

For many Zappa fans, *apostrophe* (') tops their list of favourite albums. And rightly so: its many dazzling episodes of aural invention are matched with equally dizzying moments of lyrical delight, their core themes cloaked in FZ's favoured garb of absurdity – all delivered by Zappa himself in an electrifying display of verbal dexterity. And it was a huge success, despite the omnipresence of the 'zany' elements that so often seemed to limit his commercial potential. The sixth album to be released under his name rather than that of The Mothers, he owns it in insouciant style throughout – hitting his many musical and satirical marks with a self-assured swagger.

It's a confidence reflected in the cover: gone are the hand-made Schenkel cut-ups and trademark cartoon curlicues, this is a slick, close-cropped, professional hi-res image which – on the original vinyl issue – is dramatically larger than life, leaving no doubt as to the party *responsible* for what lurks within. A dead-pan yet strangely intimate gaze replete with luxuriant rock-star locks, there's no smirking or consumer-friendly winsomeness here; this is a man who plainly means business, an ancient mariner of the sonic seas fixing to hit you with his rime. Whatever he's about to unleash on your ears, you're going to need to strap in.

And we were mighty glad to do so. Despite any premonitions to the contrary, *apostrophe* (') was a massive hit. Hot on the heels of *Overnite Sensation*, that's what it rapidly became, rocketing to number ten in the album charts before eventually going gold – the first Zappa album to do so in the US. Racking up 200,000 units in the first month alone took everyone – not least Frank himself – by surprise: a delight he famously signalled by hiring a band to parade in front of Warner's Burbank offices to thank them, however ironically, for their efforts. It was no mean feat for a record so curiously named after a punctuation mark – but we'll get to that.

If some felt short-changed to find the album contained barely thirty minutes of music, Zappa had a robust response: audio quality deteriorated rapidly over the last five of the twenty minutes traditionally squeezed onto one side of an LP, and he wanted the playback sound to reflect the effort put into the recording. The same concern had also exercised his mentor Edgard Varese, whose *The Complete Works Of Edgard*

Varèse Volume 1, EMS 401 (Frank's first encounter with the work of his soon-to-be musical hero) hadn't even made the half-hour mark. But those of you with this set in your hands have no such need to quibble: aside from the original album – re-buffed to the highest of standards – you're getting plenty of prime ancillary material to supplement your dining and dancing pleasure.

The crux of the biscuit being the *apostrophe* ('), however, it's only right that the focus for this 50th anniversary edition should be on the album as released – which, as it turns out, had crystallised around an idea that had been in Zappa's mind since 1971. That's when the title *Apostrophe* first crops up, as a working handle for a build-reel holding outtakes from the 1969 Hot Rats and 1970 Record Plant sessions and live selections from the 1971 Fillmore East shows. So the concept had evidently been on quite a journey – perhaps explaining the cryptic cover note that he'd 'struggled with' the album. But let's dive in to what he ultimately signed off on.

Don't Eat The Yellow Snow

It's tempting to think the howling wind that greets your ears as the needle hits the groove is a wry comment on what was becoming a prog-rock cliché (Pink Floyd opened their 1971 album *Meddle* with the sound of wind – and even had a song about a dog; Yes were multiple offenders, and Elton John was at it too.) But be that as it may, what was Zappa doing penning a song about yellow snow? Was that even a thing, before he turned it into an indelible meme? Dave Parlato claims he first drew Frank's attention to it after seeing a dog pee in the snow from the window of a tour bus, though Zappa himself said it was sparked by wondering if there was a word for 'yellow' snow after hearing about the many words for snow in the Inuit language.

But as with so many Zappa puzzles, uncertainty over the provenance of a particular piece is less interesting than what it became: the transmutation of a 'found object' (some unexpectedly absurd phrase or random happenstance that caught his imagination) is a signature Zappa move – with this album providing some notable examples, as we shall see. There's little doubt that a sheer childish delight in the words themselves explains much of its commercial appeal to the audience that

rushed out to buy the album on the strength of the single they'd heard on the radio. But those making it past the juvenile façade were in for a real treat.

