that it appears outrageous. Well, after Watergate--finding out that the President of the United States may be a crook...I mean, what’s outrageous? Is it outrageous to go on stage in a funny costume and spit foaming blood capsules all over the stage? Well, that’s what people think is outrageous."

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Zappa made the point that if people think his performances are strange, they should take a better look at the events in society happening around them.

Despite his disapproval of the majority of government officials, Zappa was content with the political and social freedom of the United States in the late 1970s. In 1976, an interviewer outright asked him “Frank, are you still a rebel?” He replied, with what seemed like enthusiasm, “I’m not rebelling. I’m executing! I don’t believe in political revolutions. I believe in individualism, the human’s revolution against his self. There are powerful rulers in every system. As an artist, to me it’s important that an artist can criticize freely whatever he wants.” Zappa may have had a lot to say about the problems of American culture, but its lack of freedom was never one of them until the 1980s. In the same interview he states, “We have a lot of rotten things in the USA, but that’s the situation in every country. The bigger the country, the bigger the problems. However, the USA is a country with future. I believe in this country and the freedom it is giving to artists and humans.” However, in the 1970s, although radical political movements and social unrest may have been waning in American society, political changes were still occurring. The conservative right was becoming a major political movement. By 1980, this movement would rise to political prominence with the election of Ronald Reagan. Throughout the next decade, Zappa’s belief in the freedom available in the United States would weaken considerably and with it his sense of security for the country.

117 Ibid.
CHAPTER FOUR: THE RISE OF THE BRAIN POLICE

On January 20, 1981, Ronald Reagan was sworn in as the fortieth President of the United States of America with these words spoken during his inaugural address: “I am told that tens of thousands of prayer meetings are being held on this day, and for that I am deeply grateful. We are a nation under God, and I believe God intended for us to be free. It would be fitting and good, I think, if on each Inauguration Day in future years it should be declared a day of prayer.”\(^\text{118}\) Ronald Reagan was the shining star of the conservative right. He enjoyed support from the Moral Majority and televangelists across the country. The American conservatism movement that had formed in the 1950s and 1960s coalesced into a major political movement by 1980. The framework of the movement -- the political action committees, the volunteer operations, the radio talk shows, the think tanks, and the direct mail network -- was organized completely by 1970. After the Vietnam War, the conservatives also gained support through the creation of a foreign policy agenda that would remain with the United States continuing through the war against terrorism. Evangelical Christians that had previously been politically immobilized began to assemble in order to advance their own domestic agenda through the conservative movement. They outlined an agenda that focused on cultural issues and brought millions of voters into the camp of a reformed Republican Party.\(^\text{119}\)

Although the rise of conservatism in national politics resulted in various changes in economics to foreign policy, for purposes of the Zappa story the impact of the conservatives on cultural issues is central. The dominance of conservative politics gave power to evangelical Christian groups that had previously been quiescent. These groups began taking political action in light of what they deemed as


threats to “family values”. Conservative Christians were reacting to feminism, abortion, gay rights, pornography, and the marked deterioration of public and political morality. To the conservatives, the values of the American heterosexual nuclear family, in which the father went to work while the mother stayed at home to raise the children and care for the home seemed to be deteriorating. By the mid-1970s, half of married two-parent households, and less than one-fourth of all American households, were living the postwar American Dream of a heterosexual nuclear family with a stay-at-home mother and a breadwinner father residing in a socially upwardly mobile suburban neighborhood. As, feminist and gay rights movements confronted the constraints of the conventional household, the economic recession and uncontrolled inflation made it difficult for both working and middle-class families to achieve an increased standard of living. A large number of women entered the workforce due to a decrease in the family wage coupled with an increase in divorces. Furthermore, illegal drugs and countercultural forms of sexual expression had passed from college campuses to suburban high schools throughout the nation.  

The decline of the nuclear family was recognized by most Americans, but the causes were not. Mainstream news media focused on cultural, rather than economic causes, in their explanation of the decline in “family values.” The religious right also favored a cultural critique, blaming overly permissive parents for the erosion of established values. Their “moral permissiveness” explanation required families to center on a spiritual revival in order to save the fate of both the family and the nation, now seen as connected. In the first half of the nineteen seventies, the plan of the religious right was to work inwardly against parental permissiveness and juvenile misbehavior. When this failed, the religious right began to look for external answers, finding them in the gay rights and feminist

movements which they claimed to be sabotaging family values. Others, namely the women’s movement and other liberal groups, blamed economic difficulties for the decline in family values. They worked toward public policies like federally funded day care, flexible family-friendly employment practices, and equal rights protections under the law. Conservatives saw government involvement in domestic issues as favoring alternative family structures and big government. When the cultural conservatives entered the electoral arena they did so in an attempt to counter the liberal movements. When the conservatives achieved popularity it signified the triumph of the cultural argument over the economic one as the explanation for the loss of traditional values.121

The transformation of the religious right’s understanding of the issue can be seen in the work of James Dobson, a child psychologist who would later found two of the most prominent groups of the religious Right: the Christian broadcasting and publication giant Focus on the Family and the political lobbying organization Family Research Council. In 1970, Dobson wrote the book Dare to Discipline which encouraged parents to spank their children and blamed almost all social ills on permissive parenting. This best-selling book also encouraged parents to practice sex education based on abstinence, keep their children as far away as possible from immoral movies and television, and have the mother stay at home rather than work. His book falls in line with the mainstream belief of the religious conservatives at the time that the family could still be saved from the secularization of the country and the effects of the sexual revolution by focusing internally on the family itself. They did not see the need to try to enter electoral politics or even change public policy. In 1978, Dobson published The Strong-willed Child which similarly emphasized the need to discipline children and control their behavior, but also attacked abortion as a major problem facing the family. This inclusion of abortion

121 Ibid, 15, 16
as an external enemy marks the change in the religious right's stance. Obviously, greater strictness in the family was not enough. Religious conservatives began to make scapegoats out of homosexuals and feminists.  

