

SHOWCASE

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Arts•Entertainment•Travel•Dining

Frank about Zappa

Antelope Valley High graduate Frank Zappa says he was treated shabbily during the three years he lived in Lancaster, and that his band, the Black-Outs, was harassed by adults and fellow students alike. He finds it curious that a community will reclaim its outcasts with pride, after they become famous elsewhere. But he was more interested in talking about his book, and his political stances, in an interview with Karla Tipton, inside.



Zappa talks frankly about art, politics

By KARLA TIPTON
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Frank Zappa may be one of the most famous graduates of Antelope Valley High School. But for the three years he lived in Lancaster, he didn't like it much.

"When I lived in the desert, I actually didn't have a very nice time there," said the maverick musician-composer in a phone interview from his North Hollywood office. "I wasn't treated very well."

Zappa spends several pages on his life in the Antelope Valley in his autobiography "The Real Frank Zappa Book" (\$19.95), co-written with Peter Occhiogrosso and published this spring by Simon & Schuster's Poseidon Press. But although the book has 352 pages, Zappa admitted, "I seriously did not want to do it. I didn't want to write about my childhood memories. I think that's boring."

From his standpoint, the whole purpose of the book is contained in the heavily opinionated final 100 pages: "The reason I did the book was so I could put all the political stuff at the end. That stuff needed to be said."

It's that part of the book that earned Zappa a rather unfavorable review from the Los Angeles Times.

But then, Zappa's used to that. In fact, in the chapter "Sticks & Stones," he includes a couple of sections on "Why They Write That Stuff About Me" and "Why People Don't Understand My Stuff."

Rock journalism is the target there. But in the book, Zappa has

plenty to say on many other topics as well: the censorship of rock lyrics; marriage (as a Dada concept); how his kids Moon, Dweezil, Diva and Ahmet got their names; the business of making recordings; the anthropology of a symphony orchestra; and the difficulty that comes with being a musical composer who still happens to be alive.

Which brings us back to Lancaster.

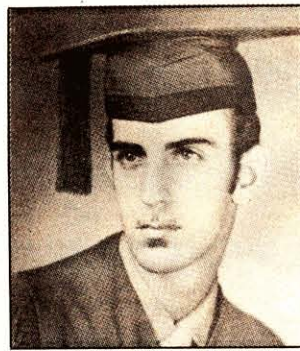
Zappa had a difficult time in high school because, as the son of one of the technical employees who had flooded into the area in the 1950s to work at Edwards Air Force Base, he sat on a low rung of the social ladder that was topped by the sons and daughters of the original alfalfa farmers.

"We were the people from 'down below' — a term used to describe anyone who was not from the high desert area," he writes. "The pecking order at the high school was pretty well laid out."

But that was only part of the problem.

According to Zappa, he got zero support when it came to his musical projects. His first band, the Black-Outs — an integrated musical group that secured a place in local history by getting its photograph in the 1957 AVHS Yucca yearbook — rehearsed at one of the member's homes in Sun Village (inspiring Zappa's 1974 song, "Village of the Sun") and played at local car club dances.

"This was the only R&B band in the entire Mojave Desert at the time," writes Zappa, who also



**FRANK ZAPPA, 1958
AVHS 'Yucca' yearbook**

associated musically with classmate Don Van Vliet, an artist-composer who, as Captain Beefheart, went on to form the innovative Magic Band (composed of local musicians) in 1964. However, the Black-Outs got harassed by reactionary adults and fellow students alike, according to Zappa.

Of course, nowadays, old-timers recall Frank Zappa in the same laudatory tones as Judy Garland and Chuck Yeager — as Antelope Valley residents who went on to do great things. "I'm glad people think well of me there," said Zappa.

But the difficulties he encountered in Lancaster in gaining support for his music are paralleled today by artists throughout small-town America: "You're just so pissed off that you have to go someplace and do something," he said.

"It's something that happens in small towns who have people trying to make their point creatively and eventually go on to find world recognition. But the time they're there, they get no support whatsoever," he pointed out.

"Of course, once they do become famous, people like bragging about them," he said. "But look how much better would it be for them if those creative artists had been supported by the town. Wouldn't the town derive more benefit from it now if that same person stayed a resident?"

While Zappa's musical talents went overlooked in Lancaster, he was encouraged in the visual arts by his high school art teachers, as well as by at least one community organization. Through support of the Lancaster Woman's Club, which chose his abstract painting "Family Room" as first place in its local art competition, his work went on to win the organization's state finals.

At the high school, one of his art teachers (possibly Amy Heydorn; he wasn't sure), enthusiastically supported one particular project of Zappa's: "It was an abstract film that was done by painting on the film," he said. "Imagine how long it would take actually painting a movie."

"Clear film leader wasn't available back then, so they gave me a dental hygiene movie called 'Judy's Smile,' and they let me dip it in nitric acid to take the emulsion off. So that's what I did. I soaked this dental hygiene movie in nitric acid and all the emulsion wouldn't come off. There were still clumps of flotsam and jetsam. And when it dried out, I just left it on there. Then I scratched patterns on it and used an airbrush on it, colored dye, nail polish..."

