



Zappa: A Biography

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Ten years after his death, Frank Zappa continues to influence popular culture. With almost one hundred recordings still in print, Zappa remains a classic American icon. Scores of bands have been influenced by (and have shamelessly imitated) his music, and a talented roster of musicians passed through Zappa's bands. Now comes the definitive biography of Zappa by Barry Miles, best-selling author of *Hippie* and *Paul McCartney: Many Years from Now*, who knew Zappa personally and was present at the recording of some of his most important albums. Miles follows Zappa from his sickly Italian-American childhood in the 1940s (his father worked for the military and was used to test the effectiveness of new biological warfare agents) to his youthful pursuit of what was a lifelong dream: becoming a classical composer. Zappa brings together the many different personalities of this music legend together for the first time: the self-taught musician and composer who gained fame with the "rock" band the Mothers of Invention; the political antagonist who mocked presidents while being invited by Vaclav Havel to represent Czechoslovakia's cultural interests in the United States, and Zappa the family man who was married to the same woman for over thirty years.

Zappa: A Biography Details

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From Reader Review Zappa: A Biography for online ebook

Steven Spector says

A thorough biography of a brilliant musician who was an even better self-marketer. Although steeped in r n b Zappa looked hard for his niche "Let me be weird and funny live and in-studio," he said, "even though I'm deadly serious about almost everything. Let me cultivate the audience that I'm ultimately laughing at, and let me bring in brilliant (and hungry) musicians only to work them to death and ultimately dispose of them." Frank was different all right. Different like a fox! And you always had the feeling that he never did quite get over Daddy's disapproval. If the bio has some semblance of truth then Frank Zappa - by default-- was probably his own best friend.

Francesco says

Schietta biografia che esplora la vita, il background culturale e l'universo musicale di uno dei più grandi compositori del secolo scorso. Direi uno strumento fondamentale per orientarsi in una sterminata, variegata e appassionante produzione artistica.

Brian S. Wise says

A fairly well written book; I was put off by Zappa's tendency toward douchy behavior, as well as his phony "artist's sensibility." He was a cutthroat businessman who operated under the self-delusion of doing what he did in the name of his art. There is nothing more insufferable than a performer, with an exaggerated sense of importance, no one has the heart to say "No" to. Reading Zappa's direct quotes is tiring; even Barry Miles, the author, makes a practice of correcting Zappa's various exaggerated claims and false assertions. A bad husband and father, more ego driven than his talent should have allowed, he made the lives of everyone around him miserable. I respect Zappa less for having read this book, which is a shame, because I've always generally enjoyed his work. In a way, I wish I hadn't read it, because now that I know more about him, I wish I didn't.

Fallopia says

I first heard *Brown Shoes Don't Make It* on the Dr. Demento Show in the 70s; I was thirteen and impressionable, so I latched onto the line "only thirteen and she knows how to nasty." It remains my favorite song in the world to this day. Frank may not have received a lot of airplay—on his first album, *Freak Out!*, one song is called *Nullis Pretii (No Commercial Potential)*—but in the 70s I was able to hear some choice songs of his, including *The Muffin Man* and *Joe's Garage* .

This bio written by Barry Miles—a self-proclaimed friend of Frank Zappa's—couldn't have been written in Frank's lifetime; he only ever approved *The Real Frank Zappa Book*, which consisted of transcripts from interview sessions with him by the author of that book. This book does contain a great deal of anecdotes, as well as quotes from those close to Frank—particularly his wife Gail, and his daughter Moon Unit.

I really would recommend this book to anyone with the least interest in Frank Zappa; even the ending, in

which the author describes Frank's final days with cancer, is important, in that at the time I felt cheated that I hadn't known how gravely ill he was. When I heard Frank had died, I was inconsolably depressed for more than a week; I had even called 818-PUMPKIN, the official Zappa hotline not long before and was told, "Oh, he's fine."

I'm really happy I read this book and will probably read it again; Frank may not have been "popular" or easily categorized, but he left his mark on the world just by doing what he had to do. There's even an asteroid named "Zappafrank" out there.

Dacod says

An elongated wikipedia article full of typos that serves better as a Cliffnotes introduction to Frank Zappa than it does an appropriate and detailed look at his career. Regardless I learned some interesting things and somewhat enjoyed the read if for nothing else than the star.

Stenwjohnson says

UK writer Barry Miles has made a career writing solid biographies and histories on counterculture topics, mainly key figures of the Beat movement. Frank Zappa, the subject of a 2003 biography, is a less likely candidate for the Miles treatment than he might appear: A wildly creative middle-class overachiever who shunned drugs and lacked self-destructive demons, his darkly satirical albums ridiculed hippie culture as well as the conservative "silent majority" of the 1960s. Zappa was a genius workaholic rather than an icon of rebellious cool.

Miles' "Zappa" meets serviceable, baseline standards for a biography. Supercharged with documented, granular detail, it strolls from chronological point to point with minimal narrative verve. The topic itself generates inherent interest, even during the long march up to Zappa's Mothers of Invention period, where Miles (or rather his drab surfeit of information) paints an evocative portrait of the west coast's cottage recording industry of the early 60s.

