

## »MAKE A SEX NOISE HERE«: FRANK ZAPPA, SEX AND POPULAR MUSIC

Paul Carr

Throughout his controversial career, Frank Zappa was often associated with provocative music, which challenged society's understanding of the First Amendment. Although his very public confrontation with the *Parents Music Resource Centre* (PMRC) in September 1985 is probably the pinnacle of his antipathy toward state prescribed restrictions, it is apparent that his entire compositional portfolio is littered with both overt and more subliminal references to sex. One of the first instances of this practice occurred in 1964 after Zappa was arrested and imprisoned for producing an audiotape of simulated sexual acts while still a jobbing musician, and was to continue for the next three decades. There is a matrix of sexual reference to Zappa's oeuvre, with examples ranging from seemingly immature references to sex,<sup>1</sup> to quasi-moral narratives about sexually transmitted diseases,<sup>2</sup> to sex as a conduit for social and religious satire,<sup>3</sup> to sustained science fiction visions of sexual dystopia,<sup>4</sup> to conspiracy driven accounts of the rise of AIDS,<sup>5</sup> to humorous narratives about sex appliances,<sup>6</sup> to the voyeuristic orgasm through torture dystopia of »The Torture Never Stops« on *Zoot Allures* (1976). Zappa rationalized his liberalistic views on sex by stating that the »sex equals sin« propaganda instilled by pressure groups such as the PMRC only resulted in the institutionalization of the »neurotic misconception that keeps pornographers in business« (Courier 2002: 416) and that lack of sex had the potential to result in some of the USA's social problems. At times a

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- 1 E.g. »Make A Sex Noise Here« (*You Can't Do That On Stage Anymore Volume 6*, 1992) and »The Groupie Routine« (*You Can't Do That On Stage Anymore Volume 1*, 1988).
  - 2 E.g. »Why Does It Hurt When I Pee?« (*Joe's Garage Act I*, 1979).
  - 3 »Jewish Princess« on (*Sheik Yerbouti*, 1979) and »Catholic Girls« (*Joe's Garage Act I*, 1979).
  - 4 *Joe's Garage Act I* (1979) and *Joe's Garage Acts II and III* (1979).
  - 5 *Thing-Fish* (1984).
  - 6 »Little Rubber Girls« on *You Can't Do That On Stage Anymore Volume 4* (1991).

libertarian with principles that seem to match aural explorations with oral expediency, Zappa remains one of the most extraordinary and far-reaching figures in popular music to have explored sex in the analysis of the human condition in all its cruelty, comedy and potential for the expression of freedom.<sup>7</sup> This essay concerns Zappa's frequently strategic anti essentialist relationship with sex drawing on a range of examples from his oeuvre, such as the relationship of his practices to popular music at large, his position on censorship in America, his dealings with groupies and the authenticity of his anthropological practices.

Born on December 21st 1940, Zappa can be considered part of the 60's generation that celebrated sexual liberation to the soundtrack of the emerging rock genre. As Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie verified in their 1978 landmark essay *Rock and Sexuality*, rock seemed to treat the problems of puberty, drawing upon and enunciating »the psychological and physical tensions of adolescence« (Frith/McRobbie 1990: 371). In the near 30 year period that he was in the public eye, Zappa's music not only articulated these factors for his »teenage audience«, but accurately and humorously reported upon how society at large and his close colleagues interfaced with sexual practice. After forming The Mothers in 1964, Zappa's music began to adhere to the »cock rock« criteria outlined by Frith and McRobbie, who describe its performance conventions as an »explicit, crude and often aggressive expression of male sexuality« (ibid.: 374). They continue to describe rock's musicians as »aggressive, dominating and boastful«, constantly seeking to »remind their audience of their prowess, [and] their control« (ibid.), a trait that Zappa often displayed overtly when encouraging his audience to mimic sex noises during live performance.<sup>8</sup> The authors sharply contrast this music with what they describe as »teenybop«, which they portray as relying on »older romantic conventions« based on »female crushes and emotional affairs« (ibid.: 379). This is an important difference when referring to Zappa, who clearly made a distinction between love and sex.<sup>9</sup> When discussing the former, he stated »I detest love lyrics. I think one of the causes of bad mental health in the United States is that people have been raised on love lyrics« (Zappa/Occhiogrosso 1990: 89). Zappa continues to discuss how these lyrics create an ideology of love that creates a »desire for an imaginary situation which will never exist« (ibid.). These mythologies are dealt

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7 I would like to thank my colleague Prof. Richard Hand for this observation.

