

Zappa: New documentary attempts to demythologize composer, multi-instrumentalist

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The new documentary *Zappa*, about the composer and multi-instrumentalist Frank Zappa, opened in theatres and was released on-demand on November 27. The two-hour film provides an overview of the life and prolific career of Zappa, who died of prostate cancer at age 52 on December 4, 1993, with a focus on his more serious work as a creator of orchestral music.

Director Alex Winter played Bill in *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure* (1989) and has made other documentaries including *The Panama Papers* (2018). Winter took six years to make the new documentary after the late artist's wife, Gail Zappa, gave him access to the large film, photo and audio archive that Zappa accumulated from his childhood and through three decades of writing, performing and promoting his music.

Gail Zappa is interviewed by Winter and contributes insights into the personality and career of the artist. Zappa's four children also supported the film project. Tragically, Gail Zappa died at age 70, five years before the documentary was completed.

The film begins with footage of Zappa's last live guitar performance in Prague before an enthusiastic audience on June 24, 1991. In the Czech Republic, Zappa had become an underground cultural icon and the film shows him being greeted upon arrival at the airport in Prague by more than 5,000 fans.

Winter then presents a series of audio and video interviews with Zappa in which he describes what it was like growing up in the Baltimore area, in an Italian-American household, and later moving to California. As a youth, he developed an interest in 8mm film editing and in chemistry (his father was a chemist and mathematician in the defense industry).

Among Zappa's musical influences as a teen were classical composers Igor Stravinsky, Anton Webern and electronics experimentalist Edgard Varèse. Zappa was attracted to dissonant and atonal music and, after stumbling upon an album of Varèse's complete works, he decided to spend time in the library teaching himself music theory and orchestral notation.

Zappa explains, "It was because of that Varèse album that I read about in a magazine and hearing 'Ionization' that I started writing orchestra music. I had no interest in Beethoven and Mozart ... I wanted to listen to the man who could make music that was strange ... [I]n Varèse's music the percussion was playing an integrated melodic part and it was in the foreground and, since I liked drums, it was a pleasure to listen to it." No doubt, serious discontent with middle-class American life in the mid-1950s, at the height of official Cold War conformism, had something to do with Zappa's interest in Varèse, but a musical career centered on "strangeness" is not something that has to be regarded uncritically.

Zappa's other influences as a teen were the rhythm and blues artists—such as Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown, Guitar Slim and Johnny "Guitar" Watson—that he listened to in Lancaster, California at the home of his high school friend Don Van Vliet. Van Vliet later became an important and successful musician with the stage name Captain Beefheart.

Winter moves through Zappa's career and the various band members he worked in the 1960s, '70s and '80s. Zappa's drive as a writer who charted all of his music, his work ethic and insistence that the musicians in his band record and perform the music to very exacting standards is presented. Zappa recorded 62 albums

during his lifetime and another 53 have been released since his death.

Winter explained his aim in making the documentary in an interview with *Paste Magazine*, “I wasn’t interested in making a music doc or a doc that looked at Zappa as a ’70s rock god. ... I was much more interested in him as a cultural figure and as an artist. ... I wanted to demythologize him ... Certainly a major part of what we were looking to do was create a narrative out of his emotional inner life and not the outer facts of his life.”

Given that much of the material Winter had to work with had been carefully curated by the artist himself, the documentarian is only partially successful in achieving this goal. That something of the real Zappa emerges is due in part to the interviews conducted with some of the artists who worked with him. Of these, the comments of Ruth Underwood (xylophonist) and Steve Vai (guitarist) stand out.

Underwood, who abandoned a classical education at the Juilliard School in New York City to join Zappa’s band in 1972, describes him as full of contradictions—he was cold, rude and even cruel, yet capable of writing fantastic music and cared that it be played properly.

Vai describes Zappa as a “a slave to his inner ear” who heard things in a particular way, yet the financial and performance limitations he faced in realizing what he was hearing led to “a lot of suffering on his part.” Vai says Zappa was demanding, but he always asked the musicians in his band to do things that he believed they were capable of doing.

Vai describes a piece of music written by Zappa called “The Black Page,” which is known as being tremendously difficult to play. Vai says that it is “probably at the forefront of innovation with regard to rhythmic, polymetric notation. There are situations in that piece that are extraordinarily complex, but the important thing is it sounds like a beautiful piece of music ... it was like a phenomenon to me and to many others.”

Although his compositions and recordings spanned an eclectic mix of classical, jazz, rock and doo-wop music genres, Zappa has often been associated with one or another of his more popular songs or his shirtless, guitar-playing, cigarette-smoking onstage rock star persona.

While some of his theatrical antics and absurdities

during rock concerts could be amusing and he was witty during television and radio interviews, Zappa’s persistent vulgarity and low-level humor appealed to the more backward tendencies in the audience. His music tended to resonate most strongly with a semi-misanthropic, amorphously anti-establishment mood among individuals who considered themselves a cut above the rest.

The severe limits of his own “iconoclasm” are indicated by his political and cultural association, as noted above, with Czech dissident and subsequent president, Vaclav Havel, and the so-called Velvet Revolution, which restored capitalism in the former Stalinist-run country. Havel once asserted that “Frank Zappa was one of the gods of the Czech underground,” which, seeing how things have turned out for the Czech people, is no feather in the musician-composer’s cap.

Zappa also expressed a degree of cynicism about the lack popular interest in his instrumental compositions. He frequently discussed the fact that he wrote and recorded his orchestral works purely for himself and, if others were interested in them, that was merely a bonus. However, as the final segment of the documentary illustrates, it turns out that an audience does exist for Zappa’s idiosyncratic orchestral music.

Winter’s film is useful both for those unfamiliar with Zappa’s life and work and for those who are long-time listeners. It cuts through some of the mythology about a contradictory figure who belonged to the generation of American musicians that emerged in the 1960s.



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