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Absolutely Free?

Frank Zappa's Musical Assault on American Conformity, 1966-1968

Brandon Chopp

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Professor Lutze

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Introduction

In 1968, American composer Frank Zappa (1940-1993) noted, “Music always is a commentary on society.”¹ Zappa viewed the concept of music as more than entertainment or an escape from reality. Rather, he regarded music as a consequential reflection of the quality of that reality, as well as a powerful tool to assess society from a critical standpoint, and in the process, strive to change that reality. To Zappa, music was the most significant aspect of everyone’s life, due to its potency to influence society, whether the average citizen knew it or not.

Between 1964 and 1993, Frank Zappa experienced a prolific musical career with the official release of over fifty albums of varying genres, including rock, jazz, and classical. His music was and remains a preeminent national and international cultural force. He has influenced generations of musicians to push the boundaries of music (most significantly, The Beatles) and anticipated definitive aspects of subsequent genres, such as cynical punk rock attitudes and complex, artistic progressive rock structures. Zappa’s lyrics are often scathing and satirical critiques of numerous aspects of American life, while his music often experiments with and meshes together various forms of traditional and popular music and incorporates serious flirtations with the avant-garde. Zappa strove for artistic approval from cultural elites and desired commercial success on his own terms, never conforming to the typical structure of a hit song; he generated and exemplified many new possibilities in popular music. Yet the nature of his work in the 1960s is perhaps the most radical in his catalogue in relation to the time of release and in his establishment as a social commentator. Zappa employed his early musical output to criticize conformist aspects of the United States in the 1950s and the resultant society, culture, politics, and music of the following decade, as well as to propound and exemplify his individualist ideals in order to combat elements of conformity in the nation.²

¹ Frank Zappa, interview with Jerry Hopkins, “The Rolling Stone Interview: Frank Zappa,” *Rolling Stone*, July 20, 1968, 14.

² The ability for humanity to conform to a group mentality, as well as the perception of individuality, have long been sociological topics of debate, especially in regard to the amount of influence a society should have on its citizens. In *Suicide* (1897), French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858-1917) referred to the repercussions of anomie, or the lack of state regulations on its citizens’ wants through prescribed direction. With no constraint on humanity’s naturally infinite desire, average citizens yearn for too many unattainable goals, and consequently become disillusioned with life as they cannot realize their aspirations, which greatly damages their psyche and leads to suicide. Therefore, Durkheim ruled that social regulation of its citizenry is necessary for the survival of a society. On the other hand, German philosopher Max Horkheimer (1895-1973) wrote about the decline of individuality through social direction. He argued in *Eclipse of Reason* (1947), in his analysis of the Nazi regime, that modern elites produce an ideological construction of individuality in the lens of a market economy. In effect, modern individuality becomes the pursuit of material gain, which in effect conforms the populace in its collective desire and accumulation of the same items, which citizens believe to be in the name of self-interest, as the elites have prescribed. However, through these pursuits, citizens conform to mass ideals and do not exhibit true individuality.

Zappa would have agreed with Durkheim that social structure was necessary to provide direction for people. He saw the necessary role of the provision of a basic social platform from which citizens could make their own informed choices—a condition he saw as natural in a humanity capable of free will. After all, Zappa’s music professed individuality as the solution, but he never directed the nation in how to execute that desired individuality—he wanted citizens to think for themselves and define their own identity. Yet like Horkheimer, Zappa detested the way in which the contemporary social hierarchy manipulated popular thought to certain ideals based largely on consumerism. Because Zappa knew that people inherently had the ability to choose and form their own ideals, he saw the overt social direction as tasteless and repressive in order to propel mass social goals that would benefit a few, instead of guiding individuals in how to attain their idiosyncratic aspirations. At the same time, Zappa was critical of Americans who he viewed had willingly conformed to social standards, due to what he saw as ignorant and apathetic compliance and the inability to make their own informed decisions outside of listening to

While Zappa achieved most musical fame and success during the 1970s and gained public recognition by the 1980s, his initial works of the 1960s with his band, The Mothers of Invention, best exhibit the enactment of his beliefs.³ The albums, *Freak Out!* (1966), *Absolutely Free* (1967), and *We're Only in It for the Money* (1968), despite poor sales upon their release, are Zappa's most important records in that he was able to utilize this musical output to demonstrate his ideals for the United States during the 1960s and beyond. Zappa never deviated far from the views that he expressed so explicitly within these three albums. The content of these initial albums serves as a foundational testament to Zappa's anti-conformist critiques and individualist ideals in regard to numerous elements of American society, culture, politics, and music, each of which this paper will attempt to convey through analyses of his music. Interviews with Zappa across the decades, his 1989 autobiography, *The Real Frank Zappa Book*, and biographies and academic studies corroborate Zappa's essential criticisms and ideals. Throughout his life and work, Zappa utilized his words and music to expound the potency of music in regard to the medium's inherent ability to enact critical assessments of society. Many authors and scholars have increasingly realized Zappa's significance with time.

Since Zappa's death in 1993, publications that detail his life and career have appeared more and more frequently; however, many are not academic, nor from a historical perspective. A majority of the works are biographies of Zappa's entire life, predominately written by esteemed music journalists.⁴ Yet there is a growing number of scholarly works that present significant scholarship through compelling arguments about Zappa's entire career.⁵ While these works are

social prescriptions. Zappa detested how society instilled these lamentable sentiments of conformity into citizens, and how those citizens seemed not to care about this cognitive control and instead only fed on those social prescriptions for their own social existence.

Therefore, for Zappa, conformity was prevalent in the social structure and in the people, and he made no distinction between the two. Any aspect of conformity received the same amount of culpability from Zappa, because to attempt to conform or to submit to conformity directly contradicted the natural human ability of self-expression.

³ The Mothers of Invention formed in 1964 originally under the name, the Soul Giants. When Zappa joined the band that year, he changed the name and became the leader of the group. He wrote nearly all of the group's material, and collaborated on the very few tracks on which he did not have sole writing credit. Essentially, the musical and lyrical content of the band represents Zappa's thoughts. Zappa played guitar and sometimes provided lead vocals. Notable musicians of the 1960s rendition of the band include the following musicians: Ray Collins, lead vocalist; Roy Estrada, bassist; Jimmy Carl Black and Billy Mundi, drums; Don Preston, keyboards; Jim "Motorhead" Sherwood, saxophone; Bunk Gardner, woodwinds; Ian Underwood, guitars, keyboards, and woodwinds; and Art Tripp, percussion.

⁴ The best biographies today include Barry Miles's *Zappa* (2004), Neil Slaven's *Electric Don Quixote: The Story of Frank Zappa* (1996), Kevin Courrier's *Dangerous Kitchen: The Subversive World of Frank Zappa* (2002), Michael Gray's *Mother!: The Frank Zappa Story* (1994), and David Walley's *No Commercial Potential: The Saga of Frank Zappa* (1996). Since all of these biographies are popular publications with the dual intent to inform and to entertain, these books are not academic, and a great majority lack citations and overarching scholarly arguments. Yet there is still merit to these works, especially as biographies. The authors all weave aspects of Zappa's narrative together well with varying degrees of detail on certain events. It is important to note that the authors often draw on their own experiences and interviews with Zappa, as well as some historic documents, to compose their own ideas and interpretations of his figure and history. In other words, unique perspectives and ideas are still bountiful among these books, and their consumption in any historical research on Zappa is still crucial.

⁵ These academic titles include Kelly Fisher Lowe's *The Words and Music of Frank Zappa* (2006), Doyle Greene's *Rock, Counterculture and the Avant-Garde, 1966-1970: How the Beatles, Frank Zappa and the Velvet Underground Defined an Era* (2016), and Ben Watson's *Frank Zappa: The Negative Dialectics of Poodle Play* (1993). Each book contains compelling and clear arguments about Zappa's work that the authors have grounded in academic research in which they used crucial primary sources. These works are especially notable for their idiosyncratic examinations of Zappa's work. Two more academic works of importance are Paul Carr's *Frank Zappa and the And* (2013), which is a unique compilation of academic articles that analyze concise aspects of Zappa's life, from the avant-garde, to his

important and successful in their own right, a great majority suffer from the attempt to cover Zappa's entire career in one volume. The lack of focus on a particular era or set of works fails to give the necessary attention to more critical aspects of Zappa's life and, in effect, inhibits one's ability to fully appreciate the complexities of the songs of Frank Zappa.

Most authors neglect the early period of Zappa's history and the significance of his early musical process and method in favor of an examination of his later, more commercially successful and politically significant years. This work, by contrast, fulfills the needed focus on Zappa's formative years and places Zappa's early works into the historical context of the 1960s. While the work may not provide an exhaustive analysis of every detail of Zappa's early albums, the contextualization and analyses of this study serve as a crucial contribution to the contemporary state of Zappa scholarship as a critical history of his early thought and musical process and method. This work focuses on the arguably most important period of Zappa's music, and expands upon existing concepts while offering fresh analyses of his songs.

The Formation of Zappa the Musician

It is imperative to understand that Frank Zappa was a product of his times—the context in which Zappa matured was pivotal to his development and his disposition in the 1960s. His adolescence during the 1940s and 1950s and the dichotomy of these decades cultivated his perception of American social and cultural norms. At the same time, cultural media and figures fostered an appreciation in Zappa for sincere and expressive media, which defined his music-making process.

Zappa grew up during the 1940s and 1950s. He distinctly preferred the music and other media formats of consumable culture from the 1950s, while he favored the living style of the 1940s.⁶ The 1940s determined Zappa's desire for an individualist lifestyle. The notion of national and international progress and freedom permeated American conceptions of the Second World War, which defined 1940s American society. In comparison, the cold-war 1950s halted these dynamic and progressive elements: a stalemate against communism and anxiety of the unconventional permeated the socially stagnant era. Whereas individuality had been an esteemed quality in the fight against indistinguishable mobs of Nazis, the same sense of individuality lost cultural significance as Americans yielded themselves to bourgeois suburbanism and materialism to avoid suspicion of being the Political Other—a communist. The drastic switch from the promotion of individuality to conformity exacerbated Zappa's desire for individuality and formed his contempt for national compliance. Consequently, Zappa viewed the consumable culture of the 1950s as a way to cope with the conformity that had come to define the United States.

For the purpose of understanding Zappa as a musician of the 1960s, his preference for 1950s consumable culture is key. Zappa became enamored with the proverbial 1950s teenage life of sex, doo-wop records, and monster movies.⁷ With a fondness and nostalgia for the distinct

films, and everything in between, and Charles Ulrich's *The Big Note: A Guide to the Recorded Works of Frank Zappa* (2018), which is a compendium of the fine details relevant to every Zappa album, which Ulrich largely bases on specific words from Zappa. Greg Russo's *Cosmik Debris: The Collected History and Improvisation of Frank Zappa* (1999) is similar to Ulrich's work as a reference guide, but also contains much biographical information. All these works are indispensable for the insights that they bring to the scholarship of Frank Zappa.

⁶ Michael Gray, *Mother! The Frank Zappa Story*, rev. ed. (London: Plexus, 1994), 13.

⁷ Barry Miles, *Zappa* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 44.

style of 1950s media, Zappa became critical about what he perceived as a lack of content and quality of consumable culture in the 1960s. Conformity had spread to the entertainment industry as movie and record production companies molded their products to popular taste in the name of consumerism. Of course, the counterculture scene—the youthful reaction against mainstream culture and conformist materialism, suburbanism, etc.—and its underground music of the 1960s was an expressive and artistic response, as well as an attempt to change from pervasive societal aspects of the 1950s. However, record companies were able to commodify the counterculture’s music as early as 1967. Zappa much preferred what he viewed as truly underground American culture—namely R&B and avant-garde classical music—and he drew upon the intrinsic underground aspects of these two music scenes for the duration of his career, notably during the 1960s in the context of the counterculture’s constant attempts to rebel against mainstream culture.

Zappa’s first love, and a major influence on his own music, was 1950s R&B music, which was a legitimate underground American culture during its inception in segregated America. A main attraction to this music was that black musicians, such as Lightnin’ Slim, Howlin’ Wolf, and Guitar Slim, often sang about loneliness and alienation—two sentiments with which Zappa often identified throughout his childhood in an increasingly anti-individualist United States.⁸ Zappa thought that R&B was truly authentic and passionate, with genuine messages in the lyrics.⁹ Unlike popular radio music, R&B addressed life and its struggles with honest, provocative thought through musical and lyrical expression. The essence of R&B lyrics inherently protested the sterile social climate of the cold-war 1950s.¹⁰ Zappa craved and consumed such original, unique, and truthful music.

Yet Zappa also yearned for music that was unique and interesting in structure. R&B music featured simple instrumentation and basic musical structure, but avant-garde classical music, which Zappa discovered around the same time as R&B, provided exciting and thought-provoking compositions through a complex array of instruments and atypical applications of music theory. In particular, Zappa adored Edgar Varèse, and the young Zappa’s first album purchase was a collection of his work. What attracted Zappa most to this type of music was “the unsaleable/saleable paradox.”¹¹ Zappa liked the fact that the music of this record was not easy to sell; the album did not represent the consumerism in popular American culture. In fact, Zappa appreciated the bizarre nature of the music and how it alienated others.¹² For Zappa, avant-garde classical music was an entity that alienated conformists who had first alienated him, and he identified with Varèse and his ilk, including Anton Webern and Igor Stravinsky. Therefore, in his work, Zappa combined the sincerity and authenticity of R&B music with the atypical and eccentric formalities of avant-garde classical music to engender a unique and influential musical product that he believed would be at the forefront of the counterculture movement in the 1960s.

In order to understand the nature of Zappa’s work in the 1960s, a comprehension of Zappa’s public image is vital. Zappa fabricated his figure distinctly for the public eye, because he saw the way that he presented himself as supplementary to his music. Zappa’s wife and children were the only people who were able to talk to “Zappa the person,” while he reserved

⁸ Ibid., 24.

⁹ Gray, *Mother!*, 29.

¹⁰ Ben Watson, *Frank Zappa: The Negative Dialectics of Poodle Play* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994), 7.

¹¹ Ibid., 5.

¹² Gray, *Mother!*, 26.

“Zappa the entertainer” for public interactions.¹³ As an off-stage entertainer, Zappa used his public persona wisely. He crafted an image that even today “encourages mystery.”¹⁴ Consequently, “shock factor” became an integral part of Zappa’s public image to garner attention and foster reactions—after all, one of his most famous photographs is of him nude on a toilet. Zappa designed an image that would cause listeners to question popular taste and the notion of what constitutes popularity.¹⁵ In order to attain this affect, Zappa often manipulated the public’s perception of his life and career through carefully-crafted anecdotes and decorated his interviews with pre-planned “provocatively quotable remarks.”¹⁶ Although Zappa’s public remarks may not have been genuine to himself and the way he acted around his family, they were veritable to his work and musical agenda, and consequently are essential for a complete understanding of his musical method.

Another crucial element of Zappa’s figure was the satire he employed in both interviews and lyrics to indicate a critical, yet accessible, assessment of any topic at hand. Zappa learned of humor’s place in music from the Spike Jones records he owned as a child, and that humor was a successful form of social criticism from stand-up comedian Lenny Bruce.¹⁷ In his music, Zappa often parodied or portrayed elements of American life in a distanced, satirical stance, much like his humorous influences did, but he took his humor a step further in that he implemented satire in popular music records.

The specifics of Zappa’s satire is a unique and indispensable element of his image and his music. His satire was personal—namely, Zappa used his satire to respond critically to his immediate world and at the same time to criticize the audiences who were responsible for that world.¹⁸ Zappa’s satire was not only a personal critique of his and his listeners’ positions in society, but also a jab against those who bought his albums. This approach led Zappa to take an intellectually elitist approach to the way in which he portrayed his thoughts, either in interviews or in his music. Naturally, Zappa believed his opinions to be correct, and many people either came to respect Zappa’s assertions or disdain his air of superiority.¹⁹ Yet Zappa’s presentation of his opinions through satire ultimately helped give him more attention and thus a wider following,

¹³ Frank Zappa, interview with Headley Gritter, “The Sanest Man in the World Today?” *RAM*, April 4, 1980, 26.

¹⁴ David Walley, *No Commercial Potential: The Saga of Frank Zappa*, rev. ed. (New York: De Capo Press, 1996), 9.

¹⁵ Kevin Courrier, *Dangerous Kitchen: The Subversive World of Zappa* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2002), 86.

¹⁶ Neil Slaven, *Electric Don Quixote: The Story of Frank Zappa* (London: Omnibus Press, 1996), 43; Gray, *Mother!*, 65.

¹⁷ Slaven, *Electric Don Quixote*, 18; Courrier, *Dangerous Kitchen*, 79-81.

¹⁸ Miles, *Zappa*, 108, 146; Doyle Greene, *Rock, Counterculture and the Avant-Garde, 1966-1970: How the Beatles, Frank Zappa and the Velvet Underground Defined an Era* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2016), 115.

¹⁹ This essay presents Zappa’s views as he stated them, as well as applies them in the analyses of his songs. Many times, his opinions and lyrics read as pretentious. Zappa evidently spent a lot of time thinking about the state of the country—he had to think critically in order to formulate these songs in a way that would convey his opinions—and consequently he believed his thought to be sound and ideal. This superior attitude is most apparent in the section on music. Yet Zappa’s egotistical behavior is no surprise to his fans: narcissism, intentional or not, became a part of Zappa’s image.

However, while Zappa believed his critiques and ideals to be correct, it is important to note that there are also many contradictions present in his thought. Perhaps the most notable contradiction throughout this work is that Zappa professed anti-conformist sentiments while he tried to tell people how to behave in some instances. A shocking example occurs in Note 241, where he tells youth that they should adhere to typical social positions instead of protesting, because he viewed protesting as a polarizing mass demonstration. Yet the goal of his essay is not to assess Zappa’s opinions, but rather to show how he portrayed them in music, so the presentation of his opinions and the analyses of his songs will contain these natural contradictions.

or at the very least more awareness of perceivably unfavorable contemporary predicaments.²⁰ Listeners related to what Zappa said, responding either positively or negatively, and thus better understood his messages about American society. However, Zappa's use of satire had polarizing impacts on the unprepared listener.

Zappa was and remains a controversial figure who has offended many people with his music. Yet these reactions exhibit how important Zappa's use of satire was for the achievement of his goals. Zappa satirized real occurrences in American society—the fact that people became upset about what Zappa expressed only showcased the dire situation of the country. To this effect, Zappa “was willing to risk public condemnation for trying to strip away the sheen of normality from society's ills.”²¹ As dangerous and controversial as this type of expression was for his public image and monetary success, Zappa knew that satire was the best possible method to elicit the most reaction among his listeners.

In many instances, Zappa's provocative music caused people to react to the problems that Zappa viewed in society; however, Zappa often became the target of the anger of his listeners. Zappa's satire was an attempt to distance himself from the actual incidents that he was targeting for critique: he did not condone the sentiments of the reality that he viewed as despicable, despite their inclusion in his music. Their portrayal, which he often exaggerated, was intentional as a way to convey his own critical stance of that reality. Yet many listeners blamed Zappa for his inclusion of those undesirable incidents that contradicted the ideal social norms in which Americans had been led to believe. Zappa focused his music on controversial content, and he received backlash because he “called attention to things that many would prefer remain hidden.”²² Many Americans did not want to face the shortcomings of their country. Even today, Zappa's music can cause problematic reactions due to its perceived brashness. Because Zappa's music deals with actual events, and in a challenging and divisive manner, the contextual knowledge of Zappa's music is essential in order to achieve full understanding of the satire and subsequently Zappa's critiques.²³ In order to understand Zappa and his music, one must understand his times, his development, his stances, and above all, his method of employing music to express himself and address his listeners from an analytical stance.

I. Society: The Foundations of Conformity

Zappa witnessed the negative, conformist influences society had on American culture as the 1950s transitioned into the 1960s, and criticized these elements in his music. Alongside him, members of the New Left, the youthful political response to mainstream society and politics, and of the counterculture, which often focused on American culture, both critiqued American society. They all believed that American social institutions, the basis for society that included the education system; parents and their traditional, conservative systems; and mass media, attempted to conform citizens to societal roles in alignment with the social needs of the United States in regard to consumerism, a controllable labor force, mass perceptions of the nation, and so on. In particular, Zappa was critical of how American social institutions disregarded independent

²⁰ Nick Awde, “Zappa and Satire: From Conceptual Absurdism to the Perversity of Politics,” in *Frank Zappa and the And*, ed. Paul Carr (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013), 93.

²¹ Kelly Fisher Lowe, *The Words and Music of Frank Zappa* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2006), 17, 207-208.

²² *Ibid.*, 17, 27.

²³ Awde, “Zappa and Satire,” 87.

interests of the citizenry in an attempt to foster an apathetic and repressed public that obeyed these social institutions and the demands of the nation.

American youth readily attacked the deceptive American systems and their intentions of conformity as early as the beginning of the decade. In 1962, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) released their manifesto, *The Port Huron Statement*, in which the group critiqued social systems and their ill effects on citizens: “The dominant institutions are complex enough to blunt the minds of their potential critics, and entrenched enough to swiftly dissipate or entirely repel the energies of protest and reform, thus limiting human expectancies.”²⁴ American institutions meticulously and subconsciously controlled American sentiments in a way that would keep the public naïve of the conformist process. At the same time, they repressed American citizens so that they would never question these institutions, nor expect any improvement within their lives or these systems, and thereby comply with the country’s demands. Zappa agreed and explained that the “real business of government is the business of controlling the labor force” through social pressures that conform a citizen to become a “certain type of individual, and then rewards are heaped on people who conform to that stereotype.”²⁵ This belief was widespread among the disaffected youth of the 1960s. Zappa and the counterculture recognized the deception and became embittered with the social systems that permeated their lives and attempted to control their existence. They felt this effect most profoundly with the American education system—the foundation for a modern society and the birthplace of learned culture.

Schooling

American schooling was typically where the subliminal, coercive aspects of American institutions and ideology first pervaded the youth and instilled exploitable conformity. Social critic Theodore Roszak asserted that American education was no more than “a matter of machine-tooling the young to the needs of our various baroque bureaucracies: corporate, governmental, military, trade union, educational.”²⁶ Schools shaped the lives of American children not for their own individual pursuits, but rather to accommodate to the wants of the country. SDS also recognized the conforming aspect of the education system: students learned “to accept elite rule within the university” from administrators and faculty, which prepared them “to accept later forms of minority control.”²⁷ The school system conditioned students to obey higher order without question and repressed the desire for individuality through tactics such as

²⁴ Students for a Democratic Society, *The Port Huron Statement* (1962; repr., New York: Students for a Democratic Society, 1964), 4. The SDS was a national left-wing student activist group in the 1960s and an influential group in the formation of the New Left.

²⁵ Frank Zappa, interview with Batya Friedman and Steve Lyons, “Revolt against Mediocrity,” *The Progressive*, November 1986, 35.

²⁶ Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and its Youthful Opposition* (New York: Anchor Books, 1969), 16. While Roszak and Zappa (Note 25) both critiqued the commodification of the labor force in their time, this notion predates them, notably through German philosopher Karl Marx (1818-1883). Although largely established in *The Capital. Critique of Political Economy* (1867), many of his works exhibit disdain for “commodity fetishism” as an elitist attempt to exploit labor and conform and commodify workers to elitist wants. To Marx, workers in a capitalist society have no agency over their work, so the value that a worker gives to a product becomes diminished, and in effect, workers become alienated, apathetic, and compliant.

²⁷ Students, *Port Huron Statement*, 11.

rigid dress codes. In effect, Americans became indifferent to their private pursuits and instead emulated the demands of society, much to the distaste of Zappa.

While Zappa did not attend higher education for very long, he graduated high school and attested to the conforming aspects present there.²⁸ Zappa also saw the American education system as a carefully planned institution to conform people to the will of the country without regard for the individuality of the students. He asserted that schools taught the youth how to be “functional ignoramuses” who were competent enough to provide services that the United States needed and blind enough to “swallow the bunting” without question.²⁹ Zappa felt that the American school system was intentionally missing fundamental parts of a proper education in order to create oblivious masses of loyal workers at the country’s disposal. In fact, Zappa believed that the “disinterested, ineffectual, teenage educational system wrecks whatever natural intelligence you had.”³⁰ According to Zappa, American schools had a regressive impact on the minds of the youth, particularly through the destruction of any individuality and unique thoughts present in the youth. Zappa believed that students should avoid American schooling altogether, and he was sure to demonstrate this point through the music on his first album, released in 1966, *Freak Out!*.³¹

Fittingly, the opening track on this album, “Hungry Freaks, Daddy,” encapsulates Zappa’s primal concern for the state of American education. The song focuses on the so-called left-behinds of the Great Society—a reference to the long-established, Winthropian concept that the United States is impeccable—with a particular focus on high school. The term specifically comes from President Johnson’s Great Society program, in which the president shared concern for American education and conveyed a special interest in vast improvements to schooling.³² American schools did not live up to the expectations of America as a Great Society. In effect, as Canadian music critic Kevin Courrier has noted, the song “speaks directly to the disenfranchised listener rather than the alienated one.”³³ The deliberate victimization of the listener was meant to stir reaction. Accordingly, in the album liner notes, Zappa dedicates the song to Carl Orestes Franzoni—an infamous freak of Los Angeles who was “**freaky** down to his toe nails” and consequently a role model for nonconformity—and commands, “Drop out of school before your mind rots from exposure to our mediocre educational system. Forget about the Senior Prom and go to the library and educate yourself if you’ve got any guts.”³⁴ Instead of buying into the school’s subliminally conforming elements, a student should take the individualist approach to a genuine education. In the song, Zappa exposes the false idea of America as a so-called “Great Society” due to the country’s inability to provide for its young students.

“Hungry Freaks, Daddy,” a typical 1960s rock number on the surface, begins with a riff reminiscent of The Rolling Stones’ 1965 hit, “(I Can’t Get No) Satisfaction.” While this element

²⁸ Zappa attended one semester of community college.

²⁹ Frank Zappa, with Peter Occhiogrosso, *The Real Frank Zappa Book* (New York: Touchstone, 1989), 241.

³⁰ Frank Zappa, interview with Michael Vosse, “Fifty-Four Fab, Boss Questions: Hopes, Dreams and Fantasies from Frank Zappa,” *TeenSet*, January 1967, 61.

³¹ In his autobiography, Zappa notes that he took his kids out of high school at the earliest age possible in the state of California, as long as they passed an exit exam.

³² Lyndon B. Johnson, “The Great Society Speech,” May 22, 1964, in *The Times Were a Changin’: The Sixties Reader*, eds. Irwin Unger and Debi Unger (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998), 40-41.

³³ Courrier, *Dangerous Kitchen*, 92.

³⁴ Frank Zappa, qtd. in the liner notes of “Hungry Freaks, Daddy,” *Freak Out!*, The Mothers of Invention, V6-5005-2, Verve Records, 1966. Emphasis original. A freak is a name for a member of the counterculture, particularly in the Los Angeles scene

may seem like a musical allusion, the riff becomes a transformative parody as the speaker begins to narrate his dissatisfaction with the conception of the United States as a Great Society in regard to school: “Mr. America, walk on by/ Your schools that do not teach/ Mr. America, walk on by/ The minds that won’t be reached.”³⁵ The ineffective and conformist nature of American education belies the nation’s status as the Great Society. No amount of lies or “corny tricks” will “hide the emptiness” of the nation and its education system, nor “forestall the rising tide of hungry freaks.”³⁶ The youth, such as SDS, were becoming increasingly aware of their deficient and subliminally manipulative education, and they would not remain compliant: “Philosophy that turns away/ From those who aren’t afraid to say what’s on their minds/ The left-behinds/ Of the Great Society.”³⁷ As a final jab, directly following each mention of the Great Society (and as an ending to the song), the kazoo, “the most satirical of all instruments,” sounds out in mocking fashion.³⁸ The message is clear: the American education system, through its attempts to conform its populace, undermines the concept of the United States as the Great Society. The youth are resentful of the schools’ attempts to dupe them, and the listener should join the knowledge-hungry individuals and confront the widespread concept of the Great Society. Yet Zappa and other critics were not finished with their assessment of American schooling.

