

From the point of view of Earth Works, *Láther* is an unmitigatedly inspired choice to be unveiling at this particular closure of the aeons. But not so much because it is the great unreleased masterpiece (even if you didn't happen to be standing by with a tape recorder on that fateful day in December 1977, you could well have heard it by now in some quasi-unauthorized format) as for what it represents. Because *Láther* is not just a question of nostalgia for the old folks: aside from being a showcase for some of the best and most variegated work in Zappa's oeuvre, it is actually an unparalleled opportunity to watch the Conceptual Continuity get down with its bad self.

It is also, of course, the stuff of legend. A massive raft of disk-age, weighing in at over two and a half hours, it's perhaps not entirely surprising that snazzy record company execs several press kits short of a taste for the bizarre might have balked at the prospect of unleashing such a large lump of unclassifiable material onto a market whose cutting edge was defined at the time by disco poot and the green shoots of punk. The persistent rumor has always been that, contractual obligations to the contrary notwithstanding, *Láther* was rejected in early 1977, ultimately to emerge over the next two years - amid a frenzy of lawsuits - re-edited into several more obvious 'genre' albums (principally *Live In New York*, *Studio Tan*, *Sleep Dirt*, and *Orchestral Favorites*).

Others have claimed that, no, it was the other way round; the separate versions were prepared first, the *Láther* album being a bold attempt to get the material released elsewhere before the corporate legal machinery started to roll. Gail Zappa has now been persuaded to give her account of what really happened; but those of you who are still confused by the sheer skullduggery of it all can console yourselves with Quentin Robert de Nameland's observations on the affliction of time: the crux of the comestible being that, no matter which came first, what we now have is two entirely different compilations of a substantial chunk of prime material, both edited and arranged by FZ himself.

So? Well, look at it like this: if you can get excited about a rearrangement of a particular song or composition (and in Zappa's case that's not too difficult) then imagine how thrilled you might be to discover that the concept of rearrangement actually extends to cover the entire output macrostructure, all of which could (and can) be realigned in a series of interlocking pieces, generating new forms and resonances appropriate to a particular circumstance or theme. Of course, if you'd been paying attention over the years to the concert material, you might have noticed that this was the idea all along: but most folks need an album to convince them. And *Láther* puts the seal on it - you could even be forgiven for thinking that it paves the way to that much-misunderstood meisterwerk *Thing-Fish*, exposing as it does the secrets of the assembly process for your dining & dancing pleasure.

Because apart from everything else, you have to keep your eye on the recombinant potential of Zappa's work. The influence of the harmonic climate, the emotional context within which a particular melody operates, applies just as much to the strategic placement of individual compositions: unexpected juxtapositions of material familiar in other combinations can throw up hitherto unimagined links and contrasts. FZ's principle of the when determining the what, ladies and gentlemen; Conceptual Continuity as Lego.

But even if your preference inclines more to the statistical groupings of pinheads than the fault-lines of the continental shelf, the heart of the matter (as with all Zappa's work) is of course the music: "basically this is an instrumental album," and then some. The range of styles on display here

runs the gamut from the inane, poppy banality of "Lemme Take You To The Beach" to the obscenely beautiful orchestral intricacies of "Naval Aviation in Art?," passing through sharply honed jazz-funk vignettes on the way to the cartoon complexities of "Greggery Peccary." And then there is the guitar work, illustrating Zappa's consummate mastery of the art of feedback. Were it not for the characteristically incongruous twists lurking in the background, it would be hard to credit - as with *The Lost Episodes* - that so much music executed in so many different styles (and with such precision and panache) could be the work of one composer.

No other artist at work in the medium (by which we have to mean "music, wherever she may be found," since to confine Zappa to a box called rock & roll is to stretch the definition to breaking point) even begins to approach the breadth and depth of musical invention and virtuosity that *Láther* represents. And that's just the music: one of the special delights of Zappa's work is that you also have lyrics to chew on. Pungent, punchy and acutely observed studies of homo sapiens at play, they present for public scrutiny the most ridiculous intimacies of the desperate individual in all of us, the superbly original use of language only sharpening the savage exposures of the wit. Love it or hate it (and once you get in there, you won't get away) what's happening here is, if not completely unprecedented, then so close it makes no difference.