In the middle of the decade, the struggle over the Equal Rights Amendment came to the fore. Women's rights activists believed the amendment would lead to greater equalization of women in the workplace and in the home, but it encountered vigorous backlash from the Eagle Forum organization led by Republican Phyllis Schlafly. This organization of religious conservative women and others who supported traditional values protested the ERA as a measure that threatened the position of women who chose to stay at home. They called for the defeat of the ERA and the repeal of no-fault divorce laws which they claimed encouraged husbands to run off with their secretaries. They were successful in defeating the ERA, which they contended would not only depreciate the role of women in the home, but also destroy legislation that made men financially accountable to the family and take away jobs from men who, they believed, needed them more than women.

As the gay rights movement became more visible in the mid to late 1970s through increased protests, conservative religious activists began to react. Religious conservatives began to feel threatened because gays were no longer embarrassed or ashamed of their homosexuality. Instead, they were rallying for equal rights. However, the conservative religious activists believed that they were not asking for equal rights, but special rights. They believed that by ceasing to keep their homosexuality private, they were asking for the world to condone what they believed to be abnormal behavior. They felt that gay rights infringed upon their rights to raise their children ignorant of such practices. In 1979, Jerry Falwell put together a “Clean Up America” rally outside the Capitol. Falwell, an

\[\text{122 Ibid. 19, 20}\]
\[\text{123 Ibid. 22, 23}\]
evangelical fundamentalist Southern Baptist pastor, would cofound the Moral Majority in 1980 and become one of the most prominent televangelists in America. Fourteen years before the rally, in 1965, he argued against political activism of ministers in response to the civil rights movement. In 1979, he now spoke out actively against gay rights and claimed that homosexuality was attacking the sanctity of the family.\textsuperscript{124}

In 1980, Falwell wrote Listen! America in which he claimed the American family was being attacked by feminists who insulted stay-at-home mothers, homosexuals who tried to lure away children into immoral behavior, licentious primetime television shows, the elimination of prayer in public schools, and day care centers funded by the government. He argued, along with other religious Right leaders that they were not trying to impose a theocracy on others, but to protect themselves from the immorality of others. Falwell became the spokesman of the religious Right in the 1980 presidential campaign, urging conservative Christians to mobilize electorally in order to change the direction of the United States. As cofounder of the Moral Majority, a new political organization that initiated a media crusade with the slogan “America: You’re Too Young to Die” in the 1980 political campaign, Falwell gained national significance. Falwell claimed the “pro-family movement” of the Moral Majority had a following of over fifty million social conservatives and evangelical Christians. The conservative religious right had completed its entrance into mainstream politics through the support of the 1980 Republican presidential nominee, Ronald Reagan. By finding fault in external cultural factors for the decline of family values in America, the religious Right argued that it was forced to enter politics in order to protect the American family. The fundamentalist Christian leaders found support and political power in the 1970s that would last through the 1980s.\textsuperscript{125}

\textsuperscript{124} Ibid, 23, 24
\textsuperscript{125} ibid 25,26,13
Zappa felt uneasy toward this situation from the start. On October 26, 1981 Zappa had an in-depth discussion of the current presidency and political situation of the United States in an interview on CNN’s Freeman Report.

When they say that the only way you can be a righteous person is to do it by their book, then that’s wrong. My recollection of when I was going to school is the constitution says there is a church and there’s a state and they shouldn’t mess with each other and if they do then that’s against the law. Ain’t it? Is that the way it goes? Alright when you have a president who has been elected with the assistance, the very strong assistance of fundamental religious groups who have put money and electronic technology behind his campaign to put him in there, they’re shaking hands pretty good and obviously now that he’s in the white house he has to help them out because they can cause him a lot of problems for his programs while he’s in there so it’s a very dependent deal the same way the president is dependent on military and industrial organizations that have supported his regime.

Zappa points out a number of problems he saw with the election of President Reagan. Zappa had long been aware of the fact that presidents buy their way into elections. Back in the 1970s, Zappa had already discussed the idea that the president has to look out for the interests of those who supported their campaign. He disliked this, but had accepted it as something that probably would not change.

However, with the rise in financial status of televangelists, Zappa feared their backing of the presidency. He strongly disagreed with the president owing anything to a religious authority. Not only did power to a religious group go against his understanding of the Constitution, it also went against his personal feelings on the authority of the Church over people. He believed religious organizations kept people from thinking for themselves. His whole mantra was that people should think for themselves. He saw church organization as another form of authority trying to control the way its congregation thinks and acts. Zappa did not believe there was anything that should give them the moral authority over anyone else. He did not think they were any more special.

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126 Clark Peterson, “Frank Zappa: He’s Only 38 and He Knows How to Nasty,” Relix, November 1979.
than anyone else, so he did not understand what made them think they could tell other people how to live their life and practice their religion.\textsuperscript{127} Zappa on religion:

There are too many inconsistencies, too much ego involved in the people who are earning their living beating on a Bible or beating on anything else. The same sort of religious ignorance extends to every one of the religions that you can look at in the world today. When one guy says, “God’s talkin’ to me, and we’re right, we’re the chosen ones, only you an’ me are goin’ to heaven and everybody else is an infidel and they oughta die” – that’s what gives you wars and shit.\textsuperscript{128}

Zappa believed in spirituality. He did not believe people had to belong to a church in order to get to heaven or gain spiritual fulfillment. To him it was all a real estate exam. Churches are tax-exempt and protected by different laws in the United States. He believed the churches were taking money from people who were brainwashed into thinking it would bring them spiritual salvation. Then instead of giving it to the charities they promised, he believed they were investing it into different projects.\textsuperscript{129}

Zappa believed that the financial power the Church organizations gained gave them political power in the United States. Not to mention a large following of people who believe whatever the preachers tell them. Zappa explained his feelings on CNN’s Larry King Live in August 1985: “…the influence of fundamentalist theory let’s call it, in American politics is I think beyond the limit of what the government should tolerate in terms of church meddling. After all these people pay no taxes, they’re getting a free ride, the IRS can’t look at their books and you got a president that owes them a lot because they use their television stations to get help get him in.” Zappa had declared that politically he considered himself to be a conservative because he favored low taxes and a small government. This was probably due to his lack of faith in the ability of the government. He thought that the

\textsuperscript{127} Occhiogrosso, Once a Catholic, 335
\textsuperscript{128} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{129} Ibid.
televangelists who also claimed they were conservatives were misconstruing the meaning of the classification:

And this moral majority religious syndrome, not just to single out the moral majority as one entity, but it is the one that people normally look at there are a lot of other ones a lot of other companies in the television religious business that are functioning today that claim to be conservative, but are really fanatic. They are as fanatic as the Muslim sects that are causing all the problems in the Middle East. They are dangerous and they’re wrong.130

Zappa saw the religious right groups as extreme as and no better than any other fundamentalist organization. Reagan’s reliance on televangelists for support was not Zappa’s only qualm with the president. He also considered Reagan a “teleprompter president.” He explained on the Freeman Report that “He is surrounded by people who feed him information, not all of it good. In fact, most of it bad. And he sits there and acts it out. He’s reading the teleprompter. He’s a teleprompter president.”131 He did not believe the President or those surrounding him to be honest. Throughout the early 1980’s Zappa became increasingly cynical of the government and political apathy in America.