Another problematic element of the American education system was how schools instilled the idea of a consumerist and politically compliant social hierarchy into its students: the fancier the clothes, the car, etc. that a student owned and the more patriotic that a student became, the higher up the student was on the social ladder. American Cultural Historian Morris Dickstein has noted that “so many of the disaffected in the sixties were the products of affluence and education rather than deprivation.”³⁹ Successful Americans were those who conformed to the propagated ideals of the education system, yet many of these students began to abhor the conservative behaviors and become estranged to their social positions.⁴⁰ Zappa also detested the mass behavior of the student elite, but from the perspective of a victim of those students who enjoyed their social privilege and mocked those who were not as successful. The affluent harassed Zappa and others while they flaunted their materialistic superiority, and, in effect, caused alienation, envy, and general alienation in the majority of less fortunate students. In particular, Zappa recalled a cheerleader, the figure he viewed as the pinnacle of the school’s social hierarchy, who recognized her prominent leadership role in the student body and taunted him during an assembly in front of the entire school for his silence during the singing of a school song.⁴¹ While many students desired to be that cheerleader due to her parading of her social prominence, Zappa recognized the sad truth of the school system that worked to establish conformity among American youth and inculcate a conservative social hierarchy.

Zappa called the desire to be at the top of the social hierarchy the “cool-person syndrome.” He illustrated the concept, which he believed to be a “peculiarly American” attribute, as mindless, conforming consumerism: “Somebody tells you to buy this particularly useless item and you’ll be a cool person. No matter how stupid it seems, you have to buy it.”⁴² In effect,

³⁵ The Mothers of Invention, “Hungry Freaks, Daddy,” *Freak Out!*, V6-5005-2, Verve Records, 1966.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Lowe, *Words and Music*, 28-29.

³⁹ Morris Dickstein, *Gates of Eden: American Culture in the Sixties* (1977; repr., New York: Penguin Books, 1989), 69.

⁴⁰ This scenario is best encapsulated in Mike Nichols’ film, *The Graduate* (1967).

⁴¹ Zappa, *The Real Frank Zappa Book*, 47-48.

⁴² Frank Zappa, interview with Dave Rothman, “A Conversation With Frank Zappa,” *Oui*, April 1979, 123.

everyone essentially desired to be the same person with the same worthless items, devoid of any hints of individuality. However, these students were content as long as their peers recognized their possessions and elevated their constructed school status, which the student body declared to be incredibly patriotic. Yet the more cool items that someone owned, the less individual they became, which Zappa viewed as a major issue, and a predicament to ridicule in his music.

On his second album from 1967, *Absolutely Free*, the song, “Status Back Baby,” is Zappa’s musical assessment of the more intimate social aspects of high school. Through the words and music, Zappa doles out “an attack on the social status games that high school students play” and features a typical character in American society who suffers from Zappa’s cool-person syndrome: “the popular, white, male high school star.”⁴³ Zappa mockingly described the song as “about young acne America and their daily trials and tribulations,” but then sincerely acknowledged, “It is unfortunate that many young Americans really do worry about losing status at the high school.”⁴⁴ Yet Zappa exploits these typical sentiments of the cool person on this song for comedic effect.

“Status Back Baby” allows for the listener to suffer vicariously, while also to laugh at, the narrator who laments his loss of status in high school. The music immerses the listener into the high school scene through “marching band strut and drum majorette whistles—very greasy and very visual.”⁴⁵ In juxtaposition, the lyrics represent the confusion and fear for the future of the “fancy football star” who was the “king of every school activity/ But that’s no more!/ Oh, mama, what will come of me?”⁴⁶ The star describes a frivolous evening of painting school posters while listening to the The Coasters.⁴⁷ He then relates how a “bunch of pom-pom girls looked down their nose at me” because he had only painted three posters while they painted “tons”; consequently, he heard rumors that his spirit must be at an “all-time low.”⁴⁸ Similar to Zappa’s ordeal (although Zappa did not care about his status at high school), the football star lost his status in the social hierarchy, due to the judgment from the peak of the social hierarchy—the cheerleaders who began to spread rumors.

Yet the football star believes he still has a chance to regain his high school status. He gives reasons that Zappa clearly mocks: “I sing and dance and spray my hair and drive a shiny car.”⁴⁹ The football star possesses the useless materialistic arsenal to climb the social ladder once again, and in effect, the listener cannot help but pity his obsession with the volatile and insignificant social hierarchy of high school—the same social hierarchy scheme that permeated adult life. In effect, Zappa’s critiques of the high school hierarchy applied to nearly everyone listening who went to high school and cared about their peers’ opinions about them, attempted to climb the ladder, and competed with others through materialism. In the bridge of the song, Zappa includes a musical quote from Stravinsky’s *Petrushka* (1911), and, in the nature of the song, reverses the play’s premise of a doll’s desire to be human into a human’s desire to be a doll.⁵⁰ To Zappa, most high school children will transform into adult dolls who will be easily manipulated consumers, and just as laughable and pitiful as the football star. Zappa used his music to rebuke

⁴³ Lowe, *Words and Music*, 40.

⁴⁴ Frank Zappa, “Mothers of Invention: The Lyrics Are Absolutely Free,” *International Times*, August 31-September 13, 1967, 11.

⁴⁵ Walley, *No Commercial Potential*, 76.

⁴⁶ The Mothers of Invention, “Status Back Baby,” *Absolutely Free*, V/V6-5013, Verve Records, 1967.

⁴⁷ The Coasters were a popular doo-wop and early vocal rock and roll group from the late 1950s.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Courrier, *Dangerous Kitchen*, 115.

the high school system's subconscious ability to instill the desire for mass consumerism in its students, but he also used his music to take a closer look at what happens at home.

Parents

Another formative social system that has influenced the youth of the United States for decades takes place right at home: the institution-like relationship between parents and their children. In the 1960s, exemplified by the large generation gap, American youth became disaffected from their parents, who were often socially sterile products of the same conforming social systems against which the youth rebelled. Zappa explained that parents of the 1960s were “unfortunate victims of their regimented environments which has put them in a state to pass on that plague to their children.”⁵¹ Consequently, American society was rife with “youth who are profoundly, even fanatically, alienated from the parental generation” and instead associated themselves ever closer with their own age group.⁵² Extreme anxiety about the type of social repression that children would learn from their parents was a defining feature for the youth of the 1960s, and Zappa's experiences typifies this ubiquitous sentiment and consequent revulsion.

Zappa's youthful social-rebel attitude was most apparent in his relationship with his father, who, as an Italian immigrant, worked with the traditional, patriarchal mindset to provide solely for his family. Zappa's father was a scientist who often worked for the government and managed to instill in Zappa a similar passion for science; however, as Zappa matured, he wanted less and less to emulate his father's constant submission to the government. Rather, Zappa wanted to be completely defiant against his parents' way of life.⁵³ Perhaps Zappa's most noteworthy tactic of defiance was his rejection of his parents' religion—the quintessence of the parents' conformist systems, according to the counterculture.⁵⁴ Zappa's parents raised him a Catholic. Yet throughout the years, Zappa became more and more critical of his faith, and, by the age of 18, he gave up Catholicism completely. Like many of his peers, Zappa saw Christianity as the faith of his parents, which fundamentally prohibited independent thinking and the quest for knowledge in exchange for dependence on conformist dogma.⁵⁵ Ever wary of the institutions of their parents, Zappa and many of his generation rejected their parents' way of life, which resulted in alienation between the generations.

Zappa believed that the best parents enabled their children to grow and survive as individuals instead of attempting to force their will and social systems onto their children.⁵⁶ Yet in the 1960s, the deteriorating relationship between parent and child was a key issue to both generations. American youth did not have the same liberties as American adults. At the same time, the youth believed that they attained full maturation quicker than their parents had, and that they deserved the same autonomy as their parents. The youth wanted essential freedoms and

⁵¹ Frank Zappa, interview with Stuart J. Scott, “Frank Zappa – The Head Mother,” *Big Ten*, May 1968, 22.

⁵² Roszak, *Making of a Counter Culture*, 1.

⁵³ Gray, *Mother!*, 23.

⁵⁴ A famous quote from Karl Marx about religion comes from a book he was writing in 1843, from which he published the introduction in his own journal, *German-French Annals*, in 1844. The phrase, “Religion is the opium of the people,” entails how, for Marx, religion was an integral component for the existence of elites in a capitalist society, both as a means to provide an immediate cure for the suffering of the exploited and as a way to prevent the average person from noticing social oppression.

⁵⁵ Miles, *Zappa*, 56.

⁵⁶ Frank Zappa, interview with David Sheff, “Playboy Interview: Frank Zappa,” *Playboy*, April 1993, 60.

rights to religion, sexuality, travel, reading, drug consumption, etc.; however, parents consistently reprimanded their children for their noncompliant attitudes and imposed their own beliefs and wills onto their children as rectification. As a result, the youth noted the hypocrisies of traditional parenting, and “runaways” became prevalent fixtures in bohemian youth colonies. Sadly, a surprising number of parents did not try to locate their children after they had fled.⁵⁷ By the act of guidance through their own outdated and conformist doctrines, parents alienated their children against older generations and their repressive ways of life; at the same time, the youth’s rejection of their parents’ guidance alienated the older generations in return. The relationship between parents and children became dire, and Zappa insisted on the initiation of mutual, reconciliatory dialogue between parents and their children if their relationships were to improve.⁵⁸ However, as a victim of parental repression, Zappa understood the youth’s reasons for rebellion and largely blamed the parents for this alienation. In turn, he used his music to comment on the negative implications of that dual alienation and ridicule parents for their role in its creation, particularly on his third album from 1968, *We’re Only in It for the Money*.

Since Zappa was genuinely concerned about the relationships between parents and children, there is prominent collection of songs on *We’re Only in It for the Money* that deal with this theme of alienation between the generations. As an accentuation of the severity of the alienation, “Bow Tie Daddy” is a pastiche 1950s ditty that sarcastically acknowledges the impact of alienation on conservative fathers and the resulting, damaging behavior: “Don’t try to do no thinkin’/ Just go on with your drinkin’/ Just have your fun, you old son of a gun/ Then drive home in your Lincoln.”⁵⁹ However, in comparison, as an address to the lack of communication, “Mom & Dad” is a much more potent song which Zappa directed at the mothers of the nation. Further, “What’s the Ugliest Part of Your Body?” exhibits the ignorance of parents in that they do not recognize how their own social institutions hurt their children, while “Lonely Little Girl” exaggerates the same theme with the juxtaposition to an alienated girl.

In comparison to most of Zappa’s other material, “Mom & Dad” is a unique entry both musically and lyrically. According to independent scholar Doyle Greene, Zappa “toned down the excess of musical complexity and lyrical sarcasm in favor of sincerity and simplicity,” evidently for his listeners to easily understand the song’s meaning due to the severity of the issue at hand.⁶⁰ Zappa explained that the lyrical tone expresses the disillusioned sentiment of parents with their children, but he used this tone in a very provocative way. Zappa utilized the song to state that even if a child were to die due to their connections with the hippie counterculture, the parents would not care. He explained that “the attitude of the song is that the parents say, ‘well, it served her right that she should associate with such trash.’”⁶¹ While Zappa’s sentiment is a harsh and biased indictment of parents, he understood the increasing gravity of the situation and the parents’ fostering of this tension, and used his music as an exaggerative demonstration in order to stir immediate and appropriate dialogue by the parents.

⁵⁷ Nicholas von Hoffman, *We Are the People our Parents Warned us About* (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1968), 193-199. This book is a nonfiction account of the San Francisco hippie scene through the lens of New Journalism. Notably, the genre is defined through a subjective narrator who represents the author who had immersed themselves in the context in order to write the reports in the book.

⁵⁸ Frank Zappa, interview with Associated Press, “Contemporary Music Has Message,” *The Sunday Press*, June 8, 1969, 9-C.

⁵⁹ The Mothers of Invention, “Bow Tie Daddy,” *We’re Only in It for the Money*, V6-5045X, Verve Records, 1968.

⁶⁰ Greene, *Rock, Counterculture and the Avant-Garde*, 108.

⁶¹ Frank Zappa, interview with Studs Terkel, WFMT-FM, August 1968.

Fittingly, “Mom & Dad” features a slow, heavy drum beat and melancholic guitar chords and lead fills—a musical style that varies greatly from the rest of the album but is crucial to establish the sincere mood. The lyrics begin with the gentle wail of “Mama! Mama!” before the daughter explains that cops opened fire on a group of hippies: “Someone said they made some noise/ The cops have shot some girls and boys.” The daughter already knows her mother will respond with apathy: “You’ll sit home and drink all night.” The mother reaffirms her daughter’s suspicions: “They looked too weird—it served them right.”⁶² The mother’s alienation toward the youth is clear—she does not value the lives of hippies, simply because of their appearance—and the daughter recognizes the appalling outlook and knows the mother will opt instead to get drunk in indifference instead of mourn the loss of life. Zappa repeats this verse to emphasize this declining relationship between mother and daughter—the old and the youth.

The song takes a drastic turn as an unknown narrator begins to berate the mother through a series of condemnatory questions. He asks if she has ever shown “real emotion” to her daughter as the mother, herself, modifies her own appearance with “moisture cream and velvet facial lotion,” if she has ever expressed love to her daughter, or if she has wondered the reason why her daughter looks sad.⁶³ These questions specifically point out the hypocrisy of the mother’s negative outlook on hippies, due to their appearances, as well as her lack of trying to rebuild a relationship with her daughter. The speaker concludes, “It’s such a drag to have to love a plastic Mom and Dad”⁶⁴—narrow-minded, inhumane conformists (more on plastic in Section II). As an ironic twist, the song ends in a musical ritardando with the daughter’s death solely through her association with the aforementioned hippies: “Shot by the cops as she quietly lay/ By the side of the creeps she knew/ They killed her too.”⁶⁵ The listener is left to mourn the death of the daughter, and, in effect, bemoan the deteriorating relationship between parents and children, with the mother’s behavior apparently at fault for her daughter’s death. At the same time, the song exemplifies Zappa’s notion that the lack of communication between parent and child exacerbated the deterioration of their relationship, along with the parents’ intrusive, conforming systems in still other songs.

To Zappa, another root cause for the volatile social situation was the parents’ lack of knowledge about the conformist systems that they tried to enforce on their children, and their consequent inability to remedy the situation at this source. He addressed this concern in “What’s the Ugliest Part of your Body?”—a song he revealed is about the intelligence of parents.⁶⁶ The parent’s lack of intelligence stemmed from restrictive social systems, such as Catholicism, that the youth tried to avoid and change. These systems essentially brainwashed the adults, who then brainwashed their children. Professor of English Kelly Fisher Lowe’s analysis of the effects of social instructions on the mind, according to Zappa, is insightful: “A mind, especially one subjugated within the public school system, a repressive government, and ignorant parents, is a pretty ugly thing.”⁶⁷ Evident from his views on school, Zappa praised an intelligent mind that was capable of unique thought, introspection, and self-determination. The parents in this song portrayed the opposite, and therefore could not escape the cycle of worsening alienation.

⁶² The Mothers of Invention, “Mom & Dad,” *We’re Only in It for the Money*, V6-5045X, Verve Records, 1968.

⁶³ *Ibid.* While moisturizers can be seen as basic skin care, the counterculture typically dismissed all chemical applications to the body as unnecessary and opted for natural appearance and odors.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Frank Zappa, interview with Studs Terkel, WFMT-FM, August 1968.

⁶⁷ Lowe, *Words and Music*, 51

The first half of “What’s the Ugliest Part of your Body?” is a slow, soothing doo-wop song, albeit with corny vocal harmonization. In this joking mood, the singer asks about the ugliest part of the body and gives inane answers like toes and nose, before he confirms that the answer is “your mind.”⁶⁸ In a clear address to parents, Zappa mocks their focus on exterior issues and appearance—reminiscent of learned, consumerist social behavior from high school—over their taking an introspective look at what actually makes them function.

The song abruptly transitions into a jarring crash of percussion with a quick, hard beat, similar to an orderly military intonation, while Zappa chants, “All your children are poor unfortunate victims of systems beyond their control/ A plague upon your ignorance and the gray despair of your ugly life.”⁶⁹ Zappa could not be more blunt about the recipients of blame for the alienation across generations: the conformist systems and their parental propagation. A brief, echoing interlude expresses the parents’ confusion about the reasons for their children’s association with hippies, before Zappa emphasizes, “All your children are poor unfortunate victims of lies you believe/ A plague upon your ignorance that keeps the young from the truth they deserve.”⁷⁰ In tune with the rebelling youth, Zappa clarified that parents were primarily to blame for the alienation of their children, and denounced the plight of the parents in that they, too, were victims of the same dishonest, conformist systems. However, the song seems to be a warning to the older generations that they still had the chance to salvage their relationship with their children if they could realize their own social crisis, which he described in the song. The lyrics act as a provocative warning to parents of the damaging effects of their behaviors on the youth that they must recognize in order to initiate reconciliation. Yet Zappa knew that parents only exacerbated their children’s alienation through their continued ignorance.

In conjunction with “What’s the Ugliest Part of Your Body?” the song “Lonely Little Girl” reaffirms the same concept of youth alienation due to parental naivety, except from a purely pessimistic outlook. This standard rock tune details the plight of a lonely, alienated girl—quite possibly the same daughter from “Mom and Dad”—whose parents “don’t care” that she is lonely and how it is too late for them to understand her feelings, because “the world for them/ is too unreal.”⁷¹ The conformist systems have completely consumed the minds of the parents, and consequently forced their children to remain forever lonely and alienated from the conservative older generations. As if to corroborate this horrific outcome, the latter half of “What’s the Ugliest Part of Your Body?” returns as a distorted music sample resembling a sinister cacophony. A pulsing bell, like a young heartbeat, frames the layers of Zappa’s now accelerated and echoing chants over the confusion of the parents. The entire song turns into layers of electric and acoustic guitar solos, which are reversed and sped up, respectively, and finally culminates with an oral belch.⁷² The ending is a truly horrific musical interpretation of the fate of the alienated children, alone in the world without parental guidance to foster the young people’s individuality. However, the pessimistic outlook of the song in regard to the negative effects on the lonely girl and the horrendous, musical amalgamation of uninformed parents and their systems is meant to stir reactions in adult listeners. At the same time, the rapid ending hints at the urgency for reconciliation between the generations, and perhaps accentuates the difficulty and

⁶⁸ The Mothers of Invention, “What’s the Ugliest Part of Your Body?” *We’re Only in It for the Money*, V6-5045X, Verve Records, 1968.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ The Mothers of Invention, “Lonely Little Girl,” *We’re Only in It for the Money*, V6-5045X, Verve Records, 1968.

⁷² Ibid.

unattainability without proper communication. While the song insinuates no beneficial conclusion, Zappa's portrayal possessed the ability to cause productive communication and cause parents to realize their own faults and hurtful behaviors.

Mass Media

While the social systems of education and family life primarily affected the youth of the 1960s in an attempt to conform them, there was still one more overriding system that permeated all of society and attempted to influence Zappa and all generations: mass media. Mass media was and remains perhaps the most ubiquitously influential system in American society, and the manner in which mass media influences the populace became a popular study during the 1960s. Marshall McLuhan, a pioneer of media theory, asserted that the deliberate configuration of mass media is more important than the content, because the media's semblance, or carefully calculated, systematic, and representative forms and images, intensifies concepts that already exist. He argued that "the medium is the message" because "it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action" with the content of that medium.⁷³ The medium format initiates the viewer's degree of engagement with the content, and, in effect, is more influential in shaping the American consciousness. Consequently, mass media's subliminal implications allowed for the exploitation of the American citizen.

The notion of mass media as a conformist instrument was prevalent among scholars in the 1960s. As Morris Dickstein noted, social philosopher Herbert Marcuse believed that industrialized societies employ mass media "as a subtle weapon of conformity" that created "a hollow shell of our formal liberties and representative institutions," most evident by Nazi propaganda.⁷⁴ The notion that mass media discourages individual freedom and expression permeated American society at this time; in turn, many began to see what mass media truly represented. Theodore Roszak described how mass media during the 1960s obeyed the technocratic hierarchy of certified experts and elitists, who resided in the distant headquarters of society, and prescribed exactly what they believed American citizens needed. If citizens were displeased with their lives, the technocracy claimed their discontentment was due to their own misinterpretations of their authorized direction. These prescriptions effectively lowered the idealized standards of living into a controllable social existence that the technocracy used to monopolize and to repress the lives of its citizens.⁷⁵ Zappa identified with these sentiments and critically addressed the concepts through his albums, chiefly in regard to advertising and the televised news industry.

The ability of advertisements to mold popular tastes and behavior led to its extensive study during the 1960s. For example, McLuhan related how advertisements portray products in line with "the image of audience motives and desires." He explained, "The product matters less as the audience participation increases" through iconic imagery and "a noisy, redundant barrage of repetition" that pushes "the principle of noise all the way to the plateau of persuasion."⁷⁶ The form and design of advertisements constantly engage viewers in a way that subliminally

⁷³ Marshall, McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, 2nd ed. (New York: Signet Books, 1964), 23-24.

⁷⁴ Dickstein, *Gates of Eden*, 67-68.

⁷⁵ Roszak, *Making of a Counter Culture*, 10-12.

⁷⁶ McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 201-202.

convinces them that the product is popular and necessary due to the recognizable and relatable presentation, as well as the frequency of placement in society. Consequently, Theodore Roszak highlighted the hypocrisy of so-called “free enterprise” as “a vastly restrictive system of oligopolistic market manipulation” that was “dedicated to infantilizing the public by turning it into a herd of compulsive consumers.”⁷⁷ SDS also recognized how “‘market research’ techniques” instilled into consumers “pseudo-needs” to buy decidedly “‘smart’ things regardless of their utility.”⁷⁸ Advertisements in the 1960s not only persuaded citizens to buy a particular product that they portrayed as popular, but transformed citizens into mindless materialists who bought on impulse, due to these manipulative methods.

Zappa’s stance did not differ from that of McLuhan, Roszak or SDS. In particular, Zappa decried advertisements as “one of the main evils of contemporary society,” because the whole system’s concept of “making people buy things they don’t need is morally wrong.”⁷⁹ Zappa attacked the immorality of the system, because he believed that advertising played on the gullibility of American citizens and repeatedly duped them to buy the next hottest, yet useless item; mass media effectively exploited and conformed citizens. Of course, Zappa’s idea of the “cool person syndrome” well encapsulates the inveterate consumerism of American citizens due to their desire for social prestige, but Zappa also utilized his album artwork on his second album as a depiction of American advertising in a truly grotesque and insufferable display.

The reverse cover of *Absolutely Free* features a surreal and vividly colored collage of a city. Transparent cars chug along the foreground, and seemingly innumerable amounts of vague advertising signs plaster oblong buildings and billboards in the background. In essence, the scene represents “brown-shoed America’s typical habitat”⁸⁰—or the city of the standard, white-collar consumer. There is much at which to marvel in this hodgepodge of a city, but the stark message of “buy” draw one’s eyes. The signs mostly do not contain any images and are bare of any subliminal designs, as if to convey plainly the repulsive materialistic effects of manipulative advertising on the American consumer. They command, “Buy this,” “Cromby Crombly & Buy Some,” “Buy America: Move Your Goods with Patriotic Sell,” “Buy a Fydo: Fits Well!” (which accompanies an image of a dog collar), “Buy This Thing,” and finally some of Zappa’s personal advertisement, “You Must Buy this Album Now: Top 40 Radio Will Never Ever Play It.”⁸¹ Just as this disorganized and drab montage assaults the viewer’s eyes, advertising media bombards American citizens. However, Zappa used his montage to show the underlying intent of the once colorful, alluring, and iconic designs of these signs: unnatural consumerism.

Further, the city and the advertisements shroud nature and kill any natural beauty. To the right of the scene, there is a decrepit, bare, black tree with words behind that state, “This Tree Is Ugly & It Wants to Die.”⁸² Mother Nature—perhaps, natural marketing tactics—has no place in this manufactured dystopia. Zappa employed this montage to showcase the gruesome and impure tactics of the media to enforce mass consumerism, as well as the effects on a city which has yielded to a complete take-over by the American advertising system. To Zappa, despite the focus of the collage on the form of oppressive billboards, all American advertising media was

⁷⁷ Roszak, *Making of a Counter Culture*, 16.

⁷⁸ Students, *Port Huron Statement*, 15-16.

⁷⁹ Frank Zappa, interview with Frank Kofsky, “Frank Zappa: The Mothers of Invention (Part 1),” *Jazz & Pop*, September 1967, 18.

⁸⁰ Slaven, *Electric Don Quixote*, 78.

⁸¹ The Mothers of Invention. *Absolutely Free*. V/V6-5013, Verve Records, 1967.

⁸² *Ibid.*

inexcusable; however, American mass media still had another relentless form that conformed American minds to the will of the government: the news industry.

Along with advertising, Zappa also criticized the news industry—particularly its presence on television—and the unconscious effect on Americans. Notably, news media of the 1960s exploited polarizing, gruesome imagery and reports of horrific topics, such as the Vietnam War, in order to garner more views. Marshall McLuhan contended, “Real news is bad news,” and that “bad” news was inherently the most engaging and influential to the average American citizen; therefore, “bad” news sold. Yet constant “bad” news had ill effects on the American citizen. McLuhan cited a police chief who related that local crime diminished with less consumption of news media “to pass around the ideas” of crime.⁸³ Criminal behavior already existed, but the news media across the nation aggravated the execution and prevalence of crime, because of the way in which they portrayed the idea.

In tune with McLuhan’s overarching “the medium is the message” argument, the method by which the news media conveyed stories was more influential than the story—the portrayal intensified the viewer’s reception of the “bad” news. Morris Dickstein described how money, privilege, and small-town bigotry were major influential forces on the rigidly conservative and cynical journalism of the 1950s and 1960s. In their essence, news reports were extremely vague and never examined underlying reasons for events—journalists treated facts as self-explanatory, earning the system the title of “cult of the discrete.” However, with the rising popularity and influence of television in the 1960s, visual aesthetics became more important and worsened the “objectivity” that already was devoid of substance in the print media.⁸⁴ McLuhan noted that the engaging nature of television, in that the medium necessitates full attention, due to the multi-sensory stimulations, forces viewers to draw more conclusions from the complex presentation of storylines that they view. In effect, he explained that “the most effective programs are those that present situations which consist of some process to be completed.”⁸⁵ The news fits this description perfectly. However, the poor presentation of stimulating images and stories on television conformed viewers to make conclusions about distorted and biased depictions of events. Zappa and others of his generation were sick of the media’s attempts to dupe them into believing the tailored stories shown on television.

Like many of his contemporaries, Zappa was not satisfied with the manner in which televised news outlets handled stories. He lamented that after 200 years, Americans were “emotionally stable enough to hear accurate news” and demanded that news outlets “remove all this censorship and this slanting of the news and tell us all the facts.”⁸⁶ Years of biased and manipulative news reporting in order to create sensationalized stories swayed public opinion away from individual sentiments toward a collective and exploitable consciousness in compliance with society’s wants. Zappa particularly focused on the newfound exploitation of the television by many news media sources in compliance with social desires. He acknowledged that, in comparison to other countries and their public awareness of government regulations of television, American television “pretends to be free, but it’s completely government dominated” with stations, especially news outlets, “all under pressure by the government to keep things the

⁸³ McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 183, 188.

⁸⁴ Dickstein, *Gates of Eden*, 128-131.

⁸⁵ McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 271-272, 278.

⁸⁶ Frank Zappa, interview with Dick Kleiner, “Frank Zappa: Blazing New Trails,” *Advance News*, October 19, 1975, 23.

way they are.”⁸⁷ While the idea may be radical, Zappa professed that the government had direct influence over the images on television in order to sway public perception to conform to a desired perspective. He noticed how news outlets appeared to control citizens in a way that seemed to benefit the contemporary social climate. Subsequently, his conception attests to the conforming aspects of biased televised news on citizens. For example, the poor television coverage of the Watts riots in 1965 particularly sickened Zappa and caused him to make a public condemnation through music soon thereafter.

