**Zappa**

By Deborah Blair
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*Ever try playing '*[*The Black Page*](http://wiki.killuglyradio.com/wiki/The_Black_Page)*'? The supreme rhythmic sadist speaks out on polyrhythms, great players, and the sad state of the music business.*

There are lots of ways to judge music. You can take it apart rhythmically or you can analyze its harmonic structure. You can criticize the melody or theme. You can think about the lyrics. You can concentrate on the technical aspects, or the musicianship, or the originality ... on and on and on. But there's one question that should ultimately be asked regarding the validity of any piece of music: *Did it change your life?* Did it stretch you, challenge you, make you view the world in a different way? If so, the composer achieved something monumental out of 12 simple notes, a few syllabic utterances, and their accompanying timbres.

[Frank Zappa](http://wiki.killuglyradio.com/wiki/Frank_Zappa)'s music changed my life. When the rest of the world was happily humming, "Yeah, yeah, yeah," he was challenging "those hungry freaks, daddy." When costumes became more important than musicianship, he was putting together monstro-groups, bringing jazz, 12-tone strategy, and chillingly great players into the fringe of the Rock 'n' Roll world. He made me wonder whether drugs were actually the cool thing to do; forced me to look into a societal mirror which proved uncomfortable at best, intolerable at worst; and consistently cracked me up with his voracious sense of humor. His music changed my life.

All this confession seems necessary in explaining why this interview became the most depressing experience I've had in a long, long time. Certainly not because I had the opportunity to talk with Frank again, which in itself is a remarkable experience. It was depressing because this man, who has created such a powerful paradigmatic shift in such a significant part of the population, is quitting the music business. Quitting. Getting out. Leaving. And I feel like I'm part of the problem ...

Before the interview, l got hold of a galley of his autobiography, [The Real Frank Zappa Book](http://wiki.killuglyradio.com/wiki/The_Real_Frank_Zappa_Book) (Poseidon Press), which is great fun to read if you like your literature as challenging as your music. I was surprised by a lot of the information he offers, but perhaps most significantly that ...

**You started out as a drummer? I don't think many people are aware of that.**I don't think most people give a shit."

**Drummers might. Can you tell me about it?**Well, I had very little hand-to-foot coordination as I soon discovered in my first job as a drummer. I wanted to be in a Rock 'n' Roll band, and I twisted my parents' arms to get me a drumset. Up until then, I had been practicing to play in this band by putting two pots between my legs like bongos and playing with drumsticks, so I didn't really comprehend that you had to work your foot or anything. But I talked my parents into buying this drumset which they got second-hand from a guy up the street for 50 bucks. We got our first job at a place called the Uptown Hall, in the Hillcrest section of San Diego, and I took delivery on the kit right before the gig. You can imagine what happened, out there trying to play a Rhythm & Blues dance tune and not knowing how to play the kick.

I've always liked the sound of drums. I've always liked the whole texture of percussion in every form. But to call myself a drummer would be an absolutely untrue statement. I can still manipulate sticks, and I can play rhythms with my hands, but I have little-to-no coordination between hand and foot, which is what playing a drumset's really all about.

The first drummer that I really thought was fantastic was [Louie Bellson](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louie_Bellson). I thought he was hot stuff. And after that I liked [Philly Joe Jones](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philly_Joe_Jones). After that I switched over to guitar and stopped listening to drummers.

**There were certain things in your book which I found completely unbelievable ... Frank Zappa in a marching band?**Well, I really have to thank [Mr. Ballard](http://wiki.killuglyradio.com/wiki/Mr._Ballard) (his high school music teacher) for tossing me out of the band – for smoking in uniform. Imagine that. I didn't want to be in the friggin' marching band anyway. But if you're a drummer, what do you do? What are you gonna do? Wear the hat with the chingus on the front. And it was an ugly uniform, it was maroon and grey – uuuhhh, man. Uuuuggghh. Smelly, uuuhhh, hands are cold trying to play rubbidy dub dub on an ugly sounding drum, marching, watching people play football and having to go 'Yeah!' Give me a fuckin' break. Thank you Mr. Ballard. God bless you, Mr. Ballard."