When asked by Freeman what gets Zappa up in the morning if he feels so pessimistic about the situation in the United States, Zappa replied:

I am dedicated to music and I get up and I do my music. And I do it my way and I try not to compromise. And if I get a chance to go on television and say this then I do that too... And other than that. What else can I do? I’m not about to march around the street with a sign in my hand. That doesn’t do anything. But you can remind people that something’s wrong because the tendency today is to just gloss over it. The desire for escapist activities is really at quite a peak now and media likes to accommodate that desire and the more you can escape from how horrible things really are, the less it’s going to bother you and then the worse things get.

Zappa was still committed to trying to get people to awaken to the reality of the problems of America, but he was no longer at the start of his musical career. In the 1980s, Zappa was mainly

130 Freeman Report, 1981
131 Ibid.
interested in producing his classical work and getting it performed. However, he increasingly appeared on television and discussed the political situation of the United States. Zappa saw the situation of the United States really deteriorating as the early 1980s progressed. On the Freeman Report, Zappa was asked if he did not enjoy the freedom to speak freely just as the televangelists do, to which he replied “And I hope I continue to have that freedom and that’s why I would not like to see them continue in the direction that they are going.” Zappa made a connection between the rise of the conservative Right and the televangelists and the decline of art, the lowering of education standards, the celebration of mediocrity, and the increase in escapist activities in the United States. Zappa believed that the government was taking steps to control the labor force of America. He referred to his idea as a conspiracy, but one with some real relevance and truth.

Zappa was featured in Progressive magazine in 1986 wherein he was given a chance to really articulate his feelings toward America’s regression in the art sphere. Zappa explained that people are too afraid to take chances on art anymore. There is no basis for supporting creative work in the “economic reality” of the Reagan era. He stated, “Most decisions about what gets produced and distributed are made strictly on a bottom-line basis.” He may have disliked the 1960s, but he always heralded the fact that in that decade the music industry was willing to take chances on new projects because they had little idea of what the youth wanted. By the 1980s, record industries knew what product would sell regardless of its actual talent. It was not just the record companies that became less adventurous though. Zappa regarded financial adventurousness in spending on an unusual music or art project a rare characteristic in America now. He blamed the Reagan Administration and did not

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have a very positive outlook for the future of the country. When asked if he believed anything could be done to reverse the trend, Zappa answered:

Perhaps. I tend to view the whole thing as a conspiracy. It is no accident that the public schools in the United States are pure shit. It is no accident that masses of drugs are available and openly used at all levels of society. In a way, the real business of the government is the business of controlling the labor force. Social pressure is placed on people to become a certain type of individual, and then rewards are heaped on people who conform to that stereotype.¹³³

Education was a very important issue to Zappa. He saw poor education standards in the United States as a major factor in the regression of culture in the country. His belief that the government turned a blind eye to the drug business in the United States is not discussed in the Progressive interview, but it was in the Freeman Report back in 1981:

The thing about drugs is, being controlled substances; there are specific laws that will put you in jail if you got it. It makes you a criminal when you use it which gives the government another, a different, type of leverage over you. If they catch you they got that extra little zinger that they can use on you. You know? It just puts your freedom on jeopardy aside from what it does to your health and your mind. I believe the government likes to have drugs on the marketplace because it keeps the population in a very usable state.

Zappa really believed there was little difference between those importing the drugs and those arresting people for them. It may sound like only a conspiracy theory, but it is not without relevance to how Zappa interpreted the situation of the United States in the 1980s. He saw the government and industries as keeping people down. These entities now had greater control of the minds of the people than in the 1960s or 1970s. It was what Zappa always feared the most: People were being encouraged not to think for themselves.

Zappa used the pop-music industry as a good example of people finding great success in conforming to the stereotype of mediocrity in America. He argued that artists made millions of dollars

¹³³ Ibid.
playing mediocre music because Americans “celebrate mediocrity.” Once an album sells millions of units then it is given the title of something special, but people can still listen to it and think “I can do that!” An artist will not try to deviate from this norm or become better because it is not necessary for making money.  

People don’t wish to be reminded that lurking somewhere there are people who can do some shit that you can’t do. They can think a way that you can’t think; they can run a way that you can’t run; they can dance a way that you can’t dance. They are excellent. You aren’t excellent. Most Americans aren’t excellent, they’re only okay. And to keep them happy as a labor force, you say, “Let’s take this mediocre chump and we say, ‘He is terrific!’ ” All the other mediocre chumps say, “Yeah, that’s right and that gives me hope, because one day as mediocre and chumpish as I am, I can…” It’s smart labor relations. An MBA decision. That is the orientation of most entertainment politics and religion.

When the interviewer asked Zappa “What are the issues that music of the 1980s can address?” Zappa replied that “It can address anything it wants to, but it will only address those that will sell.” Zappa claimed that artists don’t want to comment on anything controversial because it will not make a hit. He argued that they may discuss saving the whales or denounce war once in a while, but the majority of their music is based on escapist lyrics. Artists discuss things such as “boy-girl relationships.” Zappa believed music in the 1980s did reflect social attitudes of the decade quite accurately by “avoiding contact with things that are really there.” If Americans wanted to consume music that was controversial or stimulating, there would be a market for it. In a discussion of the radio industry, Zappa explained further “If you have a nation of people who refuse to face reality about themselves, about the rest of the world, about anything, they want reinforcement for the fantasy that they are living in. And these consulting services that format the station know that. Market research will show

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134 Ibid., 36
135 Ibid.
136 Ibid.
137 Ibid.
138 Ibid.
What was the way to get a hit in the 1980s according to Zappa? It was payola, or paying the radio station to play an artist's song. Once people hear a song on the radio repeatedly, they assume that it is a good song and therefore buy into the mediocrity.  