Miles is less deft with analysis than documented facts and makes numerous strained attempts to squeeze psychological revelation from biographical scraps. He opens with a lengthy anecdote of a 1965 incident where Zappa is arrested in a near-comic pornography sting, after making a faked audio sex tape for an informant. He served 10 days in jail, which Miles trumpets as a personal Rubicon where Zappa's trust of American values supposedly evaporated. This event looms large enough in Miles' amateur psychodrama to appear later in its chronological place, re-told in almost identical language, restating its naive thesis with equal conviction.

Miles also quotes Frank Zappa's autobiography so liberally that one questions the value of digesting mediated information. That work is "The Real Frank Zappa Book" (1990), less a pure autobiography than a curated memoir where Zappa selectively holds forth on a range of topics in his own brilliant, inimitable voice. There are no longeurs and no psychobabble. That book is the place to start.

Cory Howell says

I did find this bio of Frank Zappa fascinating, even though I was put off by the multitude of typos and errors (names of musicians, songs, etc. were often wrong). I had read The Real Frank Zappa Book several times, and it was interesting to get more of an objective viewpoint. Sadly, it does seem that Zappa was not as cool as I always thought he was. I was disappointed to read about his dalliances with so many groupies throughout his married life. I have no reason to believe that Miles was mistaken about Frank's infidelities, as Gail Zappa has referred in interviews to Frank's extra-marital activities. Still, Zappa's career had an amazing trajectory, and I think Miles manages to describe this remarkable life with a considerable degree of balance between admiration and approbation.

George Gratto says

Turned the pages with zircon-encrusted tweezers.

Dan says

Extreme amounts of detail are included in this uber-comprehensive biography. An awesome read for anyone familiar with the span of Zappa's career as it provides a great deal of context to each of his releases. It's fun to listen to the music that corresponds to each era as you read about it.

The author doesn't hesitate to inject his opinion into the biography, which surprisingly isn't the least bit annoying or distracting.

After reading this, it's impossible not to have a huge respect for Zappa's many accomplishments, musical and otherwise. It's sort of incredible that a movie hasn't been made about his life yet.

Cocaine says

Any decent biography by any decent biographer has to walk that thin line that steers masterfully between sycophancy and acid disclosure. Barry Miles fulfils this role with a natural flair. He obviously admired Zappa even if at times found him exacerbating, sometimes downright unpleasant. The depth of his research is exhaustive and all though I knew most of what is written here he still manages to uncover things I had not learnt before. Zappa was everything I thought he was and one or two things more. All in all a good biography of one of the 21st centuries great composers.

Lucius says

Great stories, excellent for a true fanatic, just for the timeline and backstories.

Commentary revealed the writer to be what so many critics are: assholes who can't create themselves, yet still feel justified to a half-informed opinion. What a clown Barry Miles is.

Lukasz Pruski says

Frank Zappa is the musical idol of my youth. I listened to Zappa's album "Freak Out!" almost 50 years ago, in 1966 or 1967, fascinated by what I considered the avant-garde freshness of the music, political references, and great sense of humor. Obviously, being a teenager, I dearly loved the scatological and obscene references. Later, when I tried to grow up, came my fascination with Mr. Zappa's strong stance for freedom of speech and against consumerism. As far as music is concerned I was very much into Mr. Zappa's guitar playing, and "Hot Rats" and "Shut Up n' Play Yer Guitar" were some of my most revered albums. Zappa's death in 1993 came as a big loss in my life. Zappa had been my hero, someone to look up to politically and musically.

I read (or tried to read) several books about my hero. Zappa's autobiography - "The Real Frank Zappa Book" - made me adore my idol even more. I did not particularly like the unfocused "The Frank Zappa Companion", and could not very much get into "Frank Zappa: the Negative Dialectics of Poodle Play, full of technical details about the music, and sounding too much like a research paper on the conceptual continuity of Zappa's work for my taste. I have just now finished "Zappa" by Barry Miles. It is a great biography, a serious, extremely well researched book that - in my view - does a fantastic job of showing the real Frank Zappa - a musical giant, yet a real person, full of insecurities and obsessions. A genius yet also somewhat of a jerk.

The major strength of Mr. Miles' biography is that it transcends the biographical details, the enumeration of albums, songs, and performances, and the trite gossip. The author proposes several theses about forces that drove Frank Zappa in his art and in life and provides convincing arguments for these theses. Perhaps the most important of them is that the experience that shaped the artist the most was the ten days he had to spend in San Bernardino County Jail for making an ostensibly pornographic tape, whereas in reality he was entrapped by a zealous policeman. "By the time he got out, he no longer believed anything the authorities had ever told him. Everything he had been taught at school about the American Way of Life was a lie." Ever from then on he would try to make America "see itself as it really was: phoney, mendacious, shallow and ugly."