8 Refer to »Make A Sex Noise« (*You Can't Do That On Stage Anymore Volume 4*, 1991) for an indicative example.

9 On American television's *Nightwatch* (Zappa 1985), Zappa reiterated this point when stating »You don't need to love someone to have sex«, a position that was encapsulated in his song »I Ain't Got No Heart« (*Freak Out*, 1966).

with throughout Zappa's career, ranging from entire albums such as *Crusing With Ruben & The Jets* (1968) to individual song's such as »Wowie Zowie« (*Freak Out*, 1966), »I Ain't Got No Heart« (ibid.) and »I Have Been In You« (*Sheik Yerbouti*, 1979), all of which skilfully and sarcastically dissemble a genre that he described as a form of absurdist comedy (Keel 1979).

Prior to discussing Zappa in detail, it is important to briefly re-establish that music directly or indirectly alluding to sex was not only associated with rock music emerging during the 1960's, nor indeed the rock and roll of the 1950's. Bernard Gendron discusses that one of the most pervasive myths associated with the style is that rock and roll »revolutionized popular music by supporting uninhibited sexuality«, proceeding to quite rightly discuss how the earlier Tin Pan Alley style was erroneously associated with »romantic« as opposed to erotic or sexual subject matter (Gendron 2004: 298). An examination of Cole Porter's »Love For Sale« serves as an indicative example, with its graphic treatment of prostitution being far more contentious than many of the songs targeted by Zappa's much maligned PMRC during the 1980's. It is well documented how sex is portrayed in other contemporary musical styles such as blues, country, rap and jazz,<sup>10</sup> but when discussing eroticism in a genre not normally associated with sex, baroque opera, Derek Scott believes that »the problem that faces today's audience may be a lack of recognition of a representation of eroticism by the composer« (Scott 2003: 20). The author proceeds to discuss how this was also the case during the Victorian period, and notes the robin as being a pervasive signifier for sex at the time, with songs such as »Won't You Come Home Robin«, »Poor Robin« and »Colin And Susan« all showing an association between the robin and the penis (ibid.: 22f.). This is usually achieved metaphorically,<sup>11</sup> and it is interesting to link this to Zappa's association with the guitar, arguably the most pervasive signifier of male sexual prowess in contemporary music today, which can be seen to have similar connotations for today's generation. Research has indicated that specific instruments have female or male associations (Sheperd 2003: 232), and the phallic nature of the electric guitar has been widely discussed by academics such as Sheila Whiteley (1997: 40), Andy Bennett and Kevin Dawe (2001: 55), and Mavis Bayton (1997). In *Instruments of Desire* Steve Wakesman typifies this argument by discussing how the instrument has the potential to »accentuate the phallic dimensions of the performing male body« (Waksman 2001: 244), but interestingly,

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10 Refer to Epstein (2004), Fillingim (2003), Semonche (2007) and Ellis (1961) respectively for detailed discussions of the relationship of sex to these genres.

11 With lines such as »She had rosy cheeks and a dimpled chin, and a hole to put poor robin in« (»Poor Robin«, Anon. 1796; cited in Scott 2003: 23).

Zappa did not resolve to overtly incorporate the performance gestures of the archetypical rock guitarist. He did however recognize the sexual attraction of the instrument, as can be seen in occurrences such as the humorous way his band members incorporated guitar necks emanating from their genital areas in Zappa's film *Uncle Meat* (1987), or the exaggerated size of the guitar a caricature of Zappa holds on the cover of *Crusing With Ruben & The Jets* (1968). Indeed this album is known to be a collection of ›anti love songs‹ with a surface doo-wop sentimentality dissected by various means such as the sarcastic timbre of Zappa's vocal delivery and the cutting realism of the lyrics. Although close examination of the music itself reveals these factors, Zappa's enormous nose on the album's cover also divulges the charade prior to taking the CD out of the case.