“Trouble Every Day,” featured on *Freak Out!*, is the song that record producer Tom Wilson heard and that caused him to sign The Mothers of Invention to Verve Records. The intense social commentary of the song makes the piece a crucial part of Zappa’s repertoire. Record producer Neil Slaven attested that the song is noteworthy in that the lyrics question the “voyeurism of filming” the atrocities of the Watts riots, which Zappa depicts in “stark images that evoke the violence committed by both the police and the mob.”⁸⁸ Zappa divulged that he thought the news media coverage of the Watts riots was “very distasteful” in that the news outlets tried to make a “spectacular thing” out of the plight of people who “were so desperate they would burn their own homes” as a way to get the nation’s attention.⁸⁹ The news outlets focused on the presentation of the event over the underlying causes in order to generate views, which forced viewers to make assumptions based on what they saw on television without the context of debilitating racism and segregation in Watts: African-American citizens rioting in the streets. This particularly vague and violent depiction swayed uninformed public opinion to take the images of the conservative news media at face value, and Zappa was not happy that the public was not allowed to make their own informed decisions on the situation based on accurate portrayals and commentary.

The conventional blues-rock song is unique musically in that Zappa used quick, almost rapping lyrics to depict the riots as he saw them from television and to note his own reactions to the way in which the news portrayed the event. “Trouble Every Day” begins with an acknowledgement of the incessant stream of violence and other particularly awful events on television, and hopes that things will change. However, after Zappa describes the beginnings of the Watts riots in vivid detail, he knows that the news media will never change their reporting methods and rebukes the media system: “Cause, baby, I don't need it/ Take your TV tube and eat it/ 'N all that phony stuff on sports/ 'N all the unconfirmed reports.”⁹⁰ Zappa admonishes the news media’s fascination with spectacles, like sports, and misuse of biased and sensationalist journalism for views.

Zappa laments further the way that media outlets compete with each other “to get the dirt/ Before the guys on channel so-and-so” and how their particular depiction of an event will be better than that of all the other channels: “And if another woman driver/ Gets machine-gunned from her seat/ They'll send some joker with a Brownie/ And you'll see it all complete.”⁹¹ If images were particularly macabre, news outlets intentionally showcased that polarizing content as the superior news. At the same time, news outlets showed these images without context and as the ideal depictions of the story; consequently, they exploited suffering for their own benefit and in a way that distorted public’s perception of these vague, yet violent events.

⁸⁷ Zappa, “A Conversation,” 126.

⁸⁸ Slaven, *Electric Don Quixote*, 52.

⁸⁹ Frank Zappa, interview with Studs Terkel, WFMT-FM, August 1968.

⁹⁰ The Mothers of Invention, “Trouble Every Day,” *Freak Out!*, V6-5005-2, Verve Records, 1966.

⁹¹ *Ibid.* A Brownie was a type of video camcorder made by Kodak.

Zappa continues his verbal assault with how he is ashamed of the news outlets' ill portrayal of race relations in the United States in the context of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, and the ability to normalize inequality and hatred between races: "I'm not black, but there's a whole lots of times I wish I could say I'm not white." He clarifies what he gathers from the news: "And it's the same across the nation/ Black and white discrimination/ Yellin' 'You can't understand me!'/ 'N all that other jazz they hand me."⁹² The vague portrayal of racism by the news fostered the notion of pervasive racism; the news on television intensified the concept and kept it relevant. Consequently, racial-based hatred spread further throughout the country, and riots could start on "any street in any town/ In any state if any clown/ Decides that now's the time to fight/ For some ideal he thinks is right." Through the news media's constant and biased portrayal of brutal events out of context, news outlets precipitated more riots—a vicious cycle that would curtail any social advancements of the civil rights movement.

Zappa concludes that the only way to prevent these endless riots and to better the social climate is to realize the issues with the current social situation: "There ain't no Great Society/ As it applies to you and me"; the United States "isn't free/ And the law refuses to see"; and privilege is the only true way to excel in society—otherwise "five in every four/ Just won't amount to nothin' more."⁹³ The concept of the insufficient Great Society returns, since it is clear that severe inequality, which Zappa exaggerates through his satirical numerical quantity of successful Americans, is present in the country. Therefore, news outlets only intensify inequality in American society through their vague and biased portrayal on television. Much in line with the views of the counterculture, Zappa was able to realize and convey through his music his perspective on the conforming influences of the biased and unrepresentative news media system on the conscience of the American citizenry of the 1960s.

Summary

Zappa's critiques of 1960s American society essentially attacked the social systems that ruled over the citizens: namely, the education system; the institution of parental figures and their own systems, like religion; and the media, both advertising and news-based. His principal admonishment about these controlling systems was how they taught or told people how to behave and think in a like manner—the goal of these institutions was to wipe out any form of individuality and create a homogenous people who could then play the desired roles of the United States. Zappa and his contemporaries this committed "widespread revulsion in the sixties against many of our most sacrosanct institutions"⁹⁴—the youth of the 1960s prevented the transpiration of this future through attacking these once untouchable systems. Yet these systems were still potently influential, and as a consequence, American culture promoted debilitating conformity according to Zappa and other cultural critics.

II. Culture: The Practice of Conformity

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Dickstein, *Gates of Eden*, 115-116.

The social institutions of the 1950s and 1960s had a tremendous impact on the mainstream culture of the 1960s. Notably, materialism and suburbanism leftover from the 1950s dominated the cultural aspirations of many Americans in the 1960s. In effect, Americans essentially desired the same materialistic and societal-climbing ideals in life—an indication of cultural conformity—toward which Zappa and the counterculture starkly objected. Yet Zappa also objected to many of the specific ideals of the counterculture, and became an independent cultural critic through his music. Still, in accordance with the counterculture, Zappa’s music first critiqued the conformist, mainstream culture that was a product of a manipulative society.

Mainstream Culture

Social institutions encouraged Americans to exhibit blind patriotism and mindless consumption in order to be the ideal American citizen. According to Morris Dickstein, “While hymning the praise of traditional values people were learning to live without a past, on a roller coaster of technological novelty.”⁹⁵ Older Americans were unaware of their conformity and erroneously valued what the institutions prescribed—they did not think for themselves. Yet the younger generation noted the social systems’ deplorable treatment of the average American. SDS abhorred “the dominant conceptions of man in the twentieth century: that he is a thing to be manipulated We oppose the depersonalization that reduces human beings to the status of things.”⁹⁶ Social institutions treated the public as a conformable and exploitable object, which precipitated dire consequences on the culture. Zappa and the youth viewed the mainstream culture of the 1960s as apathetic, ignorant, and inauthentic. American Historian Terry Anderson related how the counterculture “revolted from the norms, values, and morals of the established society” that had infiltrated popular culture.⁹⁷ The disillusioned youth came to identify mainstream culture with the term plastic.

The synthetic material, plastic, constituted a major part of many consumerist items of the 1960s—the perfect metaphorical representation of the mainstream culture, according to Zappa and the counterculture. The formation of plastic is a process in which melted plastic polymers form to a specific mold and harden to retain that shape—exactly like the treatment of social institutions to its citizens. Consequently, the disingenuous, manufactured culture of the 1960s was the hardened, plastic product that had conformed to the desired ideals of American society and its systems. For many youth, life had become nothing more than “enduring the blandness of ‘the plastic society’” in which everything that “you do reflects on your father—how you dress, anything you say . . . and all the rules and regulations!”⁹⁸ Due to the conformist nature of mainstream culture, the youth detested popular taste and ideas, which represented the desired effects of the societal institutions. The counterculture could not tolerate the plasticity of the older generations and their intrusive, conformist culture—a sentiment that Zappa shared.

Zappa detested the rampant conformist elements in culture, and especially the people who promulgated that culture. In 1965, before the release of the first record, Zappa explained the viewpoint of his band: “We consider most people of today, ‘Plastics.’ They have no respect for the finer things in life, no concern for mankind. This is more than the usual complaint of lack of

⁹⁵ Dickstein, *Gates of Eden*, 26.

⁹⁶ Students, *Port Huron Statement*, 6.

⁹⁷ Terry H. Anderson, *The Sixties*, 3rd ed. (New York: Pearson Longman, 2007), 127.

⁹⁸ Hoffman, *We Are the People our Parents Warned us About*, 56, 111.

humanism. These people have no soul."⁹⁹ Zappa exemplified the inhuman aspect of plastic in how this artificially manufactured component related to the people: these soulless individuals had no regard for their own lives, let alone culture and self-expression. He blamed this predicament on the willingness of people capable of self-determination to conform to the same ideals: "Uniformity is neither desirable nor enforceable, and especially in the case of a 'free society,' it is nothing to aspire to."¹⁰⁰ To Zappa, Americans of the 1960s chose to conform, and he found this feature of mainstream American culture to be particularly detestable, which he enunciated best on his first album, *Freak Out!*.

"Who Are the Brain Police?" is a song with no direct answer to the title in the lyrics, yet encapsulates Zappa's critique of plastic conformity. Over twenty years later, Zappa finally answered the question: the brain police are people who "police their own brains" so as to conform to social and cultural norms, as well as to disregard and destroy any sense of individuality—a "self-imposed" process over which Zappa lamented, due to the willingness of the people to "subject themselves to this self-mutilation."¹⁰¹ Zappa used the words and music to transform his feelings of disapproval into an accessible critique. Doyle Greene made the penetrating observation that the song insinuates blame on "the unwillingness of the individual to practice 'self-determination' rather than the determining social formations that instill conformity and obedience."¹⁰² Contrary to Zappa's aforementioned songs, which typically targeted the social systems of 1960s and their conforming tactics, "Who Are the Brain Police?" is unique in that Zappa specifically targeted apathetic and compliant members of society, a critique which he advanced through a musical and lyrical dystopia of plastic.

The song, "Who Are the Brain Police?" begins with the light thuds of a bending note from a clean-toned bass guitar. The song suddenly bursts into a textured array of the same note through multiple bass guitars utilizing fuzz effect pedals on overdrive. A cascade of moans (which introduce and become increasingly dissonant with each verse) follows, while almost mechanical, echoing clanks of percussion, distinctly out of time, sound in the background.¹⁰³ Zappa has set the sinister dystopian setting for his future of plasticity through these atypical elements of the rock song.

With the backing of the distorted bass, a drum set, and a shrill ring on the end of each spoken line, Zappa asks with an accusatory tone, "What will you do if we let you go home/ And the plastic's all melted and so is the chrome?" The band mockingly retorts in the fashion of a listener who asks who is responsible for such a society: "Who are the brain police?"¹⁰⁴ The lyrics set up a world of melting plastic which chrome—another manufactured, yet visually appealing material—accentuates with an almost alluring flair, but is just as fake as the plastic itself. This apocalyptic atmosphere represents a world for which the mainstream American citizen is responsible, but does not recognize their own role in the creation of this plastic-cultured dystopia of Zappa.

Zappa exacerbates the apocalyptic scenario. He questions, "What will you do when the label comes off/ And the plastic's all melted and the chrome is too soft?" An ear-splitting screech

⁹⁹ Frank Zappa, interview, "Look out Plastic People: The Mothers Have Arrived," *KFWB/98 Hitline*, December 8, 1965, 2.

¹⁰⁰ Frank Zappa, "It's about Mr. Flynt," *Hustler*, January 1984, n.p.

¹⁰¹ Frank Zappa, interview with Bob Marshall, "Frank Zappa: An Interview," October 22, 1988, in *Apocrypha (Thirty Years of Frank Zappa)*, ed. Venanzio Ridonzoli Erroneus (Milan, Italy: Great Dane Records, 1994), n.p.

¹⁰² Greene, *Rock, Counterculture and the Avant-Garde*, 89.

¹⁰³ The Mothers of Invention, "Who Are the Brain Police?" *Freak Out!*, V6-5005-2, Verve Records, 1966.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

and feedback simultaneously answer as the whole song melts down into a section of mechanical shrieks, shrill guitar feedback and dissonant soloing, and the echoed and layered mumbles of “I think I’m gonna die.” The meltdown finally culminates into the group’s familiar retort: “Who are the brain police?”¹⁰⁵ Once the inane attraction of the plastic culture is gone, the mainstream public cannot survive. Plastic culture is meaningless without the allure of the label of the social systems that give credence to the existence of such a conformist culture, as well as the superficial, appealing chrome elements. Therefore, substantial culture needed to become an integral aspect of society, and this change needed to occur before American citizens realized what true culture they had lost. Yet, in the song, Americans are unable to realize their own fault.

The song concludes with perhaps the most illuminating verse as to the answer to the title’s question. Zappa interrogates the listeners, “What will you do if the people you knew/ Were the plastic that melted and the chromium too?” followed by the same group effort of “Who are the brain police?”¹⁰⁶ Zappa reveals that American citizens are just as plastic as the mainstream culture upon which they depend. A taunting, satirical kazoo, coupled with accelerated fuzz bursts from the bass, follows the verse.¹⁰⁷ Through this musical dig, Zappa mocks the confusion of mainstream American citizens about the cause of the conformist culture that has reduced its own citizens to plastic. American citizens were naïve of how they policed their own brains to conform to the social norms, and Zappa expressed his distraught feelings about their imposed ignorance through his music. Zappa, like the counterculture and the New Left, believed this feature of mainstream culture was simply deplorable.

The rebellious youth’s solution to mass conformity in American culture was bona fide self-expression, which did not represent anything they saw in the mainstream culture. In fact, the most radical facet of the counterculture was the emphasis on the individual over technical and industrial values: members of the counterculture opposed those ideals which the social systems prescribed as ideal.¹⁰⁸ The definitive marker of the hippie counterculture was that this group rejected the traditional values of American culture and formulated inherently opposing lifestyles.¹⁰⁹ In fact, SDS noted the necessary strive for “human independence,” which was possible due to Americans’ “unrealized potential for self-cultivation, self-direction, self-understanding, and creativity.”¹¹⁰ The hippie lifestyle best enacted SDS’s belief in independent human potential. Hippies did not conform to the same ideals of plastic, mainstream America; they designed their culture to be an exact opposite of the culture of the parental generations—an effort counter to those ideals. Zappa very much lauded this ideal of self-expression, as the process was a result of self-determination. He included a provocative definition and a musical example on his first album.

The name of Zappa’s premiere album, *Freak Out!*, is an indication of his vision for an ideally individualist culture, as well as the notion that consequently came to define all of his musical releases. In the liner notes of the gatefold, Zappa defined the conception of “freaking out” as “a process whereby an individual casts off outmoded and restricting standards of thinking, dress, and social etiquette in order to express CREATIVELY his relationship to his

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Roszak, *Making of a Counter Culture*, 206.

¹⁰⁹ Anderson, *The Sixties*, 128

¹¹⁰ Students, *Port Huron Statement*, 6.

immediate environment and the social structure as a whole.”¹¹¹ Above all else, Zappa asserted that a proper culture must contain dimensions of creative and intelligent self-expressionism that communicate a transformative reflection of society. He features an extremely experimental song for 1966 as the climactic ending to *Freak Out!* in order to illustrate musically his definition of the album’s title.

“The Return of the Son of Monster Magnet” is essentially the recorded transpiration of a freak out. Zappa describes the song as “what **freaks** sound like when you turn them loose in a recording studio at one o’clock in the morning on \$500 worth of rented percussion equipment.”¹¹² The result is a heavily edited sound collage of sirens, dissonant notes from a bumbling pianist, electronic squeals and squeaks that quickly vary in pitch and often resemble synthesized wind, and the screams and chants of freaks. Zappa placed these sporadic elements over a repetitive drum set rhythm, which often varies in speed and occasionally in style, in order to constitute the first section. A shorter section devoid of any rhythm follows, which features an even more edited sound collage: seemingly nonsensical and oft repeated phrases, including the assertion that “America’s wonderful” (an obvious mockery of the notion, in this context); extreme tape manipulation, including reversals and acceleration, especially with “cream cheese” (slang for an attractive woman); and allusions to an orgy through feminine moans and masculine screeches that resemble primates.¹¹³ A designated pop record never before contained a song that featured such abrasive spontaneity and subversive structure and content. While the music represented a freak out—the ultimate form of individualist expression—for public consumption, the unprecedented and unstructured elements, in the context of a conformist culture, also possessed the ability to “kill popular music.”¹¹⁴ Through his musical depiction of an ideal culture of liberal self-expression, and that music’s stark contrast to the idealized and heavily structured popular song format, Zappa could effectively utilize elements of his music to initiate the gradual destruction of structured, conformist culture.

The Counterculture

While Zappa employed the freaks of Los Angeles to exemplify ideal self-expression, he noticed that San Francisco’s hippie counterculture was not individualist in the manner of which Zappa approved. He saw conforming elements of commodification seep into this sect of the counterculture, and was disappointed, if not outright angry. Hippies, too, realized that their movement was straying from original intentions of self-expression. In particular, they blamed the “Death of the Hippie” on mass media which publicized, popularized, and effectively commodified this underground culture, while at the same time ruined the reputation of the hippie

¹¹¹ Frank Zappa, qtd. in the liner notes of “What is ‘Freaking Out?’” *Freak Out!*, The Mothers of Invention, V6-5005-2, Verve Records, 1966. Emphasis Original.

¹¹² Frank Zappa, qtd. in the liner notes of “The Return of the Son of Monster Magnet,” *Freak Out!*, The Mothers of Invention, V6-5005-2, Verve Records, 1966. Emphasis original. Freaks were the local name for members of the counterculture in Los Angeles, where Zappa recorded during this time. Hippies were more commonly associated with San Francisco.

¹¹³ The Mothers of Invention, “The Return of the Son of Monster Magnet” *Freak Out!*, V6-5005-2, Verve Records, 1966.

¹¹⁴ Greene, *Rock, Counterculture and the Avant-Garde*, 91.

and their image.¹¹⁵ In response to the publicity, disaffected youth swarmed to San Francisco in the summer of 1967—the Summer of Love—and took advantage of the chance to experiment with this lifestyle that was not theirs. In effect, these fake hippies ruined the original goals of the counterculture—self-expression and cultural liberty—through their disregard for the reasons of youthful bohemianism; they consequently abused and misused the movement. In response, the decidedly true, original hippies “were taking flight to rural communes and ersatz, plastic hippies and teeni-boppers had taken over.”¹¹⁶ The legitimacy of the hippie counterculture as an individualist movement quickly diminished, due to the infiltration of opportunists who mindlessly plagued the counterculture with consumerist ideals. The movement quickly turned into a sham—so much so that the hippie counterculture appeared to be nothing more than a “publicity stunt” with no real purpose.¹¹⁷ Yet Zappa noticed conformist distinctions in hippies even before mass media popularized the lifestyle.

While mass media may have been responsible for the commodification of the hippie lifestyle and their movement, Zappa believed that hippies had begun to conform to themselves even before that point, which then allowed for the subsequent mass commodification. Zappa explained, “Now all the kids who think they are hippies and think they’re really making it on a cosmic level, are doing nothing more than imitating the action of their parents on a teenage level.”¹¹⁸ According to Zappa, replace alcohol with marijuana, Christianity with Zen, conservative clothing with psychedelic clothing, short hair with long hair, so on and so forth, and a youth becomes a hippie who is just as conformist as the mainstream culture, but on the polar opposite spectrum. He believed that hippies all emulated each other and, in their essence, the same ideals and customs, with slight idiosyncratic tendencies.

Specifically, Zappa described hippie dress as “an extension of high school, where one type of shoe is the ‘in’ shoe, belt-in-the-back peggers,” as well as how hippies have their “own special language,” their “own culture,” their “own folk ways,” and their “own idea of what was a good time.”¹¹⁹ Hippie fashion and culture was just as codified and commodifiable as that of high school, in accordance with Zappa’s “cool person syndrome,” which ultimately brought the attention of the media and the demise of hippies. While hippies indeed expressed themselves counter to mainstream culture, they all did so in a like manner, which Zappa abhorred and quickly lambasted in *Absolutely Free*, released before the Summer of Love.

“Plastic People” features perhaps Zappa’s best early jab at a conformist counterculture. The song starts off with a mockery of conformist politics (more on politics in section III), and it lampoons the consumerism of mainstream culture (“She’s as plastic as she can be/ She paints her face with plastic goo/ And wrecks her hair with some shampoo”).¹²⁰ Yet Zappa set up these well-known counterculture examples of plastic culture and society as an ultimate juxtaposition to the hippie counterculture, which was now itself a conformist entity. He described the needed context to understand this complex turn: “References to Sunset Boulevard, Pandora’s Box, CIA, and

¹¹⁵ Hoffman, *We Are the People our Parents Warned us About*, 238-244. The “Death of the Hippie” was an organized protest in October of 1967 in which early hippie residents of the Haight-Ashbury scene marched through the streets with a coffin in tow in order to demonstrate the plight of the original hippies and their ideals.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 119.

¹¹⁷ Roszak, *Making of a Counter Culture*, 71-72.

¹¹⁸ Frank Zappa, interview, “Where Is Frank Zappa? Part II,” *Discoscene*, June 1968, 12.

¹¹⁹ Frank Zappa, interview with Bruce Pollock, “Zappa,” *River City Review*, May 1974, 11; Frank Zappa, interview with Charles Shaar Murray, “Frankly a Freak,” *The Observer*, September 3, 1989, 4.

¹²⁰ The Mothers of Invention, “Plastic People,” *Absolutely Free*, V/V6-5013, Verve Records, 1967.

Laurel Canyon, all relate to the [sic] first youth riots in Los Angeles last year.”¹²¹ With the hippies in indistinguishable mob form in mass demonstration of protesting, Zappa addressed the hippies’ failure “to distinguish themselves from the trendsetters.”¹²² He revealed his belief that hippies viewed protests not as “a political action but some sort of activity” that was simply fun and entertaining.¹²³ Notably, the song takes a sharp lyrical turn near the conclusion in order to accentuate these views.

The comical, meandering parody of Richard Berry’s “Louie Louie” (1957) and the mixture of spoken and sung lyrics that attack differing facets of plastic conformity finally culminate in “Plastic People” with the charge against the counterculture of its own conformity.¹²⁴ Zappa makes a droll aside in cynical fashion: “I hear the sound of marching feet down Sunset Boulevard to Crescent Heights, and there, at Pandora’s Box, we are confronted with a vast quantity of plastic people.” He mockingly implores the listeners, assumedly the hippies, to go and visit this spectacular event and to see the effect of their government’s restricting regulations in action: “Take a day and walk around/ Watch the Nazis run your town.” In the same verse, he harshly orders the listeners, to “go home and check yourself/ You think we’re singing 'bout someone else.”¹²⁵ Zappa maliciously juxtaposed the hippie counterculture to the aforementioned conformist members of the society and consequently likened hippies to those conformist ideals—a very provocative remark to make in early 1967.

Zappa concludes the song as the group sardonically expounds the clear assertion: “But you’re plastic people/ Oh, baby, now you’re such a drag.” Zappa follows with mockingly vain rambles about how love—a reference to the peaceful, love-spreading protest methods of hippies—will never be “a product of plasticity.”¹²⁶ This early song was intentionally harsh to the still-young hippie counterculture. However, Zappa amplified his attack on his following record release, after the media’s commodification of the underground lifestyle attracted an influx of opportunists to San Francisco who exacerbated these conformist elements.

Zappa’s next musical effort, *We’re Only in It for the Money*, consists of many harsher, more precise critiques of the conformist counterculture and their ideals. Notably, the cover is a masterful parody of The Beatles’ *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967), which musically defined the Summer of Love.¹²⁷ While Zappa did not blame The Beatles for the infiltration of fake hippies into the counterculture, he certainly felt like they were cashing in on the scene while justifying the counterculture’s ideals in their album, such as dress. In particular, Zappa was furious about the Beatles’ fake hippie attitude in the image and music of their album. Noted music writer Ben Watson explained how Zappa admonished their “adoption of the raggle-taggle bohemianism of San Francisco flower power, rather than mandarin hatred for mass

¹²¹ Zappa, “Lyrics Are Absolutely Free,” 10. Pandora’s Box was a hippie hangout hotspot on the Sunset Strip that received strict curfew laws before eventually being scheduled for demolition. As a response, the hippie counterculture gathered in protest numerous times around the building, attracting the likes of Jack Nicholson, Peter Fonda, and Sonny & Cher. In particular, Zappa is referring to the initial riots incited due to the proposed curfew laws in 1966.

¹²² Courier, *Dangerous Kitchen*, 111.

¹²³ Lowe, *Words and Music*, 38.

¹²⁴ In 1963, The Kingsmen released their cover of “Louie Louie.” It became one of the most popular and most requested songs of the decade—an indication of conformist appeal through the basic, popular format of the song.

¹²⁵ Mothers of Invention, “Plastic People.”

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ To avoid copyright claims and lawsuits, the gatefold of Zappa’s album was reversed to feature the provocative cover image on the inside.

culture.”¹²⁸ Zappa’s parody cover, which quite literally is the polarizing, ugly opposite of The Beatles’ jovial, attractive cover, makes The Beatles the brunt of his attack, as well as the butt of the joke, and marks Zappa’s new independent role away from the mainstream counterculture.

At this point, Zappa became a distinctly independent critic of American values, as well as of the counterculture itself. In retrospect, The Beatles’ album and Zappa’s response were polar opposites of each other. Doyle Greene noted how the former became “synonymous with the utopian aspirations of 1967 and the Summer of Love,” and the latter “a caustic indictment of counterculture as well as the establishment.”¹²⁹ Although Zappa became an entity independent of what he saw as a now mainstream counterculture, he was still an important figure in the context of the counterculture even after 1967. It is imperative to juxtapose Zappa’s ideals with those of the counterculture, notably in terms of sexual liberation, drug consumption and psychedelia, and love and flower power. But first, Zappa provided a full-on assault that ridiculed the commodification of the counterculture and the infiltration of phony hippies, as well as the general conformities present, which particularly precipitate his attacks on specific hippie ideals.

In “Who Needs the Peace Corps?” Zappa takes on the role of the target of the song: the opportunists who came to San Francisco during the Summer of Love. The complex, yet light-hearted rhythms create a jovial atmosphere while the lyrics unfold “the story of a hippie hopeful” and read as “a diary of hippie aspirations.”¹³⁰ While the song seems innocent due to the cheerful ambience, Zappa is in fact lyrically brooding over the failure of the counterculture due to internal conformity and commodification by mass media, as he describes the banally optimistic perspective of the newcomers to the San Francisco scene. Specifically, the song decries the failure of the hippie counterculture movement because, as Kelly Lowe has noted, the movement itself “seemed to encourage or collect those who would, instead of some following a great cause, be content with dropping out of society.”¹³¹ To Zappa, the counterculture in its essence was doomed from the start. He believed the successful commodification of the hippie counterculture transformed the movement into a way to escape social ills, instead of trying to reverse them through self-expression. His lyrics mock that which the mainstream hippies held in highest regard and serve as an exaggeration of original hippie ideals.

The first half of “Who Needs the Peace Corps?” describes the adventures of a naïve opportunist in San Francisco. Zappa asks, “What’s there to live for?/ Who needs the Peace Corps?” Yet he decides there must be no purpose to life—not even helping impoverished peoples abroad is worth his time—so he declares, “Think I’ll just drop out/ I’ll go to Frisco, buy a wig, and sleep on Owsley’s floor.”¹³² The hippie opportunist sensed the counterculture scene as a way to escape from society and its alienating culture, and that aspect was more appealing than trying to solve the country’s problems. He continues his tale of dancing at the Fillmore and being hippy, trippy, and “a gypsy on my own,” before he decides, “I’ll stay a week and get the crabs and take a bus back home.” He quickly apologizes for his intrusion and blames his wrongdoing on his drug consumption, in the same way that Zappa believed hippies apologized for their own public misconduct: “I’m really just a phony, but forgive me ‘cause I’m stoned.”¹³³ The

¹²⁸ Watson, *Poodle Play*, 21.

¹²⁹ Greene, *Rock, Counterculture and the Avant-Garde*, 105.

¹³⁰ Courrier, *Dangerous Kitchen*, 136; Slaven, *Electric Don Quixote*, 86.

¹³¹ Lowe, *Words and Music*, 46.

¹³² The Mothers of Invention, “Who Needs the Peace Corps?” *We’re Only in It for the Money*, V6-5045X, Verve Records, 1968. Owsley Stanley was a notable hippie who worked with The Grateful Dead—the musical big shots of San Francisco counterculture—and was also the first private producer of mass quantities of LSD.

¹³³ *Ibid.*

opportunist took advantage of this social escape and adopted the abhorrent customs, including drug consumption, upon which he could blame his unacceptable actions.