In 1984, Zappa articulated his theories of conspiracy regarding the church and government trying to weed out artistic qualities in Americans in his first book Them or Us. The book is not an objective piece of work. Zappa wrote it in the style of a screenplay so that a number of complicated scenarios could be intertwined without the book being much longer. (The book is already over three-hundred and sixty pages.) Zappa explained Them or Us as an application of the Unified Field Theory, which in physics would be an equation to explain the “interrelationship between how gravity works and atomic energy and all this stuff.” His book, like this theory, attempts to unify a number of unrelated topics into a cohesive story. The stories are the narratives of albums he had already produced, “Joe’s Garage”, “Billy the Mountain Goat”, and “Greggery Peccery” and those he was releasing shortly after the publication, “Them or Us” and “Thing-Fish.” The book jumps from one narrative to the next, ending in a meeting of the stories. Lyrics to different songs on the albums are spoken by the characters at different times. Zappa meant not only to tell a story, but also to provide a visual accompaniment to his music by describing the different scenes in a screenplay format. Readers could listen to his music while reading the story.

Because of its complexity, the plot of Them or Us is not an easy one to summarize, but there are parts that should be highlighted because they illustrate Zappa’s feelings toward the increased control by the government, church, and industry. The idea presented in the book is that there is an

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139 Ibid., 38  
140 Ibid.  
141 The Frank Zappa Interview Picture Disk, 1984
attempt by the major power structures in America to produce a uniform society that would be easier to control:

Eventually it was discovered that GOD did not want us to be ALL THE SAME. This was BAD NEWS for the GOVERNMENTS OF THE WORLD, as it seemed contrary to the ‘Doctrine of Portion-Controlled Servings.’ Mankind must be made MORE UNIFORM, if ‘THE FUTURE’ was going to work. Various ways were sought to BIND US ALL TOGETHER, but, alas, ‘SAME-NESS’ was UN-ENFORCEABLE.  

The government could not figure out how to make everyone more mediocre until someone came up with the idea that if everyone were made to be crooks the idea of uniformity could be carried out. “Total criminalization” as it was called, was highly popular except, of course, to those people who did not want to be criminals. Those people would have to be deceived into it. Zappa explained that this is how music came to be made illegal.

Shrewdly our Legislators calculated that MOST PEOPLE were TOO LAZY to commit a REAL CRIME, so NEW LAWS were manufactured, making it possible for anyone to violate them, ANY TIME of the day or night, and once we had all broken SOME KIND OF LAW, we’d all be in the SAME BIG, HAPPY CLUB… right up there with THE PRESIDENT, the most EXALTED INDUSTRIALISTS, and the CLERICAL BIG-SHOTS of ALL YOUR FAVORITE RELIGIONS.

Towards the end of the book Zappa uncovers the plot of the “un-named Christian organization” to get rid of all artists through some kind of video radiation created by a genetic engineering lab. The dialogue runs similar to his statements in Progressive magazine, only with a little more imagination added. The character of Frank explains the situation:

It is the tradition in America to reward artistry with contempt and ignorance with outrageous praise… Those who attempt it (excellence) are murdered by prolonged exposure to video radiation. The process has been remarkably effective so far. The committees who administer the program are now preparing to ‘move forward’ with the ‘final solution’ to ‘mere competence.’ Once the ‘merely competent’ have been dispatched, the executive division will celebrate at a religious picnic with beige flags all over the place. The entire Bible will be

142 Frank Zappa, Them or Us (Los Angeles: Barfko-Swill, 1984), 69.
143 Ibid.
144 Ibid.
145 Ibid., 263
recited out loud by people who cannot read. Everyone will have a real estate license. They will all be republicans.\textsuperscript{146}

Notice that Zappa used the phrase “final solution” in his description of the church’s actions. Zappa saw the actions of church organizations similar to those of a fascist state. The people had been brainwashed into mediocrity, into giving up their rights as individuals to the church organization to form a unified mass of people loyal to the church organization. They were no longer thinking for themselves.

In the book, a genetically mutated “thing-fish” is the result of the government testing their newly-created disease designed to wipe out all the artists. Zappa is probably drawing on his childhood memories of his father coming home with patch tests on him from the government. If the government was willing to test chemical warfare on citizens, it would seem plausible to Zappa that they would test biological warfare. Clearly, the book is a work of science fiction, but it illustrates Zappa’s distrust of authority, which had only grown throughout his life. In the 1980s, he discusses a few times his theory that the government was responsible for the AIDS virus. He thought it more likely than any other theory, that it was government experiments gone wrong. His father’s career gave him a different perspective on the workings of the United States military and government. In 1986 on Fox’s The Late Show Starring Joan Rivers, in a discussion of Reagan’s plans for the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), Zappa scoffed, “Ask yourself one thing: Does it kill germs? It don’t kill germs. I think both sides would like to do away with the nuclear warheads, because they mess up the real estate.” Zappa believed that unless SDI was able to prevent new forms of warfare, it really did not matter if it worked or not. No country’s leaders were interested in getting their property destroyed. Zappa disliked the situation in Washington throughout the early 1980s and he would tell anyone who

\textsuperscript{146} Ibid., 262
listened. However, it would be the emergence of the Parents Music Resource Center that would really compel Zappa to mount a reaction against the direction he saw American life and politics heading.
CHAPTER FIVE: ZAPPA MEETS THE MOTHERS OF PREVENTION