Zappa's long term confrontation with the PMRC throughout the late 1980's possibly best typifies his determination to instil his and others' rights to freedom of speech in music. Formed as a direct response to Tipper Gore's personal objection to the explicit sexual content in Prince's ›Darling Nicki‹ (*Purple Rain*, 1984),<sup>12</sup> the pressure group quickly responded by threatening to sue the *Record Industry Association of America* (RIAA) for exposing it's youth to the realisms of sex, drugs and alcohol, demanding that all albums were to undergo a rating system similar to the movies by including detailed warning stickers on covers. As outlined in the May 1989 edition of *Penthouse Magazine*, Zappa was outspoken regarding what he believed to be a restriction on an artist's First Amendment rights, describing the proposals as ›anti sexual, pseudo Christian legislative fervour‹ and that the misconception of ›sex equals sin‹ as responsible for keeping pornographers in business (Zappa/Occhiogrosso 1989: 74). Zappa's argument was continued periodically on American TV, where he defended the assertion that rock and roll music was directly associated with the rise of aids and sexual immorality, defiantly stating on *Crossfire* that ›the government does not belong in the bedroom‹ (Zappa 1986). In both the 1986 *Crossfire* interview and his autobiography, Zappa reiterated the fact that lyrics ›cannot hurt anyone‹ (Zappa/Occhiogrosso 1990: 284), although this assertion clearly conflicts with his position outlined above regarding the impact of love lyrics. In his autobiography, he stated: ›You're getting the bulk of your ›behaviour norms‹ mapped out for you in the lyrics of some dumb fucking love song‹ (ibid.: 89), a point that he also asserted on *The Dick Cavett Show* in 1980. He stated:

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12 In particular the lines ›I met her in a hotel lobby, masturbating with a magazine‹.

»The problem with lyrics, stems from a primitive belief in this country that there are certain words in our language that will corrupt you instantaneously the moment they are uttered into the atmosphere« (Zappa, in Cavett 1980).

Despite pinpointing tracks such as »Do That To Me One More Time« as offensive, Zappa's portfolio was never touched by the PMRC in court, although he obstinately included his own stickers on a number of releases and revelled in the irony of his all instrumental album *Jazz From Hell* (1986) obtaining an RIAA sticker in the United States.

It is apparent that throughout his career, Zappa both abhorred the restrictions of society, while simultaneously instilling his own sometimes severe control mechanisms on his band. This was perpetuated through various means, ranging from the autocratic ways he used musicians in both live and recorded environments, to the voyeuristic documentation of their sexual activities – usually from an ›outsiders‹ anti essentialist perspective. Regarding the pleasures Zappa derived from documenting and recording band members' sexual practices, he did seem to derive at least some gratification from using them as a psychological control mechanism.<sup>13</sup> He stated:

»Every once in a while one of these guys will come over, and I say listen to this. They are always shocked to know that somebody saved these things, and actually put them together in album form, and I have not detected any great enthusiasm on the part of the participants to have this material put out to release« (Zappa, in Radcliffe 1994).

As can be observed on many of his live recordings, when working with Zappa, his musicians would not only be showcasing their musical gifts, but would also be required to ›behave‹ in specific ways. This ranged from archetypal rock and roll stage antics to a more unusual acceptance of Zappa anthropologically documenting their ›road stories‹, which often included public declarations of sexual activities that would otherwise be private. As a family man, this essay is absolutely not suggesting that Zappa condoned these activities himself,<sup>14</sup> but that he felt an anthropological responsibility to document and portray the existence of these practices as they existed in the world he lived. Regarding the means through which he obtained the band based information, he commented:

»Every morning, the ones who woke up early enough to eat breakfast before they got on the bus or went to the airport, would give the report of whatever

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13 Ben Watson has also construed Zappa's practice of documenting his musicians' public and private activities as another means of exerting power over them (refer to Watson 1993: 115).

14 For a text largely dedicated to Zappa's promiscuity, see Lennon (1995).

they had done the night before, you know, and some of those reports were interesting, and some of them were boring« (Zappa, in Radcliffe 1994).

Ex Zappa Sideman Tommy Mars concurred with Zappa's anthropological approach to songwriting, stating:

»Everything that is written is about the band and life with Frank, that is total autobiography. I mean you name it, *Punkies Whips* did happen. Terry had a fantasy about Punky Meadows. *Jumbo Go Away*, there was a girl name Jumbo. *The Guacamole Queen* – these people exist. Those underpants did blow my head off one night« (Mars, in Radcliffe 1994).