Zappa concludes the lyrical section with his own brief admonition: “Every town must have a place where phony hippies meet/ Psychedelic dungeons popping up on every street.” He condemns the principal town as San Francisco.¹³⁴ Yet, as Zappa just noted, conformist aspects of the hippie counterculture did not stay local to San Francisco. In the song, Zappa returns to the perspective of the hippie, who gushes over his visit to San Francisco and his hippie hairstyle that he brought back home with him, in a style reminiscent of a musical: “How I love ya, how I love ya, how I love ya, how I love ya, Frisco/ “How I love ya, how I love ya, how I love ya, how I love ya—Oh, my hair is getting good in the back.”¹³⁵ While these opportunists may have left San Francisco to return home, they spread the newly conformist influences across the nation. In effect, Zappa saw hippie conformity as infecting all sects of culture in the country, and he continued to castigate these phony hippies in the second half of the song.

The latter half of “Who Needs the Peace Corps?” typifies and condemns the stereotypical hippie through the monologue of a hippie hopeful against the background of the same music from the first half. Zappa, as the hippie, describes his specific goals during his brief stay in San Francisco, but in such wry and silly fashion, as well as through a mockingly disinterested tone, as to show Zappa’s clear disapproval of these conformist characteristics. In a concise manner, Zappa was able to identify the features that constituted a hippie and allude to their distasteful conformity, as well as ridicule their ideals, including those that stem from sex, drugs, and flower power. The witty monologue speaks for itself:

First, I'll buy some beads, and then, perhaps, a leather band to go around my head, some feathers and bells, and a book of Indian lore. I will ask the Chamber of Commerce how to get to Haight Street, and smoke an awful lot of dope. I will wander around barefoot. I will have a psychedelic gleam in my eye at all times. I will love everyone—I will love the police as they kick the shit out of me on the street. I will sleep—I will, I will go to a house—that’s, that's what I will do: I will go to a house where there's a rock and roll band 'cause the groups all live together, and I will join a rock and roll band. I will be their road manager, and I will stay there with them, and I will get the crabs, but I won't care.¹³⁶

The speaker is clearly prepared to take advantage of the situation as he gears up with typical hippie apparel and possessions, takes on their mannerisms, and remains blissfully unaware: a genuine member of the counterculture would never ask the Chamber of Commerce—the Establishment—how to get to Haight Street, the center for San Francisco counterculture. These fake hippies were laughable and truly did not represent the heart of the counterculture. Unfortunately for the counterculture, these opportunists became the face of the counterculture by the end of 1967, and Zappa was furious. However, the dichotomy of Zappa’s ideals to the original, yet commodifiable ideals of the hippies is crucial to explore.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid. “Oh, my hair is getting good in the back” is a reference to a comment that Zappa once heard a fake hippie make about his hair while in the audience at one of Zappa’s concerts at the Garrick Theatre in New York. Long hair became a commodified trend of the hippie counterculture, in particular.

¹³⁶ Ibid. “I will love the police as they kick the shit out of me on the street” is censored on various album releases.

Hippie Ideals: Sex, Drugs, and Zen

Sexual liberation was perhaps the only widespread, cultural arena that both Zappa and the hippie counterculture believed could improve mainstream culture, but their conceptions differed slightly. The older generations had instilled restrictive, Puritanical values of sex in the youth: sex was for married adults and the youth had to avoid all forms of “premarital sex and promiscuity,” including masturbation, since the act did not result in procreation. The result was a youthful conscience riddled with guilt about the natural sexual longings that they had before marriage. In turn, hippies viewed the act of sex as guilt-free—there should be no shame about this natural human desire.¹³⁷ In particular, the hippie counterculture emphasized the need for sensual enjoyment in culture, especially through this facet of sex.¹³⁸ They attested to the concept of free love, or unrestricted sexual activity, in order to combat guilty feelings inherent in the culture. To them, neither marriage, adulthood, nor procreation were necessary to engage in any form of sexual intercourse. However, while the hippies’ notions for sexual liberation were sound, Zappa and other social critics analyzed sexual repression in terms of subliminal control of daily thought and actions.

Hippies did not realize the manipulative undertones implicit in sexual repression. Theodore Roszak denounced how sex fell victim to the technocracy as a tool to control American citizens through sexual repression inherent in mainstream culture—the Puritanical preconceptions of sex. He described the reason for this cultural control: “To liberate sexuality would be to create a society in which technocratic discipline would be impossible.”¹³⁹ Social norms proscribed sexual longings that did not comply with conservative standards of sex. In order to satiate these longings in a socially deemed acceptable way, victims of sexual repression sought other outlets and obeyed the social systems’ alternative prescriptions, such as consumerism. While both hippies and Roszak realized that sexual yearning is perhaps the most primitive of human sensations, hippies focused on the sensual end result through the act, once they defied social standards, and Roszak emphasized the social ramifications that if sexual desire becomes distorted, the mainstream victim is more likely to be compliant in order to alleviate guilt and anxiety. Roszak realized that sexual repression was a tactile tool of conformity that needed to be stopped at the source. While his particular sentiment of sexual repression’s mind manipulation may be radical, the concept was present in the context of the 1960s, and is one which Zappa shared.

In a like manner to the rebellious youth’s cries for free love, Zappa was explicit about his principle method of cultural liberation: sexual freedom in all forms—but, like Roszak, within cultural conceptions about sex. Zappa maintained that sexual repression had become a necessary cultural function of society in order for the state of the nation to persist: “American sexual attitudes are controlled as a necessary tool of business and government in order to perpetuate themselves,” and unless people realized that repressive aspect, “they’re always going to have the same neurotic attitudes.”¹⁴⁰ Sexual repression conformed American citizens through thought. He

¹³⁷ Anderson, *The Sixties*, 135.

¹³⁸ Dickstein, *Gates of Eden*, 20.

¹³⁹ Roszak, *Making of a Counter Culture*, 14-15. While Roszak and Zappa (see Notes 140 and 141) discussed minority control through sexual repression in the 1960s, German sociologist Max Weber (1862-1920) theorized about 60 years earlier in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905) that the promotion of Puritan ethics helps to establish capitalistic societies and control work ethic in the labor force. That is to say, one can achieve gratification through hard work, which already is a Puritanical value.

¹⁴⁰ Frank Zappa, interview with Charlene Keel, “Interview: Frank Zappa,” *Genesis*, April 1979, 92.

described how, for example, societal leaders instilled in the culture the polarizing notion of “dirty fucking,” so that the same leaders could promise to clean up this manufactured “smut,” which did not heed conservative values of procreative sex in wedlock, and sway public opinion to favor them and their platforms.¹⁴¹ Zappa believed that sex was simply sex, of which no variation should be thought of as deplorable. The idea of an act of sex as dirty or repulsive, because of the perhaps atypical execution and socially unfavorable status of the partners, confounded Zappa. He condemned the societal leaders’ manipulation of American culture and sensations in order to discredit certain methods of sex.

To Zappa, sexual gratification was a vital aspect of the human condition. In fact, in comparison to the counterculture’s use of mind-altering substances for “mind expansion,” Zappa’s solution was simple: “Do it sexually, that’s the only way you’re going to set yourself free.”¹⁴² Zappa saw sexual mores as the principal method to achieve control of oneself and escape the grasp of conformist culture. He hoped to end the stigmatization of all sexual acts and to normalize thoughts about sex as a way for cultural and mental liberation. He included notable examples in his music to illustrate the normalcy of sex, the repercussions of mainstream sexual impressions, and his ideals for preventing the spread of repressive sexual conceptions in comparison to hippies.

Throughout his music, Zappa includes numerous references to sex. Most of these examples are humorous or commonplace to make the listener more comfortable about the idea of sex. For example, “The Return of the Son of Monster Magnet” from *Freak Out!* places an orgy in the public context of a freak out, while at the same time it questions the serious attitudes toward sex through primate noises.¹⁴³ On the same record, Zappa includes a song that vividly describes how the band wishes to conduct sexual acts with groupies in the audience, such as biting their necks and scratching their backs in bed. Yet this “Motherly love” is actually what these alienated, sex-hungry youths craved: “They’re ravin’ ‘bout the way we do/ No need to feel lonely, no need to feel sad/ If we ever get a hold on you.”¹⁴⁴ *Absolutely Free* also has some silly sexual references throughout the first record side, in the general context of nonsensical lyrics and improvised free-form jazz solos, so as to create a less tense relationship with sex. Notably, the side culminates with implied sexual relations with an orgasming pumpkin that pants increasingly harder before a deeper pant briefly appears alongside. In climax, Zappa exclaims, “What a pumpkin!”¹⁴⁵ However, there are two songs on *We’re Only in It for the Money* that Zappa dedicated to the end of stigmatized sex: “Harry, You’re a Beast” addresses the predicament, while “Take Your Clothes off When You Dance” provides the solution.

“Harry, You’re a Beast,” a rather contentious song in Zappa’s repertoire, is about a sexual encounter between Madge, and her husband, Harry.¹⁴⁶ Zappa explicitly stated that the song is “about the sexual attitudes of the parents.”¹⁴⁷ He also employed the mainstream cultural context of his time to provide a characteristic context to the provocative sexual encounter in the

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Frank Zappa, interview with Jim Ladd, “Zappa on Air,” *Nuggets*, April 1977, 18.

¹⁴³ Mothers of Invention, “The Return of the Son of Monster Magnet.”

¹⁴⁴ The Mothers of Invention, “Motherly Love” *Freak Out!*, V6-5005-2, Verve Records, 1966. A groupie was a young woman who was a fan of a particular band, and typically had the end goal of sexual relations with a band member.

¹⁴⁵ The Mothers of Invention, “Soft-Sell Conclusion,” *Absolutely Free*, V/V6-5013, Verve Records, 1967. At this time, the pet name of Zappa’s soon-to-be wife, Gail Sloatman, was Pumpkin.

¹⁴⁶ Madge was a stereotypical housewife name.

¹⁴⁷ Frank Zappa, interview with Studs Terkel, WFMT-FM, August 1968.

song. Theodore Roszak described the typical sexual attitudes of the time: “*Playboy* sexuality” dominated the sexual atmosphere of mainstream culture in the 1960s. In particular, the woman in the relationship became “a mere playmate, a submissive bunny, a mindless decoration,” and the “inconsequential entertainment” of sex.¹⁴⁸ Zappa’s reference to this notion has garnered much criticism for his views on women, and critics targeted him over the issue present in the song. However, Kelly Lowe recognized how the song is opposed to this promulgated cultural conception, rather than an extension of it: “the song is much more an indictment of white, male privilege and an acknowledgement of the growing sense of frustration that many women had with the role(s) that society had proscribed [*sic*] for them,” and how Zappa’s criticism of women in the song “is not a rant so much as a plea, much more in tune with Zappa’s meta-argument about sexual freedom.”¹⁴⁹ Zappa was extremely provocative in the use of his music to reflect these serious sentiments.

A brief, but elegant grand piano solo introduces the first verse of “Harry, You’re a Beast.” To the basic rhythm of a drum set, Zappa warns that he is going to “tell you the way it is,” and he is not going to be “kind or easy.” He instantly mocks, “Your whole attitude stinks, I say/ And the life you lead is completely empty,” and illustrates the reasons in the next verse, through a slightly distorted chorus of voices: “You paint your head/ Your mind is dead/ You don’t even know what I just said/ That’s you, American womanhood.” A procession of silly snorts and dreamily twinkling sounds end this section.¹⁵⁰ The mainstream American woman, due to social pressures and cultural norms, had become a simple housewife subservient to the whims of her husband, which Zappa then accentuates with his portrayal of her role in bed.

The remainder of the song continues with a quick verse that explains the completely submissive nature of the repressed, mainstream woman: “You’re phony on top/ You’re phony underneath/ You lay in bed/ And grit your teeth.” Over a repeating exchange between a series of guitar strums coupled with a high snare drum, and a deep tom drum, Harry approaches his wife in the stereotypical voice of a buffoon: “Madge, I want your body.” Madge retorts in a shrill voice: “Harry, get back!” But Harry continues his advance: “Madge, it’s not merely physical.” Madge rejects the advance: “Harry, you’re a beast!”¹⁵¹ The music and dialogue here is intentionally foolish sounding and odd, but at the same time, also contemptuous. Women had no sexual freedom in a mainstream relationship of the 1960s, which Zappa sets up in a comical way to serve as a perfect dichotomy to the shocking conclusion.

The final verse encapsulates Zappa’s own feelings of regret about the situation. The line, “Don’t come in me, in me,” as spoken by Madge, repeats four times over a horn arrangement, but in a mishmash of audio edits. The line appears in crudely and arbitrarily cut-up segments of various lengths, which Zappa pieced together in various orders of the line, with some segments reversed, as to retain the musical flow of the verse.¹⁵² The abrasive and jarring effects of the horrific, musically simulated rape reveals the contemptuous and alienating attitudes in regard to mainstream sexual relations. There is no sexual freedom for the woman, let alone any emotions indicative of self-expression and a healthy culture or relationship. The song quickly ends after

¹⁴⁸ Roszak, *Making of a Counter Culture*, 15. Emphasis original.

¹⁴⁹ Lowe, *Words and Music*, 50.

¹⁵⁰ The Mothers of Invention, “Harry, You’re a Beast,” *We’re Only in It for the Money*, V6-5045X, Verve Records, 1968.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² *Ibid.* The line specifically is a reference to a stand-up comedy routine by Lenny Bruce: “To is a Preposition; Come is a Verb.” Zappa’s original intention was to keep the verse unaltered, but, at the request of MGM, censored the words through this avant-garde tape editing technique.

the verse, with the return of the piano, the weeping of Madge, and the disingenuous consolation of Harry who attempts to justify his actions and prevent any culpability: “Madge, I—Madge, I couldn't help it! Doggone it!”¹⁵³ The ending music and dialogue alludes to what just happened, effectively creating a horrifying conclusion. Zappa portrayed the mainstream sexual relations in a provocative and gruesome manner in order to accentuate the need for conceptual sexual liberation. On the same record, Zappa voiced his solution.

In comparison, “Take Your Clothes off When You Dance” is Zappa’s much more light-hearted, musical approach to sexual liberation. In fact, the song is unusually jovial and optimistic in both musical and lyrical nature. While the song may be a parody of the peppy pop music tunes of the 1960s, the sincere cheerfulness suggests that the message of this song is a concept in which Zappa believed.¹⁵⁴ This idea makes perfect sense, since Zappa declared a lack of sexual liberation to be the foremost cultural problem that seriously inhibited anti-conformity in Americans. Consequently, he alluringly presents the solution of sexual liberation in the song.

Bright guitars, tambourines, and verses of la la la’s and other euphoric noises structure the whimsical lyrics, which denote Zappa’s ideal of complete sexual liberation. He describes that one day, people who are lonely—alienated youth and conformist individuals in an uncultured country—will be “free to sing and dance and love,” and every known evil will be “an evil that we can rise above.”¹⁵⁵ Zappa predicts an untroubled future; however, he explains that this future does not align with the hippie counterculture and their ideals. Zappa chides, “Who cares if hair is long or short or sprayed or partly grayed—we know that hair ain’t where it’s at!” This remark is a direct reference to the hippie counterculture, which Zappa identifies through its well-known symbol of hair, but at the same time, is also a reference to the conservative culture’s treatment of appearance regarding hair, and especially its opposition to the long hair of hippies. In short, self-expression through appearance is not the answer since the commodification of appearance is so easy to attain. Zappa affirms this belief through a consumerist approach: “Who cares if you're so poor you can't afford to buy a pair of Mod-a-Go-Go stretch-elastic pants?”¹⁵⁶ Obnoxious spending on frivolous, fancy items are not the key to salvation.

Instead, Zappa declares that everyone needed to be comfortable with their bodies and sexuality so that people could dance nude: “There will come a time when you can even take your clothes off when you dance.”¹⁵⁷ According to Zappa, once the American people achieved sexual liberation and were not ashamed of their bodies and the idea of sex, Americans would attain true freedom and their culture would peak. The mental control of negative conceptions about sex was inhibiting necessary free thought in regard to culture. Yet while hippies detested sexual repression and the feelings of sensual restriction, they focused on another cultural factor to remedy mainstream culture in order to provide free thought, a means with which Zappa and others disagreed: mind-altering substances.

Drugs and psychedelics, notably marijuana and LSD, respectively, were at the forefront of hippie culture, and hippies believed that these substances were an option for enlightenment that could provide the new way of life. According to Theodore Roszak, the hippie concept was that ubiquitous substance usage in the nation possessed the ability to “change the prevailing

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Lowe, *Words and Music*, 53.

¹⁵⁵ The Mothers of Invention, “Take Your Clothes off When You Dance,” *We’re Only in It for the Money*, V6-5045X, Verve Records, 1968.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

mode of consciousness” away from restricting Establishment ideals; therefore, “universalize the use of dope and you can change the world.”¹⁵⁸ Because drugs and psychedelics changed the way one thought, the idea was that if straight individuals used these substances, they would think much like the hippies and desire cultural liberation away from mainstream ideals.¹⁵⁹ In particular, psychedelics were a mental way to escape society, “especially from the Establishment.”¹⁶⁰ While Zappa particularly despised rampant substance use, and declared the notion as a way for users to opt out of societal responsibility—the attractive, commodifiable feature of drug consumption—there were more inherent problems with the hippie counterculture’s reliance on mind-altering substances.

The main weakness of psychedelics was their negative effects on mental cognition, despite their attitude-changing abilities. Older members of the hippie community realized that a dependence on psychedelics, especially LSD, had serious implications for the human mind. In general, substance users emotionally felt better about themselves—similar to lobotomies in how they “attenuate those inner struggles and conflicts”—but there was an increasing anxiety in those community members of unprecedented anti-intellectualism due to the psychedelics’ emphasis on the visceral parts of the brains over the cerebral.¹⁶¹ Again, the hippies focused on sensual liberation, this time through emotional behavior, over mental stimulation—an idea Zappa countered his entire life. Due to the dependence on these mind-altering substances, Roszak noted that the hippie counterculture was “in the process of trying strenuously to inflate the psychedelics to the size of an entire culture.”¹⁶² To those outside of the typical counterculture mindset regarding drugs, such as Roszak and Zappa, there was no true cultural substance to the utilization of psychedelics. In fact, Zappa believed that hippies were only becoming dumber.

Zappa was ambivalent about drugs and psychedelics in a free society, but was starkly against their consumption. He did not desire their prohibition, because as long as consumers did not harm others while high, such a ban infringed on the freedom of an individual to attain and consume a substance that altered the chemistry of their own body.¹⁶³ Instead, Zappa abhorred the conscious decision to consume drugs and psychedelics, principally because of the effects on mental cognition. Directly following the Summer of Love and the spread of rampant drug consumption, Zappa stated the band’s opinion on mind-altering substances: “We don’t endorse any drugs or artificial means that would do anything to change the consciousness of a single individual.”¹⁶⁴ Zappa saw psychedelics as an omnipresent element of the hippie counterculture which collectively conformed their thought.

In particular, Zappa loathed how many hippies employed drugs as a way to escape the societal ills, as well as to discredit any culpability they had for their own actions. He described how Americans utilized drug consumption as a bestowment of “a *‘special license to be an asshole,’*” which allowed consumers to excuse any “heinous act” because “they were ‘high’ while *doing it.*”¹⁶⁵ If hippies believed they had no responsibility for themselves, they certainly did not

¹⁵⁸ Roszak, *Making of a Counter Culture*, 168.

¹⁵⁹ “Straight” is hippie jargon for someone who did not consume drugs.

¹⁶⁰ Anderson, *The Sixties*, 134.

¹⁶¹ Hoffman, *We Are the People our Parents Warned us About*, 212-215.

¹⁶² Roszak, *Making of a Counter Culture*, 160.

¹⁶³ Frank Zappa, interview with Dave Turner and Lisa Weisberg, “Frank Zappa Interview: Part II,” *Buzz*, March, 1988, 36.

¹⁶⁴ Frank Zappa, exclusive interview, “Mothers of Invention: Strange People – Great Sound!” *Freak Out, U.S.A.*, Fall 1967, 51.

¹⁶⁵ Zappa, *The Real Frank Zappa Book*, 229. Emphasis original.

have any responsibility for their own society, and their culture turned into one of apathy. Zappa employed many of his songs, through disparate musical and lyrical processes, in order to criticize the consumption of drugs and psychedelics and the dangerous and conforming implications on American citizens and the culture.

While “Call Any Vegetable” of *Absolutely Free* makes no reference to drug consumption, the song is an indictment of those who have dropped out of society. Zappa defined the term “vegetable” as a hint to the meaning of this surreal song: “people who are inactive in a society” and “do not live up to their responsibilities are vegetables.”¹⁶⁶ Zappa effectively transmuted the term plastic into a concept reciprocal to the apathetic members of the counterculture: human vegetables. In particular, the song features amusing expressions that attempt to persuade listeners to call for vegetables, due to an inanimate vegetable’s natural compliance, and asides of what constitutes a vegetable.¹⁶⁷ Zappa used the overly silly and nonsensical elements in order to convince the listener of “how vegetables can be useful in achieving sexual gratification,” in conjunction with the thematic continuation in “Soft-Sell Conclusion,” which culminates with the orgasming pumpkin.¹⁶⁸ This particular use of the vegetable in the song, in connection with vegetables as apathetic individuals, places human vegetables in a precarious position: they are just as unemotional, uninspired, and culturally compliant as the sexual relations of mainstream couples, and are used in a way that implies sexual liberation through this atypical gratification. Zappa’s comparison shows how much disdain he held toward apathy, if these vegetable people represented the exact opposite of his professed ideal of sexual liberation, and are, in effect, mere tools for proper sexual liberation.

Another negative implication of drug consumption upon which Zappa touched in his music occurs in “Son of Suzy Creamcheese,” which also comes from *Absolutely Free*. The song comments on the destructive nature of mind-altering substances in the life of a consumer, notably from the perspective of a hippie hopeful. Kelly Lowe has suggested, “Suzy, in many ways, seems representative of the poseur, the fake hippie wannabe.”¹⁶⁹ This particular opportunist, like numerous others, could not handle the effects of drugs and psychedelics. In effect, Suzy Creamcheese was reduced to “a pot-smoking, acid dropping harlot living and protesting in Berkeley” who was “not committed to social change,” and was instead attracted to the hippie lifestyle of dropping out.¹⁷⁰ The song explains Suzy’s self-destruction due to drugs, which then leads to her existence as an apathetic hippie.

The quick-paced and constant time signature changes, as well as the frequent switch between energetic guitar strumming, frantic drumming, and the group answer of “Yeah, yeah, yeah!” after nearly every lyric, create a jarring, hard-rocking ambience to “Son of Suzy Creamcheese.” The musical context instigates anxiety while the speaker, perhaps this son, tries to discover the fate of Suzy Creamcheese, a once agreeable individual: “Suzy Creamcheese/ Oh, mama, now, what’s got in to ya?”¹⁷¹ Each stanza reveals new aspects of Suzy’s destruction, but it all began with her over-indulgence of drugs in the first complete verse: “Blew your mind on too

¹⁶⁶ Zappa, “Lyrics Are Absolutely Free,” 10. When Zappa performed this song live, he sometimes changed the introductory lines, “This is a song about vegetables: they keep you regular, they’re real good for you,” to “This is a song about the citizens of San Francisco: they keep you regular, they’re real good for you.”

¹⁶⁷ The Mothers of Invention, “Call Any Vegetable,” *Absolutely Free*, V/V6-5013, Verve Records, 1967.

¹⁶⁸ Courier, *Dangerous Kitchen*, 113.

¹⁶⁹ Lowe, *Music and Words*, 41.

¹⁷⁰ Greene, *Rock, Counterculture and the Avant-Garde*, 96. Berkeley was another counterculture hub in California.

¹⁷¹ The Mothers of Invention, “Son of Suzy Creamcheese,” *Absolutely Free*, V/V6-5013, Verve Records, 1967.

much Kool-Aid.”¹⁷² Through this wording, Zappa places an emphasis on drugs as the principle reason for the destruction of her life, all because they ruined her mind. Consequently, she becomes an addicted thief after she takes the narrator’s “stash,” starts running from the law since “the heat know where you are,” escapes to Berkeley, and completely degrades herself into “Protest-marching Styrofoam”—another notorious synthetic material comparable to plastic for its manufactured inauthenticity.¹⁷³ Zappa condemned the apathetic hippie lifestyle that resulted from overt drug consumption, but also its mentally destructive features.

Still another negative feature of drug consumption which Zappa detested was how the process starkly lessened one’s intelligence. He employed the jarring effects of *musique concrète* on “Are You Hung Up?” and “Nasal Retentive Calliope Music” of *We’re Only in It for the Money* to enact this detested effect. A loose collection of electronic squeals, sputters, groans, and sharp or long whooshes of air permeate the unstructured sound collages while Eric Clapton makes trippy remarks.¹⁷⁴ The atmosphere is disjointing and alienating, and stimulates reactions similar to the effects of interacting with a stoned, unintelligible hippie. In particular, Zappa told Clapton to act like Eric Burdon of The Animals, but on acid.¹⁷⁵ In the latter song, Clapton bursts into the textured ambience to announce, “Beautiful!” and “God! It’s God—I see God!”—clearly a drug-induced hallucination.¹⁷⁶ In the former, Clapton moans, groans, and utters seemingly nonsensical phrases that came out of the hippie counterculture, such as “Are you hung up?” “Are you strung up?” and “Outta sight, yeah”, which Zappa heavily edited into jumbled repeats and distant echoes in juxtaposition to a very confused woman who insists that she cannot understand Clapton.¹⁷⁷ Effectively, these pieces comment on the grotesque mind-altering aspect of psychedelics, as well as the creation of confusing, drug-induced hippie slang and its alienating effects on people, due to the inherent vacuity of the slang.

Lastly, “Absolutely Free” of *We’re Only in It for the Money* is Zappa’s frontal assault on the concept of psychedelia in American culture. The song mocks the concept of being “absolutely free” from societal ills through the use of drugs. Essentially, the song mocks “hippie metaphysical enlightenment,” their style of music, their naivety, and their “fascination with the mystical.”¹⁷⁸ The song sardonically criticizes all facets of the drug-induced elements of the counterculture, including their entrancement with spiritual elements of Eastern religion. In particular, Zappa used his lyrics to employ a mockery of “nonsensical poetry that passed for

¹⁷² Ibid. Kool-Aid was a popular slang term for LSD. The origins come from Ken Kesey, an influential, early hippie counterculture figure. In his psychedelic-colored bus, *Further*, with his posse of “Merry Pranksters,” Kesey traveled the country and spread hippie ideals, notably of LSD. Communal experimentation principally existed through “Acid Tests,” in which participants typically drank Kool-Aid laced with LSD. In his book, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968), Tom Wolfe immortalizes the Acid Tests and Kesey’s experiences on the road.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ The Mothers of Invention, “Are You Hung Up?” and “Nasal Retentive Calliope Music,” *We’re Only in It for the Money*, V6-5045X, Verve Records, 1968. Eric Clapton just happened to be at the same recording studio at the same time as Zappa.

¹⁷⁵ Charles Ulrich, *The Big Note: A Guide to the Recorded Works of Frank Zappa* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 2018), 599. Eric Burdon’s voice was very recognizable at the time, and his stage antics indicated drug usage.

¹⁷⁶ The Mothers of Invention, “Nasal Retentive Calliope Music,” *We’re Only in It for the Money*, V6-5045X, Verve Records, 1968.

¹⁷⁷ The Mothers of Invention, “Are You Hung Up?” *We’re Only in It for the Money*, V6-5045X, Verve Records, 1968. In order, these phrases mean the following: “Are you worried about something?” (American), “Are you worried about something?” (British), and “Go away.”

¹⁷⁸ Greene, *Rock, Counterculture and the Avant-Garde*, 106-107. Examples of prominent psychedelic groups at this time include The Beatles, Pink Floyd, and Bob Dylan (While Bob Dylan was a folk singer, his album *Blonde on Blonde* (1966) was noticeably abstract).

lyrics in 1967.”¹⁷⁹ Evidently, the consumption of psychedelics had a formative influence on the poetry during the peak of the counterculture—and Zappa found these lyrics to be particularly devoid of any intelligence. He decided to copy what he heard, but in caustic fashion, as to show how there truly was no point to psychedelia and the concomitant metaphysical sentiments.