The Parents Music Resource Center was founded in 1985 by Tipper Gore, Susan Baker, Pamela Howar, and Sally Nevius with the stated intention of informing parents about the music their children were listening to. Tipper Gore started the organization after coming to the shocking conclusion that the Prince album, Purple Rain, she had just bought her then eleven-year-old daughter contained sexually explicit lyrics. The song that she heard, “Darling Nikki”, would become one of the most prevalent examples of “pornographic language” used by the organization as it is about a girl who is masturbating in public. Tipper and the PMRC began their campaign by going straight to the entertainment industry to ask for self-imposed labels. The organization proposed a rating system that would enable parents to see what was in the album before they bought it for their child. The labels would be placed on the front cover: “V” for violent imagery; “X” for lyrics about sex; “D/A” for references to drugs and alcohol; and “O” for supposedly occult material.147

The cause of the PMRC drew national attention, especially because it held the support of the Parents Teacher Association, who had begun lobbying record companies a year earlier for a voluntary labeling system of perceived explicit content. It became popular on nightly news to run segments on the “dangers” of music. Often these news specials would show parts of the music videos that had explicit lyrics. Many parents were surprised to find out their kids were listening to such explicit lyrics in their music. These shocked parents demanded recourse. They blamed the record industry and the artists just as the PMRC did, never looking at themselves for any of the responsibility. Zappa argued that the matter would not have gotten nearly as much attention had it not been for the eye-catching, fear-inciting segments that ran on the nightly news.148 Zappa began to appear on television and radio

147 Christopher Luna, “Gore, Tipper,” Current Biography 61, no. 10 (October 2000): 239
148 Larry King Live Aug. 13, 1985
shows denouncing the actions of the PMRC and the PTA as trying to create censorship on music.\textsuperscript{149} Many Americans agreed the actions were attempted censorship. Protective of the first amendment, Americans were not about to allow some “Washington wives” dictate what they could or could not listen to. However, the PMRC vehemently denied the charge that they were trying to place any censorship on the record industry. They argued they were only trying to gain consumer information for parents and that the ratings would be voluntary rather than imposed by the government. Still, it was not clear what effect ratings would have on artists’ ability to record and sell albums.

Due to the actions of the PMRC and the nation-wide attention the issue received, the Subcommittee on Communication of the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation held hearings on the issue of record labeling on September 19, 1985. The hearing on the “Contents of Music and the Lyrics of Records” included the testimonies of Susan Baker and Jeffrey Ling of the PMRC, John Denver, Edward Fritts and William J. Steding, the president and vice-president of the National Association of Broadcasters respectively, Stanley M. Gortikov, the president of the Recording Industry Association of America, Inc., Honorable Paula Hawkins, a Senator from Florida, Dee Snider of Twisted Sister, Dr. Joe Stuessy and Dr. Paul King, belonging to the University of Texas at San Antonio and Memphis, TN respectively, Millie Waterman the National PTA vice president for legislative activity and Frank Zappa. Also statements were included by such organizations as the Faith Christian Fellowship Church, Citizens against Music Censorship, the American Civil Liberties Union, Camelot Enterprises, MTV Networks Inc., the National Broadcasters Association, and the Songwriters guild of America.\textsuperscript{150} All sides of the argument were aptly represented, though the opinions of the


\textsuperscript{150} Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, Record Labeling: Hearing before the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, 99\textsuperscript{th} Cong., 1st sess., September 19, 1985, III
Senators on the committee clearly swayed in the direction of the PMRC. The stated purpose of the hearing was not to develop any kind of legislation, but to, in the words of the Chairman John C. Danforth: “simply provide a forum for airing the issue itself, for ventilating the issue, for bringing it out in the public domain. The concern is that the public at large should be aware of the existence of this kind of music, and the fact that it is now available to kids, and that kids of all ages are able to buy it.” They also wanted to find out whether or not the record companies would be able to adhere to a level of self-restraint similar to the one practiced by the movie industry.

Susan Baker, the representative of the PMRC, spoke accompanied by other members of the organization. Similar to the opening statements made by the Senators, she pointed out the changes in rock music that have occurred since the 1950s and 1960s. Although rock has always been controversial and lyrics have always carried a sexual demeanor, there is a large difference between Cole Porter’s lyrics “the birds do it, the bees do it” and WASP’s lyrics “I f-u-c-k like a beast.” She insisted that increased rates of suicide and rape were being caused by the increased mention of rape, suicide, sadomasochism, and other sexual or violent acts in songs. She gave statistics that showed an increase in teenage suicide and teenage pregnancy from previous decades. Then Jeffrey Ling spoke, relating the statistics to lyrics of different songs that depicted masturbation, suicide, sadomasochism, and other deviant acts. The speaker before them, Paula Hawkins, had shown the rock video “Hot for Teacher” by Van Halen and images of various album covers belonging to the bands WASP, Def Leppard, and Wendy O. Williams. These images along with the samples of lyrics made an impression on the Senators. Susan Baker also claimed that the PMRC was not after

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151 Ibid., 1
152 Ibid., 4,5
153 Ibid., 11
154 Ibid.
155 Ibid., 14-17
156 Ibid., 7-10
censorship, that “censorship implies restricting access or suppressing content” and that their “proposal
does neither.” By this time, the PMRC had dropped all requests of specific labeling and settled on
one single warning label for all explicit material.

Before even the announcement of a Senate Hearing to take place, the Recording Industry
Association of America (RIAA) had made the offer of using one type of sticker that would read
“Parental Advisory: Explicit Lyrics” instead of the PMRC’s complicated rating system. Those acting
against the PMRC saw this as a great blow to their cause and an act of appeasement that was not
only a stab in the back, but also unnecessary. Record labeling was not as distinguished from
censorship as the PMRC made it out to be. Already in October of 1985, Sears and JC Penney had
declared that they would not allow stickered albums into their stores. Also, in some shopping malls in
the United States, the association owners threatened a chain called “Camelot” with their lease if they
stocked albums labeled explicit. The issue became a matter of de facto censorship. At the end of the
day, record labeling punished artists for their self-expression with a label. It dissuaded artists who are
concerned about being able to make a living from really speaking their mind. By the PMRC’s
definition, record labeling was in fact censorship.