Mars is referring to a story Zappa outlined in »Panty Rap« (*Tinseltown Rebellion*, 1981), where he invites the audience to contribute »feminine underclothing« to form a quilt, which was actually exhibited in Denver in 1983. Constructed by Emily Alana James, the artist commented on how the material was posted to her:

»The bag of undies I received was an accumulation of one concert tour. The box was about the size of a large monitor box. Frank called prior to sending it and told me they were discussing whether or not the undies should be washed prior to shipping. I said, »absolutely not« as the point of the piece was to capture the essence of the relationship between fans and the artist they adore« (Sovetov 2009).

As outlined above, in addition to translating life as he perceived it into his compositions, Zappa was also prepared to release the actual raw material as recorded live. He commented:

»I put together a tape called the *Anthropology Of A Rock And Roll Band* at one time but the contents of the thing could be proved to be so embarrassing to so many people who have become so much more sophisticated these days, that I doubt that it will ever be released, but it contains things like breakfast reports and [pause], recordings made in motel rooms, just stuff taped on the bus, and actual dialogue« (Zappa, in Radcliffe 1994).

Although Zappa continues to doubt whether this project would ever be released as a commercially viable product, it is unclear from this dialogue if it is moral responsibility or legal restrictions that prevented the release of this so called »album«, and it is interesting to relate this to the sampled sex noises he incorporated into live performance on pieces such as »Emperor Of Ohio« and »Tracy Is A Snob« (*You Can't Do That On Stage Anymore Volume 6*, 1992). This practice links to Zappa's ten day imprisonment in San Bernardino County Jail in 1964 for recording an illegal sex tape (James 2002: 22), having to use his royalties from »Memories Of El Monte« and »Grunion Run«

to get his ›accomplice‹ Lorraine Belcher out on bail (Slaven 2003: 42). Zappa later described the lead up to his imprisonment as »entrapment«, where he was commissioned by an undercover detective to compile what he describes as a recording of »bogus grunts and squeaky bedsprings«, with »no actual sex involved« (Zappa/Occhiogrosso 1990: 56). Zappa was more revealing when describing the sexual dystopia of »The Torture Never Stops« (*Zoot Allures*, 1976), depicting the grunts and groans as »an evening's work«, he elaborated

»We did most of it in the bedroom of my house. There were two chicks there – one was my wife – plus myself. I think they enjoyed it very much. We got four hours on tape and then cut it down to just under ten minutes. My friend opens up with the first grunt and it carries on from there. Er, I don't think it's worth telling you precisely what went on [...] you wouldn't be allowed to publish it« (Zappa, cited in Slaven 2003: 230).

Although this comment does not provide any explicit detail, it is one of the few instances of Zappa admitting direct involvement, as opposed to his usual strategic anti essentialist position. Sunaina Maria describes this practice as »the ability to highlight, underscore, and augment an aspect of one's identity that one cannot express directly« (Maira 2002: 80), a statement that George Lipetz accentuates by suggesting that the artist adopts a disguise »in order to express indirectly parts of their identity that might be to threatening to express directly« (Lipsitz 1994: 62). With a few exceptions, this is the position that Zappa adopts consistently, in his song lyrics (which in the main deal with other people), his position outside of the band, during personnel introductions,<sup>15</sup> and in films such as *Uncle Meat* (1987) and *200 Motels* (1971), where he observes and records the sexual activity either through a movie lens in the former, or via an actor (played by Ringo Star) in the latter. Regarding *Uncle Meat*, it is apparent that the footage throughout is overtly voyeuristic, with some scenes ambiguously straddling the anti essentialist divide between real and acted. As in *200 Motels*, Zappa is featured mainly as film maker, and is seen to interview the cast, in addition to ›directing‹ and commenting on their sexual activities. The home movie feel and largely improvised text accentuates the sexual ambiance of what is essentially an exercise in sexual fantasy between band members and groupies.

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15 When introducing band members during live performance, Zappa did not comply with the stereotype of having a colleague introduce him, but tended to refer to himself with an alias name such as Ronnie Hawkins, Bob Duffy and Fillmore Slim.