Yellow Snow sets us up for the fall. We're in a dream world with Nanook – psychic scion of the eponymous hero of *Nanook of the North*, an early docudrama about the people of the *igyaloos* – which Frank would probably have seen at school. Understandably enough, mini-Nanook is on the hunt for some entertainment amid the frozen tundra, though his mother doesn't want him wasting money on such frivolities. But he's determined to go – and as he turns around (incredibly enough, in one of those serendipitous Zappa coincidences, the meaning of *apostrophē* in the original Greek is 'the act of turning away') he's rewarded with a glimpse of the elusive Northern Lights, prompting his mother to utter her immortal homily.

Nanook Rubs It

The jocular tone now set with a selection of the lavish foley effects that litter the album, we're off to the races. It turns out that Nanook must contend with one of the evil fur trappers who, from the early 1970s, had become the object of much celebrity hand-wringing – and Zappa wastes no time in putting in the lead-filled snow shoe. Reprising the brief snatch of the jazz standard *Midnight Sun* inserted at near supersonic speed in the opening bars of *Yellow Snow*, he cuts to the chase by skewering both the fur-trapper and Lionel Hampton with a suitably sleazoid version of this legendary lounge-lizard ditty, sandwiched between two incantations of 'strictly commercial' for good measure (there being no greater sin in Frank's book) – thereby propelling it to iconic status, a conceptual continuity clue to rival *Louie Louie*.

And the pinniped predator richly deserves it, having had the *unmedicated* audacity to jump up from behind Nanook's igloo ('unmitigated' audacity would have been a sufficiently worthy addition to the meme pool, but 'unmedicated' is pure alchemy) and his punishment is meted out accordingly: to be blinded – temporarily – by a pair of doggie-doo snow-cones rubbed into his eyes with a vigorous circular motion that Nanook believes, in a knowing nod to Conceptual Continuity, will replace The Mud Shark in our mythology. With the sound of Fido's summons leaking through (prefiguring *Stink-Foot* and perhaps a hint to the source of the dream), Nanook is

moved to wreak further vengeance on the fur trapper, whose sad predicament is underscored with a moment of sheer sonic joy as the horn section serenades his blindness with a spectacularly lush fanfare, comically framed by the helpless stereophonic flailing of the man with *deflicted* eyes.

St Alphonzo's Pancake Breakfast

Stumbling through the tundra in search of a cure, the fur trapper fades into the next scene of the dream – announced with a nimble tuplet flourish from the vibes and brass – where we find ourselves at a church fundraiser in the parish of St Alphonzo, with the narrator gleefully engaged in ripping off the *mah-juh-reen*. The proximate source for this otherwise puzzling act (if hardly more so than ‘widdling on the bingo cards *in lieu* of the latrine’) was, according to Frank, a TV commercial for margarine so ‘loathsome’ he felt compelled to memorialise it in song. Having spiked the depraved denizens of this suburban assembly with a relish worthy of Raymond Scott, he follows with a spell-binding snatch of a piece known as *Rollo* – which, according to the original lyrics, was the name of a dog invited to sit up, beg and watch an act of fellatio (coincidentally or otherwise, it was also the name of an imaginary tone-deaf critic devised by Charles Ives, described by him as a *mental-musico-defective*).

Father O'Blivion

But I digress. Back in the dream sequence, the parish priest appears – *resplendent* in his frock – and Zappa embarks on a bravura rhythmic and rhyming flow faithfully mimicked by the twists and turns of the music, a performance honed to perfection after months on the road (a special shout out here to Ralph Humphrey for some truly frenetic drumming). Father O'Blivion – for it is he – is himself a continuity clue: his name being a tweezed reference to a suite of music that was once a staple of the Wazoo bands, known at the time as *Farther Oblivion*. Given that the sense of ‘farther oblivion’ is the condition of being totally out of it (perhaps as a result of the mental stamina required to play such a piece), it was manifestly ripe for mutation into the name of an Irish priest so screwy he thinks he's getting off on a leprechaun stroking his smock – the alliterative absurdity of his forename only amplifying the general

sense of ridiculousness, and (with apologies to Vivians of all persuasions) offering a broad hint as to his likely sexual orientation.

