

Pop Talk: Dweezil plays Frank in Zappa Plays Zappa

by *George_Varga*

Dweezil Zappa had two major goals in mind when he launched Zappa Plays Zappa last year, each equally ambitious.

ZAPPA PLAYS ZAPPA - 'I felt it was important for new generations to be exposed to his music,' says Dweezil Zappa of his band, Zappa Plays Zappa, which plays music from throughout the career of his legendary dad, Frank Zappa. CNS Photo courtesy of Michael Mesker for Zappa Family Trust. The first was to honor the heady artistic legacy of his legendary father, Frank Zappa, whose death from prostate cancer in 1993 robbed contemporary music of one of its most innovative and prolific composers, guitarists, bandleaders and all-around visionaries.

The second was to introduce a young new audience to his dad's genre-leaping work rather than simply cater to longtime fans who grew up listening to the elder Zappa's music in the 1960s and 1970s.

To make his father's demanding music more palatable to his target audience, Dweezil decided it should be performed by a group with predominantly young players, such as keyboardist-trumpeter Aaron Arntz, 24. (Besides Dweezil, the only member of Zappa Plays Zappa who also worked with the elder Zappa is singer-guitarist Ray White, a veteran of 21 Zappa band albums.)

"This year, 40 to 50 percent of our audiences are younger, compared to 15 percent on our first tour in 2006," said Dweezil, 36.

"If we're playing (1969's) 'Willie the Pimp,' I want it to sound exactly like that record. It's not my intention to modernize any of Frank's music or make it seem 'contemporary.' The music is still valid and contemporary because there's nothing else like it."

Like no one before or since, Frank Zappa created a musical universe all his own. Drawing from rock, blues, jazz, contemporary classical, doo-wop and a dizzying array of other styles, his work challenged its listeners and performers alike.

His deviously complex music could be hard-rocking, jazzy or orchestral; his lyrics bitingly satirical, silly or scatological. And his bands featured some of the finest players around, be it on keyboards (George Duke), violin (Jean-Luc Ponty), drums (Terry Bozzio, Chad Wackerman) or guitar (Steve Vai).

Zappa's admirers also include matchbox twenty singer Rob Thomas, young pop-jazz star Jamie Cullum and others who rose to fame after Zappa's death 14 years ago. The members of Phish performed Zappa's "Peaches en Regalia" at some of their concerts, and Phish drummer Jon Fishman oversaw the compilation album "Zappa Picks," featuring 16 of his favorite Zappa recordings.

In addition, there have been various posthumous Zappa tribute bands, from France's Nasal Retentive Orchestra and Hungary's Cosmik Debris to Brazil's Central Scrutinizer Band and New York's Project Object.

With Zappa Plays Zappa, Dweezil covers works from throughout his dad's career. They include "Uncle Remus," "G Spot Tornado" and a suite from "Absolutely Free," the landmark 1967 album by Zappa's Mothers of Invention.

"The reason this band exists is to be a grass-roots development and reach out to a new fan base," Dweezil said. "I had the feeling it was possible for Frank's music to fade away in my lifetime, and I just didn't want that to happen."

Like his father, Dweezil uses visual cues to prompt his band. A hand motion can signal the musicians to start playing any five-note pattern of their choice, so long as it follows a rhythmic pattern of two notes followed by three notes. Crowd participation is encouraged by bringing audience members on stage at shows to help "write" a new song for immediate performance.

"The other day in New York, we brought up Rudy, a 12-year-old boy," Dweezil said. "Rudy froze, so I asked him: 'What's the last thing you said to your friend on the phone?' And he replied: 'I'm going to a concert.' So the song became the triumphant story of 'Rudy's going to a concert.' Then, it became 'Rudys at the concert,' 'Rudy's on stage,' and the crowd was loving the way it developed. You can't plan for this stuff."

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