

Dweezil Zappa keeps his famous father's music upfront and fresh

by *George_Varga*

LOS ANGELES — Dweezil Zappa is not prone to crying in public, but he got all choked up when his band, Zappa Plays Zappa, won a Grammy Award this year for Best Rock Instrumental Performance.

Dweezil Zappa's band, Zappa plays Zappa, received a Grammy Award for Best Rock Instrumental Performance this year. The band wants to introduce the new generation to Frank Zappa's legendary music. Photo courtesy of Diva Zappa/Zappa Family Trust. "Did you feel it? The Earth actually fell off its axis!" Zappa quipped, before quickly growing more serious. "Thanks. Obviously, this means a lot."

The dark-haired guitarist stopped for a moment, in a futile effort to maintain his composure during the pre-telecast portion of the music industry's most prestigious annual awards show. He then started to softly weep tears of joy.

"I'm trying to keep it together," said Zappa, flanked by his fellow Zappa Plays Zappa members.

His band's victory came for its soaring rendition of "Peaches En Regalia," a genre-leaping song from "Hot Rats," the landmark 1970 solo album by his legendary musician father, Frank Zappa. The elder Zappa, who died of prostate cancer in 1993 at the age of 52, wrote "Peaches" in 1969, the same year Dweezil was born.

"This song means a lot," Dweezil said, clutching his Grammy. "It's 40 years old and was dedicated to me when I was born by my dad. So, I'm dedicating it right back to him."

In fact, Zappa Plays Zappa is itself dedicated to honoring the artistic legacy of his father. Formed by Dweezil Zappa in 2006, the one-woman, seven-man band also was designed to introduce a new generation of listeners to the music of Frank Zappa.

A 1995 Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductee, his current fans range from Matchbox Twenty singer Rob Thomas and young pop-jazz star Jamie Cullum to Primus guitarist Larry LaLonde and Phish drummer Jon Fishman (who, in 2002, each compiled their own "Zappa Picks" albums, featuring their favorite Frank Zappa recordings).

One of the most talented, prolific and eclectic composers and band leaders of the last century, Zappa created a musical universe unlike any other. Rock, blues, jazz, contemporary classical, doo-wop, funk, avant-garde, tangos, waltzes and more, he drew from any style that struck his fancy. The Baltimore-born maverick recorded a staggering 80-plus albums between 1966 and 1992.

Lyrically, Zappa's songs could be silly or surreal, biting satirical or unabashedly scatological. Witness such classics as "Montana," "The Illinois Enema Bandit," "Who Are the Brain Police?" and "Valley Girl" (which, in 1982, gave Zappa the only Top 40 hit of his career).

By turns earthy or intricate, hard-rocking or bluesy, jazzy or orchestral, his music was a dizzying marvel of styles and approaches that always sounded unmistakably "Zappa-esque."

Performing such demanding pieces required first-class instrumentalists. That is why, much like jazz icons Miles Davis and Art Blakey, Zappa was also acclaimed for nurturing dozens of talented young musicians. Among the top players in his various bands were singer-guitarist Lowell George, violinist Jean-Luc Ponty, keyboardist George Duke, drummers Terry Bozzio and Chad Wackerman, and guitarists Steve Vai and Mike Keneally.

The Grammy Award for "Peaches En Regalia" was especially sweet for Dweezil Zappa, since his father only won a single Grammy (in 1988, for the all-instrumental "Jazz From Hell") in his lifetime.

"Winning the Grammy for Dweezil means something more than it does to all of us," said Zappa Plays Zappa guitarist Jamie Kime.

"This, after all, was Dweezil's dad, so the passion runs very deep for him," Kime continued. "This band has shaped up in a way none of us expected, except for Dweezil, who went in with a clear vision of what he wanted and the caliber he wanted this music presented at."

Indeed, he did.

"I definitely present large challenges to the band, but they're up to the task," Dweezil Zappa said, speaking from his Los Angeles studio.

"I don't ask of them something I wouldn't do myself. It is a task and a half to learn all this music and to perform for up to three hours a night.

"What this experience offers audiences is a chance to hear real musicians â€” not just people operating computers â€” speaking a musical language on stage ...

"To play this music, you have to be very, very diligent and be prepared to play the written parts and to take big risks while improvising. So, there's an element of surprise that happens on a nightly basis."

The concert repertoire of Zappa Plays Zappa spans the elder Zappa's entire career.

A new addition for this tour is "Billy the Mountain." The 1972 epic, which clocks in at nearly 30 minutes, took more than two weeks for Zappa Plays Zappa to perfect, both because of its knotty music and its nearly 3,000-word text.

"Essentially, the goal is to provide the audience with a more broad overview of Frank's music," explained Dweezil Zappa, who does not read music and learned all of his father's challenging music by ear.

"We don't want to give them what some cynical people might have expected, which is to take the easy route and play the 'hits,' like 'Dancing Fool,' 'Disco Boy' and 'Bobby Brown Gets Down.' We haven't played those yet. We focus more on the difficult instrumentals and what really makes Frank stand out as a grand composer.

"The actual role of being the band leader hasn't been a hard process for me, but I definitely do it in a different way than my dad. He wrote every single thing, so we use his music manuscripts and recordings as the final arbiter, because that's the reference. Whatever he put out is the way he wanted it to be heard."

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