In a state of post-orgasmic euphoria, the misinformed minister now begins a frenzied sales pitch for his sleazy pancakes – only to be greeted, as if at the end of a dream, with words lifted directly from the aforesaid commercial for Imperial Margarine. As FZ describes it, *There's a young black gentleman sitting in a bed, and he's just woken up - and then his young girlfriend comes trudging into the room; she's carrying a tray. She walks in, and he goes, "Oh, boy! Pancakes and butter!" And she says, "Good morning, your highness! No, it's not butter!"* Here, of course, it's a pair of snow shoes – returning us neatly to the world of Nanook and the fur-trapper as the dream finally ends. But we're not yet done with deviant spiritual costermongers. Oh no.

Cosmik Debris

The 'k' in Cosmik is the clue, of course – abetted by the little snitchlet of vibes that shatters like shards of glass before the start. Recorded with a close-miked clarity so pristine you can almost hear FZ's tonsils twitch, the lyrics expand on the withering scorn for *re-lij-er-mus* baloney concealed within Father O'Blivion's name, and extend his disdain to spiritual gurus of all stripes. Rehearsing a theme he reprises in *The Adventures of Greggery Peccary*, where the culprit is Quentin Robert DeNameland, he homes in on the *nominal service charge* at the heart of all such operations – including the pancake breakfast – the word *jivin'* with its dual meaning of 'dancing' and 'deceiving' (and its very own apostrophe, natch) being the perfect choice to express the seductive sleaziness of the *cosmic debris* being peddled by the Mystery Man.

Tossing in a couple of casual continuity clues (dust from the Grand Wazoo and the suggestion that the imposter's poncho may be more Sears than ethnic), Zappa even name-checks his childhood ailment of asthma – the unhappy subject of multiple mystery cures along the way – before belting out a blistering guitar solo with a tone fit to flambé the eyebrows of any fraudulent mystic in the vicinity. The distinctive sounds of Tina Turner and the Ikettes in the background link the song to Ike Turner's

Bolic Sound studios where *Overnite Sensation* was recorded, but far from being an outtake, this was a savage satire just waiting for the right context.

Excentrifugal Forz

Heading up what was originally the second side of the album, *Excentrifugal Forz* supplies something of a change of direction. Though the tone remains sardonic, the subject of this brief excursion into SF parody is rather more autobiographical: if anything described the energy that powered Zappa's prolific achievements, the lexical mash-up of the title is probably as close as it gets. Essentially, it's a play on three ideas: *eccentric* in the sense of 'off-centre', *eccentricity* in the 'freak' sense, and *centrifugal force*, dba 'an outward force apparent in a rotating reference frame' – meaning the force pushing away anything swung round in a circle (like the camera Zappa shot his first film with, whirling it round his head tied to a clothes line).

These three elements were all defining parts of Frank's character, the healing distance they offer from normative convention surely being the reason he was "*never really lonely in my Excentrifugal Forz.*" It's fascinating to discover it's actually a mutation of *Excentrifugal Forts* (which, shortened to *X-Forts*, was the name first given to *Echidna's Arf*), the *z* of *forz* still pronounced /ts/ – German style – but now both pointing back to *force* and making the word personal to him. One of my most precious and poignant memories of Frank is from the last occasion I spent time at the house, in the early summer of 1993 – seeing him sitting sick, gaunt, bearded and alone at his work-desk 'fort' in the basement, yet still sniggering away delightedly to himself as he edited together sections of what became *Blood On The Canvas*.

A xenochronous construct built on a drum track stripped from a rare jam with John Guerin in 1972, the lyrics are more suggestive than satirical, playing on nonsense rhymes through which Zappa threads an inscrutable solo. But there are knowing nodes still: the one-celled Korla Plankton, aka Korla Pandit, the turbaned fraudster who passed as an exotic Indian at the keys of his Hammond Organ(ism, geddit?) and the chinless Pup Tentacle, putative lost relative of the monster referenced in the preamble to *Cheepnis*. Then there's the final line, as if predicting the process we're engaged in here – nostalgically crossing the line from later on to way back when.

Apostrophe

And so to the title track – perhaps significantly, the only one not to have lyrics. Jack Bruce features prominently, of course – although as a comparison with the outtakes reveals, the piece is highly edited, with much of the jam omitted. The possible relevance of that to the track's title will appear in due course, but despite the edit it's still more duel than duet – muscular and agile though the bass is, it doesn't yield much road, or leave space for development. It's a 'heavy' groove and Frank comps behind Bruce like a trooper, producing a solo he liked enough to later reproduce in band arrangements: but in the end it's a foursquare affair that harangues more than it inspires, providing neither levity nor creative deviation – always the most rewarding part of Zappa's solo excursions. Given that Bruce's fame and Frank's respect for Cream probably account for its presence here more than its musical flair, if anything on the album were strictly commercial, this is probably it.