As one of only three artists who made the point to speak at the Hearing, Zappa took the
matter seriously. On top of his appearance at the hearing, he appeared in a few debates with the
founders of the PMRC before the event. He sent one hundred copies of his five-page statement to
the committee before the hearing. He researched what would be necessary to provide lyrics to the
records on the outside of the album for parents to see before making a purchase. In a condensed
version of his written statement, his testimony proposed his plan of providing lyrics, which would do

157 Ibid., 13
158 Paul D. Fischer, “Challenging Music as Expression in the United States,” in Policing Pop, ed. Martin Cloonan and Reebee
Garafalo (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 225
away with the questions of who would rate the albums and by what moral scale they would be rated. His plan necessitated the spending of money because lyrics, he explained, belonged to publishers rather than the record companies. The record companies would have to be reimbursed for buying the rights to the lyrics. However, he argued, if it really was important to parents and society the costs could be managed. He came up with the idea to print the lyrics on a sheet separated from the actual album (so that the album art would not have to be sacrificed) enclosed in the cellophane wrapping (so that parents could view them before taking it home). While the Senators showed interest in this idea, it was never pursued. After all, it was more cost-efficient and required less work by parents to just put stickers on the albums. 159

Zappa argued that the label creates a stigma on the artist. Unlike ratings in the movie industry, ratings in the music industry adhere right to the name of the artists. Actors and actresses get paid to act. They can play an obscene or sexual role and not become stigmatized by it because it is not real life. Musical artists on the other hand are more accountable for their work. If even one song on an album gets rated as explicit, the whole product gets held accountable along with the artist. Furthermore, the question of who is going to decide what is explicit and what is not was a serious issue for Zappa. 160 There are problems of interpretation and differing standards of morality. When John Denver testified, he noted that his song “Rocky Mountain High” was taken for a song about an elated feeling from drug usage, when really it was about an elated feeling towards life viewed from the Rocky Mountains. His song was originally banned from many radio stations because of an inaccurate interpretation. 161 Different songs mean different things to different people. Zappa would rather decide the explicit nature of an album, rather than have a third party do it for him. He believed

159 Senate Committee, Record Labeling, 54, 55
160 Ibid., 54
161 Ibid., 65
the parents should be the ones to decide what is and is not explicit for their children. If the parents have a problem with the nature of contemporary albums they should not let their children listen to them. Rather, they should get their children interested in an instrument themselves or in classical music. Zappa suggested appropriating more money towards art programs in the school system.\textsuperscript{162}

Zappa also denounced the suggestion that rock lyrics, or any lyrics, made people do things. Zappa’s retort in one of his debates, "If lyrics make people do things, then how come we don’t love each other," has become a well-known aphorism. Zappa believed that if they wanted to look for answers to increased rates of suicide and teenage pregnancy, look at the condition of society itself, not its music. Music does not shape society, society shapes music, he argued. John Denver made similar arguments. He believed that if music had gotten worse since the generation of Elvis, it was because society had as well. Denver also argued that music was a reflection of society. If parents disliked what they were hearing on the radio and watching on MTV, then they should take a better look at their children’s environments. At the end of the day, the parents can spend more money on music education and promote a healthier lifestyle by themselves.\textsuperscript{163}

Zappa saw the crusade as partially an attempt to rear children away from any mention of sex. The PMRC argued that the deviant sexual acts mentioned in the songs were not only wrong because they allegedly caused children to have sex earlier, but also because they caused children to grow up thinking those acts are a normal part of sex. Zappa argued that if parents educated their children from a young age about sex, they would know when such things as sadomasochism were wrong. He asserted that American society as a whole tries to hide sex. He reasoned that if sex was not as taboo as it was in society, then it would not appear in such deviated forms in musical expression. Labeling

\textsuperscript{162} Senate Committee, Record Labeling, 62
\textsuperscript{163} ibid., 66
music was an attempt to extinguish any mention of sex from music. He saw this as part of the agenda of the fundamentalist Christian Right. He urged parents to provide sex education to their children if they did not want them to misunderstand the lyrics of the music or become pregnant at an early age.

Perhaps the greatest issue for Zappa, beyond the threat of censorship, was the behind-the-scenes deal-making he believed to be transpiring between the PMRC and the RIAA. He owed the fact that the PMRC was able to get the RIAA to negotiate on labeling, when the PTA could not a year before, to the prominence of the members of the organization. The ladies who founded the PMRC were the wives of prominent men in Washington. Known as the “Washington wives”, these ladies carried a political clout the PTA never had. Tipper Gore was the wife of Senator Al Gore, later vice president to Bill Clinton and the 2000 democratic presidential nominee. Susan Baker is the wife of Treasury Secretary James Baker, later Secretary of State under George H.W. Bush. Pam Howar was the wife of Washington realtor Raymond Howar. Sally Nevius was the wife of Washington City Council Chairman John Nevius. While the country debated the issue of “porn rock”, the RIAA was trying to get legislation passed in their favor. To be decided on October 30, 1985 by Congress was a piece of legislation called the Mathias Bill/H.R. 2911 or more commonly, The Blank Tape Tax, which would have created “a private tax, levied by an industry on consumers, for the benefit of a select group within that industry.” The government would collect a tax on all blank tape and recording equipment to give to the recording industry. Zappa estimated that the price of blank tape would have increased by about a dollar a cassette, the price of a cassette recorder by about ten percent, and the

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164 Ibid., 63, 64
165 WRIF Interview, October, 28, 1985
price of a double cassette recorder by twenty-five percent.\textsuperscript{166} He found it too coincidental that Senator Hollings and Senator Gore both were, or would become, involved in the creation of this legislation when they were also both on the committee of the Senate Hearing. He also found it too coincidental that five of the Senators who sat on the Committee of Communication, Transportation, and Science were husbands of women who first signed the demands of the PMRC. The Hearing was originally supposed to be held by the Senate Committee on Family, Children, Drugs and Alcohol. It would have made more sense to hold the Hearing here, but they claimed they were “too busy” even though the chairperson of that committee, Paula Hawkins, was able to testify at the Hearing that took place. Zappa blamed the RIAA for selling out to the demands of the PMRC, who used their political influence get what they wanted while the public was distracted from the real political maneuvering at play.\textsuperscript{167}

In November 1986, a year and a half after he initially became involved the anti-labeling campaign, Zappa was still pursuing the cause. He sent out packages of information and press clippings from his record company office to anyone who called and asked for one. In a \textit{Rolling Stone} interview that took place on November 6, 1986, Zappa claimed he spent 70,000 dollars of his own money trying to “keep pressure on the other side.”\textsuperscript{168} He spent the money on a combination of travel, printing costs and phone bills. He appeared on maybe three hundred talk shows trying to bring the issue to light.\textsuperscript{169} He saw even the slightest censorship as a great threat to the United States. When John Denver testified against the PMRC his comments were not very different than Zappa’s. They

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{166} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{167} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{169} Ibid.
\end{flushright}
both saw labeling as only the beginning. Measures that limit free speech in any way, especially if undertaken by the government, could lead to even greater measures of restriction.

