

It's a sweltering early summer Sunday afternoon, and all's well on the homefront at the Laurel Canyon HQ/fortress, *chez Zappa*. Mom is in the kitchen fetching beverages for the various guests or popping into the editing room, where Frank sits smugly with a couple of nicely-dressed women from *Money* magazine. There they sit, humbly listening to a playback of Zappa's most recent effort, ostensibly for public radio—an unrepentantly hard-edged, over-the-top urban pastiche with comic Eric Bogosian. There are nervous giggles and pinched guffaws in the room as the air quivers with rapid-fire lewdness covering such redeeming topics as castration, phone sex, racial slurs, sexist jibes and other garden variety gonzo filth.

Elsewhere on the Zappa estate, Moon is still glowing over getting Max, her new golden retriever; the first thing Max did when they brought him home was bark twice and jump into the pool. Twelve-year-old Ahmett, who announced his intention of starting a band yesterday, is working out with a synth-playing chum in the Utility

Muffin Research Kitchen, the state-of-the-

art in-home studio. Dweezil is in and out with his friend (Donovan's son); they've started a mock-metal band called Druid, and are writing a tune called "Jamie, I Hate Your Afro." Mom isn't amused. "Did you like Dweezil's song?" she asks Frank with a scowl. "He didn't sing it for me," says the old man, "he just told me about it."

"Stupidest thing I ever heard. So hideous."

Dad grins through his Dutch Masters facial hair: "I told him a rhyming line for it, something about 'that haircut in 1973.'"

Introducing Frank Zappa, family man, incurable *enfant terrible* and one of the hardest working, least categorizable men in show biz. After forty-five years and over two dozen albums, he has survived with his scabrous wits intact. He still gets a rise from a slobbering punchline to a dirty joke or an intelligently articulated anti-social quip. His music veers between scatological cabaret and compositional virtuosity.

He's posited some of the most dizzyingly intricate scoring in the guise of rock, and has brought several young monster players to the forefront. But many can't get past Zappa's penchant for dirty-ol'-man baritone narra-

rageous crusader for free spirits in American life?

His latest venture may help clarify these questions. An avowed digital disciple who bought one of the first Sony digital decks and continually upgrades his digital recording system, Zappa has an inherent interest in the technological advances of Compact Discs. He has signed an extensive retrospective release deal with the all-CD company Rykodisc; eventually all his old titles will be packaged for CD, along with new work geared for the medium.

No longer tied to the guitar, Zappa has become increasingly involved with the Synclavier as a compositional tool.

His newest compositions are intergalactic chamber music of the most riveting, quasi-tonal brand. "It's scary what you can do with a typewriter," Zappa grins.

What else is afoot *chez Zappa*? He's moving toward the purchase of his own satellite television channel, programming "everything you always wanted to see on television, unscrambled." Is he pursuing this out of a sense of mission? "You bet it's a fuckin' mission. If you look at the rest of the broadcasting on, if it's not purely religious, it's already been tainted by the pressure from these groups.

royalties from record sales or tour receipts.

MUSICIAN: *Do you distinguish between your "serious" instrumental work and your more pop-oriented endeavors?*

ZAPPA: No. The way I look at it, it's all the same thing. It's a guy imposing his will or his taste on musical material. It's all made out of the same stuff: the twelve chromatic notes of the scale. It's equally serious and it's equally stupid, either way you want to look at it. Or it's equally worthless, but it's all the same stuff.

I'm delighted to write something very simplistic and stick it up against something technically hard to do because they complement each other. Serious music is even more serious in contrast to "Louie, Louie."

MUSICIAN: *But usually composers like to steer clear of the "Louie, Louie" side, leave that to somebody else.*

ZAPPA: That's because what is known as a composer these days is a guy who owes his ass to a university and in order to keep their pedigree or their tenure or whatever they're trying to keep, they have to give this illusion of dead seriousness because the people who run the universities don't have a clue or

ZAPPA

THE LICENSE TO BE A MANIAC

tion and bathroom humor.