With the intricately textured, loose and varying structure, and spacey and incredibly exaggerated psychedelic ambience of “Absolutely Free,” Zappa employs the vague lyrics which purport meaning in order to mock the meaningless societal escape that psychedelics allegedly provide. As a quick dig at the intelligence of the psychedelic audience, Zappa begins the song with the definition of disincorporate, because the word and Zappa’s satirical concept for it appear frequently in the song: “It means to leave your body.”¹⁸⁰ Zappa urges the listener to disincorporate and join him in a relaxing, drug-induced escape: “Shifting, drifting/ Cloudless, starless/ Velvet valleys and a sapphire sea, wah wah!” Yet Zappa reminds the listener: “Unbind your mind, there is no time/ To lick your stamps and paste them in/ Disincorporate and we will begin, wah wah!”—a verse which becomes increasingly more frantic and disjointing with each consequent utterance.¹⁸¹ However, Zappa never explains why there is such urgency. The song becomes increasingly urgent and the lyrics more enigmatic as a way to display the laughable futility of societal escape through the consumption of stupefying psychedelics and consequent fascination with the metaphysical.

The song continues with vague, psychedelic lyrics that imply a mystical meaning of some sort, but instead mock the whole concept of metaphysical enlightenment through drugs. Zappa employs verses such as “Diamonds on velvets on goldens on Vixen/ On Comet and Cupid on Donner and Blitzen/ On up and away and afar and a go-go/ Escape from the weight of your corporate logo!” and “Dreaming on cushions of velvet and satin/ To music by magic by people that happen/ To enter the world of a strange purple Jell-O/ The dreams as they live them are all mellow yellow”¹⁸² that truly confound the listener. The juvenile references to children’s lore and food communicate the infantile nature of the drug-induced culture in conjunction with the members’ subsequent fascination of Eastern religions and fantasies, particularly from China and India, as well as a critique of the selfishly juvenile attempts to escape society through drugs. Zappa’s psychedelic trip is not as appealing as he makes it out to be. He vaguely concludes, “Freedom, freedom, kindly loving/ You’ll be absolutely free/ Only if you want to be”¹⁸³ as a double entendre to show that to be free is actually not to consume psychedelics. The idiosyncrasies of these songs in how they portray Zappa’s disdain for drug consumption allude to the gravity of that aspect of what he saw as the flawed counterculture. They also allude Zappa’s final critique of the hippie counterculture’s ideals—Eastern religion and flower power—which became a by-product of the continued desire for sensual liberation.

The cultural concept of love and flower power quickly spread through the hippie counterculture.¹⁸⁴ These peaceful ideas embodied the hippie ideal of public subversion. In

¹⁷⁹ Lowe, *Words and Music*, 51.

¹⁸⁰ The Mothers of Invention, “Absolutely Free,” *We’re Only in It for the Money*, V6-5045X, Verve Records, 1968.

¹⁸¹ Ibid. The stamps are S&H green stamps, which customers received with purchases at select retail stores and gas stations, and could cash in a certain amount on cheap, consumerist products—an indication of the conformity of these psychedelic individuals.

¹⁸² Ibid. Mellow yellow is a reference to the Donovan song of the same name, which is about the popular rumor that smoking banana peels could get one high.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ The term comes from the actions present in the infamous images of hippies placing flowers on the gun barrels of riot police.

contrast to aggressive, harsh, and threatening protests, beatnik-turned-hippie poet Allen Ginsberg prescribed the essentials behind flower power in his notion of ideal protest technique: to invoke “the Zen principle of catching the opponent off guard, of offering no resistant target at which he can strike back” through “a captivating mood of peaceableness, generosity, and tenderness that may melt the rigidities of opponents and sweep them along despite their conscious objections.”¹⁸⁵ Hippies particularly loved the Zen-based concept, because they believed that the expression of love is a more potent force than a negative, punishing action. The tactic was particularly useful because it gave the meek a voice. Journalist Nicholas von Hoffman described how flower power “was taken up by kids who had no political interests but who seemed to have a lot of difficulty articulating hostility to parents, teachers, or anyone.”¹⁸⁶ While the intentions to spread a culture of love were sound, the flower power movement made little change, perhaps because the notion came from the half-baked utilization of misunderstood, foreign ideals—an application which Zappa and others decried in the context of the United States.

The inherent flaws of flower power were perhaps due to hippies’ fascination with their senses. The Eastern metaphysical Zen faith attracted the youth as a separate religious path, contrary to the conformist Christian institutions of their parents. Yet Theodore Roszak noted how the attraction quickly transformed into its own conformist “phantasmagoria of exotic religiosity,” while hippies distorted the complex and foreign principles of Zen due to “crude simplifications” and “shallow understanding.” He insinuated that hippies consequently employed their erroneous interpretations to justify their actions of spreading love in the form of flower power.¹⁸⁷ While Zen and other Eastern religions may have benevolent messages, they were messages that Roszak thought hippies could never understand, due to their own biased fascinations and the societal and cultural differences from which the ideas came. Zappa identified with Roszak’s interpretation of the misuse and abuse of these entrancing, foreign religions.

Zappa focused on the sensual emphasis of Eastern religions, their inherent inability to function accurately and beneficially within American society, and the resultant ineffectiveness of concepts like flower power. Zappa described the issue: “The real goal of eastern religion, with mystical experience and all of that, those aims are difficult if not impossible to achieve in an industrial society,” and “people who claim to have made satori someplace in the States today really gotta be pulling your leg.”¹⁸⁸ Zappa berated hippie fascination with Eastern religion, much like how he berated the Catholicism of his parents—to him, all religion was stupefying and conformist. Consequently, Eastern religion gave rise to the idea of flower power, which Zappa believed was simply a reason for hippies to gather. He cynically described the youth of flower

¹⁸⁵ Roszak, *Making of a Counter Culture*, 150-151.

¹⁸⁶ Hoffman, *We Are the People our Parents Warned us About*, 39.

¹⁸⁷ Roszak, *Making of a Counter Culture*, 134-139. Ten years later in *Orientalism* (1978), cultural critic Edward Said would establish the concept of orientalism in a similar manner to Roszak and Zappa (Note 188). He defined orientalism as the West’s fetishism and patronizing approach to cultures in the East, which the West regarded as underdeveloped and servile, due to the West’s earlier imperialist attitudes. Consequently, interest in the East led to cultural hegemony and the likelihood to misinterpret Eastern beliefs and practices, as according to the sense of superiority.

Interestingly, many religious people often have their own interpretations of their religions and choose to follow only certain aspects. While this note is not defending the hippies for any sort of cultural appropriation, it shows that perhaps Roszak and Zappa were overly critical of the counterculture’s embrace of Zen and the way in which the youth applied the interpretation. Yet these two critics were more concerned about the effects of Zen on the counterculture through its simplified interpretation, and how these interpretations could not rectify American culture.

¹⁸⁸ Frank Zappa, interview with Emmett Lake, “Mutation Blues,” *East Village Other*, February 1-15, 1967, 18.

power: “They're desperate for something they can get involved in, but they are morons when it comes to thinking things out for themselves.”¹⁸⁹ Hippies took on an asinine, conformist mob mentality when they gathered; their demonstrations lacked any real call for change, as they sat around and acted cheerful instead of expressing disgust with the society they were purportedly trying to change. Zappa’s music attacks what he saw as reprehensible thought and behavior.

While Zappa’s infamous remark that “Flower power sucks!” in “Absolutely Free” is his most blatant and direct attack on love and flower power, he also uses “Flower Punk” on the same album in order to describe and chastise the aimless nature and typical sentiments of a flower power activities, such as a love-in.¹⁹⁰ The format of the lyrics are an exact parody of The Leaves’ song, “Hey Joe” (1966).¹⁹¹ Yet Zappa’s version questions where hippies are going, and they all give answers characteristic of the trivial sentiments of flower power. Specifically, Doyle Greene has argued that the song serves as Zappa’s “indictment of favored hippie pastimes like getting high and love-ins as pointless pseudo-rebellion,” while Kelly Lowe has described the song as Zappa’s “critique of people who joined the counterculture in order to be part of a scene,”¹⁹² such as the flower power scene. Love-ins and other flower power gatherings featured numerous conformist elements of the counterculture, and consequently could not serve any real purpose, according to Zappa. They were ineffective and uninspired, and he portrayed them as such in the song.

The psychedelic flair of “Flower Punk,” with an exaggerated, distorted electric guitar through a wah-wah effect pedal, reminds the listener of the spiraling, drug-fueled environment of a love-in. The almost monotone speaker easily identifies the hippies by their appearance and accessories, including “that flower in your hand,” “that button on your shirt,” “that hair on your head,” and “those beads around your neck,” and he asks where they are going. The hippies respond with frivolous answers in a similarly monotonous tone: going “up to Frisco to join a psychedelic band,” “to the love-in to sit and play my bongos in the dirt,” “to the dance to get some action, then I'm goin' home to bed,” and finally, “to the shrink so he can help me be a nervous wreck.” With the passage of time, a steadily increasing cacophony of yells from a mob of people arbitrarily back some utterances of the questions and answers.¹⁹³ The answers vary, but, to Zappa, they all distinctly serve no purpose in changing society. Zappa utilized sardonic humor to point out the baneful conformity of hippie gatherings that often had to do with flower power or propagating love. The final answer indicates the long-term mental effects of such beliefs that come from the Zen-based beliefs—American emotions become contorted through the forcing of erroneously calculated, foreign ideals.

As if to reiterate the meaningless actions of cultural hippie gatherings, Zappa concludes the song with two simultaneous monologues of hippies, one in each audio channel. The two hippies ramble over each other, the nonsensical jabbering, chants, and yelps of an energetic crowd of hippies, and jarring electronic chirps and buzzes of *musique concrète* in the

¹⁸⁹ Frank Zappa, interview with Jef Jaisun, “Ya Muddah!” *Berkeley Barb*, November 22, 1968, 13.

¹⁹⁰ Mothers of Invention, “Absolutely Free.” MGM censured this perceptively flagrant attack on flower power on many album releases as not to agitate potential hippie customers. A love-in was a public gathering of hippies where they expressed the peaceable love for each other, and tried to entice passersby to join them and spread the idea of love as a healing cultural force.

¹⁹¹ Jimi Hendrix made this song popular with his cover the following year and consequently turned the music into an iconic song of the Summer of Love.

¹⁹² Greene, *Rock, Counterculture and the Avant-Garde*, 106; Lowe, *Words and Music*, 51.

¹⁹³ The Mothers of Invention, “Flower Punk,” *We’re Only in It for the Money*, V6-5045X, Verve Records, 1968.

background.¹⁹⁴ The hippie in the left channel talks about how proud he is to be a guitarist in a band that provides counterculture content for hippies, because the “youth of America today is so wonderful, and I'm proud to be a part of this gigantic mass reception.” Meanwhile, the hippie on the right contemplates how he will spend his royalty check from “making a rock and roll record.” Yet they both end their monologues with aspirations that girls will notice them because of their musical efforts.¹⁹⁵ The listening experience is just as disorienting and unstructured as flower power events, and the haphazard, selfish, and lustful sentiments in the monologues express no real concern for social and cultural change. Zappa condemned love-ins and other hippie gatherings as nothing more than uninspired social gatherings with no true benefits to social or cultural progress.

Naturally, Zappa believed his ideals to supersede all others. As a lyrical conclusion to *We're Only in It for the Money*, Zappa included the catchy and alluring song “Mother People,” which was essentially his way of expressing that his method and ideals for cultural liberation were superior to those of the hippies. The song recognizes that Zappa and his idiosyncratic method, dubbed “the other people,” may seem “crazy” or “creepy,” but if listeners hear his plan, they may realize that they actually identify with his ideals and will become “the other people, too.” Zappa believed himself to be at the forefront of the true counterculture. In fact, the song illustrates that if the listeners do not agree with Zappa’s ideals, they are not worthy of his association: “If it doesn't show,/ Think you better know/ I'm another person.”¹⁹⁶ While his voice was not nearly as powerful and influential as the popularized, counterculture hub of San Francisco—as evidenced by poor record sales in his early years—Zappa was unique in that he utilized an experimental, yet generally popular music format to showcase his cultural ideals.

Summary

Zappa’s critiques of culture were revealing of prevailing sentiments in regard to mainstream American culture and the counterculture. Zappa agreed with the youth that mainstream culture was insufferably conformist and mundane and that self-expression was the ideal counter to that horrific culture. Self-determination was vital to the betterment of American culture, as it moved away from the grasp of societal institutions. However, Zappa’s application of self-expression and that of the counterculture differed greatly. Overall, hippies preferred sensual liberation, while Zappa preferred mental liberation. Accordingly, although hippies craved sexual liberation, Zappa believed they did not understand the mental implications as he professed his preferred method of removing the social stigma of all sexual forms. Instead, hippies focused on the consumption of psychedelics as the key to cultural liberation, which also led the Zen-based flower power to spread a loving culture. Zappa abhorred both of these ideas as ineffective: the former inhibited proper mental cognition while the latter was but a meaningless social gathering. He both professed and ridiculed many counterculture ideals in his music, much in the same way he offered his critiques of society. His critiques of and ideals for American politics followed the same trajectory.

¹⁹⁴ *Musique concrete* is an electronic style of music which largely deals with mixing pre-recorded sounds into montages.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁶ The Mothers of Invention, “Mother People,” *We're Only in It for the Money*, V6-5045X, Verve Records, 1968.

III. Politics: The Hypocrisies and Double Standards of Conformity

The late 1960s in American political history is the point during which governing forces of authority lost much of their credibility in the eyes of the American public. As citizens realized the repressive nature of the conformist society and culture that the government had instigated in order to combat communism, they also noted the dubious nature of the government's goals and the ill effects that its hegemonic project had on legislation and political actions. In particular, Zappa and the rebelling youth noted the glaring hypocrisies and double standards of the government, which became apparent over the course of the 1960s to average citizens, largely due to public protesting by political groups like SDS. Zappa turned to his music to critique the government in how it solely represented financial interests through private lobbying. He also ridiculed the double standards of laws that suppressed individuality according to the conservative morals of politicians who also contradicted their sacred image in private affairs. Finally, Zappa targeted the extremely harsh and violent treatment of government officials toward the rebelling youth, while he also criticized the youth's method of protest as polarizing. However, young adults were noting political paradoxes even before Zappa's music enunciated them for the average music consumer.

As the nation feared communism abroad, an almost blind faith in the government of the 1950s allowed government officials to become increasingly more manipulative and dishonest with the American public, who generally believed every word, with very little social resistance present. The government effectively played on public faith to perpetuate worries of a communist takeover in accordance with its political agenda: the government stifled individuality in order to conform the populace to anti-communist ideals. Yet in the early 1960s, social unrest aimed at the government increased, notably among young adults who began to note this deceptive nature of the state. In 1962, SDS noted political paradoxes in regard to in the government's treatment of domestic and international affairs: the assertion that "all men are created equal" contradicted treatment of African Americans in the South; the "peaceful intentions" of the United States were countered by its Cold War military investments; nuclear power used for arms instead of renewable energy; and so on.¹⁹⁷ While a minority of youth were aware of the hypocrisies of political policies, widespread skepticism across the generations was not present until the mid-1960s with the escalation of the Vietnam War: the conflict waged by the United States against the spread of communism, came to define the political activism of the decade, and pervaded the American conscience, due to daily coverage on television.

The political treatment of the Vietnam War and the response of American citizens exemplified the growing alienation and distrust of American citizens toward the government. In early spring 1965, the United States escalated and Americanized the conflict through *Operation Rolling Thunder*, which allowed air strikes and the sending of active marines. While President Johnson's administration "attempted to conceal the escalation and downplay involvement," members of the American public quickly realized the hypocrisy of the government's actions compared to its words. Students and faculty quickly held antiwar demonstrations in response, and, in April, a group of 20,000 headed to the nation's capital to protest.¹⁹⁸ Yet the government continued to lie about the American escalation of the war in Vietnam. The public could not ignore the effects of the war, as young Americans went abroad to fight, and reports and polarizing images on television frequently gainsaid the government's words. Average Americans

¹⁹⁷ Students, *Port Huron Statement*, 3.

¹⁹⁸ Anderson, *The Sixties*, 64-65.

began to question both the reason the country was in Vietnam in the first place and the credibility of their political leaders' direction.

The American public, predominately the youth, but also some members of the older generation, became disillusioned with and distrustful of the governing forces in the 1960s. The attempted manipulation of public perception of a foreign war made Americans question the true motives of the government and why public officials tried to obscure the truth. Morris Dickstein noted that increasingly, "middle Americans began to live with less of a mystified and paternalistic sense of Authority," and they learned that "Authority's talent for abusing power is greater, or at least more nimble, than society's ability to check that abuse."¹⁹⁹ Skepticism of those once sacrosanct governing powers permeated throughout American youth, and even spread to average American citizens. Zappa and other political critics especially reprimanded the government for the way it handled affairs, and they felt they knew why political leaders acted in this suspicious manner.

Lobbying

Many political critics centered their analyses on one key issue: the pursuit of financial gain by big business through the puppetry of government actions and the government's conformity to the will of these investors. Lobbying had corrupted the goals of the government and fostered a disregard for the interests of the American citizen. In regard to the Vietnam War, Roszak credited the reason for public manipulation to the seemingly clandestine money interests in American government: "For a capitalist technocracy, profiteering will always be a central incentive and major corrupting influence."²⁰⁰ The war generated income for manufacturers from needed tools and weapons for the military. At the same time, these manufacturers possessed an incredible amount of leverage on political representatives through lobbying to perpetuate the war, so that they could continue to profit. SDS asserted that big businesses needed to be made responsible for their exploitation of the government, because the "influence of corporate elites on foreign policy is neither reliable nor democratic," and "a way must be found to direct our economic resources to genuine human needs, not the private needs of corporations nor the rigged needs of maneuvered citizenry."²⁰¹ In order to appease investors, the government attempted to conform American public perception in order to engender a compliant citizenry who blindly served those private goals of big business. This notion of pecuniary domination of the American government by non-political institutions, and the subsequent puppetry of government officials, was an increasingly widespread sentiment of the 1960s, and particularly one in which Zappa whole-heartedly believed.

Zappa made his criticism of big business's monetary control of the government and the government's submission to the private aims very clear. He described how government officials "really aren't DOING anything" since "the power is really in the hands of a few" who are "OUTSIDE of the government." Like SDS, he explained that the government was "partly controlled by the military and partly controlled by big business."²⁰² To Zappa, government goals mostly represented the interests of financial influences. In essence, money controlled political

¹⁹⁹ Dickstein, *Gates of Eden*, 118.

²⁰⁰ Roszak, *Making of a Counter Culture*, 17.

²⁰¹ Students, *Port Huron Statement*, 47-48.

²⁰² Zappa, "Mutation Blues," 8. Emphasis original.

actions, and any form of public protest would not stop these actions as long as they continued to be profitable. In effect, government officials suppressed opposing views in society in order to promote the goals of their investors. Zappa noted, “I think that the only things that they have an interest in is their own well-being, and feathering their own nest, and the acquisition of more power for their own personal gratification.”²⁰³ Big business allowed politicians to earn much money and power through campaigning investments, private promises of work outside of the political arena, etc.. In return, these politicians complied with the goals of big business and promoted its private goals to the public in order to maintain these investments and promises. Notably in regard to the Vietnam War, politicians attempted to nationalize these private goals in order to garner public approval, but many realized the peculiar goals contradicted the interests of American citizens who did not want this war. Zappa enunciated the transparent inauthenticity of the government and the debilitating repercussions of lobbying in two songs on *Absolutely Free*.

While the conclusive target of “Plastic People” is the hippie counterculture, the first half of the song makes a clear mockery of the disingenuous government and the forced subordination of American citizens to selfish goals. Zappa claimed that the song is also about politicians: “The insincere ass holes [*sic*] who run almost everybody’s country are plastic people.”²⁰⁴ While plastic could refer to mainstream culture, the inauthentic, synthetic aspect of plastic is equally applicable to a government that represented the goals and interests of its investors.

The musical landscape of this song particularly mocks the manufactured political ideals. As mentioned before, the song is a parody of “Louie Louie,” but Zappa specifically parodied The Kingsmen’s 1963 cover and the particularly unintelligible lyrics of that version. After the release of this version of “Louie Louie,” Kevin Courrier related how a rumor quickly spread that the “mangled vocals were masking unimaginable sexual fantasies.” Consequently, the song became incredibly popular as the rumor spread, which ironically prompted the FBI and the FCC to conduct an investigation into the song’s meaning.²⁰⁵ Social leaders, through their constant attempts to manage the spread of perceptibly dirty sex, had created an American public that looked to vague pop tunes for sexual gratification. The government had housed a deprived culture that resulted in the transformation of the song into a musical metaphor for sex. In Zappa’s version, his juxtaposition of the president to the background of this wildly popular song, with its created sexual meaning, makes a mockery of the government’s stature; the governing powers had lost the respect of Americans in their attempts to conform citizens to their political ideals.

“Plastic People” begins with a drumroll, Zappa’s droll announcement of the appearance of the president, and a sardonic imitation of President Johnson’s addressing of Americans: “Fella Americans.” The basic notes to “Louie Louie,” backed with some mocking, verbal “doot” noises, cut him off.²⁰⁶ The silly, sexualized song has overpowered and subsequently ridiculed the president. As the verbal “doot” noises mock further through a change to a higher pitch and increased dissonance, Zappa exclaims, “He’s been sick, and I think his wife is gonna bring him some chicken soup!”²⁰⁷ Through this infantile exaggeration and the musical ambience, Zappa shows how the American president has lost the façade of being the most powerful man in the world—and has effectively lost the respect of the American people.

²⁰³ Zappa, “The Sanest Man?” 27.

²⁰⁴ Zappa, “Lyrics Are Absolutely Free,” 10.

²⁰⁵ Courrier, *Dangerous Kitchen*, 40-44.

²⁰⁶ Mothers of Invention, “Plastic People.”

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

Zappa concludes his attack on the president with the repeated, energetic group declaration of “Plastic People/ Oh, baby, now, you’re such a drag!” and two cynical interludes, which Zappa speaks over silly, meandering guitars and horns: “I know it's hard to defend an unpopular policy every once in a while,” and “there’s this guy from the CIA and he’s creeping around Laurel Canyon.”²⁰⁸ The first interlude, while it appears sympathetic, slanders those politicians who must defend their policies that are unpopular with the public, because those policies reflect the desires of investors. The goals of the American public did not align with the actual goals of the government, which tried to emphasize the goals’ relevance in the context of the Vietnam War to the middle American and coerce citizens into blind support. The second interlude alludes to Zappa’s knowledge of surveillance by the government. In fact, the government sent agents to infiltrate the counterculture in order to find proof that “foreign governments or Communists” controlled youth organizations.²⁰⁹ Government officials could not trust the youth of the country and their ideals, yet they expected Americans to trust the government and follow its goals wholeheartedly. The deceit and double standards of the inauthentic government ultimately caused Zappa and the rebelling youth to reject its politics, but Zappa employed another song to enunciate this effect, chiefly in regard to the Vietnam War.

As a companion to “Plastic People” on the same record, “Uncle Bernie’s Farm” assaults the idea of a plastic government, but through a more specific perspective: the song focuses on the outside money influences on the government and their regressive impact on society. Zappa’s description of the song was rather enigmatic: he stated that the song is about “ugly toys and the people who make them,” and that the people who bought them “might be as ugly as the toys themselves.”²¹⁰ Zappa’s metaphor represents government officials as manufactured toys and the big businesses as their consumers. At the same time, businesses manufactured actual toys, including the G.I. Joe, introduced in 1964 and one of the best-selling action figures, in order to prepare children to conform to the ideals of obtrusive big business in regard to war. Through a lyrical quote from Bing Crosby’s “White Christmas” (1942) at the beginning, which alludes to the frantic mass consumerism of this time of the year, Zappa’s song “attacks the war-toys that are promoted at Christmas” and presents a “paranoid vision of the world as an assemblage of artificial objects.”²¹¹ In the song, as a reference to lobbying and inauthentic politicians, people who represent big business buy plastic congressmen. The song also features the concept of war-toys that condition the youth to militarization at an early age in order to serve businesses’ war-mongering interests abroad. The controlling businesses commodified politicians and children alike and turned them into exploitable plastic objects.

The oddly cheerful and bright song mostly lists the contents of a “box of ugly plastic things” called “Uncle Bernie’s Farm”—a Christmas war-toy set. During the song, Zappa often holds back laughs, different voices add to that of Zappa for certain enunciations or to add asides, and sound effects of the listed toys resonate. The first verse tells of standard, cheap toy items, including, a “baby doll that burps and pees” and a “case of airplane glue.” However, the box also includes a “bomb to blow your mommy up/ A bomb for your daddy, too” and a “hungry plastic troll/ To scarf your buddy's arm.”²¹² The juxtaposition of these toys prove the latter to be notably

²⁰⁸ Ibid. Laurel Canyon is the counterculture hub of Los Angeles, according to Zappa.

²⁰⁹ Anderson, *The Sixties*, 99. COINTELPRO (COUnter INTELLigence PROgram) was a collection of covert FBI operations that infiltrated domestic organizations from 1956 to 1971. The aim of these projects was largely to infiltrate and to discredit seemingly subversive domestic organizations.

²¹⁰ Zappa, “Lyrics Are Absolutely Free,” 11.

²¹¹ Watson, *Poodle Play*, 83.

²¹² The Mothers of Invention, “Uncle Bernie’s Farm,” *Absolutely Free*, V/V6-5013, Verve Records, 1967.

violent. The bomb is a reference to the Vietnam War in how a bomb, which could kill a youth sent to war, could effectively destroy the lives of a parent—yet, the bomb is a seemingly innocent, plastic toy in the box, even if the child throws it at his parents. Still, the box includes more items which allude to the businesses' role in the perpetuation of the Vietnam War and other political affairs.

Zappa continues the list in the second verse. He explains, “There's a little plastic congress/ There's a nation you can buy.” The snarky aside follows, “I'll take two.”²¹³ Zappa once again compares American political leaders to inauthentic plastic, but now reveals that they are plastic due to pervasive monetary influences. Further, the aside indicates the private investors to be greedy. As a result, in the box there is “a doll that looks like mommy/ She'll do anything but cry,” as well as “a doll that looks like daddy” who is “a funny little man/ Push a button and ask for money/ There's a dollar in his hand.”²¹⁴ The parents are evidently a typical, white-collar family. Yet the wife does not cry as the husband essentially sells away the country and the lives of American youth to the war, because the parents enjoy the extreme amount of wealth gained from the big businesses and have the funds and sanctimonious privilege to buy their children out of fighting in Vietnam. To Zappa, money and power prove to be main interests of politicians, and they willingly subordinate the public to the goals of business in accordance.

Consequently, the final two verses enunciate the fate of the children in this state of a bought-out, compliant nation. Zappa implores for Christmas to be canceled, because every toy at Christmas teaches “murder and destruction.” However, the government does nothing to stop the militarization of American children, even though politicians are aware: “There's a man who runs the country/ There's a man who tried to think/ And they're all made out of plastic/ When they melt they start to stink!”²¹⁵ Investors have commodified politicians to the point where they cannot think for themselves and resemble less and less their human forms: they have deteriorated into a repressive mass of conformity.

Zappa concludes, “There's a book with smiling children/ Nearly dead with Christmas joy!/ And smiling in his office/ Is the creep who makes the toys.” The song then descends into ramblings of the violent actions that take place with these toys, including a gruesome car set that features “little plastic puddles of blood that you put up on the car” once the child crashes the car into the wall, as well as, for the driver figurine, “plastic intestines you can stuff back into his stomach.”²¹⁶ Big businesses successfully desensitized the children to gore and death through their violent toys, ultimately culminating in the death of the youth at war. The war-mongering wills of those businesses permeated government actions and affected the citizenry without its consent. Zappa abhorred the fact that politicians focused on their own wealth rather than on stopping this calculated loss of young lives. However, the children of politicians could avoid the draft. In effect, the individual hypocrisies of politicians was another facet of the government that Zappa and the rebelling youth denounced.