**Did you ever make it to a parade?**Yeah, I marched in parades. I hated every minute of it, but I also hated school, so it was just all one thing

**Your music has always been filled with some of the most complex rhythms imaginable. Who were your influences there?**You mean the polyrhythms and all that kind of stuff? Well, I really don't know what to say about that kind of rhythm. Most people don't use it, they don't take to it very naturally; but there have been other composers who worked in that field. It came as a big shock to me when somebody sent me an album by a Dutch group that had *Ballet Mechanique* by [George Antheil](http://wiki.killuglyradio.com/wiki/George_Antheil) on one side, and the other side had pieces for violin and piano, and I swore I could have written them because of the rhythms. It was exactly the same kind of stuff that I would have done. And I'd never heard these pieces before – they'd been laying in somebody's closet, and they'd found the charts and performed them.

It's just something that you hear, and what you feel. Just like most people in western Europe have a tendency to lean toward rhythms in twos and threes and fours, and then in eastern Europe, you hear people being comfortable with 5, 7, 9. Then you get all the way over to India and you have people being comfortable with everything from 2 up through 13 through whatever.

**I was intrigued by your autobiography's discussion of hose you go about creating rhythmic tension. Can you paraphrase some of that for me?**Well, I think I say it really well in the book; to say it conversationally you'll fuck it up. I'd rather have you just take it out of the book.

*[OK, here goes. Although understand, this is taken our of context and is cut drastically, lest my lovable but irascible editor kill me for creating a 22-page interview:
Just as in diatonic harmony, when upper partials are added to a chord, it becomes tenser and more demanding of a resolution – the more the rhythm of a line rubs against the implied basic time, the more 'statistical tension' is generated.
The creation and destruction of harmonic and 'statistical' tensions is essential to the maintenance of compositional drama. Any composition (or improvisation) which remains consonant and 'regular' throughout is, for me, equivalent to watching a movie with only good guys in it, or eating cottage cheese.
The Real Frank Zappa Book waxes poetic on rhythms, the problem of playing odd times, and more – including a startling description of how a soloist is held hostage by the abilities of his rhythm section. Great stuff ...]*

**Can you talk a little bit about your relationship with your rhythm section? How do you get guys to play your music in the first place.**You have to pay them a lot of money, and you have to be very patient. And then you have to pay them more money, and then you have to be more patient. It's basically that.

**How do you make the decision of who gets in the band?**Well, there's a lot of factors. First of all, it's not just my decision. If there's already an existing band, then he has to meet the social approval of the rest of the guys in the band. It's not my role to just grab a guy, even if I think he's fantastic, because if they feel they can't spend months on the road with a guy, then it ain't gonna work. And sometimes, when they think they can spend months on the road with a guy, they find out that they're wrong and end up hating the guy. Which is what happened on the '88 tour. (He's not talking about the drummer, folks

But the criteria always starts with basic musicianship, and the level of expertise in terms of classical training varies from instrument to instrument. I require more of a piano player than of a drummer or a guitar player or a percussionist, for example, just because of the types of things that they're required to do. They all have to absolutely be able to read; they have to be able to perform just like they were in a symphony orchestra.

**You give** [**Vinnie Colaiuta**](http://wiki.killuglyradio.com/wiki/Vinnie_Colaiuta) **(with Zappa in '78 and '79) an award for being able to both conceive of and play complementary polyrhythmic figures better than anyone else.**Oh, he's a mutant. I'm sure that somewhere on the planet there's another guy who can do what Vinnie does – I think nature works that way. I don't think that it produces single organisms like that. But at the time that he was in the band, I couldn't imagine a drummer that could think and perform a rhythm the same way that he did. He had an uncanny knack for playing things that other people, if they saw them on paper, would think impossible. And he would play it spot on, if not the first time, certainly by the third try. It was utterly ridiculous. And do it with a smile. And after he had it learned, he could style it for you. It's not like he even had to think about playing 13 against 5, or something like that. He'd just figure it out and do it – it'd be part of his body language. But his personality changed after he was out of the band. He was doing a lot of studio stuff, which requires a different mind-set. I'm sure he's still an excellent drummer, but I don't know if he's ever going to do the stuff that he was playing in the band again.