Who is this Frank Zappa, purveyor of ribald fantasies and the uneasy union of Kurt Weill, Edgard Varèse, Muddy Waters, R. Crumb and

Lenny Bruce?

Is he a frustrated, formidable self-taught modern composer and agile intellectual led astray by arrested adolescence? Or a cou-

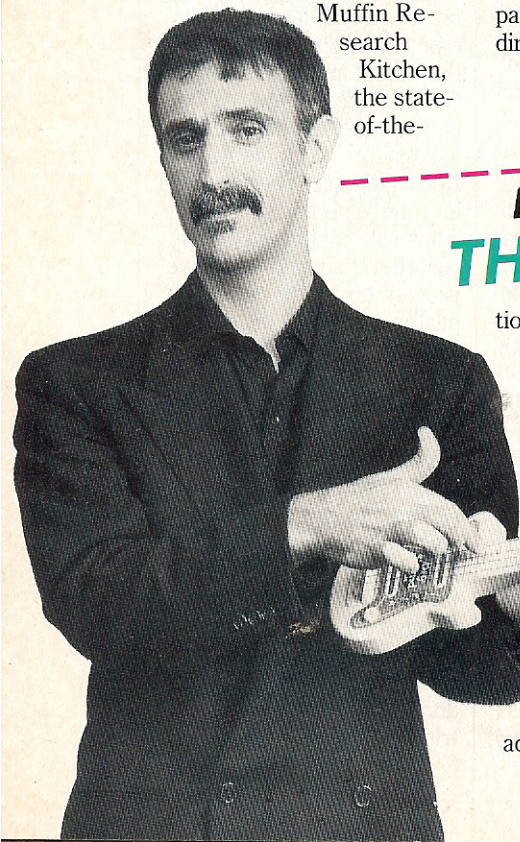
Somebody's got to stand up and say, 'Hey, this is nonsense.'"

MUSICIAN: *Would you say that the composer is a fairly negligible character in America?*

ZAPPA: It's a miracle or a fluke that a guy earns his living from writing music. I still am baffled by how I'm able to do it. I don't have condos or major stock investments supporting me. What comes in that enables me to buy equipment that I turn around and make music with are actual

sense of humor.

There are a lot of committees involved and in order for any five or ten people to agree on something, it has to be emasculated to the point where the nincompoop quotient goes way up. There are too many committees around and too few people willing to put their ass on the line. And unless *somebody's* ass goes on the line, you don't really come up with substance. Committees abhor substance. They'll do whatever they can do to delete substance from whatever it is



they're doing. The minute you have to make a decision palatable to an entire group of people, there's a lot of ass-kissing and politics that has nothing to do with the matter at hand, which is pushing the musical frontier as far as it will go, or the audio frontier. Whatever it is, you just want to get out there and deal with it. You should have the opportunity to be a wild man, go and do whatever you want. Experimentation needs to be done, because if you don't experiment, what do you have to work with? The same old things you already have. Society is truly ignorant if it stifles the work of people who are willing to take chances, because the fruits of that experimentation are the benefits for the rest of the people sitting at home waiting to find out what's happening to them.