Repressive Lawmaking

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

Politicians of the 1960s used their privilege as public officials to benefit themselves and impose repressive measures on the citizens they supposedly represented. In particular, SDS objected to the “localized nature of the party system” in that “problems are not raised by and for the people.”²¹⁷ The interests of citizens were not integral to the actions of the politicians who controlled their fate—politicians focused on internal matters of the government, namely the interests of those lobbyists. Consequently, the laws which politicians produced curtailed the advancement of the nation, especially in regard to individuality and social development. At the same time, many politicians focused on their public figure in regard to lawmaking. SDS bemoaned how politics of personality and image superseded political ideas and platforms.²¹⁸ Politicians approached their work with a superior sense of obligation to promote their own moral high ground and patriotism as the correct way to live, and attempted to coerce average citizens to believe them with their political flaunting of power and wealth. Yet these personal sentiments resulted in laws that inhibited opposing thought and fostered strict compliancy to the politicians’ cultural ideals. Zappa took particular interest in the flashy display of politicians and how their public images and private affairs resulted in inequitable lawmaking, which was reflective of the social restrictions that politicians had effectively also placed on themselves.

To Zappa, politics had become a sham, resulting in repressive lawmaking. Zappa insisted that American politics were “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.”²¹⁹ Politics for Zappa had become nothing more than an extension of advertising, as well as a logical continuation of the “cool person syndrome” from high school. Politicians flaunted their powerful image, conservative morals, and patriotic platforms to garner public support; however, their political actions contradicted promises of freedom and benefits to the American citizenry. In particular, Zappa loathed the lack of statesmanship in politics.²²⁰ To Zappa, politicians were too concerned with their own personal affairs and wrongly wrote acutely restrictive laws.

Consequently, Zappa decried how American politicians wrote laws that repressed and conformed citizens to the conservative ideals from which he believed lawmakers themselves suffered. He criticized the pretense: “People have to stop being hypocritical about the way they live and think, and take their whole mind and body into consideration when they’re designing laws.”²²¹ Zappa noted that the laws of these politicians reflected the restrictive environment they had fostered. For years, politicians enacted oppressive laws which in turn conditioned future politicians to match those sentiments, even though they suffered from the rigid regimen of restrictions. Yet, despite their own suffering, politicians continued to make these repressive laws that passed the suffering on to those whom they represented. Zappa saw this hypocritical cycle most notably in regard to the political moral high ground of sexual behaviors and the promulgation of alleged dirty sex. After all, there is still popular speculation to this day originating from the early 1960s that President John F. Kennedy had a secret relationship with model Marilyn Monroe. Yet before Zappa started making music, Zappa experienced firsthand political piety in regard to the conception of dirty sex, which caused him to understand fully the political hypocrisies and repercussions of repressive laws.

²¹⁷ Students, *Port Huron Statement*, 13.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*

²¹⁹ Zappa, “Mothers of Invention (Part 1),” 16.

²²⁰ Zappa, “Blazing New Trails,” 23.

²²¹ Frank Zappa, “Frank Zappa on Freedom,” *Hit Parader*, October 1967, 6.

In 1965, Zappa served time in jail, accused of conspiracy to commit pornography. An undercover detective had offered Zappa payment to make a pornographic audio tape, which Zappa falsified without committing any real sexual acts (he and a female friend imitated orgasms and jumped on a bed). The detective promptly arrested Zappa, whom the judge sentenced to six months in Tank C of the San Bernardino County Jail, though he only served ten days. Zappa later noted, “I haven’t seen anything since then to change my opinion of how poorly the system works.”²²² While his incarceration was brief, the initial consequences of his actions, which the detective intentionally instigated, showed Zappa how ineffective current lawmaking truly was. Popular counterculture author and music journalist Barry Miles illustrated how, above all else, Zappa’s targeted arrest due to the falsified notion of dirty sex was the most formative influence on Zappa’s overt cynicism of politicians and their hypocrisies:

He no longer believed in anything the authorities had ever told him. As far as he was concerned, the entire American education system had failed him; it was a lie from start to finish, the reality was that America was a corrupt, grubby little fascist state. He was determined never to be duped again. Tank C 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.²²³

Zappa made sure to enunciate the double standards of this contrived crime through a politicized musical explanation of how politicians did not obey their own moral high ground in private, yet still applied their beliefs to repressive lawmaking.

“Brown Shoes Don’t Make It” of *Absolutely Free* is perhaps the pinnacle of Zappa’s politicized songs. Zappa evidently believed so since he played the song on tour—which was extremely difficult to achieve due to the extraordinary complexity of the musical structure—and, although he often did not rerecord past material, he released a live version on 1981’s *Tinsel Town Rebellion*. Zappa was sure to make the meaning of this song clear. He explained that the song is about politicians who, as “a result of their own hidden sexual frustrations,” prevent American citizens “from living the kind of life you know you should lead” through “inequitable laws and ordinances” that specifically restrict the youth from their individual pursuits. He concluded the description with a simple, concise phrase: “Dirty old men have no business running your country.”²²⁴ These men who ran the country were victims of the same sexual restrictions they placed on their citizens. However, Zappa claimed they continued to make restrictive laws that lacked connection to the citizenry because of distractions by their own sexual fantasies.

There has been much study of this particularly complicated and satirical song of Zappa. Professor of Music Studies Martin Knakkegaard wrote an essay dedicated to “Brown Shoes Don’t Make It” in order to show how this particular song epitomizes Zappa’s utilization of “subtle correspondences between music styles, titles, lyrics, texts, and more” in order to reflect critically on “central aspects of modern culture and human life in a psychological, sociological as

²²² Zappa, *The Real Frank Zappa Book*, 54-60.

²²³ Miles, Zappa, xiv, 87-88.

²²⁴ Zappa, “Lyrics Are Absolutely Free,” 11.

well as philosophical exposition.”²²⁵ Zappa was especially thoughtful in the utilization of musical textures in order to convey his satire in “Brown Shoes Don’t Make It.” In essence, “Brown Shoes Don’t Make It” is “a scathing indictment tracing how authoritarian attitudes are shaped.”²²⁶ The song exemplifies how City Hall Fred, as a product of the government’s society and culture, becomes the despicable, dirty man who suffers from his unknown sexual frustrations, while he continues to make restrictive, disconnected, and hypocritical laws.

The sporadic, volatile, and operatic composition begins with a bluesy shuffle that serves as an enlightening prelude: “Brown shoes/ Don’t make it/ Quit school/ Why fake it.”²²⁷ Zappa’s central message of the song becomes clear: white-collar politicians are not superior—they are the principal product of the conformist high school systems—so there is no need to do well in the school system, nor desire to be a politician. Over a basic drumbeat in obnoxious, yet comical voices that range from baritones to falsettos, Zappa ridicules the pretentious and mainstream lifestyle of a politician-to-be with only a year left of school. He eats a “T.V. dinner by the pool”; watches the accumulation of facial hair on his brother, who is “too weird,” a plumber, and, consequently, a “bummer every summer”; smiles at every “ugly”; and finally shines his shoes and cuts his hair, so that he can be “a loyal, plastic robot for a world that doesn’t care.”²²⁸ The politician-hopeful ends up as a conformist joke, as well as an inhumane, heartless robot who will serve private interests—namely, those of big business.

The next section reveals the dissatisfaction and disillusionment of the now-politician due to his oppressive work environment. The bluesy shuffle returns as a voice in a stereotypical, New Jersey businessman accent chants, “Be a jerk!” and a group in the same accent yells in response, “Go to work!” A grumbling voice commands to do “your job, and do it right.” Then a euphoric falsetto sarcastically exclaims, “Life’s a ball!” while a whiny baritone complains, “T.V. tonight.” The bluesy shuffle concludes with a gravelly voice that patronizes the businessman: “Do you love it, do you hate it?/ There it is, the way you made it, wow!”²²⁹ The repressive work environment of the politician is abrasive and alienating, and he has nothing at home to which to look forward save television. In turn, the life of the politician is drab and submissive, and this depressive life is his fault, whether he likes it or not. Zappa argued that disgruntled politicians of the 1960s who did not care about their work made poor, restrictive laws that transferred that lifestyle of banal conformity onto the citizenry. Yet in the song, a more sinister influence begins to distract these politicians from their work, because they lack a basic human need in that obtrusive environment: sexual gratification.

The following section begins with a fragile piano that gives way to an extremely distorted guitar. The baritone and falsetto voices sardonically sing together: “A world of secret hungers/ Perverting the men who make your laws” as the “girls in the office” tempt the politicians to the point of salivation.²³⁰ The musical mood becomes more sinister as these bored, frustrated politicians begin to lust after their employees. As a result, these men created hypocritical laws

²²⁵ Martin Knackkergaard, “Zappa and Modernism: An Extended Study of ‘Brown Shoes Don’t Make It,’” in *Frank Zappa and the And*, ed. Paul Carr (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013), 167. Knackkergaard uses *The Frank Zappa Songbook, Vol. 1* (1973) to take a masterful and critically musical approach to the dissection of all 22 identifiable sections of this composition and their relation to the vocals in order to achieve Zappa’s desired satirical effect. For the complete study, see pages 167-184 of *Frank Zappa and the And*.

²²⁶ Courier, *Dangerous Kitchen*, 117

²²⁷ The Mothers of Invention, “Brown Shoes Don’t Make It,” *Absolutely Free*, V/V6-5013, Verve Records, 1967.

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Ibid.

that effectively passed their sense of moral restriction onto citizens, while they escaped the sexual repression through fantasies.

As if to accentuate the hypocritical concept, the sexual yearning quickly intensifies after the listener hears a series of obnoxious oral noises, which insinuate sex, and the musical mood becomes tense with slow, suggestive violins, horns, and piano. Zappa describes that in the “City Hall mind,” we see the politician’s daydream “of a girl about thirteen” and his sexual desire for this young girl: “Off with her clothes/ And into a bed/ Where she tickles his fancy/ All night long.”²³¹ Zappa employs grotesque exaggeration to underline the hypocrisy of these perverted men: these politicians, who claimed and appeared to be unadulterated, while they promulgated the notion of dirty sex and subsequently persecuted the perpetrators, fantasized about dirty sex themselves. Yet Zappa continues to castigate the piety, as well as to jest with this predicament of City Hall Fred.

Zappa blurs the line between the politician’s fantasy and reality throughout the majority of the remaining sections, as he contorts and escalates the hypocritical anecdote of the sexual daydreaming. While City Hall Fred’s wife is “attending an orchid show,” even though she “squealed for a week to get him to go,” he is “back in the bed [with] his teenage queen” who is “rocking and rolling and acting obscene.” Screams of “Baby, baby!” mix with the sexual noises from earlier.²³² While the politician avoids his pointless, public marital duties, he has an affair with the underage girl: dirty sex distracts the politician from a job which he deems to be pointless, and the quality of laws suffer as a result.

Over the steady pulse from a contraband clarinet coupled with elongated, falsetto “woo” noises of pleasure, Zappa further describes the sex scene. He affirms how the politician loves this dirty sex and the action “curls up his toes” and “lights up his nose” while his underage mistress “bites his fat neck.” Zappa concludes, “She’s nasty, she’s nasty/ She digs it in bed.”²³³ The sex is exactly that which the politician had condemned as dirty in his platform, but here he takes advantage of the opportunity to thoroughly enjoy the genuinely pleasing act without the public’s knowledge. Zappa effectively hints that the politician may have reserved dirty sex for his own personal pleasure. Yet Zappa is not through with his emphasis on the pious attitudes of politicians.

After a seemingly climactic and stereotypical musical conclusion that eerily winds down, as if to signify closure, the music starts up again and becomes particularly slow and sleazy with a piano, percussion, and lone, seductive saxophone. Zappa reaffirms that the couple repeatedly has dirty sex, mockingly emphasizes the “nasty” aspect, and reiterates the socially repulsive age of the girl who now has a “corrupted, corroded mind”: “Only thirteen and she knows how to nasty.”²³⁴ The politician of the song literally harms the minds of American youth through his own sexual fantasies that pervert his laws. He thoroughly enjoys these distractions that he hides from his citizens while preventing their own enjoyment of sexual liberation through intentionally repressive laws. His hypocrisy is inexcusable; however, Zappa continues to lambaste this sexual sanctimony since the concept is crucial to him and his idea of cultural liberation.

After electronic, almost extraterrestrial noises paired with the now legato, smooth notes of the contraband clarinet ring out and create an unearthly ambience, Zappa contemplates Fred’s next sexual fantasies in an echoing thought aloud: “If she were my daughter, I’d...” to which a

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² Ibid.

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ Ibid.

recording of an extremely young girl innocently asks, “What would you do, daddy?” The thought and question repeats three times before, in tune with a stereotypical country and western background, Zappa concludes, “Smother my daughter in chocolate syrup/ And strap her on again,” as well as to “make her do a nasty/ On the White House lawn,” and to “boogie 'till the cows come home.”²³⁵ Zappa insinuates not only the incestuous intentions of City Hall Fred, but also the increasingly socially unacceptable sexual actions that politicians proclaimed as inherently dirty, in order to emphasize the existence of real double standards in politics.

However, before the hypothetical becomes a reality, the music becomes slow and depressing, as City Hall Fred, in a disheartened voice, explains that he has to leave his sexual fantasies at the office and go home to meet with some lawyers to do real work.²³⁶ All the sex that the listener just heard was all in Fred’s mind. While that acknowledgement may be a relief, Americans still had to be concerned that this perverse man made the laws of the nation. As a conclusive emphasis on this aspect, Fred, in a slightly jovial voice, says, “T.V. dinner by the pool/ I’m so glad I finished school,” before he and the group of politicians, with a stark emphasis on each word, exclaim, “Life is such a ball: I run the world from City Hall!”²³⁷ This man now enjoys the life he once hated through the sexually gratifying scenarios he can dream up in his office while he writes the restrictive laws that he knows controls the nation. The hypocrisies of the politicians of the 1960s were inexcusable: they contradicted their image in private, but held fast to their publicized morals and created repressive laws from those ideals, either to emulate their morals out of necessity, or to keep citizens from true pleasure. Many of Zappa’s contemporaries realized these double standards, and Zappa put much effort into the formation of this overtly satirical song in order to make this sad truth apparent for the rest of the country. Yet Zappa also criticized the government’s manner of addressing public unrest, and the youth’s way of conveying that unrest.

Protests

In the 1960s, mass demonstrations of protest became the method with which predominately college students and the New Left expressed their disapproval of the government’s direction, especially in regard to the war in Vietnam. In October 1965, activists declared the first International Days of Protest and held a series of demonstrative protests across the nation, which notably included the first burning of draft cards—an action that defined subsequent protests of the 1960s. Television broadcast the demonstrations to a horrified audience, and political officials deemed these protesters as “treasonous,” as well as lacking any credibility due to the conception that these students were simply acting out or under the influence of drugs.²³⁸ The government denied the legitimacy of these demonstrations. Police brutality, which already was common at the Civil Rights protests, soon became a frequent occurrence at student demonstrations. In effect, the government tried to cause the movements to lose efficacy through its spreading of conceptions of unpatriotic youth. Zappa despised the violent and demeaning treatment of the government to the youthful citizens in order to eradicate the validity of their professed issues with the government’s direction. Yet, while Zappa agreed with the goals

²³⁵ Ibid.

²³⁶ Ibid.

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Anderson, *The Sixties*, 75-76.

of the counterculture to rectify governmental ills, he disagreed with the manner in which members of the New Left protested en masse and he believed ruined the image of their message.

Zappa had many concerns about the contention between the protesting youth and the government that intentionally refused to listen. Zappa's principal target was the government, which was clearly in the wrong. He was outraged that the government did not consider the ideals of their young citizens, because the youth were soon to be the unrepresented majority in American government.²³⁹ The government instead met the youth's desires and critiques with violent measures of resistance. The government was not prepared to change in regard to the youth's desires. Instead, the government stifled free speech and the freedom to demonstrate in order to suppress these opposing sentiments and conform public conception. The state was hypocritical in its manner of addressing the concerns of its citizens in a country that developed out of revolution and the desire for equal representation. Zappa thought the government's suppressive response to sensible complaints he often shared was inexcusable. However, since Zappa believed that the rebelling youth's political response of protest was ineffective due to the government's abhorrent treatment of the youth, he criticized mass demonstrations in favor of his own idea for a means of attaining the political rectification he also desired.

In regard to demonstrations, Zappa abhorred their utilization due to what he saw as the inherent inability to correct "grievances"; he declared that a demonstration only polarized the "good guys from the bad guys," as well as served "to notify the other party that you're pissed off about something," which was redundant because "everybody's been notified already."²⁴⁰ Zappa saw demonstrations as ineffective, alienating displays that only exacerbated the political situation and feelings of division. However, Zappa wanted the youth to succeed with its aims. He proposed a solution for the youth that he believed would realize their goals effectively: instead of politically destructive protests, they needed to "become lawyers, teachers, doctors—do everything their parents did but do it better." Yet, Zappa's cynicism caused him to believe that the youth would never follow his idea, because he claimed they believed his way to be "the hard way."²⁴¹ The lack of initiative of the youth to change society in an effective manner troubled Zappa. From his perspective, they were content with their polarizing mob mentality instead of taking idiosyncratic approaches to solving the nation's issues through infiltrating the government and other social institutions and changing them from within. In effect, Zappa saw a paradox of the youth wanting change while doing nothing effective to ensure that change. Consequently, Zappa saw hypocrisy in the government and youth through their respective treatments of this political division. He faulted the government for the instigation and worsening response, as well as pitied the youth's maintenance of ineffective protest. In music, Zappa escalated the scenario into apocalyptic terms initiated by the state that suppressed the youth and its message.

Despite Zappa's references to the government's violent response to protests in "Trouble Every Day" and "Mom and Dad," and his allusions to the ineffectiveness of protest in "Plastic People" and "Flower Punk," Zappa confronted the feud between the youth and the government in "Concentration Moon" on *We're Only in It for the Money*. Zappa described the song as "a make-believe story about some very real concentration camps"—the Japanese internment camps from WWII—in which he portrays the "popular myth" that "very soon, any dissatisfied, potentially non-conforming person in the United States is about to be rounded up by the government and stashed away in these camps," including hippies, militant Blacks and Latinos,

²³⁹ Frank Zappa, interview with Bill Hoy, "An Album for Germans," *Distant Drummer*, March 1969, 14.

²⁴⁰ Frank Zappa, interview with Mike Bourne, "The Aesthetics of Freakery," *Down Beat Yearbook*, 1971, 38.

²⁴¹ Zappa, "Contemporary Music Has Message," 9-C.

and anybody who did not conform to the government's "hokum."²⁴² Even the rebelling youth were aware of the aggravating effects of the protests on the government's response, and Zappa wanted to warn the youth of the potential negative repercussions if the counterculture did not change its ways, because the government clearly had more power. Still, the main target of the song is the oppressive government. At this time, the song was "a direct statement on what [Zappa] saw as a creeping authoritarian state."²⁴³ In the song, Zappa exaggerates the increasingly volatile situation through the hypothetical creation of a dictatorial government that disposed of the nonconforming naysayers.

The first half of "Concentration Moon" begins with the charging-up of a synthesizer before the band breaks into slow song over the strums of an acoustic guitar and playful tambourine. From their detained states, the speakers sing about the "concentration moon" that they can see from their camp, and how they wish to be back in the "alley" with "all of my friends/ Still running free" and their hair "growing out/ Every hole in me."²⁴⁴ Zappa sardonically identifies the speakers as hippies whom the government has detained in a concentration camp. However, the song takes a drastic turn as the mood shifts with an electric guitar and anxious lyrics. An almost disembodied voice decries the new "American way," which started with the death of a thousand creeps in a park, and how the country is now a degenerate, authoritarian state: "Scab of a nation/ driven insane."²⁴⁵ In this alternate history, the volatile situation between the youthful rebels and the government turned into a genocide of the members of both the counterculture and the New Left, because they would not conform to the government's ideals. Even the new singer is not safe and dies at the hands of the police, as he, over upbeat drumming, childishly tells the listener not to cry, because he has to go "bye bye": "Suddenly die, die/ Cop kill a creep, pow pow pow!"²⁴⁶ Zappa ends the first half in a satirical manner, which emphasizes police brutality through this cold-blooded murder in the name of the United States government, but also quips about what he saw as the infantile nature of ineffective mass protesting.

The second half of "Concentration Moon" begins with the same verses from the detainees, but changes when the song reaches the American way verses. The disembodied voice establishes that the American way is threatened "by us"—the existence of nonconformist youth who tried to alert the rest of the country of the government's ill direction and hypocrisies—and that the government drags these people away "in a bus" to the concentration camps, which is eerily reminiscent of the trains of the Holocaust. In effect, the new American way is to detain and kill as many of these nonconformists as possible: "American way/ Prisoner lock/ Smash every creep/ In the face with a rock." The voice utters the same childish words as before and dies as the song ends.²⁴⁷ Zappa was brutal in his depiction of the escalating tensions between the counterculture and the government. He despised the government's treatment of the youth, but, at the same time, disagreed with how what he determined to be protestors' refusal to mature and address the issues present in a serious manner. While the song targets both sides, it is clear that the former is the worse perpetrator as a vicious, over-powering and conforming entity capable of mass murder, while Zappa briefly mocks the latter as trivial nincompoops both set in their ways and victims of the authoritarian state.

²⁴² Frank Zappa, interview with Studs Terkel, WFMT-FM, August 1968.

²⁴³ Lowe, *Words and Music*, 47.

²⁴⁴ The Mothers of Invention, "Concentration Moon" *We're Only in It for the Money*, V6-5045X, Verve Records, 1968.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

Summary

Through these songs, Zappa pointed out how, in the end, a nation that based its government on the principles of freedom was not afraid to take away the freedoms of others—perhaps the ultimate hypocrisy of the politics of the 1960s. In effect, Zappa and other young adults utilized their rights to their freedoms, such as free speech and expression, in order to criticize the deceptive nature of the government. Zappa employed his music to portray how political leaders lost much of their credence through their deceptive and self-serving portrayal of the country's affairs in submission to big business. At the same time, he noted how the behaviors of the political leaders contradicted their platforms, as well as restricted the freedoms of their citizens through a transfer of their own self-imposed restrictions. Finally, Zappa ridiculed the government's refusal to credit the ideals of the growing majority and the protestors' exacerbation of the situation. Still, Zappa and the youth noted flagrant hypocrisy in the politics of the era, which they both made known to average Americans, either through protest or music: American politics all around had become contrived and deplorable. Consequently, Zappa saw all of the conformist aspects of society, culture, and politics reflected in music—his passion since childhood.

IV. Music: The Sounds of Conformity

The repercussions of conformist institutions, culture, and politics resulted in a conforming consumable culture. American mass culture during the 1950s and 1960s was distinctly simple and immersive, and consequently did not receive recognition as an engaging art form like the perceptively high culture of classical music, artworks, and other media formats. This concept of an unrespected, low art created many disgruntled popular artists, like Zappa. Yet Zappa was unique in his thoughts of music, if not outright supercilious and condescending. In particular, Zappa hoped to utilize his music to show the faults of popular music in what he saw as its dangerously fabricated and misleading lyrical content and disengaging and basic musical structures. He also lamented the lack of music knowledge in the American public and the subsequent disregard for the art form. To Zappa, these flaws of the American music scene conformed the perceptions of music and inhibited the exploration of musical forms. In response, Zappa employed his music to convey his own musical and lyrical ideals in order to demonstrate new possibilities of music that broke away from standardized structures and cultural restrictions on entertainment. In a similar manner, other popular artists of the 1960s wished to elevate the status of popular culture formats that had been downplayed since the 1950s.

The elitist cultural ambience of the 1950s created stark divides in consumable culture and perpetuated the concept of a low and a high culture. Morris Dickstein described how cultural elitists maintained this divide through their “hard-and-fast cultural distinctions, exclusions, [and] hierarchies.”²⁴⁸ The elites dictated which aspects of art constituted true, high art, and labeled anything that did not conform to their guidelines as low non-art, which marred the value of popular mass culture of the 1950s, despite any intrinsic artistic value the media could have contained. In the 1960s, many popular artists began to despise these biased assessments of their

²⁴⁸ Dickstein, *Gates of Eden*, 4.

work by these haughty elites. They wished to break down the barriers of high and low culture and to prove that mass culture was an art form worthy of praise and critical analysis. Dickstein alluded to these artists' success: by the end of the 1960s, "the line between high culture and popular culture gave way," and "on some fronts was erased entirely."²⁴⁹ The most successful medium was music. While musicians had originally conformed to certain guidelines in order to achieve their terms of success as high art or mass culture, experimental musicians broke away from this banal conformity in order to remove these repressive principles of art and allow art to portray uninhibited expression, notably through the rock music of Zappa and his counterculture contemporaries.

In the 1950s, rock and roll was an important low art and popular format, because the vigorous style attracted and represented a culturally repressed youth, but in the 1960s, rock music became the most significant popular medium of the decade, due to support from the youthful counterculture. In effect, rock took on a new cultural purpose as the genre moved away from the typical, radio-friendly rock and roll single format. Dickstein argued that "rock *was* the culture of the sixties" due to the musical format's "hallmarks [of] energy and intensity," as well as the medium's representation of the "expressive, romantic, free-form" spirit of the 1960s.²⁵⁰ The format inherently embodied the ability to experiment, since there were not established preconceptions of what constituted rock music, and elitists did not impose strict guidelines which defined or controlled the creation of rock music. Rock music was inherently an anti-conformist entity in American mass culture. The unrestricted intensity of the style transformed into experimentation with the popular format, which produced new musical features that reflected the rise of the avant-garde counterculture in the mid-1960s.

Rock music mirrored the exploratory lifestyles of the counterculture searching for sensual liberation in a way that turned the genre into a complex art form that defied the strict, commercial standards of popular music and low culture. Professor of English David Pichaske explained that "by incorporating new sounds, new styles, and new instruments rock opened new worlds to the generation of the sixties."²⁵¹ Experimentation with rock music allowed for counterculture enlightenment through sound, which greatly appealed to the inquisitive nature of the rebellious youth. However, the experimentation also allowed for the artistic enhancement of rock music in a way that appealed to the elites. Pichaske further noted that "art is sometimes the only form of subversion tolerated by the uncomprehending toughs hired by the establishment to defend itself."²⁵² Therefore, with the increasing artistic attributes of rock through representative experimentation in the form of groundbreaking musical complexities and poetic lyrics, the counterculture transformed rock music into a recognized cultural tool that criticized the nation and its direction, which Zappa's music clearly accomplishes. The rise of a counterculture attempting to break away from traditions led other members of the movement to utilize rock music in a way that embodied the unrestrained lifestyles and possessed the potential to alter the conformist conception of consumable culture worldwide.

In 1966, alongside Zappa's debut album, *Freak Out!*, in June, the releases of experimental rock albums by already established and popular bands, namely The Beach Boys' *Pet Sounds* in May and The Beatles' *Revolver* in August, marked the initial transition of low

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 186.

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 185. Emphasis original.

²⁵¹ David Pichaske, *A Generation in Motion: Popular Music and Culture in the Sixties* (1979; repr., Granite Falls, MN: Ellis Press, 1989), 192.

²⁵² Ibid.

culture music into an art form reminiscent of high culture. In the context of popular rock music records, *Pet Sounds* and *Revolver* contain groundbreaking and progressive utilizations of extensive studio techniques and experimentation. Notably, these successful albums included tape manipulation and the incorporation of nonmusical sounds, classical instruments and orchestrations juxtaposed with rock music arrangements, Eastern music influences, sophisticated lyrical themes, and intricate vocal harmonies. These high concept works influenced American artists to prove to cultural elitists that rock music was a popular art format equivalent to the sacrosanct notion of high culture. While Zappa's views on music as a true art form were similar to these general sentiments of the decade, he possessed a unique outlook on the concept of high and low culture, as well as specific critiques of and ideals for popular music.

Zappa dismissed outright the distinction of a high culture and a low culture. His diction about the subject indicates that he was skeptical of such a cultural division, yet he recognized the conception and his place within the spectrum: "I composed a composite, gap-filling product to plug most of the gaps between so-called serious music and so-called popular music."²⁵³ Despite the advancements of popular rock music, Zappa felt the music scene was still lacking in terms of artistic enhancement, and that his work progressed the respectable stature of popular music further and broke down more conforming standards of popular music forms. At its roots, Zappa's music is a combination of R&B, perceptively a low-culture music, and avant-garde classical, a high culture form, but these genres held no cultural distinctions in any way for Zappa. He saw no difference between his R&B records or his avant-garde classical albums.²⁵⁴ Both styles were sincere and interesting to Zappa. Consequently, Zappa believed that because music is "a matter of expression, rather than a matter of living and dying by a certain popular style," composers should write for their "own taste" and play whatever they wanted to hear "for whatever reason."²⁵⁵ Zappa thought that music should not conform to anyone else's standards—the cultural elitists, radio, or otherwise—and should explicitly be a product of self-expression. In his own oeuvre, Zappa wanted to hear R&B and avant-garde classical together in the context of the same record, even if the attempt would not be popular.