"One of my art teachers was so impressed with the project, she called Disney studios without my knowledge. We took my home movie down there and had a screening at Disney," recalled Zappa.

"They said, 'Nice little boy. Thank you very much for bringing your movie here.'"

Because of the punishment "Judy's Smile" received, a very little bit of the original still remains intact: "Over the years, it eventually fell apart," said Zappa. "There's only a few seconds left."

Its essence, however, has been preserved forever in his home video collection.

For various reasons (not all good), Zappa has immortalized in books, interviews and on album covers the names of Antelope Valley High School faculty members Ernest Tosi, Jerry Murnane, William Ballard, Don Cerveris and the aforementioned Amy Heydorn.

But he has so little faith in the public school system today that he insists his children take the high school equivalency test as early as possible at age 15 in order to get them out of California schools.

"They don't give you enough

See ZAPPA on H14

Frank Zappa discography

1966
Freak Out

1967
Absolutely Free
Lumpy Gravy

1968
We're Only In It For
The Money
Cruising with Ruben and
the Jets

1969
Mothermania
Uncle Meat
Hot Rats

1970
Burnt Weeny Sandwich
Weasles Ripped My Flesh
Chunga's Revenge

1971
Fillmore East, June 1971
200 Motels (re-released 1986)

1972
Just Another Band
From L.A.

1973
Waka/Jawaka
The Grand Wazoo

1973
Over-Nite Sensation

1974
Apostrophe (')
Roxy and Elsewhere

1975
One Size Fits All
Bongo Fury

1976
Zoot Allures

1978
Zappa in New York
Studio Tan

1979
Sleep Dirt
Sheik Yerbouti

1981
Orchestral Favorites
Joe's Garage Act I
Joe's Garage Acts II & III

1981
Tinseltown Rebellion
Shut Up 'N Play Yer Guitar

1982
Shut Up 'N Play Yer Guitar
Some More

1982
Return of the Son of Shut Up
'N Play Yer Guitar

1982
You Are What You Is
Ship Arriving Too Late To
Save A Drowning Witch

1983
The Man From Utopia
Baby Snakes Soundtrack

1984
Picture Disc
London Symphony Orchestra
Vol. I

1984
Boulez Conducts Zappa,
The Perfect Stranger

1985
Them Or Us
Thing-Fish

1985
Francisco Zappa

1985
The Old Masters, Box I
FZ Meets The Mothers

1986
of Prevention
Does Humor Belong
in Music?

1987
The Old Masters, Box II
Jazz From Hell

1987
Joe's Garage Acts I, II & III
London Symphony
Orchestra, Vol. II

1988
The Old Masters, Box III

1988
You Can't Do That On Stage
Anymore Sampler

1988
Frank Zappa: Guitar
You Can't Do That On Stage

1988
Anymore, Vol. I
Broadway The Hard Way

1988
You Can't Do That On Stage
Anymore, Vol. II

Zappa albums, CDs, audio
and video cassettes are
available by calling (818)
PUMPKIN or by writing to
Barfko Swill, P.O. Box 5418,
North Hollywood, CA
91616-5418.

*"I'm hoping that one day people will wake up to the
fact that people who dream are a natural resource..."*



THE BLACK-OUTS, Frank Zappa's first band when he was a student at Antelope Valley High School, included members Johnny Franklin (second from left), Wayne Lyles (third from left), Terry Wimberly (at keyboards) and Zappa (at right).

Two saxophone players pictured are unidentified. Other members in the band were Carter Franklin and brothers Freddie and Walter Salazar (not pictured). (ID's courtesy of Gary Lienhard and Jack Sanders.)

Zappa

From H3

data to judge good or bad quality or right from wrong or good from evil or anything," he said. "(Schools) don't help children develop these skills. But while you're in school, you can learn that you will be ostracized if you don't wear a certain kind of pants. They teach ignorance, with style."

So what will the next generation of government leaders be like? Zappa wouldn't say, except to comment that "the term 'government leader' is almost an oxymoron."

And artists?

"If there is a next generation of artists, where are they going to work? How are we going to know they exist?" asked Zappa, answering a question with a question.

"The people who get all the awards in art — the Grammys, the Academy Awards — are always people who have the endorsement of the pop and beer companies, which doesn't necessarily mean it's great art," he said.

"If I were a real optimist, I would say that eventually the American people will go, 'God, am I ever sick of this crap! I hate it so much, I'll run for office.'"

When asked if he would run for office, Zappa answered, "I might."

No matter how important politics becomes to him, his concerns for the artist always seem to surface.

"I'm hoping that one day people will wake up to the fact that people who dream are a natural resource — and won't worry about how are we going to save this woodpecker over there or that owl or this cockroach," said Zappa.

"Then they will support people with good ideas which eventually put others to work and benefit the economy."