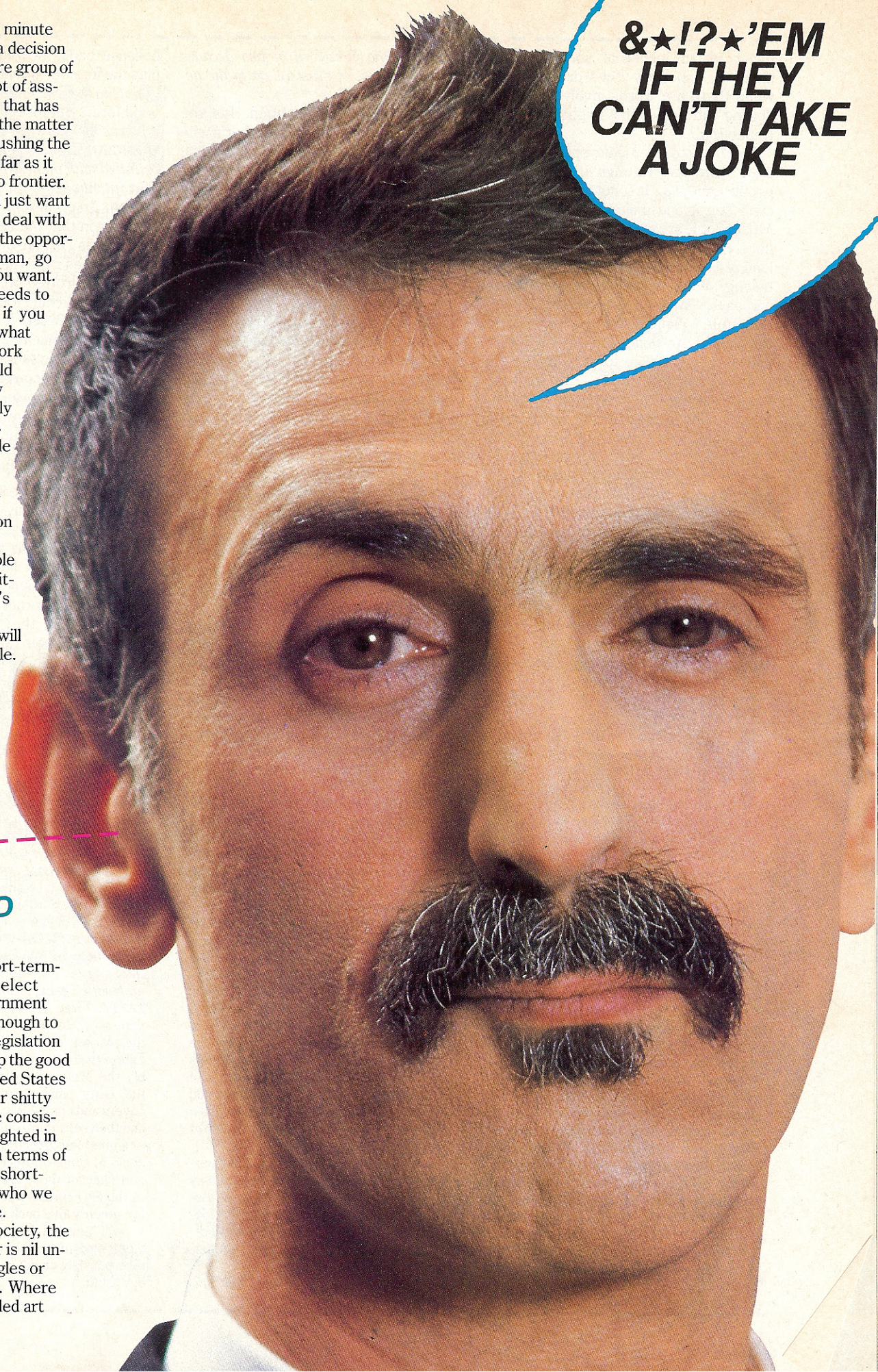
Other countries will win in the GNP battle. Ignorant American companies who cut their operating costs by shrinking their R&D depart-

**BY JOSEF
WOODARD**

ments. They're short-termers. They have to elect idiots to their government who will be dumb enough to sign protectionist legislation that will try and keep the good stuff out of the United States so they can sell their shitty stuff. At least we're consistent; we're short-sighted in terms of the arts, in terms of business and we're short-sighted in terms of who we elect to public office.

In an industrial society, the value of a composer is nil unless he's writing jingles or doing movie scores. Where is the use for so-called art

**&★!?!★'EM
IF THEY
CAN'T TAKE
A JOKE**



music in an industrial society? Who needs it, especially if it's dissonant or, when there are words involved, you're dealing with topics that might distress a Republican?