**How about other drummers? You've worked with some remarkable players.**[Chester Thompson](http://wiki.killuglyradio.com/wiki/Chester_Thompson). Definitely solid, inspiring drummer, a totally different style than the other guys. It was always fun to play with Chester, especially after he learned how to play, polyrhythms, because he came into the band basically from the world of boogaloo. He could boogaloo his brains out. But trying to play guitar solos with Chester ... you had the positive side that his rhythm was so contageous that people could really tap their feet no matter what you were doing on the guitar; but the negative side was that if you were doing some of the polyrhythmic things that are comfortable for you to do, and the drum track doesn't move with what you're doing, then it doesn't quite mesh.

So I had a couple of talks with Chester, and tried to explain to him in a non technical way how things should be at certain points in musical compositions, and he scratched his head over it and started modifying, and I think it opened him up a little bit to some other ideas. He was great to travel with, too. A hilarious guy.

**You certainly aren't talking about the stereotyped drummer, the guy who can barely carry on a conversation ...**You mean drummers who get hair weaves? That's what's out there now. Ooh aah, ooh ooh aah. So what? The world wants that? Eat it up. Go ahead. I've even seen drummers who could actually play amazing stuff, but they couldn't get a job until they got the hair weave and went ooh aah, ooh ooh aah. That's what's happened to the record business in the United States. You know, it's pitiful. And probably the worst aspect of it was when punk became the fashion – where the more idiotic your performance, the more incompetent and the more messy and non-musical your performance was, the easier it was for you to get a record deal. I saw people like blotting out whole sections of their brain in order to get a contract. That's what the song 'Tinsel Town Rebellion' is about.

Another drummer that I really enjoyed playing with was [Aynsley Dunbar](http://wiki.killuglyradio.com/wiki/Aynsley_Dunbar). He was great. He could shuffle his brains out. He was just a shuffling guy. And I've played many interesting solos with [Chad Wackerman](http://wiki.killuglyradio.com/wiki/Chad_Wackerman), too. There's some good examples from the '88 tour that have yet to be released. And from a scientific standpoint, he's probably the most experimental in terms of equipment that he would use and electronics that he would put together, and a style that he developed based on his sampling gear.

[**Terry Bozzio**](http://wiki.killuglyradio.com/wiki/Terry_Bozzio) **has some interesting things to say about working with you. He says something about feeling you'd have a hard time replacing him, and then** [**Vinnie Colaiuta**](http://wiki.killuglyradio.com/wiki/Vinnie_Colaiuta) **walked in ...**Well, Bozzio was utterly fantastic, too. Remember – he was the first human being to play '[The Black Page](http://wiki.killuglyradio.com/wiki/The_Black_Page).'

**He also talks about getting to the point where he felt as important as you were to the band, and not realizing until later that he was gravely mistaken.**Well, that happens to everybody in the band. Most everybody gets to the point where they go, 'Shit, what do we need that old guy for? Look how fabulous I am. Why do we need a guy with a nose that large standing in front of the band, when WE, in our ultimate magnificence, are capable of performing all these musical miracles?' And it happens to every one of them.

**Why is that, do you think? Does it have to do with the calibre of the player?**It's human nature. It's the way it is. It's like everybody hates their boss. Everybody.

**You don't think it's because of you? Something about your music, your style?**Well, one contributing factor is that if a guy's in a regular band, he's not being pushed to do something unique or something that expands his personal capabilities. So at that point, everybody in the band is just trying to do something for a living. But if you get into a band where somebody not only asks you to do something which you never even dreamed possible, and helps you to do it, and moves you up a couple of notches as a musician, as a performer, puts you into a whole different echelon – the moment they arrive at that echelon, they say, 'Hey I really am fabulous.' And then they forget how they got there, or who pushed them to make them do that. They forget the push, and they look in the mirror and they see this fuckin' gleam and glow around their head, and they go, 'Yeah, I always knew I was this fabulous.' And of course they were, but I do think I deserve a small amount of credit periodically for helping them to reveal their inner charm to themselves. (laughing) You know what I mean? I don't ask much: Just play the job, and do it right.