Uncle Remus

In the starkest of contrasts, *Uncle Remus* delivers a full fistful of wistful. Conceived (by George Duke) as an instrumental solo, in Zappa's hands it becomes a perfect vehicle for the pathos and pungency that is such a hallmark of his music – subverting the sumptuous bluesy tones of George's piano with a sideswipe at the sad failure of the black liberation movement to carry through on its promise, selling out on political aspirations for a chance to wear sharp clothes, ditch the doo-rag and grow a 'fro.

Hence the invocation of Uncle Remus, the grizzled old former slave who narrates the Brer Rabbit stories which controversially pioneered (and even inspired) what Zappa called the 'negrocious' language he put in the mouth of Thing-Fish. When the trouble coming every day foreseen in *Freak Out* is reduced to the nobbling of lawn jockeys – like the one that stood guard outside the UMRK studio, complete with a broken nose – even a figure as reactionary as Uncle Remus can see things are not moving in the

right direction, and that there's little redemption in hard work when dice are loaded against you. But sometimes there are more personal matters to attend to.

Stink-Foot

Cue *Stink-Foot* – another song with a 'strictly commercial' origin, though it became the vehicle for something far more sophisticated. Inspired by a preposterous TV ad for Dr. Scholls foot spray in which a puppy fetching its master's slippers keels over from the smell, it wasn't all plain sailing: as Frank complained in November 1973, "*Do you know how hard it is to write a song about something like that?*" Fortunately, he was up for the challenge – this is a bad-ass blues with killer guitar fills and a solo that clucks and gobbles its way up and down a Mixolydian scale like a deranged turkey, repeatedly bending up to those epic high E notes in one of the most plangent breaks he ever played. And to top it off, the lyrics are catnip for fans of semantic scrutiny, containing an exchange that links two of the most debated terms in zappology: *conceptual continuity* and the *crux of the biscuit*.

Derived from a track recorded as far back as 1970 (Zappa's ribald reworking of the Lightnin' Slim classic *I'm A Rollin' Stone*, released on *Funky Nothingness*) the song begins with what feels like a heartfelt evocation of the fetid world of a lonely loser ("*Do the walls close in t'suffocate ya / You ain't got no friends an' all the others: they hate ya*") before inviting us to contemplate the even less savoury prospect of 'excessively foul-smelling sweat' – known to the trade as *bromhidrosis*. Somewhat uncharacteristically, Zappa not only misspells this as Bromidrosis, but misattributes the term; in reference to feet it's technically called *podobromhidrosis* (an oversight later corrected in live performance during the 1988 tour after a tip-off from Scott Thunes.) But who cares about that when it's *puttin' a hurt on your nose* – certainly not the poor little puppy, innocently responding to his master's summons. Perhaps Frank had his own little puppy in mind here, as the long-lived Doggess – later his constant studio companion – was likely a new addition to the family at this point.

After the guitar break, we find ourselves unexpectedly plunged into a pseudo-Socratic dialogue. Picking himself up off the floor, Fido coolly revisits a mysterious philosophical encounter with an anonymous interrogator who quizzes him on his

conceptual continuity. Let's pause here to recall the origin of this much-quoted phrase. It surfaces for the first time in the "M.O.I. Customised Press Kit" of 1971, where Zappa singles out "the conceptual continuity of the group's output macrostructure" as the most unique aspect of The Mothers' work, adding "*There is and always has been, a conscious control of thematic and structural elements flowing through each album, live performance, and Interview*". Clearly ticked off with the complete lack of understanding of the nature of his project shown by the 'snazzy' record executives he was dealing with, he uses the phrase in similar contexts in several interviews published prior to the release of *apostrophe* (').