In the summer of 1988, Zappa went back on tour in the United States and Europe. He claimed he mainly did the tour because he wanted to do one during the United States presidential election year. It just happened that many people in Europe also wanted to hear his music, so he decided to play in forty-six cities in two months with fifteen press conferences. In an effort to increase voter participation in the States, Zappa invited people to set up voter registration tables at his concerts. He then would encourage the audience to register during a half hour intermission he provided. Zappa claimed they were able to register at least ten percent of the audience per night, with some nights as high as twenty-five percent becoming registered. At a press conference in Oslo, Norway Zappa blamed the low voter turnout in the United States on the difficulty of registering. He used the example of Alabama, wherein people were made to register in the basement of a jail and only allowed to do so between the hours of nine AM to five PM. He also explained that eighteen to twenty-five year old people make up the largest age bracket of unregistered voters. Just as he had been decades earlier, Zappa was still concerned about the voting rights of the youth. When asked who he thought people should vote for, he stated “I don’t tell them who to vote for.” He might mention candidates he likes or dislikes, but his major concern was only that voter turnout was so low. Without the ability to vote, he argued, a person has no representation.

In February 1989, Zappa made an appearance on Fox's Arsenio Hall Show. Hall had recently taken over the late night time slot that had belonged to Joan Rivers. Before Hall was asked to do the

171 Ibid.
172 Ibid.
173 Ibid.
show, Zappa had been up for the spot. Similar to his idea for a show in 1968, he wanted to be able to interview people and discuss politics. At this point in his life, Zappa was more than prepared for the position. He claimed he spent much of his day watching news programs or C-SPAN, and he had made important connections over the years. He had made arrangements and planned a guest list for the show, but Fox Network cancelled a few days before. He had invited Daniel Schorr to the show in order to discuss the Iran-Contra Affair, the trials for which would have ended right before the show took place. Schorr had been part of Edward R. Murrow’s celebrated CBS team. Prior to his death in July, 2010 he was the only journalist of that team still completely active in the field, as a senior news analyst for National Public Radio. Zappa claimed Fox was scared of the level of politics that would have been part of the show. In the same interview with Hall, Zappa was asked to repeat what he told CBS when they asked him to say a few words to the newly inaugurated President of the United States, George H.W. Bush. Zappa related that his response went something like, “Now George...said you were going to be the friend of the environment, you’re going to be the education president, you’re going to help the homeless, you’re not going to raise my taxes. Now George, if you can do that, in four years, I’ll become a republican and I’ll campaign for you, but if you can’t I might run against you.”

Indeed, in 1991, Zappa took the opportunity to announce his interest in making a run for the presidency in an interview with the publisher of Spin magazine. Dismayed by the level of apathy in the country and the lack of choice offered by the two-party system, Zappa seriously considered running as a nonpartisan candidate. He had already been in contact with two political consultants in Washington. He noted that if he did run, he would not do it only half way. This presented a problem,

175 Arsenio Hall Show, Fox, February 1989
because a real run would require a person to be on the ballot in every state. This would cost around one million dollars for each state. Then he would still have to worry about spending money on ads. His plan seemed partly feasible though because he did not have to worry about any primaries.\textsuperscript{176} He stated, “All I have to do is say, I’m gonna volunteer to run, I’m willing to do this. I’m willing to give up music for four years. I like this country enough that I’ll give up something that I love for four years to do this job that nobody is doing right here.”\textsuperscript{177} His platform involved the abolishment of the income tax. He would also run a “zero balloon campaign.”\textsuperscript{178} Zappa would attempt to run the least expensive campaign in American history. From home he could he could be on radio talk shows all over the country and respond directly to questions people have. As a nonpartisan candidate Zappa wanted to forego the spending of millions of dollars and applying “for matching funds from the federal government”\textsuperscript{179} by which he would “be forced to abide by all those rules in order to do it.”\textsuperscript{180} He wanted to prove that a campaign does not require millions of dollars and a ton of balloons.

Zappa considered running, an action he had previously deplored, because he viewed the situation in the United States as only deteriorating. Zappa blamed the educational system and the parents and government who were not doing anything to fix it. According to him the parents were leaving it to the government to worry about, and the government prefers the mass of Americans to be uneducated. For Zappa, how else could people be transfixed by balloons, “yellow ribbons and little flags and buzz words and guys saying ‘new world order’...I mean, only a person who has been dissuaded from any kind of critical thinking and doesn’t know geography, doesn’t know the English

\textsuperscript{177} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{178} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{179} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{180} Ibid.
language – I mean if you can’t speak English, then this stuff works on you."  

Part of the problem he saw with education was that in place of civics, which taught students about the U.S. Constitution, social studies was being taught in high schools. He stated, “Here we live in a country that has a fabulous constitution and all these guarantees, a contract between the citizens and the government – nobody knows what’s in it.” He claimed Americans needed to learn about the Constitution to ensure that politicians continued to adhere to it. Zappa’s concern was also in regards to children’s reluctance to read. They rather take in information through audio and visual sources. He thought equipment should be placed in classrooms that would “deliver data into the language that the kids already understand” in order to meet them halfway. However, the cost of these programs convinced Zappa that parents would rather place their hope in the new “education President” (the name George H.W. Bush began to campaign under) than see an increase in taxes.