Like Joyce (James, that is - you know, the other guy with a thing about panties) Zappa has harnessed all the vocabulary available in his chosen heritage, and made it completely his own. His range, palette, execution and coherence are at a level unmatched by his peers (You don't think so, huh? Well, go ahead, name one...) and yet some people still have the nerve to believe: "comedy music." Ingenuity, poise, and audacity are stamped on all the compositions like a hallmark, a constant source of inspiration for those with ears that do not merely hear. In the context of contemporary comparisons, "Read 'em & Weep" is indeed the adjustable slogan: but the tears, when they come, will be tears of joy.

-DISC ONE- (SIDE ONE)

RE-GYPTIAN STRUT

Replete with sleazoid brass and corny cabaret piano, "Re-gyptian Strut" is an unexpected starter given its more familiar position somewhere in the back row of *Sleep Dirt*. But Zappa never selected an opening shot lightly, and besides suggesting that a reevaluation of this sumptuous little number is in order, it sets the tone nicely for the whole monstrosity: a potent mix of tack, charm, cheese and bombast.

NAVAL AVIATION IN ART?

Undoubtedly one of the leading contenders for the ultimate FZ desert-island disc, this exquisite piece features a special congealing of essences that, even in this less lush version, exposes the core of Zappa's aesthetic with stunning clarity. Sandwiched cleverly between the aforementioned bombast and the "comedy music" that follows, it gleams with a pristine tension and sense of space that belies its apparent lack of statistical density. Mandatory listening for those who thought that "Dinah-Moe Humm" was where it's at.

A LITTLE GREEN ROSETTA

Intruding gracelessly in a typical shift from the sublime to the ridiculous, the lyrics cast a sardonic comment on those who might be tempted to tap their foot along: but although transformed eventually into a de-syncopated and extended outro on *Joe's Garage Act III*, this earlier version gets closer to the latent savagery grinning beneath its paper-knife frosted surface - the song breaking off into a jaggedly intense moment of aural decoration radiant after the moronic muffin music, also known as "Ship Ahoy."

DUCK DUCK GOOSE

A burst of manic guitar followed by a collage of loose ends and sound-alike outtakes from the *Lumpy Gravy* sessions stirred in with Varésian *musique concrete*: it is as if the grouting used between the other tracks has taken on a life of its own and become the actual track itself. And on the subject of grout: for those wondering what it's all about, check the energy and enthusiasm which Zappa brought to these sessions, to be glimpsed in the brief studio segments featured in the film *Baby Snakes*.

DOWN IN DE DEW

A curiously structured solo excursion reminiscent at times of "Toads of the Short Forest." Note the furious pace of the percussion, which, according to FZ's own notes (see the *Guitar World* cassette where this track first "officially" appeared) was the base on which this composition was built.

FOR THE YOUNG SOPHISTICATE

Zappa's most snarling guitar (eat yer heart out, Eric) prefaces and continues to underlie this lighter, more touching rendition than the road-tested version that eventually appeared on *Tinseltown*. Lyrically, a classic example of FZ's passion for "alternative information on specimen behavior," a funny (and balanced, please note) put-down both of the young sophisticator's image of himself and the spurious worries of the lady in question: the mind as the ugliest part of the body.

(SIDE TWO)

TRYIN' TO GROW A CHIN

This starts off a run of three more "alternative information" songs dealing with the self-imposed traumas of social and sexual relationships, which on the original album made up side two of the box set. "Tryin' To Grow A Chin" (an absurdly apt graphic image) is for all teenage victims of parental indifference, enduring the hurt that many go on to feature feature for most of their lives. A storming emulation of mongoloid rhythms and thought processes.

BROKEN HEARTS ARE FOR ASSHOLES

A masterpiece of unbridled bluntness, this superb song picks up where "Chin" leaves off. Dedicated as ever to the cause of mental hygiene, the opening phrase says it all: "Some of you might not agree / But you probably likes a lot of misery..." The thoroughly traumatized individual (recognize anyone?) seeks solace in the realms of true love, only to be cruelly disappointed. Analysis over, we are whisked into a bubble of twisted sexual fantasy before having the rug pulled out in a typical Zen moment: "but you forgot what I was saying..." Some cite this song as evidence of Zappa's arrogance, but in concert he used to point to himself during repetitions of "you're an asshole": no one escapes the merry-go-round. Cynical? Perhaps you prefer bent over...