You have to keep your spirit going to plow your way through that. A lot of people give up. It's not just that they can't sell it and make a living from it. Most people are gregarious. They like to have friends. They like to have some kind of a social environment. They like to belong. When somebody comes along and says, "We hate you because you do this stuff," eighty to ninety percent of the people are going to stop doing that just so they can have some buddies.

I was invited to be the keynote speaker at the American Society of University Composers at the Ohio State University, and I picked up some information. I heard a story about someone who overheard a conversation about some people from the Froom Foundation. The word went out that Froom was only funding minimalists. [*Cops a robotic nerd*] Froom's funding minimalists. The word went out like wildfire and the next thing you know, everybody's got a chimpanzee and an echoplex. That's the way it is. You want a grant? There it is. That's art. You have to do this art.

MUSICIAN: *Minimalism has apparently*

FZ ON CD

MUSICIAN: *What is the nature of your deal with Rykodisc?*

ZAPPA: That's been quite some time in the negotiating. The basic deal is eight titles per year, one year with two one-year options leading to a total of twenty-four titles. The selection of which titles were to be released was not left up to me entirely. I had to argue with [Rykodisc president] Don Rose about what to put out. He wanted a certain amount of archival material included. That's their market research.

MUSICIAN: *How have you digitally renovated old material?*

ZAPPA: What we did was to take analog masters and transfer them from two tracks to twenty-four. The engineer would bring those two tracks back up through the board and re-equalize and add echo or whatever, using modern-day equipment to get this stuff as sharp as possible for digital release. Here's the two tracks playing back through the board, with another analog phase through the board, then back onto another two tracks on the multi-track and then D-to-D from the multi-track to the cassette. So we lost one analog generation, but the only thing that you could have picked up would be system noise or if you had compression, you might pick up compressor noise. But I would say that in ninety-nine percent of

conquered the buzzword of two decades ago—serialism. It must relate to the accessibility of triads.

ZAPPA: It also has repetition. It's the kind of music that a board member's wife could almost understand. It's like wallpaper. It does have a kind of interior decorator twinge to it. And if the three notes that are repeating are the proper three notes, it's roughly the equivalent of a pop music hook so you could almost walk out of the hall humming the composition. Dah dah dah. Hey, what a great piece that was!

MUSICIAN: *I can't see you doing that, minus the interplay of a band or other creative collaborators.*

ZAPPA: Oh, you're very wrong. I've had a number of requests during the last year to write things for groups and it's always tempting. The money is even good for some things. But, in my mind, I know what it's going to sound like when they start playing. No matter how good they can count, no matter how good they think they can count, it's not going to be correct. Even if they wanted to be correct, they can't be because there are physical limitations as to what human beings can do.

If I need to write human being music, it probably won't be in the technical vein, it will just be more "Louie, Louie"-like,

the cases, this results in an enhancement of the sound rather than taking the original masters and just running them straight through without touching them.

The audio hardware business moves pretty fast and new tools come out every year that give you even more control over your signal. The hippest one recently has been the Aphex Dominator—a wonderful compressor. It's especially good for digital because when you run out of bits, you're dead. You can set a ceiling on that thing and your signal does not go beyond it.

MUSICIAN: *Have you re-treated some of the musical parts?*

ZAPPA: Some of the original masters which I'd owned had been stored so badly by the former owners that the oxide had actually worn off the tape on the two-track masters, so it was impossible to go from two tracks to the digital. It required a remix. I had to dig up the original, in this case, 8-track and 12-track masters of these albums. I decided that I would add new digitally recorded drums and bass. That's been done to *We're Only In It For The Money* and *Ruben And The Jets*.

Some people prefer it. Maybe five percent of the people who have heard it say they wish I would have left it alone. But there was no way to leave it alone, because the original masters were trashed.

MUSICIAN: *How did you go about spiffing it up?*

ZAPPA: Well, one of the things that you

because bands do that well. They can play the fuck out of that kind of stuff. This [*points to the Synclavier*] is not especially good for it. But for other intricate things [*smacks his chops*], it's got it.