One of the most pervasive themes that Zappa revisited is that of groupie folklore,<sup>16</sup> an early example of which can be found in »Son Of Suzy Creem-cheese« (*Absolutely Free*, 1967). In typical fashion, Zappa uses double entendre when describing this piece as »a stirring saga of a young groupie« who is »motivated by a desire to be ›in‹ at all times« (Zappa 1967). Although the piece itself is tame by his later standards, this description is an early example of the euphemistic way he was to often deal with sexual subject matter in his later work.<sup>17</sup> When discussing Groupies during his time with Led Zeppelin, Robert Plant distinguished between *Fans* who wanted a brief sexual encounter and *Groupies* who travelled with musicians for extended periods of time, acting as surrogate girlfriends or mothers, often taking care of the musician's valuables, drugs, wardrobe and social life (Davis 1985). If this distinction is true, then Zappa's interface with Pamela Ann Miller (Miss Pamela, later known as Pamela Des Barres), Linda Sue Parker (Miss Sparky), Lucy Offerall, Christine Frka (Miss Christine), Sandra Leano (Miss Sandra), Mercy Fontenot (Miss Mercy) and Cynthia Wells (Miss Cynderella) provides a quintessential example, indeed it accentuates the norm of groupie involvement associated with rock stars of the time. Collectively entitled *Girls Together Outrageously* (GTO)<sup>18</sup> by Zappa himself, various members of the group lived in Zappa's log cabin during the 1960's, with Frka and Des Barres both acting as a live in nanny for his eldest children Dweezil and Moon Unit, and Frka being a central feature on the cover of Zappa's *Hot Rats* (1969). Offerall also appeared in a number of Zappa's films, including *Uncle Meat* (1987), *200 Motels* (1971, alongside Pamela Ann Miller) and *Video From Hell* (1987), always playing the part of a groupie. *Rolling Stone* magazine's »The Groupies and Other Girls« special issue of February 1969 described the group as »a sociological creation of Frank Zappa« (Anon. 1969: 16), who financed and produced their only release, *Permanent Damage* (1969), a recording largely consisting of songs mixed with other friends, including the infamous groupie/artist Cynthia Plaster

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16 Although Zappa's ongoing almost voyeuristic involvement with groupie folklore is unusual, examples of other musicians dealing with groupie subject matter in some form is prevalent, with notable examples including Chuck Berry's »Sweet Little Sixteen« (*One Dozen Berrys*, 1958), The Beatles' »She Came In Through The Bathroom Window« (*Abbey Road*, 1969), Pink Floyd's »Summer 68« (*Atom Heart Mother*, 1970) and Michael Jackson's »Billie Jean« (*Thriller*, 1983).

17 For example »I Have Been In You« (*Sheik Yerbouti*, 1979), »Easy Meat« (*Tinseltown Rebellion*, 1981) and »Would You Go All The Way« (*Chunga's Revenge*, 1970), etc.

18 Although the acronym has an interchangeable meaning, with »Girls Together Often« and »Girls Together Only« being frequently adopted.



Caster,<sup>19</sup> notorious for creating plaster casts of famous musicians' penis. Although never participating, Zappa was a known supporter of her work, and after moving her to Los Angeles, evolved the concept of publishing her diary and preserving her casts for a potential exhibition (Anon. 1969: 20). Although this never materialized, her activities are immortalized in the film *Plaster Caster* (Everleth 2001), in addition to non Zappa songs such as Kiss's »Plaster Caster« (*Love Gun*, 1977) and Jim Croce's »Five Short Minutes« (*I Got A Name*, 1973). When discussing his ongoing fascination with groupie related activities, particularly during the early 1970's, he stated:

»I think that what you're describing is something that was common, only maybe over a 4 or 5 year period, in the early days when that type of sexual activity was a general topic of conversation, it would be like – idiotic to try and do an album dealing with that topic right now, you know – who cares?« (Zappa, in Radcliffe 1994).