THE LEGEND OF THE ILLINOIS ENEMA BANDIT

Which brings us neatly to an asshole who obviously did. Most of the criticism aimed at Zappa for "politically incorrect" attitudes mistakes the messenger for the message, and the flak that this song attracts (even from those who normally know better) is no exception. A telling example of the way in which a chance snippet of news is elevated to "album material," the only laughter here is at the absurdity of the situation: it is hardly as if the behavior is being endorsed. The combination of sexual deviance, legislative incompetence and a new metaphor for the efficacy of college education, coupled with the chance to have a national television announcer do the introduction was just too good to pass up. For those who pay attention to these things, the guitar solo also gives a clue to Zappa's true feelings on the matter.

-DISC TWO- (SIDE THREE)

LEMMIE TAKE YOU TO THE BEACH

Moving right along here, side three of the original set opens with this sparkingly affectionate parody of surfer music on speed, a delightfully dotty ditty with some spectacularly cloying orchestration tucked away in the shrubb'ry. The order of this and the next two tracks is identical to side two of the original vinyl release of *Studio Tan*, so it must have been good.

REVISED MUSIC FOR GUITAR & LOW BUDGET ORCHESTRA

An abbreviated and thoroughly overhauled version of the piece originally written for the violin (premiered with Jean-Luc Ponty on the *King Kong* album), this is true cartoon for your ears. The precision, clarity and deviousness demanded from (and delivered by) the performers would scare your regular ensemble to death.

RDNZL

As if bursting to unravel the cryptic foreshortening of its title, "RDNZL" is an exploding firecracker of a piece that whizzes like a catherine wheel for good measure. Both the keyboards and Zappa's own solo (a curdling baroque gem all on its own) make maximum use of Stravinsky's "economy of means" to wind the music to fever pitch: it's not difficult to imagine the sheer musical fun that must have gone on in these sessions.

(SIDE FOUR)

HONEY, DON'T YOU WANT A MAN LIKE ME?

Setting out the stall for side four is another song that seems to upset some folks (including the heckler, crushingly silenced by Zappa with the band missing nary a beat). A classic portrait of ineptitude on the singles circuit, it again cuts both ways: "Ladies, you can be an asshole too" may not be a popular theme, but, as they say, it takes two to tango. Offended females of the species can take comfort in the fact that the behavior of the male of the species in this particular encounter could hardly be construed as flattering.

THE BLACK PAGE #1

Dirt beneath the rollers segues deftly to this spectacular percussive showpiece, about which enough has already been said elsewhere: feast your ears and imagine the fate of those fortunate enough to have been hauled on stage for the dance contests in which this piece regularly featured.

BIG LEG EMMA

Another jump from the sublime to the merely absurd, just to make sure we don't lose touch with reality. A song that celebrates as it ridicules, like so much of Zappa's best pastiche, and a frequent choice at concerts. The fickle finger of fate is pointing firmly at the guys on this one, by the way.

PUNKY'S WHIPS

One of the great concert numbers, the arrangements a superb counterpoint to the ridiculousness of the (true) situation being embellished upon here. Bozzio's protestations of innocence "I'm not queer...I'm not gay" are interspersed with casual brass squibs replete with a density that most jazz combos would die for. The rhythmic insistence of the sequence that follows the hysterically frenzied "Why maybe he'd like to...yank my crank" is both poignant and alluringly sexual in a way that is positively mesmerizing. Hotcha. Oh, and if you're worried that there might be a homophobic vibe, well, perhaps you thought "Big Leg Emma" was a love song.

-DISC THREE- (SIDE FIVE)

FLAMBE

Resplendent in its original form for those who might have entertained feelings of ambivalence when first confronted with the vocals added for the CD release, the prominent position accorded to this abbreviated "cocktail lounging version" - the opener of the original side five - gives an indication of the esteem in which Zappa held it, a further vote for the all-too-neglected virtues of the album *Sleep Dirt*.

THE PURPLE LAGOON

A punchy little number that feels like it takes over where *Waka / Jawaka* and *The Grand Wazoo* left off: the virtuoso performances of the Brecker Brothers a prime example of the superb performances Zappa was so adept at coaxing out of accomplished sidemen almost without them even knowing it. Jazzy yet raunchy at the same time, its throwaway feel nonetheless delivers enough originality for a less talented musician to have made an entire career of. Patrick O'Hearn's piquant protrubearances are an unadulterated delight.