MUSICIAN: *I guess you've long been disgruntled with orchestras who don't satisfy your intentions.*

ZAPPA: An orchestra is very much like a dinosaur in that the head is real tiny and the body is real big and by the time the thought goes from there to here, the tail has already rotted off. That's the worst thing about writing for an orchestra.

If you write a score, it's very much like being in a monastery and doing monk work. One page takes you a whole day. It goes by in a second and you're building this recipe for a noise. You plan it out scientifically. You know that this and this will do that and that. You take it to a copyist and a couple of mistakes happen there. There might even be some mistakes when my score is copied, those are passed along. Finally, you take it to the orchestra and they don't want to play your music because you're alive. They don't like to play anything other than triads. Orchestras sound fabulous playing triads; it's another triadic medium.

Besides that, they already know the classical repertoire and it's like a bar band that already knows the top forty,

gain there is your digital dynamic range. You put digital drums on it and suddenly you gain a whole new perspective. In the original recording, the drums were mono because you didn't have all that many tracks for the drums. When you record masters now, the drums are six tracks. Also, the drummer and bass player in this instance were much better musicians than the original guys who played the parts. Some of the songs were changed a little bit in order to take advantage of the extra skill of the performers. Then it was all re-mixed with digital echo and all the things that you use nowadays.

MUSICIAN: *So you had no qualms about changing the existing work? It's a sort of necrophiliac thing to do.*

ZAPPA: First of all, it's a necrophiliac thing to do to buy those old records, but the market for them is immense, to the extent that there's a guy in Milan—probably the Mafia—who has taken copies of the early albums, rephotographed the covers and completely pirated the record, and then sells them out of the back of a car or something to record stores. I've gotten ahold of some of these bootlegs. There's a market for those things: original copies of those records—*Freak Out* was selling for seventy-five bucks.

So I decided I would repackage the things and make them sound as good as they possibly could, since people want to buy them.

and if you come and say, "Hey, why don't you play 'Radio's Broken' from *Jazz Discharge Party Hats*," they're not going to do it. And the conductor probably is not too thrilled about it because he can always look and sound better playing Beethoven than if he's doing something new. Everything is stacked against you.

All these are real good reasons for getting yourself a computer.

MUSICIAN: *But what about the performance aspect? There's not much theatricality or intimacy in just activating machines in a dark hall.*

ZAPPA: But wait a minute, why does it have to be heard onstage? This is direct to disc, direct to tape. That's where the real income for a composer is going to be, off sales of records, certainly not sales of tickets in a 500-seat hall. What do they pay for a piece to be performed live? A guy's lucky to get fifty dollars or a hundred dollars, or he gets \$1,000 for the world premiere.

If you expect to earn any income from being a composer, you have to get it from royalties and the best place to collect those is from sale of a record, CD or film score. But certainly not from live performance. It pays the worst.

MUSICIAN: *How do you proceed composi-*

tionally on the Synclavier? Does it open up new pores in your creative mind?

ZAPPA: That's a good question. I don't know how to answer it. It allows me to do music the way I always wanted to do it, just go in there and do it. You can play that in, just blast it in there and then edit and tweak it. It's kind of like being a sculptor and being able to manufacture the substance that you're going to sculpt at the same time. If you're a sculptor, you get some rock, some metal or wood and then chisel at it and get to do your thing with it. But if you wanted to sculpt a completely unknown element, you can do that, just build a sound from scratch that never existed before.

MUSICIAN: *How many of these pieces have you done? Is this a primary focus now?*

ZAPPA: [Points to his disc file] See these floppies? Most of them contain compositions. There's an average of six per disc and there's a couple of hundred discs. I tend to work on the whole library a little bit; I'll grab a disc at random and edit onto it, do two or three different pieces in a night. They all improve and evolve over time, not only as the ideas get more refined but as the hardware comes on line. Some of the things were started before we even had sampling. So when the

sampling arrived, we put samples instead of the synthesizer sounds so the piece becomes completely entirely different, so you see it and treat it a different way. When the new editing software came on board, you could do more things.