Zappa is clearly encapsulating the zeitgeist, with his work around Groupies coming to a peak during the Flo and Eddy era of the early 1970s, commencing with songs such as »Road Ladies's« on their debut *Chunga's Revenge* (1970), but cumulating on *Fillmore East, June 1971* (1971). Taken from this album, Zappa applies the following couplet to »What Kind Of Girl Do You Think We Are«:

»These girls wouldn't let anyone spew on their vital parts  
They want a guy in a group with a big hit single in the charts«

It is apparent that this short statement incorporates his pervasive euphemistic language and sexual connotation. It is verified as factual by Cynthia Albritton. She stated: »I don't chase people just because they are famous – people like actors, vice precedents or war heroes – but only if they play good music« (Anon. 1969: 20). The song then proceeds to outline the stereotypical mentality of both musicians and groupies, as Howard Kalin asks »how a young girl such as you, might be thrilled and overwhelmed by me«, prior to concluding with a reiteration of how much the girls »want a guy from a group who's got a thing in the chart«, a comment that Russo considers to be »an obvious double entendre for the payola and sexual favours required to have a hit record« (Russo 1999: 102).

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19 Cynthia Albritton, who Zappa tried to persuade to join the group.

## Conclusion

The question remains, what Zappa's practices actually signify about him? Do his sometimes perverted lyrics, stage antics, and voyeuristic tendencies display what *Time Magazine* described as a »force of cultural darkness« (Tyler 1969), or can we contextualize this alongside his other work and describe it as a means to shock and confront the norms of society in a similar way to comedians such as Bill Hicks, Richard Prior and his friend Lenny Bruce? In 1973 Australia's *Go Set* described Zappa as »the greatest satirist of all time. The distorted mirror through which we experience ourselves and the neurotic perverted society that man has created« (Anon. 1973: 3). Do we simply find Zappa's honesty too revealing? When it comes to the love/sex continuum, it is suggested that the sarcastic introduction to »I Have Been In You« (*You Can't Do That On Stage Anymore Volume 6*, 1992) is a microcosm of his position, where he outlines what he describes as the »preposterous« way the subject of love is dealt with in the lyrics of various rock artists. Using Peter Frampton's bestselling album *I'm In You* (1977) as a source, he asks the audience »How can a title such as this be rationalized«? (»Is That Guy Kidding Or What« on *You Can't Do That On Stage Anymore Volume 6*, 1992). In a bootleg of the same track recorded in New York in 1978 (*Zappa 1978-09-21 – Mid-Hudson Civic Center, Poughkeepsie*), Zappa describes the title itself as »extremely offensive« and after hearing it stated »something must be done«. What Zappa decided to do throughout his career was deal with the realities of the world by combining an uncompromisingly honest satirical eye through a strategic anti essentialist perspective, very rarely revealing his true self. It is interesting to note that when outlining his sexual lyrical subject matter, Zappa would often superimpose this content over rhythmic backgrounds that are associated with love,<sup>20</sup> making his contention with the ways society presented itself more ironic and overt. Although he never made the connection himself, Zappa's view of organisations such as the PMRC and other Christian fundamentalist groups is similar to the dystopia George Orwell depicted with the »Junior Anti-Sex League« in *Nineteen Eighty Four* (1965), with Orwell's »Big Brother« and Zappa's »Central Scrutinizer«<sup>21</sup> having similar totalitarian tendencies. Both works also portray an explicit paranoia in their authors regarding the potentials for governments to suppress freedom of expression – including sex.

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20 As indicated in »I'm In You« and his use of the doo-wop genre.

21 As featured in *Joe's Garage Acts I, II & III* (1979).

Throughout his career, Zappa had the capacity to ambiguously combine both an emic and etic conceptual position to his work, where he straddled the divide between an inside member of a rock and roll group, and an impartial observer, a process that gave him credibility and cultural/personal neutrality. Zappa's strategic anti essentialist position is not only apparent in the subject matter of his song lyrics and his visual representation on stage and screen, but also occasionally in the personas he adopts when introducing his band. The song »Velvet Sunrise« (*Bongo Fury in El Paso*, 1975) is an indicative example of Zappa clearly displacing himself from both the subject matter of »Carolina Hardcore Ecstasy« and the controversial content of the narrative that follows. After performing the song, Zappa states: »Good morning ladies and gentleman, this is Dr Maurice speaking to you«. He then proceeds to inform his audience that »the topic of conversation tonight is having a good time in America«. »Dr Maurice« then asserts »the problem is that in the United States you can have a good time for a little while, but you can't have a good time all the time«, and that »maybe some people really don't know how to have a good time – and they keep trying to have a good time doing the wrong things«. Zappa then outlines what he considers the »right things to do to have a good time« are as follows:

»Clue number one: many of them take place with their clothes off.