Popular Music

Zappa criticized many aspects of popular music and its conformist implications. He detested the quality of popular music in American culture: "*Popular music* tells us something about *popular culture*, which then tells us something about *popular thought processes* (or the absence thereof)."²⁵⁶ To Zappa, popular music was devoid of any thought, because the composers conformed to the popularized ideals of mass culture; this music did not serve the self-interests of the composer, and, therefore, did not necessitate the utilization of any true compositional skills and thoughts. In fact, several years prior to Zappa's debut, SDS noted how the arts were "organized substantially according to their commercial appeal" in that "aesthetic values are subordinated to exchange values" and artists "swiftly learn to consider the commercial

²⁵³ Slaven, *Electric Don Quixote*, 43. Slaven cited a *ZigZag* magazine article entitled "The Earliest Days of The Mothers Just another Band from L.A." Probably c. 1972.

²⁵⁴ Lowe, *Words and Music*, 7-8.

²⁵⁵ Frank Zappa, interview with Florindo Volpacchio, "The Mother of all Interviews: Zappa on Music and Society," *Telos*, Spring 1991, 126.

²⁵⁶ Zappa, *The Real Frank Zappa Book*, 201. Emphasis original.

market as much as the humanistic marketplace of ideas.”²⁵⁷ The interests of mass consumerism were at the forefront of popular music and art. Consequently, Zappa believed that, in comparison to his music, popular music inherently dumbed down the listeners: “What we do is art and has a great deal of intellectualism, where most of pop is on a glandular basis.”²⁵⁸ Artistic merit was the most important aspect of music to Zappa—music should necessitate critical thinking to compose and, in effect, to engage the listeners mentally. In the end, Zappa wanted wholly interesting aspects of music that would turn people off of humdrum and disengaging popular music and onto complex music that necessitates thought. He used his own music to satirize the faults of popular music.

To Zappa, the quintessential popular song was the love song. This abundant music was simple, insincere, and pandered to the masses. In particular, Zappa reacted disdainfully to love songs, because the content was the most offensive of all popular music. He flatly stated, “**I detest ‘love lyrics.’**” and he attributed the music to “one of the causes of bad mental health in the United States,” because the music is “a subconscious training that creates a desire for an imaginary situation which will *never exist for you.*”²⁵⁹ The disingenuous musical style instilled unrealizable expectations into listeners who became dangerously hopeful. Many individuals conformed their conception of love to these falsified, idealized scenarios, which was a great hazard to their social existence, as they would not settle for less and became increasingly despondent and anxious when not satisfied. Yet the codified content was incredibly popular and sold well. Zappa satirized the love song on his first album in order to combat its appalling success and conforming impacts on the American psyche.

Notably on *Freak Out!*, Zappa employed satirical exaggeration of the love song in order to ridicule what he saw as its ridiculous and dangerous nature. He described his music on *Freak Out!* as “an abstraction of certain trends in pop music,” which he tried to make “as gross as possible, so that somewhere along the line someone could say, ‘That’s really gross.’”²⁶⁰ Zappa wanted people to listen to his blatantly hyperbolic and repulsive love songs and realize that popular tunes were just as appalling. While there are many songs on Zappa’s first album that achieve this effect, there are a few notable examples that succinctly illustrate the various detestable aspects of love songs and their negative effects on the individual, especially in regard to conceptions of love.

The first song of note is the most flagrant anti-love song on *Freak Out!*: “I Ain’t Got No Heart.”²⁶¹ Zappa curtly explained the purpose of this composition: the song is “a summary of my feelings in social-sexual relationships.”²⁶² Zappa did not believe in the notion of love as depicted in the love songs of his era. He believed that at the basis of love was the natural desire for sex, and love songs instead focused on the superfluous, romantic aspects of a monogamous relationship: the idealized element of love that would never exist because of the ever pervasive sex drive. The successful display of commercialized love inhibited American perception of raw love, as they collectively yearned for excessive intimacy. Kelly Lowe has noted that the success of this song in terms of Zappa’s goal is due to his utilization of the hackneyed musical setting of

²⁵⁷ Students, *The Port Huron Statement*, 15.

²⁵⁸ Zappa, “Contemporary Music Has Message,” 9-C.

²⁵⁹ Zappa, *The Real Frank Zappa Book*, 89. Emphasis original.

²⁶⁰ Frank Zappa, interview with Bob Levinson, “Mothers Invent Sounds Worse than Music,” *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*, July 24, 1966, F-5.

²⁶¹ As a note, “How Could I Be Such a Fool” and “Any Way the Wind Blows” also have stark anti-love sentiments.

²⁶² Frank Zappa, qtd. in the liner notes of “I Ain’t Got No Heart,” *Freak Out!*, The Mothers of Invention, V6-5005-2, Verve Records, 1966.

a love song in order to present these anti-love lyrics, and the jarring dichotomy consequently defies expectations.²⁶³ Zappa's hope was that listeners would realize the gross juxtaposition and recognize the falsehoods in popular love songs.

While the music is an alluring rock number with impelling vocals, the lyrics of "I Ain't Got No Heart" are intentionally abrasive and direct in order to display love lyrics as instruments of cultural conformity. In the song, a male narrator insists that he has "no heart to give away" to any one individual. Zappa reveals his belief that the idealized love in popular songs does not exist: "I sit and laugh at fools in love/ There ain't no such thing as love/ No angels singing up above today."²⁶⁴ Popular love songs were not a divine proclamation that should dictate the way someone displayed love—the idealized, romantic kind of love was false and conforming to popular taste. Zappa continues the assault as the narrator addresses a potential lover. He explains, "You say your heart is only mine" but "you must be blind," because there is no reason that "I would throw away the groovy life I lead" since what the lover offers "sure ain't what I need."²⁶⁵ The groovy life implies that the speaker would rather have sexual relations with multiple women. He is not satisfied with one woman as his sex drive necessitates multiple sexual relationships—a natural, human trait that popular love songs shrouded. The narrator concludes, "Why should I be stuck with you?/ It's just not what I want to do/ Why should an embrace or two/ Make me such a part of you" before the ultimate assertion that he will not give away his heart.²⁶⁶ With these blunt lyrics, Zappa ridiculed the notion of romantic, monogamous relationships; inherent sexual desire rendered monogamy impossible. Popular love songs precipitated damaging falsehoods of love, which conformed individuals to act out against their natural sex drive. Zappa visited this same idea in yet another song, but from a differing perspective.

"Go Cry on Somebody Else's Shoulder," a song co-written with Ray Collins, who had conceptualized the idea, further points to an unstoppable sex drive for the inability to realize the scenarios of popular love songs; but here, the song instead blames the ideals of mainstream culture over the sex drive itself.²⁶⁷ Zappa described the song as "very greasy" and implored that one should "wear it on your hair" instead of listening to it.²⁶⁸ This joking description is a clear reference to the plastic, consumerist mainstream culture. Despite the subject matter of this song, which largely deals with a cheating partner, the context sets the song up as a satire of consumerist culture in regard to the mainstream treatment of love.²⁶⁹ With this song, Zappa does not blame the cheating partner for the failure of the relationship, since her feelings were natural. Rather, Zappa holds liable the mainstream culture that upheld trivial values of an idealized relationship modeled on the consumerist ideals expressed in love songs.

The musical context for "Go Cry on Somebody Else's Shoulder" is a standard doo-wop love song, which again Zappa employs to his advantage as a juxtaposition to the lyrical content. The first half of the song indicates sincerity, with lyrics that deal with the speaker's dejection of his cheating partner, even though she has returned to be with him after a year: "You cheated me baby,/ And told some dirty lies about me/ Fooled around with all those other guys/ That's why I had to set you free." He responds with the titular command because he is "somewhat wiser now"

²⁶³ Lowe, *Words and Music*, 29.

²⁶⁴ The Mothers of Invention, "I Ain't Got No Heart," *Freak Out!*, V6-5005-2, Verve Records, 1966.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁷ As a note, "You Didn't Try to Call Me" has a very similar message as this song.

²⁶⁸ Frank Zappa, qtd. in the liner notes of "Go Cry on Somebody Else's Shoulder," *Freak Out!*, The Mothers of Invention, V6-5005-2, Verve Records, 1966.

²⁶⁹ Lowe, *Words and Music*, 31.

and “one whole year older.”²⁷⁰ The song seems genuine, although at odds with the musical style, and even a bit silly. Yet Zappa effectively plays on the notion of genuine, romantic relationships in order to create sympathy, if not empathy, for the man and his predicament. These feelings allow for the satirical finale that ridicules the trite and foolish relationship.

The lyrics take a turn in the second half as Zappa reveals the trivial attributes of this relationship, which he enacts through exaggerations of consumerist ideals. The relationship was based on a laughable and negligible interaction that the speaker narrates in a fond way: “I gave you my high school ring/ At the root beer stand,” which resulted in “a teenage love” that was “sharp” and “grand.” However, the partner’s betrayal was so devastating that the speaker sought comfort in getting “my khakis pressed.”²⁷¹ These lines satirize the mainstream ideals of the relationships in love songs as superficial and undesirable, yet Zappa continues to exaggerate the concept. The song concludes with a loose monologue that entails the frustration of the speaker as he cannot fathom why his girlfriend cheated on him in the first place. He had his “car re-upholstered,” his “hair processed,” noting, “I got a nice pompadour job on it,” and “bought a new pair of shoes” and “some new khakis.”²⁷² The man believes his main points of attraction are his shallow consumerist ideals. Consequently, Zappa decries this type of love as artificial and simply repulsive, and the man’s feelings of despondency in regard to his cheating ex-girlfriend become nearly insignificant since his own values are so insubstantial. Zappa portrayed how the trifling relationship of a love song is more damaging and troubling than the natural desire to have sex, even if with another partner. In effect, the man is a clear victim of conformity, whom Zappa has presented in terms and tone that ridicule mainstream listeners. But Zappa was not finished; he had still more musical commentary on the nature of popular love songs.

On *Absolutely Free*, Zappa briefly revisited the love song with “Duke of Prunes,” but although he still attacked the resulting conformity, he did so in a completely different fashion than on *Freak Out!*. Zappa described the song as a “surrealistic love song.”²⁷³ While the music is again reminiscent of a love rock song, there is no genuine love in the lyrics at all; rather, Ray Collins spontaneously ad-libbed the lyrics to sound like a love song.²⁷⁴ The whole concept mocks the idea of love songs as artistic expression and their lyrics as conformist nonsense. The entire song consists of stanzas of lyrics with undertones of love, which are just repeated iterations of the initial, silly verses: “A moonbeam through the prune/ In June/ Reveals your chest,” “I see your lovely beans,/ And in that magic go-kart,/ I bite your neck,” and “The cheese I have for you/ My dear/ Is real and very new!” As the song goes on, the tempo quickens and jovial utterances of “pa-da-dah!” and chants of “chunka” litter the ambience.²⁷⁵ These lyrics in this musical setting contradict the existence of genuine love lyrics—the concept is inherently stupid and illogical, much like these words. In effect, mainstream love songs, “The Duke of Prunes,” and later on *Absolutely Free* as a lyrical continuation, “The Duke Regains His Chops,” all emphasize surreal situations of love in songs, which Zappa declared will never exist and for which listeners should never hope. To Zappa, love songs were dangerous, yet they were prevalent on the radio. Alongside these love songs, Top 40 radio played other popular songs

²⁷⁰ The Mothers of Invention, “Go Cry on Somebody Else’s Shoulder,” *Freak Out!*, V6-5005-2, Verve Records, 1966.

²⁷¹ Ibid.

²⁷² Ibid.

²⁷³ Zappa, “Lyrics Are Absolutely Free,” 10.

²⁷⁴ Ulrich, *The Big Note*, 3.

²⁷⁵ The Mothers of Invention, “The Duke of Prunes,” *Absolutely Free*, V/V6-5013, Verve Records, 1967.

which Zappa saw as devoid of any musical purpose or lyrical meaning and denounced as another hazard of the consumable culture that conformed listeners to facile compliance.

Top 40 radio, which featured the most popular songs of all radio stations, was the bane of Zappa's existence. The incredibly simplistic, overtly commercialized songs present on these stations went against every aspect of music in which Zappa believed: to him, there was no artistic merit nor true thought put into the creation of these songs. He proclaimed, "Top 40 radio is unethical, unmusical and it stinks," and he detested the "very rigid, limited programming."²⁷⁶ To Zappa, the exclusive nature of these radio stations and their preference for disengaging and thoughtless music was unsettling; they forced the worst kind of music on to people, which had negative implications on the American conscience as they conformed to accepting only this style of music. Marshall McLuhan attested to the conforming aspect of the radio medium: "The subliminal depths of radio are charged with the resonating echoes of tribal horns and antique drums. This is inherent in the very nature of this medium, with its power to turn the psyche and society into a single echo chamber."²⁷⁷ In regard to the ill effect of music on the radio format, Zappa described typical music consumers as "trained consumers" who bought a "certain type of entertainment," and consequently possessed "no concept of music as art. Their concept of music is a Pepsi-Cola jingle."²⁷⁸ In essence, these radio stations transformed listeners into mindless consumers who did not truly appreciate the artistic merits of music; instead, they listened to commercialized Top 40 radio, which Zappa mocked in his album artwork and music in order to deter public acquiescence to this subliminal level of musical conformity.

The materialistic nature of Top 40 radio appalled Zappa. He utilized his early album artwork to combat the conception that the physical appearance of musicians was more important than artistic merit—a concept that became increasingly popular in order to sell the music within an album cover of attractive people. Zappa explained, "We were all ugly guys with weird clothes and long hair: just what the entertainment world needed. Fuck all those beautiful groups."²⁷⁹ The idea that appearance played into musical talent at all confounded Zappa, so he made sure to exemplify the weird clothes, long hair, and blatant ugliness on his album covers. *Freak Out!* features the group in vulgar apparel, with unkempt, long hair and glaring expressions; the colors of the image had been grossly distorted through solarization.²⁸⁰ *We're Only in It for the Money* also epitomized the absurd and hideous appearance of the band members: their faces are again stern and uninviting, and they now appear grotesque in drag clothing.²⁸¹ The portrayal of the band members on these album covers was inherently ugly and would repel any typical consumer. At the same time, Zappa showed that appearance was not important in the creation of exemplary music.

Within *Freak Out!*, Zappa parodied the music that he thought to be found within a beautiful album cover. He explained the satirical intentions of his bubblegum pop song "Wowie Zowie," the quintessential Top 40 radio song: the music "is carefully designed to suck the 12

²⁷⁶ Frank Zappa, interview with Don Paulsen, "Frank Zappa the Incredible Boss Mother," *Hit Parader*, June 1967, 44.

²⁷⁷ McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 261.

²⁷⁸ Frank Zappa, interview with Town Fool et al., "Zappazappazappafrankzappa," *Georgia Straight*, August 30, 1968, 11.

²⁷⁹ Zappa, *The Real Frank Zappa Book*, 79.

²⁸⁰ The Mothers of Invention, *Freak Out!*, V6-5005-2, Verve Records, 1966; Ulrich, *The Big Note*, 165. To solarize is to expose negative film to light during development.

²⁸¹ The Mothers of Invention, *We're Only in It for the Money*, V6-5045X, Verve Records, 1968.

year old listener into our camp” because the music is “cheerful” and “harmless.”²⁸² These innocuous introductory remarks intentionally mask the malicious critiques in the song and Zappa’s disdain for this typical song of Top 40 radio, which he replicates in critical exaggeration. Doyle Greene has described how the song features concepts of infantilism, such as “the rudimentary musical setting, the intentionally dumb lyrics and nonsense catchphrase title, the cloying sing-along melody, and the musical sugarcoating of tinkling tuned percussion and piano,” in order to criticize popular music in as much as the inherently juvenile style ultimately as uninteresting and disengaging.²⁸³ In this regard, Zappa believed that popular music was a damaging cultural force that conformed the populace to childish idiocy, so he parodied the ubiquitous form in order to demonstrate how dangerous the music truly was.

“Wowie Zowie” is musically uninvolved and features cheerful guitar, tambourine, and xylophone, but the lyrics again defy the ambience, as with Zappa’s love songs. Zappa employs grotesquely simplistic, yet surprising verses in the lyrical style of Top 40 radio, as well as incessant utterances of the title, in order to illustrate how tasteless this music is. An infatuated boy describes to an assumed girlfriend how her love is “a treat,” how she “can’t be beat” and is “so neat,” and consequently he does not “even care if you shave your legs.”²⁸⁴ These expressions of elementary rhymes are notably uninspired, mainstream expressions, and the ultimate line, from the conservative perspective of orthodox hygiene, becomes trivial and laughable. The narrator is facile, and quite possibly a conformed product of popular music himself. Yet the next verse is even more generic, as he describes how she is “so fine,” pleads with her to “be mine,” and exerts, “Wowie Zowie/ Up and down my spine,” and “I don’t even care if you brush your teeth.”²⁸⁵ The song’s lyrical quality quickly degrades along with the intellect of the narrator who now dismisses an essential element of basic hygiene. However, the song becomes increasingly cynical of the popular format and its implications on the listener through the insipid behavior of this boy.

The song ends in a similar, but shocking vein. The narrator gushes over how he dreams about the girl “each morning” and “each night,” but one day he “got so shook up,” because he unexpectedly dreamed of her “in the afternoon.”²⁸⁶ The scenario becomes even more mundane and comical. Effectively, Zappa parodies how popular music was just as expressive and thoughtful in those lyrics as in his own. The narrator tells the girl how she should “love me do,” because he will “love you, too,” “be true,” and does not “even care if your dad’s the heat.”²⁸⁷ The simple and awkward rhyming returns, but the boy’s intentions become sinister as he disregards that the girl’s father is a police officer. At this point in the song, listeners realize that these characters clearly are not in a relationship, which makes the innocent, rhyming assertions creepy and almost threatening. Yet there is no conclusion to the scenario. The song ends with utterances of “Wowie Zowie” to the melody of The Four Seasons’ “Sherry” (1962), a stock popular song of the time. In effect, Zappa’s music becomes “a song the listener has literally heard before with different lyrics and a generic melody that can be show-horned into any musical setting.”²⁸⁸ Seemingly innocent popular music turns out to be just as dangerous as the mind-numbing, yet

²⁸² Frank Zappa, qtd. in the liner notes of “Wowie Zowie,” *Freak Out!*, The Mothers of Invention, V6-5005-2, Verve Records, 1966.

²⁸³ Greene, *Rock, Counterculture and the Avant-Garde*, 88.

²⁸⁴ The Mothers of Invention, “Wowie Zowie,” *Freak Out!*, V6-5005-2, Verve Records, 1966.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁸ Greene, *Rock, Counterculture and the Avant-Garde*, 89.

starkly ambiguous sentiments in Zappa's take on the Top 40 radio staple. While the concept of this parody is intricate, Zappa takes another jab at Top 40 radio in an oversimplistic, characteristic manner.

Later on *Freak Out!*, in stark contrast to "Wowie Zowie," "Help, I'm a Rock" exemplifies what Zappa considered the simplicity and ridiculousness of popular music and lyrics through what he believed to be a literal representation of popular music. Zappa cynically dedicated the song to Elvis Presley—perhaps the most significant influence on popular rock music—and satirically implored the listeners to note "the interesting formal structure and the stunning four-part barber shop harmony," as well as "the obvious lack of commercial potential."²⁸⁹ This dichotomy of the most marketable rock musician of the 1950s without commercial potential is humorous, but alludes to the purpose of this zany song. The song is not very interesting musically, which purposely contradicts Zappa's introduction. Kelly Lowe has described the song as "repeated figures, lack of melodies, random noise, spoken-word texts, and processed vocals."²⁹⁰ These elements of the song, despite its dedication to a popular music icon, go against the concept of marketable music. However, through this ironic reversal, Zappa displayed how this song is just as tasteless as popular music. The song acts as a popular format through the gross exemplifications of how a popular song sounds to the trained ear.

The duration of "Help, I'm a Rock" is 8:37 and Zappa subtitled the song as a "Suite in Three Movements" on the label: both of these aspects contradict the simple, two-minute-long popular song format. The first movement features a consistent drum rhythm and a repeated guitar lick that continues into the bass. Sporadic voices sing, moan, and chant gibberish that do not resemble any words.²⁹¹ In essence, this elementary playing and lyrical nonsense resemble popular music in its truest form according to Zappa: uninspired musical babble that breeds American conformity.

After a brief interlude of a screech and feedback, which Zappa sampled from "Who Are the Brain Police?" the song enters the second movement, which is musically the same, but coherent words join the gibberish. While these words are typically nonsensical and surreal, there are moments where the lyrics become vaguely politicized. For example, the screams of "Help, I'm a rock!" become "Help, I'm a cop!" and a voice rambles about the fear of social rejection.²⁹² In this gross exaggeration of the popular song format, the irrational rambling is still more meaningful than the lyrics of a tactically structured popular song.

An inserted sexual section from "The Return of the Son of Monster Magnet" announces the final movement, which focuses on the grotesquely dissonant and exaggerated harmonies of a cappella singing. The words are still somewhat unintelligible, but become increasingly politicized as they deal with social rejection of the counterculture from the perspective of mainstream society. The group incessantly asserts, "It can't happen here!" while the singers sardonically mock society's fear of the counterculture, as well as babble about social ignorance due to the pretentious, consumerist lifestyle.²⁹³ Zappa utilized a poorly crafted and unpopular music format to formulate a surreal indictment of mainstream social behavior, which in the context of a critique of popular music consequently lampoons that medium's inability to be

²⁸⁹ Frank Zappa, qtd. in the liner notes of "Help, I'm a Rock," *Freak Out!*, The Mothers of Invention, V6-5005-2, Verve Records, 1966.

²⁹⁰ Lowe, *Words and Music*, 35.

²⁹¹ The Mothers of Invention, "Help, I'm a Rock," *Freak Out!*, V6-5005-2, Verve Records, 1966.

²⁹² *Ibid.*

²⁹³ *Ibid.*

remotely significant and meaningful. Through this reversal of the popular music format, Zappa showed the faults of popular music and displayed its insignificance as consumable culture in gnarled fashion. To Zappa, listening to disengaging music by his definition bred stupidity. Yet Zappa also had concerns about the negative social treatment of music that was inherently unique and engaging.

American Attitudes toward Music

American inexperience with intricate, thought-provoking music appalled Zappa, who attributed this predicament to the education system. He explained that “most of the kids are not equipped to listen. The schools haven’t prepared them. Music appreciation as taught in the schools is garbage.”²⁹⁴ Because music education in school was not satisfactory to Zappa, youth did not have enough knowledge of music to be able to appreciate it completely. Students could not recognize nor comprehend the structural or lyrical complexities that make music interesting. Zappa believed that American disregard for music was most apparent in the context of a live performance. He initially saw many of his spectators as present not for the appreciation of the music, but rather to be part of a crowd. In other words, a lack of music knowledge condoned conformity in the name of the music scene, which certainly irked Zappa. He chastised the “phony people in blue Velour sweatshirts and Poor Boy sweaters” who were “trying so hard to be cool and think they are so in” by attending rock music concerts in order “to be discovered.”²⁹⁵ While this sentiment may be overly cynical and cruel, Zappa felt this way because he took offense when people did not care about his original, complex content, and instead requested the popular hits, namely “Louie Louie.”²⁹⁶ Zappa lambasted American naivety of music and their exploitation of an intellectual music scene through his studio recordings, which both lyrically and musically take place in the context of a live performance.

On *Freak Out!*, Zappa employed “You’re Probably Wondering Why I’m Here” as a way to criticize American musical illiteracy through brutal, direct attacks on youthful audience members. Interestingly enough, this composition was the only track on the album to which Zappa did not attribute a note inside the gatefold. Perhaps the intention was a cynical joke in order to leave the listener in the dark, like the ignorant audience members Zappa portrays in the song. This measure may seem like a harsh attack on his fans, but Kevin Courier, in relation to this song, has emphasized Zappa’s desired interaction between the band and the audience members. Zappa believed that “buying a record or going to hear the Mothers play was not a license to be coddled by the band”; rather his critiques of the audience should make “them demand more from their favorite artists than they had come to accept.”²⁹⁷ Zappa wanted music fans to be active listeners and mentally to interact with the band and their music at all times—music was more than simple entertainment or background noise, and definitely was not to be regarded as a part of American conformity. Zappa employed this song to mock those who came to his shows for any reason other than to concentrate on his music, chiefly the youth who came in order to appear cool.

²⁹⁴ Frank Zappa, interview with Lorraine Alterman, “Head Mother Speaks,” *Fifth Estate*, December 1, 1967, n.p.

²⁹⁵ Zappa, “Look out Plastic People,” 2.

²⁹⁶ Frank Zappa, interview with Dan Foote et al., “Zappa: An Interview,” *New Times*, April 18, 1973, 2.

²⁹⁷ Courier, *Dangerous Kitchen*, 95.

“You’re Probably Wondering Why I’m Here” is a straightforward amalgamation of rock and doo-wop, along with the satirical kazoo, which attacks deplorable aspects of Zappa’s oblivious listeners. Throughout the song, Zappa remarks, “You’re probably wondering why I’m here,/ And so am I—so am I!” which precedes his direct attacks on the audience.²⁹⁸ The verse indicates the indifference of the audience to the performing band, as they search for social elevation, as well as the scathing annoyance of a performing vocalist to an audience who does not understand the music, let alone care to listen. In general, the remaining verses critique those audience members who reveal characteristics of the mainstream culture as they completely disregard any musical originality or complexities in a performance.

Zappa exaggerates the reason for the audience’s presence as if they were there only for popularity, much in accordance with his “cool person syndrome.” Zappa directly ridicules the materialistic endeavors of his audience—the “lameness on your face.” He mocks, “You spray your hair and think you’re neat/ I think your life is incomplete,” as well as derides their choice to wear make-up and “plastic” apparel in order to go out to a “cheesy bar,” especially if only to “meet the gang where the action is.”²⁹⁹ Again, to Zappa image was not important in any musical atmosphere, especially if the goal was for other audience members to notice another’s appearance while in the decidedly “cool” social scene. Zappa also mocks the “corny things” they do and the insipid “social games” they play. He taunts, “Stomp all night and drink your fizz/ Roll your car and say ‘Gee whiz!’” and “told your mom you’re stoked on Tom/ And went for a cruise in Freddy’s car/ Tommy’s asking where you are.”³⁰⁰ To Zappa, these people led inauthentic, laughable lives and contributed nothing to the musical environment of a live concert—they were not worthy to be part of the audience. Zappa concludes, “You’re probably wondering Why I’m here.../ Not that it makes a heck of a lot of a difference to ya.”³⁰¹ In the end, these youth did not mind who was playing as long as there was background music for their trivial social interactions, as a deplorable part of mass culture to Zappa. In effect, he claimed that, while the youth made the effort to see a live performance, they were present simply out of their own self-preservation in the social hierarchy. Yet Zappa also abhorred the idea of music as pure background noise, not even part of a “cool” scene.

While “You’re Probably Wondering Why I’m Here” targeted the youth who came to concerts for the social climate, Zappa utilized “America Drinks” and “America Drinks & Goes Home” together on *Absolutely Free* in order to criticize the adult music scene. Zappa noted that the former song is “an abstraction (in advance of) the set of lyrics which close side two,”³⁰² so here the essay will focus on the latter version, which completes his critique. Zappa explained how the music “is an unsubtle parody of adult conduct in neighbourhood cocktail lounges in America,” of which Zappa critiques three elements: “the type of music your parents like to listen to”; the “insincerity” of the music; and, especially, the extremely disrespectful “manner in which the audience persists in talking above the level of the music while it is being performed.”³⁰³ Zappa thought cocktail lounges were the worst venue for live performance and spread musical simplicity at an alarming rate for all involved, performers and listeners alike. In order to exemplify this aspect, Doyle Greene entailed that Zappa employed a unique recording technique

²⁹⁸ The Mothers of Invention, “You’re Probably Wondering Why I’m Here,” *Freak Out!*, V6-5005-2, Verve Records, 1966.