MUSICIAN: *Skipping idioms for a second, it seems that your bands have been testing grounds for young virtuosically inclined players. Do you have your antennae up for fresh talent?*

ZAPPA: Don't even have to, because I get tapes all the time, resumes. If I walk down the street, odds are fifty-fifty that somebody's going to step up and say, "Hi, I'm a guitar player" or a drummer. We keep a file of these people and if for some reason somebody in the band doesn't want to do a tour or gets fired or something, we immediately go to the file and see who the next contestants would be. And then we audition.

MUSICIAN: *What do auditions consist of?*

ZAPPA: A combination. Usually the roughest ones are the drum auditions. We had forty contestants the last time we auditioned for the drums and twenty-five for the bass. I think Chad Wackerman qualifies as a pretty fabulous drum discovery and I think Scott Thunes qual-

continued on page 46

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goes on over a bright color and then shrinks away to let the undercolor burn through. Savage stuff.

And you gotta love this story. Gibson closes its Kalamazoo, Michigan plant where many of its greatest instruments were made and consolidates in Nashville. What do all those workers do? They don't take it lying down, hell they start their own company. **Heritage Guitars** is run by all those same people who ran the Gibson production line in the 60s, and their guitars clearly show it. They do a lot of custom work, and will build whatever you want, but their standard-issue Les Paul, with cut-down body weight to eliminate bad posture, is plenty fine. Appropriate to its America-first predilections, Heritage also offers a complete range of patriotic inlays like flags, eagles, the Statue of Liberty and the space shuttle (not many orders for that one, I suspect).

Hartley Peavey has an even better America-first program, though. He opened a plant in England to sell his products to the Europeans, a virtual one-company crusade against the U.S. trade deficit. Robert E. Lee would be proud.

That wasn't all we saw in Chicago, but it's all I've got room for this month. Having been wide-awake for four exciting, equipment-packed days, I gotta sleep sometime y'know. ☐

ZAPPA from page 30

ifies as a good bass player. Vinnie Colaiuta and Terry Bozzio were legendary auditioners. Arthur Barrow was. They're easy to spot. You just have to wait and wait and when you hear the right guy, he sticks out like a sore thumb. Arthur Barrow walked in and played "St. Alphonso's Breakfast" on the bass and then topped it off by knowing seventy-five percent of the songs I ever recorded. He was genuinely interested in playing that music. He's now working with Giorgio Moroder.

Colaiuta was amazing. I'd say "play this, play that." Whatever it was, he could play it. "Thirteen in one hand, eleven with the other, do something else with your feet," and liking it and being natural about it. For polyrhythms, I've never seen anybody who had that kind of animal grasp of what polyrhythms are supposed to sound like. It's unfortunate that he wound up doing studio stuff where he doesn't get a chance to be the maniac that he truly is.

They're out there, I know there are fabulous musicians out there. I'm talking about people who love music and would rather do music than anything else—truly devoted. Unfortunately, not all of them look good enough for MTV, so they are going to have trouble with a record

contract anyplace. The record industry is too tied to the visual medium. Eventually they're going to find out that they've hoisted themselves by their own petard, because by tying their product to the visual medium, they've tied their asses to MTV and are neglecting the bulk of the American consumers who like music. You're not listening anymore, guys.

MUSICIAN: *So obviously you're not leaping feet-first into the video realm.*

ZAPPA: I've already made one. I'll tell you what: Take a look at *200 Motels* from 1971. You will see that all of the theory of doing a video—in other words the cross between the visualization of the lyrics of the songs intercut with people playing the song—is in *200 Motels*. You should have seen what I went through trying to explain that to United Artists at the time.

Well, just look at how videos get financed. If you're with a record company, the company puts up the money in advance and they take it out of your royalties. They're making you bend over and they keep the rights to the video. What is this?

I did one video in 1980 financed by CBS. I have a foreign distribution deal with them and they wanted to use the video to promote things foreign. So I did a song called "You Are What You Is." I hired a guy like Ronald Reagan and I put him in an electric chair. I also had a black person spewing Pepto Bismol while saying the word "Mercedes Benz," which tended to keep the video off the air.