(SIDE SIX)

PEDRO'S DOWRY

Opening side six, conceptually sandwiched between "band" selections, and outside (now) of the orchestral box in which it is normally cast, this abrupt left turn into cartoonland is inspiring. The "orchestra" tag carries so much excess baggage with it that it is often difficult to hear the music with unsullied ears, but listen to it at if it were a band playing, and a new vista appears (you can try the same trick with *The Yellow Shark*).

LÄTHER

The definitive pronunciation of this mutant German fetish-word is, of course spat out in the opening dialogue, a gargling cross between "lather" and "leather" evoking the foam from the sudsy nozzle excited by the terpsichorean splendor of the leather-clad denizens of the Mudd Club. The title "I Promise Not To Come In Your Mouth" chosen for *Live In New York* leaves little doubt as to the "indelicate" implications hiding behind the play on the phonetic resonances of the umlaut, but, hey, you've got to call them something. Music, Varese once said, can express nothing but itself. Perhaps he never got a good blow-job.

SPIDER OF DESTINY

More so than "Flambe," perhaps, this is a tune with which you benefit from knowing the lyrics it was originally written to accompany. The sheer absurdity of the B-movie plot-line revealed on the *Sleep Dirt* CD version rubs nicely against the ridiculous swagger of the melody - for those of you ready and able to sing along.

DUKE OF ORCHESTRAL PRUNES

Lumped all together, the *Orchestral Favorites* album can sometimes feel too heavy to be fully accessible. But segued here with "Spider Of Destiny," "The Duke" sparkles with grace and style, a masterly example of Zappa's mature feedback technique (extended in "Filthy Habits") making a harrowing contrast with the overblown pomp of the orchestral accompaniment.

-DISC FOUR- (SIDE SEVEN)

FILTHY HABITS

The opener of the original side seven (yes, it's *Sleep Dirt* again: getting the idea yet?). Words are pretty redundant here, except to note that it was one of FZ's favorite solo's. Feedback transformations like you can't believe: this is music to fly to, to cry to, to die to. Proof, if any were still needed, that Hendrix sits at Zappa's feet in heaven.

TITTIES 'N BEER

A rumbustuous expedition into biker territory, inspired perhaps by that segment of the fan base that always liked to appear at the concerts in full regalia. One of the songs that also attracts the attention of those who seek to emphasize the supposed misogynist tendencies in Zappa's oeuvre, but once again, the portrayal of the male protagonist is by no means a ringing endorsement of specimen behavior.

THE OCEAN IS THE ULTIMATE SOLUTION

Time to get serious. Soaring guitar against an impossibly disjointed accompaniment that twitches as if with a fatal dose of strychnine. Let yourself get sucked into that and it'll really get you out there.

(SIDE EIGHT)

THE ADVENTURES OF GREGGERY PECCARY

Placement speaks volumes. This epic work, the electrifying opener on *Studio Tan* and, here, the final side of *Läther*, sparkles with new resonances in the context of what has gone before. Exemplifying the movie-for-your-ears methodology, it is a truly appropriate conclusion, not merely in the way that "King Kong" brings *Uncle Meat* to an end, but as a crowning achievement and scintillating review of all that has gone before: the musical material buried in "Greggerly Peccary" is effectively a compressed summary of the elements that make up the whole album. No wonder Zappa spoke of it in the original radio broadcast as a masterpiece - it contains many pieces of fine, fine, superfine music supporting a story line which itself is a hilarious satire on our enslavement to time and the vagaries of fashion, featuring some of FZ's most memorable turns of phrase and including some extremely agile expeditions to the frontiers of rhythm, both linguistic and musical.

The existence of several matching animated piglet sequences in the film *Baby Snakes* almost suggests that it was once intended as a soundtrack, but the music throughout is so graphic that visual aids seem superfluous: the instrumental section which follows Zappa's withering description of the power of advertising (culminating with "and spreads it throughout the land using all the frightening little skills that science has made available") virtually animates itself as a portrait of the manic speed of a digital technology now harnessed across the globe to the task of supplying all the answers to the things that might be bothering you. Anyone for Internet?

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