Zappa often claimed he did not want to become what he is known to most people as - a rock musician. He famously confessed "I never had any intention of writing rock music. I always wanted to compose more serious music and have it performed in concert halls." His becoming one of the most famous rock artists was a vehicle that allowed him achieve his ultimate goal - having various symphony orchestras play his "serious" compositions. The guise also allowed Zappa to achieve the other major goal of his life - becoming a pre-eminent social critic. Songs like *Brown Shoes Don't Make It* express "consummate indictment of government corruption and the vacuous sterility of American consumer society." In *I'm the Slime Zappa* "describes television content as vile and pernicious, brain-washing the American public until they are a country of zombies who do as they are told: eat the processed junk food that is advertized, and think what the government wants them to think, all dished up as mind-numbing sit-coms, soap operas and game shows." Well, it is hard not to totally agree with this assessment.

Mr. Miles' diagnosis is most acute when he emphasizes Zappa's "ambivalent relationship to the counter-culture". While living in the absolute center of this counter-culture, he despised most of what it stood for. Zappa usually had very little respect for his fans and often he even vilified his audiences. He treated many people whose money he took for performing for them like complete idiots (and rightly so). The famous "Gee, my hair's getting good in the back!" quote satirizes the audiences' preoccupation with looking like the band members they idolized. The adolescent boys screamed in delight when they listened to Zappa's famous *Titties and Beer*, which was, basically, a song about how stupid they were.

I am for complete freedom of speech in arts and do not mind if an artist wants to write songs with lyrics

about defecation, urination, flatulence, feet odor, nasal excretions, and other such things. People who are disgusted by the subject matter should just refrain from listening to these songs. And yes, I am disgusted with some Zappa's lyrics - I think 'Jazz Discharge Party Hats' might be the grossest song ever - yet I still support his right to write such a song, while at the same time doubting whether he ever managed to grow up.

What Mr. Miles' book made quite clear to me is how tyrannical and callous Frank Zappa was with respect to the musicians who played for him. Despite the fact that they had to work extremely hard - no other bands in the history of rock had to practice that hard during insanely prolonged rehearsals - and that Mr. Zappa paid them little, he continuously berated them and fired at will. His patronizing remarks about the members of the London Symphony Orchestra, who played his compositions and applauded his skills as a composer, are a particularly acute example.

Mr. Miles puts forward several other interesting theses in his book, for instance, about the influence of Zappa's Sicilian patriarchal roots, the consequences of his father's constant job changes and consequent relocations of Zappa's family, his lack of friends, even his apparent inability to love, yet this review is already way overlong. To sum up (finally!): Frank Zappa is a great musician and a keen social observer. He is the author of perhaps my favorite epigram "Scientists claim that hydrogen is the basic building block of the universe because it is so plentiful. I say there is more stupidity than hydrogen, and *that* is the basic building block of the universe." Yet, there is also another side to the genius and while I still admire Frank Zappa, I would somehow feel embarrassed, having read this great biography, to call him my hero.

Four and three quarter stars.

Corrie Campbell says

Barry Miles gets trashed by other reviewers and some of the critiques are justified especially when you don't get Zappa's date of death correct. Nonetheless, Miles attempts to write a well-rounded biography that discusses warts and all. Some of it is disillusioning hearing the negatives about Frank, but it was always the things that you already suspected; such as Zappa being an absent father, a control freak or not wanting to pay his musicians. This book was better than Frank's own "The Real Frank Zappa Book" because it was trying to paint the whole picture. As far as how it ranks to other biographies of Frank Zappa, I couldn't comment since I haven't read any. The biography includes a discography section, which is also nice. It is nearly 400 pages, so it takes a bit of a time commitment.

Lee says

I have read a couple other biographies by Miles, like William Burroughs and The Beat Hotel and have enjoyed them both. He begins this biography with a story of, that most Zappa fans know, that Frank got busted for making a porn-movie. While it is usually scoffed off as a minor incident Miles makes it a pivotal experience for Zappa as an artist. He describes in detail Zappa's upbringing, and his long trip through music-making. I read it a while ago but still pick it up and read sections; it also has a great discography in the back.

Adam Patterson says

There was a time when I had a complete reverence to anything Z put forth. Years later, I'm safely on the other side of my demystification process, and happier, healthier for it. There are still the dozen or so Essential Frank Zappa recordings, the ones I'll stand by till death, but really, the guy has finally hovered down among the more mortal types that co-occupy my conscious pantheon.

Miles does a pointed job at really nailing Z as a human subject, and I greatly appreciate this perspective, albeit one that was certainly only to be published posthumously. At times, he goes a little TOO far in his "humanizing", though, and some of the unnecessary and unflattering anecdotes seem to verge on classic British tabloid slander. At some points, this writing that seems to dig a little too far into the barrel betrays its own thesis, which could be a very valid and engaging one.

Zappa was indeed a complex character. His culture-conflicts it seems, while ostentatiously pointed outward, against the retarded, repressive world he seemed mired in, were more often, and at a deeper level, conflicts with himself.