Clue number two: many of them take place not only with their clothes off but in unorthodox positions.

Clue number three: many of them involve vegetables.

Clue number four: some of them involve animals and minerals«

(»Velvet Sunrise« on *Bongo Fury in El Paso*, 1975)

These comments, although light hearted, contribute not only to the strategic anti essentialist position Zappa regularly adopts, but also to the metaphorical nature of the use of »vegetables, animals and minerals«, all of which conceptually resonate with the content of songs such as »Call Any Vegetable« (*Absolutely Free*, 1967), »Soft Cell Conclusion« (ibid.) and »Penguin in Bondage« (*Roxy And Elsewhere*, 1974). Controversial remarks such as these in many ways reflect the way Zappa constructed his entire portfolio, where dramatic and often shocking changes in style, genre, time signature, texture, even time and space itself could be combined as he saw fit, to quote his famous maxim: »Anything, anytime, for no reason at all« (Zappa/Occhiogrosso 1990: 163). Rather than cast an opinion of Zappa's moral standards, it is best contextualised in a famous quote by Herbert Marcuse, who stated:

»Obscenity is a moral concept in the verbal arsenal of the Establishment, which abuses the term by applying it, not to expressions of its own morality but to those of another. Obscene is not the picture of a naked woman who exposes her pubic hair but that of a fully clad general who exposes his medals rewarded in a war of aggression; obscene is not the ritual of the Hippies but the declaration of a high dignitary of the Church that war is necessary for peace« (Marcuse 1969: 8).

Zappa's work can also be considered reminiscent of the scientific experiments outlined in Mary Roache's recent publication *Bonk* (Roach 2008). With chapters ranging from »Dating the Penis Camera: Can a Women Find Happiness with a Machine« to »The Prescription Strength Vibrator: Masturbating for Health«, Roache outlines how a range of extraordinary sexual activities have been performed and recorded under »laboratory conditions«. Like many of the authors in Roache's book, Zappa demonstrated a hypocritical attitude toward sex, bridging at times an uncomfortable duality between a disinterested social anthropologist and someone who enjoyed the sexual practices described in his work.<sup>22</sup> Conversely, as alluded to above it is possible to consider Zappa's dealings with sex as no more than one of the many dramatic techniques he employed to counter his audience, the market and the media.<sup>23</sup> To quote Zappa: »What I do is composition. I just happen to use material other than the notes in the pieces« (Zappa/Occhiogrosso 1990: 139). Research conducted by Fedler et al. (1982) reveals an increasing emphasis on physical as opposed to emotional subject matter in popular music recorded between 1950 and 1980 and it is proposed that Zappa is a unique microcosm of this trend, which is itself indicative of the commercialisation of sex in the latter half of the twentieth century. Popular music was the ideal environment through which both record companies and artists could portray the »psychological and physical tensions of adolescence« referred to by Frith and McRobbie above. Zappa must be considered within this context, albeit extending its boundaries somewhat. His depiction of the plethora of sexual activities that occurred both within his ensemble and in society at large is not only consistent throughout his entire career, but also a unique musical record of the realities of how some members of our society view(ed) sexual activity. The complex insider/outsider nature of Zappa's relationship to this subject matter should not detract from this unique portfolio.

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22 I would like to thank my colleague Geof Wills for pointing this out.

23 I would like to thank my colleague Nath Gatti for this observation.

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## Abstract

Throughout his controversial career, Frank Zappa (1940-93) was often associated with his entitlement to indoctrinate First Amendment rights into his work. Although his very public confrontation with the *Parents Music Resource Centre* (PMRC) in September 1985 is probably the pinnacle of his antipathy toward state prescribed restrictions, it is apparent that his entire compositional portfolio is littered with both overt and more subliminal references to sex. This essay concerns Zappa's frequently strategic anti essentialist relationship with sex, drawing on a range of examples from his oeuvre, such as the relationship of his practices to popular music at large, his position on censorship in America, his dealings with groupies and his incorporation of anthropological practices.