**But playing with you is just a little bit different than playing with an ordinary guitar player.**Probably, yes. But it's not just that. When a guy goes on stage with this band, he walks into a world where the audience comes to the concert with respect or with awe. Because of all the people who've been in the band before, who've demonstrated great musicianship, we have a lot of musicians in the audience. And they're not coming just for a Rock 'n' Roll show. They expect every new band to amaze them. And part of my job is to supply their need to be amazed. So I'm always having to push these guys, if it's a new guy in the band, like, 'You don't know what these people are expecting out there. They want you to be more than wonderful.' And if a guy just thinks he's got a good paying job, then he's not going to last very long. And I think the audience has every right to expect something more than wonderful.

The only problem is that delivering something more than wonderful is more expensive than I can afford. It is impossible, to deliver something more than wonderful with no tour support, with people like I took on the road in 1988. I lost $400,000 on that tour, and the concerts were sold out. Now what do you do? We rehearsed for four months – that's how you get to be more than wonderful. You spend the money to pay people to learn the music.

**But surely you don't get out of the music business ... there has to be another alternative.**Think about it. For 25 years I have tried to do something more than wonderful in the United States. And I have eaten shit. I can't get my music played on the radio. I do a series of sold-out concerts and lose $400,000. I wind up with musicians who feel they can do it all without me. Now what is this?

I have been offered opportunities to move into another type of life. Another type of work. And I'm gonna do it.

**Do you want to talk about what you're going to do?**No. You'll read about it in the Wall Street Journal."

**Well, I can think of all sorts of things that you'd be fabulous at ...**Yeah, but not in the United States. You know the chapter on failures at the end of the book? That chapter could have been 800 pages long, but we didn't want to dwell on it. Do you understand?"

**But those aren't really your failures; they're the failures of those who didn't support the ideas.**Well, these are projects that didn't work. The list of projects that didn't work goes on and on and on and on. Now, I figure that there are other places in the world where large-scale interesting projects can work, and will work. Even if businessmen and politicians in the United States are too stupid to do them. And they must be done. So if I can't do them here, I'll do them somewhere else. What are you supposed to do? At this point, the whole idea of being a composer is, 'Well, that's a nice hobby.' So long as it doesn't cost me too much to do. If I can squeeze it in with the rest of the stuff, OK, I'll do it.

But I'm negotiating to sell all the 'P' copyrights to all of my masters, and trying to basically move away from the music business. Because, really, it's too depressing. I don't want to spend the rest of my life with a broken heart, eating shit. You know what I mean? I don't need this. And you wouldn't either."

**No, I probably wouldn't. I guess my assumption is that someone with your level of musicianship can't escape music. That it's compulsive. That there's no way you could really give it up and back off ... it's not in your character.**Well, it's not in my character. But, you can mutate. I could get to the point where in my life I could never stand to hear music again, just because of what it reminded me of. I could become a person who hates music. Almost overnight."

**I can't believe this. You don't think this is just a mood? You don't think it will go away?**I don't think so. There's still plenty of stuff that's either completed or near completion that I will finish off, so there will he more product coming out. But I must say that my whole desire to function in the world of music has severely diminished. How long can you wait? How much can you do? How much can you lose before you look in the mirror and say, 'You're out of your fuckin' mind'?"

**I guess.**You guess? I hope you continue to guess, and you never know."

If Zappa actually does leave music behind (and in my heart of hearts I still don't believe it), it will perhaps be the strongest social statement he's ever made. What does it mean when a musician of this calibre gives up because his heart is broken? What does it say about the music business ... about our support of the arts ... about a society whose accolades only go to the people they've seen on prime-time television? When journalists who know better don't bust their butts searching out the best music to report on instead of settling for the most "happenin' thing on the block," then it's their own damned fault if there's nothing left worth writing about. If the only people who can truly make it are those who sing their hearts out for the likes of Pepsi-Cola, what the hell's gonna happen to music

You tell me. I sure don't have the answers.