Zappa also discussed the Gulf War in the interview with Spin. He saw the war as an utter failure of diplomacy and a means of distracting Americans from the situation of the country. He estimated that at the end of the decade, twelve percent of the homeless were Vietnam Vets, while around thirty percent were people who were kicked out of mental institutions that were closed by the Reagan administration. Zappa claimed the rest were families, who unlike the yuppies who prospered enormously through the stock market, were left without a home during the depression of 1982-1983. In the interview, Zappa stated, “So to feel good about the ’80s, I think you would have to be mutated away from the human condition quite a bit…there was nothing that swell about it. Fortunately for us the music of that period leaves an accurate record of how empty that whole era

181 Ibid.
182 Ibid.
183 Ibid.
184 Ibid.
185 Ibid.
In Spin Zappa was able to give a very educated description of why the United States chose to leave Saddam in power. He explained that there was no certainty they would have been able to and that to root out the entire Baathist Party would have been implausible because they infiltrate all levels of the government and there are five different forms of secret police. Furthermore, there was the threat of democracy spreading throughout the Middle East if they toppled Hussein’s government. The United States government and American businessmen would rather have to face a corrupt monarch than a disorderly democracy. 187

Unfortunately, Zappa’s health got the better of him and he was never able to run for president. In November of 1991 it was announced by his two eldest children that he was battling prostate cancer. A little over two years later, on December 4, 1993, Zappa passed away. He continued to work on his music and make appearances as much as his health allowed until the time of his death. In 1993, he managed to appear on NBC’s Today Show with Jamie Gangel where she described him as “still Frank Zappa: funny, opinionated, and off the wall." He never lost his ability to comment on American society and politics, even though his forecast for the country was bleak. In an interview in January 1992, he stated:

Things are getting worse in the United States. The whole mood is on the verge of becoming a police state. For a while, every time you turned on the TV there was a fucking military parade, yellow ribbons, missile launchers, people lining the streets trying to feel good about themselves because we’d killed however many Iraqis -- we'll never know the real number. And for what? Saddam Hussein is still in power. 188

186 Ibid.
187 Ibid.
Still in 1993, his concerts of classical music were selling out in Europe. He received twenty minute ovations by these audiences, both when he was there and when he was too sick to attend. He had become the classical composer he always wanted to become.
CONCLUSION

Many obituaries were written in memory of Zappa after his untimely death. One of the most strikingly profound ones, both because of its context and its author, was written by Vaclav Havel, a playwright, essayist, dissident, and the first President of the Czech Republic following the Velvet Revolution and the fall of communism in Czechoslovakia. In the last lines of the obituary Havel wrote, entitled “Revolutionary,” he stated, “I thought of Frank Zappa as a friend. Meeting him was like entering a different world from the one I live as President. Whenever I feel like escaping from that world – in my mind, at least – I think of him.”

During the 1970s, Zappa, along with Captain Beefheart and the Velvet Underground, was idolized in the Czech underground music scene. The country had been closed off from foreign contact at this time. The local artists and audiences held onto their culture, even in the face of persecution by the police. In 1990, shortly after the revolution, Havel and Zappa met in Prague. Zappa had recently become involved in business ventures with Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. He had begun international business opportunities in Italy and the prospect of creating trade with the former communist-bloc excited Zappa. He was interested in creating trading opportunities between the United States and the newly democratizing states. He had been in the Soviet Union on behalf of the Financial News Network helping to produce a television show that would air discussions of potential business ventures between Soviet and American entrepreneurs, when he decided to make a stop in Czechoslovakia. He had gotten access to an interview with Havel through his friend Michael Kocab, who happened to be both a member of Parliament and a well-known Czechoslovak rock

191 Ibid.
musician. In the obituary he wrote, Havel stated Zappa's interest in "what this sudden collapse of a bipolar world might bring," the future of the Soviet bloc, the "radical changes taking place," and the "negative as well as the positive aspects of the 'velvet' course we had set for ourselves." Furthermore, Havel wrote, "What fascinated and excited him was the idea that the artist had a role to play in active politics. He gave serious thought to offering unofficial assistance to our country, in both cultural and economic spheres." The proposal never worked out for reasons unknown to even Havel. It might have been that the United States officials Zappa talked with about the position had disliked the idea, or that Zappa just became too sick. Nonetheless, Zappa played one of his last shows in Czechoslovakia. He dedicated time in the consideration of what it would take for formerly communist countries to succeed in democratizing and entering the capitalist system.

Zappa was most intrigued by the idea that it was artists who were now in charge of the government in the Czech Republic. Zappa stated in an interview soon after his first meeting with Havel that, "This is a brand new government made up of artists, writers and musicians. They know they are making over society. That's their mission. But they realize they will ultimately be judged on whether they – an artistic, humane group – can run an economy." Zappa knew that artists perceived the world differently than politicians and economists, but he did not believe this made them any less qualified for the task ahead of them. When asked what qualified as Frank Zappa, an artist, to "advise a nation on its trade and economic development," Zappa stated:

Do I need to be an expert in international finance to do this job, to help writers, musicians and intellectuals achieve their vision? I'm the guy who sat next to a guy on a plane who knew about M.H.D. [Magnetohydrodynamics, a business idea he had for Czechoslovakia by which their coal, which they still use a lot of, would be "burned but the emissions are cleaned, put..."
through a loop and used to increase electricity output—like a turbocharge." You collect all this information, you make the connections that need to be made. Now we have a chance to make a lot of new connections. It's just like making a piece of music. You start with the theme. Then, what's the melody? How do you develop the harmony? What's the rhythm below it? You don't have to know about international financing. You just have to know about composition.\textsuperscript{198}

Zappa believed artists were capable of more than society gave them credit for. He thought them able to run a government, to handle finances, if only given the chance. He viewed their unique capabilities to see the world differently and make connections that many cannot as qualifying characteristics.

For most of his life, he was not only interested in becoming a musical composer, but also in the opportunities that profession allowed. Zappa's life was dedicated to political awareness and change more than most of his American contemporaries of the 1960s. His life is worth looking at because of the perspective it provides and the insight it gives on the nature of the role of the artist in American society. If, in the twenty-first century, there is any chance of artists making a real political difference, Zappa's life needs to be better understood and appreciated. It is difficult as part of a generation born two decades after the tumultuous sixties to understand what happened in that decade. The sixties are often looked back on with a nostalgic longing for what could have been. However, instead of getting too wrapped up in the emotions of the past, cases such as Zappa's should be studied and remembered in the hope that in the near future, the humanistic thinking of artists can have a greater role in society.

\textsuperscript{197} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{198} Ibid.
Primary Sources


Secondary Sources