But what exactly is it? It's not a formulation that cuts much ice outside of the fevered speculations of Zappa fans eager to train-spot occurrences of another secret word or reference to a previous album. But drill down on the notion for a moment. We're talking a continuity of concepts, not content. It's not a particular symbol or image that's important, but the ways in which they recur. It's the more subtle similarity between things that can appear, at first glance, to be unrelated – like a cerebral signature, a constant connective thread that runs through all of Zappa's albums, despite the differences in style. As Heinz Hermann, author of the extravagantly-titled tome *From Biology to Sociopolitics: Conceptual Continuity in Complex Systems* puts it: "Conceptual continuity is, therefore, a way of understanding empirical relationships and the complexity of living matter" – an insight confirmed in Zappa's foreword to *Them Or Us The Book*, which he asserts is "*designed to answer one of the more troubling questions related to conceptual continuity: How do all these things that don't have anything to do with each other fit together, forming a larger absurdity?*"

Either way, Fido the dog is not fazed by this peremptory enquiry – bouncing back with the legendary quip *The crux of the biscuit is the Apostrophe*(') [as notated by FZ; the bracketed (') emphasising its role as punctuation]. On the face of it, that makes as much sense as a dog talking in the first place, and like 'conceptual continuity' remains the source of endless speculation about what it could possibly mean – everything from a symbolic representation of the female sex organs to the idea that it points to an apostrophe-shaped mark in a brand of dog biscuit. And, of course, we're never going to know for sure.

But here's the thing. What's an apostrophe for, after all? When did this charming little *endanglement* spring into existence, and why did people start using them? Opinion is divided as to the date, but they seem to have come in with printing, and have only been with us since the 16th century. Though probably introduced as a way to save ink, the key function of an apostrophe is to tell us that something's been left out (hello, Jack Bruce), even when that something is not obvious anymore – like the 'e' in the 'es' used in Old English for the genitive case, a marker indicating possession. *Frank's dog*, for example, would at one time have been written *Frankes dog*; the apostrophe is all about elision, ladies and gentlemen, and that brings us to rhythm.

Because the difference between *Frankes dog* and *Frank's dog* is not merely typographical – it's an important guide to pronunciation. Think of *cannot*, *can't* and *cant*. The more formal *cannot* is two straight syllables, whereas *cant* (a rare word these days, unlike the thing it references) is one syllable. But the apostrophised and abbreviated *can't* is a hybrid – a syncopated syllable that infuses the stiffer *cannot* with the perkiness of the spoken word. Zappa's sensitivity to this is made explicit in the separate lyric sheet he prepared for the album – a rare departure for him – which is positively peppered with apostrophes (the girl-friend's speech provides a good example: STINK FOOT *darlin'*... I ain't *lyin'*...can you rinse it off *d'you* suppose?)

In this he's following a tradition that stretches all the way back to Shakespeare, an enthusiastic early adopter of the then new-fangled mark, who used them to show actors how to speak their lines – in other words, to direct the rhythm of their speech. So, have you guessed it yet? The hail of apostrophised auxiliaries (IT DOESN'T, 'n YOU CAN'T! I WON'T, 'n IT DON'T! IT HASN'T, IT ISN'T, IT EVEN AIN'T 'N IT SHOULDN'T...) with which the man talking to the dog tries to counter Fido's astute observation may be a farrago of nonsense – but it's a funky one, and that's the point: the crux of the biscuit being not so much the matter itself, but the style with which it's presented. To quote the Duke, it don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing.

So much buried inside a word that doesn't even mean anything you can see, touch or feel. Who'd'a thunk it? Maybe the man who, in that same 1971 press release also wrote: "*Imagine the head of a pin. On the head of this pin is an amazingly detailed illustration of some sort. It might be a little thought or a feeling or, perhaps, an*

obscure symbol. It might be just a picture of a sky or something with birds in it... but it's on the head of this pin, remember, and it's infinitely detailed." For if we know anything about Frank Zappa, we know he was all about intricacy, absurdity, and the concealment of complexity in plain sight. To quote the press release again: *We make a special art in an environment hostile to dreamers.*

And whatever the secrets of its commercial success, *apostrophe* (') is as fine an example of that special art as he was ever to produce – a deep-dish platter delivered by a bunch of hand-picked virtuosos at the top of their game, a blissful *bisquette* of funk for us to feast on. *The poodle by-ee-ites, the poodle chews it.* I rest my case.

Simon Prentis, London 2024