MUSICIAN: *I can't imagine why.*

ZAPPA: Hah. Fuck 'em if they can't take a joke. No reason why the video shouldn't be done.

MUSICIAN: *"Valley Girl" must have been an unexpected hit for you. Did you have any idea it would take off that way?*

ZAPPA: No, I didn't. I didn't have any idea that "Yellow Snow" would be a hit and neither did anybody at the record company and neither did anybody anywhere. It was totally "how the fuck did this happen?" There are two really good examples that the smartest people at Warner Bros.—completely unprepared for "Yellow Snow"—and CBS—our distributor at the time of "Valley Girl"—neither of them had the slightest hint that this record would go. They all think they know, until you catch them with their pants down; then they don't know shit.

In the case of "Don't Eat The Yellow Snow," it was also an accident. A disc jockey in Pittsburgh on a station that had a policy of playing novelty records of the 60s received the album in the mail, listened to "Yellow Snow," which was ten minutes long and said "My god, it's a modern-day novelty record," cut it down

continued on page 85

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ZAPPA

from page 46

to three minutes and transferred it to tape. Cut it down, put it on cart, put it on the station which was part of a chain. It instantly goes into the top twenty, it's picked up on all the stations on the chain.

In the case of "Valley Girl," it was a hit from the minute it went on the radio. They played it on KROQ (once a rock novelty station), the phones exploded. Next thing you know, they had an acetate. It wasn't even released. It was something that people wanted to hear. The worst thing about that record is the fact that nobody really listened to it. They listened to the slang in there, it has a reasonably good beat, a couple of nice chords in it, but it's a monologue record. People didn't even listen to what the song was saying. The whole coverage of the song barely mention of what the song was really saying, that these people are really airheads.

MUSICIAN: *With all your Synclavier adventures, have you given up on the guitar.*

ZAPPA: No. The problem about me playing the guitar is that what I like to do on it has probably less of a market than the weirdest stuff I've done on the Synclavier. People have a very low toler-

ance for those kinds of guitar solos. People who like it, really like it and people who don't like it, really don't like it and there are far more of them than those who do like it.

You have to choose—what are you going to spend your life on? I can't be good at everything, let alone *do* everything. There are people who have dedicated their lives to playing the guitar. They practice it every day, they eat, sleep and breathe guitar notes. I don't. I like to play it. I can't just sit down and play by myself; I need a band to do what I do and that makes the overhead really expensive, because nobody wants to play the background for a guy playing guitar for free. You have to pay them to make them sit there and do that.

Not only that, you can't just get anybody off the street to do it because they can't do it. There are only certain people I can play with that can follow it. I give that a ninth ranked priority behind everything else. I wouldn't say that I'll never pick it up again. In point of fact, if I put a show together, I probably will pick it up again so I can play with the band.

I need some awfully good reasons to go through the back-breaking effort to literally learn how to play it all over again.

It hurts when you've lost all your callouses and you've got to start again. You just feel like shit. Even if the ideas might still be there, in order for them to get from your head to your hand, you've got to redevelop all the muscles in your fingers and your wrists so that you think and it appears there and there's no dinosaur syndrome where it takes a week to get down there.

MUSICIAN: *There have been album cuts, such as that lyrical little instrumental "Zoot Allures," that suggest you could have followed the trail of the guitar instrumentalist if you chose to.*

ZAPPA: It would be impossible to, because my reputation is based on stuff that's verbal. In fact, only the smallest percentage of people who know my name know that I even play a musical instrument. One time my wife went to the market to buy food, wrote a check and the guy at the checkstand says, "Zappa? You're married to Frank Zappa the comedian?" That's the way it is.

I'd be delighted if more people thought I was funny. I *am* funny [*snickers*]. Don't you forget it. I make myself laugh most of the time, but then again I spend more time with myself than I do with other people so I have to to keep going. ▣