²⁹⁹ Ibid.

³⁰⁰ Ibid.

³⁰¹ Ibid.

³⁰² Zappa, “Lyrics Are Absolutely Free,” 11.

³⁰³ Ibid., 12.

in which he mocks “a lounge number recorded to replicate a live recording replete with loud audience and ambient bar noises.”³⁰⁴ The song sounds like an authentic recording from a lounge bar, and while the track is not an enjoyable listen, the content is humorous, entertaining, and enlightening to Zappa’s notion of American disregard for music in regard to mass culture.

In contrast to most of Zappa’s music, the lyrics are the least important part of the song. Zappa briefly exhibits his first two critiques in the “special request” within the song’s lounge context, which turns out to be a variation on the cliché, uninspired love song of “America Drinks”: “I tried to find how my heart could be so blind/ Dear, how could I be fooled just like the rest.”³⁰⁵ The presentation is lackluster and drab, as the singer realizes the obtrusive bar ambience overpowers his own words; in effect, he becomes indifferent to his own performance. The obnoxious and disruptive bar ambience displays the disrespect to the struggling musician and the apathy of Americans to music to regard it as background noise.

The jarring sounds that come from the bar become the point of focus of “America Drinks & Goes Home” as they drown out the sappy love lyrics and mundane performance. The cash register rings nearly every second, loud, insensible chattering and exclamations come from the bar, glasses clink, and, in the background, there are indications of a rowdy bar fight.³⁰⁶ This scene is not atypical for a bar, and certainly does the performance an injustice—the whole song ridicules disrespect for music. To accentuate this feature, the monotone and apathetic closing dialogue of the night-club crooner ends the song as he insincerely talks over the noises of the bar. He wryly hopes the audience has “had as much fun as we have” and that “we’ve played your requests: the songs you like to hear,” reminds them of upcoming, inane events, such as a “jam session,” a “xylophone troupe,” a “dance contest night,” at which the bar will provide “peanut butter, jelly, and baloney sammiches for all of you,” and announces the last call for alcohol. He quickly makes small talk with “Bob” and takes a request for next week of Duke Ellington’s 1937 jazz standard, “Caravan,” but with a “drum sola.”³⁰⁷ However, this dull dialogue is exactly what one would expect in this environment of apathy, and Zappa thus effectively mocks the entire musical venue. According to Zappa, Americans were blind in their approach to music: the performance became a background feature to the environment of the lounge bar. Zappa was disgusted. He knew that American music and the attitude towards the consumable medium had to change, so he employed elements of his own music to provide solutions for the insufferable situation and as a way to repel the elements of conformity which had seeped into popular music.

Zappa’s Solutions

While Zappa critiqued and parodied much of the popular music scene and illuminated the downfalls, he employed aspects of his own music as an influential resolution of anti-conformity. Zappa strove to infuse elements of experimental, complicated, thought-provoking music into a popular rock music format. With this intricate type of music, he hoped to defy the listener’s expectations of mainstream music in order to stimulate individualist thought that would induce movement away from the prescribed and glorified set of simplistic, mainstream music ideals.³⁰⁸

³⁰⁴ Greene, *Rock, Counterculture and the Avant-Garde*, 98.

³⁰⁵ The Mothers of Invention, “America Drinks & Goes Home,” *Absolutely Free*, V/V6-5013, Verve Records, 1967.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁸ Lowe, *Words and Music*, 15.

Zappa hoped to change the music on the radio forever: out with the conformist and thought-limiting popular music; in with inherently complicated and expressive music. Zappa was well aware that this goal was herculean—one musician could not solely confront and dismantle the powerful consumable culture industry. Yet Zappa thought that just to express this sentiment and to get people to realize that there was more music than just what the radio played was sufficient.³⁰⁹ In a vein similar to The Beatles and The Beach Boys, Zappa released complicated, high concept music that featured erudite and experimental elements that he believed popular music should replicate in lieu of commodifiable ideals.

The logistical construction of Zappa's albums demonstrate his hope for more intelligent approaches to music composition that would defy standardized popular music. For example, inside the gatefold of *Freak Out!*, Zappa included a list of nearly 200 individuals who had influenced the music on the album. He cited classical avant-garde composers, contemporary musicians of various genres, famous authors, personal influences on his life, and other noteworthy people.³¹⁰ In essence, Zappa showed how music composition was a complex, strategic, and thorough process: music possesses crucial cultural roots. Further, Zappa often employed classical musical technique throughout his work and incorporated musical quotes of famous songs, both in name and practice, including the works of these cited influences. As we have seen, some quotes changed the meaning of the song, but at other times, Zappa simply referenced a distinctly high culture song, because he liked the music and wanted to introduce listeners to classical music structures. The first side of *Absolutely Free* especially features many quotes and complexities, notably on the instrumental "Invocation and Ritual Dance of the Young Pumpkin," which highlights the distinguishable French horn solo from Gustav Holst's "Jupiter, Bringer of Jollity" from *The Planets* (1918).³¹¹ Zappa's desired result was to portray the intelligent potential of popular music, as well as to turn listeners on to sophisticated music away from the humdrum of radio.

The sophisticated, conceptual construction of his albums broke many boundaries in terms of the contrived limitations of the record format and popular music. In fact, Zappa's approach to the vinyl record and the included music was reminiscent of Bertolt Brecht's approach to theater. Like Brecht, Zappa wanted people to realize that consumable culture was not an immersive escape from reality; rather, it should be engaging and provocative in order to stimulate critical thinking. Zappa employed revolutionary techniques on his albums that enact this sentiment. While there are several examples, including the ever-present Suzy Creamcheese, who breaks the boundaries across all three independent musical releases, and Zappa's sampling of his own music across songs, the most noteworthy instances occur on *We're Only in It for the Money*. In a style of "Brechtian inner-commentary," Zappa sporadically placed cynical, echoing whispers from engineer Gary Kellgren between songs, as well as in the middle of songs.³¹² These comments consistently remind listeners that they are listening to a disposable and controllable medium format, and thus effectively destroy the immersive illusion. Kellgren's comments at the end of "Are You Hung Up?" are the most jarring:

³⁰⁹ Gray, *Mother!*, 66.

³¹⁰ Frank Zappa, in the liner notes of "These People Have Contributed Materially in Many Ways to Make our Music What It Is: Please Do Not Hold It Against Them," *Freak Out!*, The Mothers of Invention, V6-5005-2, Verve Records, 1966.

³¹¹ Ulrich, *The Big Note*, 5. Ulrich notes innumerable instances of Zappa's musical quotations throughout his book.

³¹² Greene, *Rock, Counterculture and the Avant-Garde*, 106.

One of these days I am going to erase all the tape in the world. Tomorrow I may do it— all the Frank Zappa Masters: nothing. Blank, empty space. That's what they are now: blank, empty space. Oh, I know he's sitting in there, in the control room now, listening to everything I say, but I really don't care. Hello, Frank Zappa!³¹³

This blatant exploitation of the album format layout obliterated the façade of a starkly repressive medium and gave rise to new possibilities in popular music. The experimental play with the medium anticipated how much more innovative rock groups could become with their own works. In fact, Zappa utilized several more musical innovations within the structures of his songs.

In terms of Zappa's music, the high concept musical structures and meshing of styles enacted his notion of the scholarly popular musical form that contradicted simplistic, radio-friendly tunes. His music combined elements of high and low culture, both in the context of a popular record, but even more importantly in the context of a single song. "Who Are the Brain Police?" is the most indicative example, with the composition's highly avant-garde and experimental tendencies that merge with the stock format of a popular song, and all of which greatly add to the song's meaning—a revolutionary piece in 1966. In *Absolutely Free*, Zappa utilized incredibly complicated time signatures, notably on "Son of Suzy Creamcheese," which took a year for the band to learn. He illustrated, "It's four bars of 4/4, one bar of 8/8, one bar of 9/8—OK? And then it goes 8/8, 9/8, 8/8, 9/8, 8/8, 9/8, then it goes 8/8, 4/8, 5/8, 6/8, and back into 4/4 again."³¹⁴ These rhythmic complexities never before appeared in the setting of popular music that largely remained in one time signature. Further, with *Absolutely Free*, excluding "Plastic People," all the songs on the first side of the album flow together through extended, improvisational soloing and thematic continuations across the songs.³¹⁵ There is no clear break between these compositions, which inherently defies the quick, sporadic style of Top 40 radio. The intrinsic characteristics of Zappa's compositional method created elaborate and prodigious works that helped pave the way for the elevation of popular music and the suppression of radio conformity. All of these logistical, conceptual, and structural characteristics climaxed in Zappa's finale to his third album.

"The Chrome Plated Megaphone of Destiny" is the culminating avant-garde rock and *musique concrète* piece of *We're Only in It for the Money*, and demonstrates Zappa's ideals for high concept and individualist popular music. The innovative and cacophonous instrumental defies all rigid conceptions of structure—or even of music itself. The composition features the use of extremely experimental studio techniques to achieve a desired horror ambience, and employs those sounds to give significant meaning to the song. Zappa based the music on the intellectual short story "In the Penal Colony" (1919) by Franz Kafka, which focuses on a machine that rectifies prisoners of a totalitarian state through a torturous process that inscribes the violated commandment into their backs. In the liner notes, Zappa urges listeners first to read the story. He then twists its meaning according to his music; he reminds listeners of the Japanese internment camps and the myth of their use as the "FINAL SOLUTION to the NON-CONFORMIST (hippy?) PROBLEM today." Zappa implores listeners to imagine themselves, as they listen, to be in one of these concentration camps—dubbed Camp Reagan—and about to be subjected to a machine reminiscent of the story. He ends the note with the warning that "YOUR

³¹³ Mothers of Invention, "Are You Hung Up?"

³¹⁴ Zappa, "The Mothers of Invention (Part 1)," 17.

³¹⁵ The Mothers of Invention. *Absolutely Free*. V/V6-5013, Verve Records, 1967.

CRIME will be carved on your back.”³¹⁶ The instrumental becomes a musical indictment of the unjustifiable political treatment of the counterculture, as well as a warning to that counterculture, in a way that defied all preconceived notions of music as entertainment.

The disorderly composition is intentionally abrasive and unsettling in order to create an interconnected and intellectual experience. The song sounds as follows: a quiet drone climaxes into a jumble of frantic notes from atonal pianos; electronic effects of *musique concrète* replace the pianos with a collage of incessant pops, clicks, and obnoxious screeches; droning and oscillating woodwinds accompany the *musique concrète*, while manipulated samples of unearthly laughter, yips, and screams sporadically interject the cacophony. The noises culminate with a drone of the woodwinds that turn into light hisses. A collage of disturbing, sardonic laughter erupts, while the *musique concrète* returns and transforms into sinister, oscillating hisses and chirps, as well as distinctly mechanical noises, all of various pitches. The laughter gives way to simultaneous, dissonant bursts of various stringed and percussion instruments, but quickly degenerate into sporadic notes distinctly out of time. Electronic thumps and crashes interject the notes. The song ends with abrupt mechanical squeals and a light drone, which indicate the loss of mechanical power.³¹⁷ The composition is not pleasant to hear and musically represents well Zappa’s apocalyptic scenario—the song is meant to frighten listeners.

The nature of the song has a stark effect on listeners in comparison to typical music of the time. Zappa’s context reverses the roles of music and listener; the music targets the listeners in order to cause sensory pain in relation to his message. Doyle Greene has explained how Zappa utilized the piece to break the entertaining illusion of music. He called the song “Zappa’s attempt to sonically represent the torture machine in operation with the torture being inflicted on the listener,” and Greene points to the laughs, which specifically appear to be directed at the listeners.³¹⁸ In effect, “The Chrome Plated Megaphone of Destiny” demolishes all expectations of immersive, entertaining popular music: musical conception should be intelligent, structures should be fluid, and the medium should be interactive. In sum, Zappa thought that these characteristics should work together to defy mainstream conceptions and the simple, mainstream standards of listeners and musicians alike. Despite Zappa’s stark focus on musical aspects, he also had commentary on the nature of lyrics.

As noted with his parodies, Zappa detested the inauthentic, simplistic, and consumerist-dominated lyrics of popular music. Zappa’s notion for ideal lyrics were those that truthfully represented the contemporary predicaments of society—similar to folk music of the 1960s. Naturally, Zappa practiced this sentiment throughout his music as a measure to combat lyrical conformity. He contended that, while a minority of his lyrics can count as political theater, a majority of his words are an amateur form of anthropology.³¹⁹ Zappa’s lyrics are significant in that they always comment on his environment. In particular, Zappa illustrated how he came up with his evocative lyrics: “I deal with incidents, real historical incidents from my past which relate to the problems of bizarre individuals in the context of a very unpleasant society.”³²⁰ He

³¹⁶ Frank Zappa, qtd. in the liner notes of “The Chrome Plated Megaphone of Destiny,” *We’re Only in It for the Money*, V6-5045X, Verve Records, 1968. Emphasis original. Future President Ronald Reagan was the Governor of California at this time.

³¹⁷ The Mothers of Invention, “The Chrome Plated Megaphone of Destiny,” *We’re Only in It for the Money*, V6-5045X, Verve Records, 1968.

³¹⁸ Greene, *Rock, Counterculture and the Avant-Garde*, 109.

³¹⁹ Zappa, *The Real Frank Zappa Book*, 142-143.

³²⁰ Frank Zappa, interview with John Bryan, “Frank’s Favourite Topic: Creeps Are the Backbone of this Country,” *Open City*, December 22-28, 1967, 8.

simply emphasized what he perceived in his own country through his music, especially with his more direct songs such as “Trouble Coming Every Day.” Notably, Zappa utilized two songs on *We’re Only in It for the Money* to portray his conception of proper lyrics: “Let’s Make the Water Turn Black” relates to the bizarre individuals, while “The Idiot Bastard Son” illuminates the context of Zappa’s idea for an unpleasant society.

“Let’s Make the Water Turn Black” and “The Idiot Bastard Son” work together as an exhibition of representative lyrics, no matter how absurd and uncommercial the words may seem. Zappa based the songs on the activities of Ronnie and Kenny, whom he knew in 1962. They admitted to Zappa of the many absurdities that they conducted in their free time, including “The Manly Art Of Fart-Burning,” having competitions of “*booger-smearage*” on a window, and urinating in mason jars, which they eventually had dumped into a crock in which strange creatures grew.³²¹ Zappa recorded all of these events and others in both songs. He contended that Ronnie and Kenny were, in fact, the “real backbone of the country.”³²² To Zappa, these brothers inherently represented the United States in all honesty, because their actions went against mainstream elements of American society. The duo did not care about how their peers perceived them: they were the ultimate non-conformists. Similar to the societal awareness of a folk song, Zappa’s music commented on the perceptively unacceptable behaviors of Ronnie and Kenny in the detestable aspects of contemporary society.³²³ Zappa employed these songs to emphasize how these genuine occurrences were left out of popular music in favor of idealized fabrications that conform the nation to unrealistic expectations.

“Let’s Make the Water Turn Black” specifically comments on the unbelievable actions of Ronnie and Kenny. Zappa emphasizes the lyrics in a half sung, half spoken story format over a basic drum rhythm and guitar strums. In order to combat the improbable nature of the lyrics, Zappa announces, “Now believe me when I tell you that my song is really true” and that he wants “everyone to listen and believe.”³²⁴ He recognizes the shock value of these events and how listeners would not believe them, so he includes this disclaimer to assert their validity. Zappa continues with the lyrical set-up of a typical, middle-class family, but then he lists the very true actions of Ronnie and Kenny: “Whizzing and pasting and pooting through the day/ Ronnie helping Kenny helping burn his poots away!” as well as references “Kenny’s little creatures on display,” and how “Ronnie saves his numies on a window in his room/ A marvel to be seen: dysentery green.”³²⁵ Zappa’s lyrics directly reflect the history of his friends, but are so absurd that the words themselves seem fake. Ironically, a falsified popular song becomes more believable than these actions. Yet Zappa explains how the neighbors watched these actions every night, and how “I bet you’d do the same if they was you,” before he concludes, “Ronnie’s in the army now, and Kenny’s taking pills.”³²⁶ Despite the unbelievable aspects of the actions of these everyday people, the listener still enjoys hearing them, much like the lyrics of popular music; however, these lyrics are true whereas popular lyrics are not, an observation upon which Zappa expands in the following track.

“The Idiot Bastard Son” puts the characters of the preceding track into a surreal social environment that represents issues of the United States, but through even more unbelievable

³²¹ Zappa, *The Real Frank Zappa Book*, 85-87. Emphasis original.

³²² Zappa, “Frank’s Favourite Topic,” 8.

³²³ Courrier, *Dangerous Kitchen*, 140.

³²⁴ The Mothers of Invention, “Let’s Make the Water Turn Black,” *We’re Only in It for the Money*, V6-5045X, Verve Records, 1968.

³²⁵ Ibid.

³²⁶ Ibid.

lyrics. The music features intricate and avant-garde aspects as to represent the complexities and absurdities of the context: changing time signatures, a wah-wah guitar, and disruptive elements, including mournful snarls of the titular character. The song largely deals with the plight of the “idiot bastard son,” whose “father’s a nazi in congress today” and “mother’s a hooker somewhere in L.A.”³²⁷ These lyrics are even more absurd, yet are clearly an enigmatic, exaggerated critique of American society. Zappa brings back Ronnie and Kenny, who raise the “idiot bastard son” until he is old enough to live in the “the world/ Of liars and cheaters and people like you.”³²⁸ Zappa grounds this surreal environment in reality by this direct comparison of the song’s climate to what he saw as the insincere listeners of reality. He continues with a challenge to understand the song’s meaning: “You think you know everything—maybe so/ The song we sing: Do you know?”³²⁹ Despite Zappa’s blatant declaration of truthfulness, as well as the direct comparison that establishes these lyrics in reality, this cynical assault mocks how listeners are so familiar with fabricated lyrical topics that they will still assume Zappa’s songs to be false. The inherent irony of a listener not believing Zappa’s truthful lyrics show how romanticized popular music had conformed people to defy the existence of these ordeal realities. Zappa lamented falsified lyrics as a harmful, conforming entity, and he professed the notion of lyrics grounded in reality, a manifestation of individuality, such that of Ronnie and Kenny.

Summary

Zappa’s critiques and ideals of music were trendsetting in the context of the 1960s. While he agreed with the desire for popular music to be recognized as a bona fide art form, Zappa wanted the medium to be deserving of that classification. He derided the contemporary state of popular music as simplistic, disingenuous, and disengaging—there was no musical merit inherent within these detestable traits—while Americans shamefully did not care or know about music as he believed they should. Zappa believed that the contemporary state of popular music had helped to conform listeners to blissful apathy. Alongside other bands of the 1960s that experimented and heightened the complexity of music, Zappa wished for intrinsically intelligent approaches in music composition that would naturally elevate the status of popular music and encourage more individualist and expressive music. Zappa’s complex, engaging songs demonstrated the structural and lyrical integrity that displayed his musical and lyrical ideals for the country. Along with his innovative contemporaries, Zappa influenced and continues to influence popular musicians to create ever more compelling music and break down the barriers of mainstream restrictions.

Legacy and Contemporary Relevance

In the 1960s, Zappa’s music was a radical cultural entity. Zappa utilized the songs on his record albums in order to convey complex ideas about the contemporary state of the United States, which encouraged musicians to produce albums in similar ways. While Zappa took

³²⁷ The Mothers of Invention, “The Idiot Bastard Son,” *We’re Only in It for the Money*, V6-5045X, Verve Records, 1968.

³²⁸ Ibid.

³²⁹ Ibid.

idiosyncratic approaches to numerous aspects of aspects of American society, culture, politics, and music, all of his critiques worked together to critique pervasive conformity in the nation and champion the solution of individuality.

Akin to members of the counterculture and other rebelling youths, Zappa abhorred social institutions that dictated societal norms: inadequate schooling, restrictive parenting, and manipulative mass media conformed the lives of citizens to a state of compliance and consumerism. These social influences resulted in a conformist culture that defied self-expression. The counterculture and Zappa agreed on individuality as the fundamental element of a healthy culture. However, Zappa professed the notion of mental liberation, primarily through ending the cultural stigma of all sexual acts, as the best manner to achieve this effect. He deplored the conformist ideals of the counterculture (especially hippies) who almost exclusively attempted to achieve sensual liberation through guilt-free sex, mind-altering substances, and peace-touting Zen religion. Further, Zappa's attack on politics reflected growing sentiments of the time: American politics lost credence as everyday lies and hypocrisies became increasingly apparent in terms of government actions and the behaviors of politicians. Zappa also focused on the clashes between the government and protestors, and he noted the increasing dangers of a too powerful state that protestors exacerbated without solving any social ills. Finally, elements of conformity seeped into mass culture and popular music, which Zappa found to be especially devoid of creative thought and individuality and further instill public ignorance. Zappa employed his own music to call out and expose these inherent features of popular music, as well as to display the erudite possibilities of the truly unbounded, artistic format. Consequently, Zappa's musical method to demonstrate these concepts had a lasting impression on the capabilities of rock music and encapsulated his lasting impressions of the United States and the tendency of conformity.

Primarily, Zappa's lyrical and musical concepts often complemented each other in order to reveal his scathing critiques or endearing solutions, which Zappa made accessible through his extensive employment of critical satire—a concept never before heard in popular music. However, the mainstream consumer largely ignored these initial albums at the time of their release: they did not purchase the experimental albums, especially since the songs received no airplay on the radio. Despite the poor sales, Zappa's music initiated new possibilities with rock music. Through his early, radical musical concepts, Zappa anticipated genres that were able to dilute and thereby normalize the then uncommercial elements of Zappa's music into massive consumable cultural products. These new genres inherently defied the conformist aspects of popular music, due to their inspiration from Zappa.

Musicians began to make music in tune with Zappa's original efforts that further broke fallacious boundaries of consumable culture in a more popular format. Alongside The Beatles and The Beach Boys, Zappa's more complex and avant-garde arrangements, including the first side of *Absolutely Free* and "The Chrome Plated Megaphone of Destiny," bolstered the burgeoning concept of rock music as an art form, which gave way to progressive rock music groups of the late 1960s through the 1970s. While Zappa's works were too abrasive for commercial appeal, groups such as Emerson, Lake, and Palmer; Pink Floyd; and Jethro Tull took the concept of artistic, thought-provoking musical structures and formulated appealing and intricate rock music compositions that often followed classical structures and utilized extensive instrumentation. These works contradicted short and basic music singles, yet the bands' musical appeal increased with acceptance over time, and their lengthy songs became radio staples. Popular music stations slowly began to incorporate engaging and progressive works that did not comply with the consumerist standards of the 1960s. In comparison to Zappa's uncommercial

music, these progressive rock bands marketed their material in order to receive airplay. However, Zappa's influence is evident, and their successful existence has attested to his success in this realm of musical complexity.

At the same time, along with contemporaries of the late 1960s such as The Stooges and MC5, Zappa's lyrics encouraged the formation of punk rock in the mid-1970s through the cynical attitudes expressed in his albums such as in his anti-love songs on *Freak Out!*, "Concentration Moon," and "Trouble Every Day." Foundational groups, including the Ramones, the Sex Pistols, and The Clash, featured heavily politicized lyrics that attacked the social systems. While Zappa's lyrics were exceptionally brash, condemnatory, and abrasive, punk rockers were able to take his approach and apply it in a way that would appeal to a mass market. Punk rock concerts and public images reflected the attitudes that not only defined the genre through the music's energetic and abrasive hard-rocking style, but also engendered its acceptance as overtly critical and subversive. The music and attitudes were enjoyable in that intense context—listeners expected the critiques, instead of how Zappa had strewn his own throughout various musical styles of his albums. In effect, subversive and realistic lyrics became more accepted and permeated throughout the radio, much like Zappa had attempted to instigate ten years earlier. Punk music on the radio effectively combatted those conforming American entities that Zappa had identified. Yet during the 1970s with the increasing acceptance of progressive rock and punk rock, Zappa's music became less radical and experimental in an attempt to secure a living as a musician, while he continued to rely on his old content to spread his critiques of conformity and ideals of individuality.

During the 1970s, Zappa achieved national recognition and monetary success through a fitting manner in regard to his cultural ideals. Zappa's musical landscape became more accessible in order to feature absurd and extensive sex scenes and other raunchy themes, which greatly appealed to teenagers and young adults. Zappa's music attracted the sexually repressed youth, and his light-hearted portrayal of these sexual themes possessed the ability to help end stigmatized sexual actions in the future of American society. Yet early fans noted the change in lyrical direction. In 1977, in response to questions about the thematic movement away from his early content, Zappa declared that he was "a very thorough individual," noted that new fans "will probably work backwards in time" and hear the critiques of his early content, and believed that there was no need "to keep spouting the same information." In response to if he had any new political points, Zappa asserted, "I've made my political points. They haven't changed. They still don't change. They won't change," and he declared, "Once you've said brown shoes don't make it, and the people that pass your laws are all perverted, and all the rest of that stuff, what have you gotta say?"³³⁰ Zappa believed that his early work encapsulated all of his ideas about the United States in a timeless manner: Zappa's music, in its essence, critiqued American conformity that existed even after the 1960s. While he built upon these concepts at times in later work, these principal albums are effectively relevant in any context in which conformity exists. While the music commented on the aspects of the 1960s, his critiques of conformity applied to aspects of the nation outside of the specific context. In fact, Zappa became more political during the 1980s, but still pointed to his 1960s music to convey his critiques of American conformity.

In the 1980s, Zappa again tried to face the worsening problems of his country through early songs. In 1988, he declared the state of the country to be "[m]uch worse" than that of the

³³⁰ Frank Zappa, interview, "Zappa," *International Times*, March 1977, 24.

1960s.³³¹ Zappa evidently noticed the further spread of conformity, and he considered a run for president, while his initial response was to re-issue his early albums. Zappa, who by this point had become famous from his 1970s music, tried to bring attention to his critiques of conformity in his largely unheard work of the 1960s, and implied that they were some of the most significant in his catalogue, as well as relevant to the 1980s context. He declared that he was rereleasing these albums “for a new audience,” because “a lot of the things that were said in those lyrics” have “relevance today,” and he cited “Mom and Dad” as an example.³³² Zappa again turned to his music as a way to combat the conformist issues he saw in American society. Yet he did not create contemporary work to achieve this effect; rather, he employed his twenty-year-old works, because he knew that the anti-conformist concepts and calls for individuality he expressed spoke to the current state of the country. While Zappa’s early music never achieved the amount of success against American conformity, during the 1990s, Zappa became aware of the international impact of his principal songs in regard to staving off conforming influences in Communist countries.

Zappa’s political efforts through music were not in vain. In 1990, Zappa discovered that bootlegs of his early albums had kept alive subversive underground cultures in Eastern Bloc countries. His condemnation of conformity resonated with foreign youth who experienced the profoundly oppressive and suppressing entity of Communist society. In particular, youth in Czechoslovakia admitted to Zappa that the secret police had detained them in order to “beat the Zappa music out of them.”³³³ He was a musical hero in the Eastern Bloc due to the insurgent content of his early work in regard to anti-conformity, in which he saw continuous applicability to his own country. Many critical sentiments that Zappa expressed in *Freak Out!*, *Absolutely Free*, and *We’re Only in It for the Money* remain relevant today, due to their overarching emphasis on the ills of conformity. At the same time, Zappa’s work demonstrated the significance of music in the nation through the way in which he transfigured his songs into representative critiques of American society, culture, politics, and music. While much has changed in the past fifty years, a thorough understanding of the context of the 1960s allows for Zappa’s music to transform into a critical art form of the United States today.

³³¹ Frank Zappa, interview with Laurence Vittes, “Frank Zappa Has a Tip for Serious Musicians: Get a Real-Estate License,” *Los Angeles Reader*, October 13, 1989, 6.

³³² Frank Zappa, interview with William Ruhlmann, “Frank Zappa: Moving on to Phase Three,” *Goldmine*, January 27, 1989, 10.

³³³ Frank Zappa, interview with Libby Purvis et al., “Zapparap: For Real!” *T’Mershi Duween*, July 1991, n.p.

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