

I FIGURE THE ODDS BE FIFTY-FIFTY: FZ and the Ten Commandments

by Simon Prentis [delivered in Rome at ICE-Z 2, June 2006]

The happy coincidence of the start of the great global knuckle-dragging contest in Munich¹⁾ and the opening day of this grand confederation of *over-educated shitheads* is an appropriately absurd symbol for the two poles around which Zappa's work revolves: a dialectical dance between *the gut-bucket and the slide-rule*. The esemplastic resolution between them being of course, the ongoing *crux of his biscuit*, and if we are gathered here today to praise Zappa, not to bury him in a torrent of words, we ought perhaps to give some thought to the language in which we choose to do so. For to be worthy of its name, a Zappalogical conference should surely not neglect to speak to *the mind of the man on the street*, as well as those versed in Hegelian-Marxist rhetoric. In particular, friends and neighbors, it might behoove us to consider the possibility that our theses, *or in the case of many dignified academics*, the size of the words themselves might relate to *elements of subconscious tension* – weird twisted anxieties which could force a person to become a writer of HARD books (in which Adorno, the lead theoretician, thrusts his seminal strictures into our slithering synapses...).

I am not entering a plea for dumbing-down here. Part of the reason we all love and appreciate the oeuvre is precisely the fact that it refuses such compromises. It's more a question of *"If you're going to talk to somebody, you want to talk to them in a language they can understand using words that they're familiar with²⁾."* The difference between us may or may not be very far, but if we can't follow the thread³⁾, our dialogue will not be complete. And although many of us here will doubtless be more than averagely fond of statistically dense philosophical abstractions, if we're at all concerned to reach a wider audience then we may need to think about re-adjusting our position on the dial.

But enough of that. It is not only inevitable but probably right and proper that we should ride *dense but radiant* hobby-horses of our own design to tilt at the

wind-farms of a greater understanding of the project/object; like the blind supplicants feeling up the Buddhist elephant⁴⁾, we all have our own particular visions of the one size we wish to fit all, whether we have our hand on its dick or our head up its arse. And each vision will have its core of truth. But the elephant we are ultimately stumbling around in this particular room, the *Jumbo* each one of us has to face at some point in our endeavors, is Zappa's famous disdain for '*intellectuals and other dead people*'⁵⁾ – with or without pens in their hand. I think there's little doubt he would have hated the idea of his work being picked over and discussed as we are going to do here. This does not necessarily invalidate the process, of course, but it should give us pause; if one of the reasons we were drawn to his work in the first place was its ability to *crush all boxes* and cut through the snobbery of classes and classifications, we ought to put that insight to work in whatever we have to say about him.

So if I'm choosing to nail my colors to the Zen muffin in this context, it's because I see a strong parallel in his work with the methods of those who have attempted to free themselves from the seductive tyranny of intellect in a tradition known in Japan as Zen (though by other names elsewhere⁶⁾). I'm not suggesting that Zappa was consciously influenced by any particular Zen teaching, though he did acknowledge that reading about it was a catalyst in his escape from Catholicism. It's more that he seems to have had an intuitive grasp of what is required to *unbind the mind*, a process which involves not just *casting off outmoded and restricting standards of thinking*, but learning to elude the hardening of categories that words can lead us into. There is no more elegant demonstration of this method at work than in his music, which consistently refuses categorization, his distinctive use of incongruity sabotaging any conceptual complacency in his audience just as the shock tactics of Zen are used to jolt students into awareness. A side-effect of this heightened level of consciousness (*which is obviously the aim of our show this afternoon*) is a sharpened sensitivity to bullshit of all persuasions, a widely-remarked characteristic of Zen adepts, who traditionally catch their quizzical students off-balance through a seemingly preternatural ability, as Ben Watson noted in Zappa himself, to "blow up the area where the

question's coming from⁷⁾." For the true aim of Zen is not to attain some repressed state of emptiness, but to open up to the unmediated fullness of the entire universe, and thrill to the revealed splendor of the *Big Note* and all fractal sub-divisions thereof.

The initial idea for this paper came from a late-night discussion at the home of Andy Hollinden, resident professor of Zappology at Indiana University, during which we waxed nostalgic over a number of prime musical cuts in our sad semblance of *rock and roll clothing*, bemoaning the fact that insufficient attention was paid in most books published about Zappa to the consistent vision that underpins the music and runs through the lyrics, articles and interviews. We got to talking of Zappa's sometime proposal to establish CASH, the *Church of American Secular Humanism*, and wondered what some of its core tenets might look like based on his lyrics, a sort of ten commendments. Of course, part of the whole point about Zappa's work, either musically or lyrically, is that there are no prescriptions, nothing to 'say'. It is, in fact, quite carefully designed to unbalance anything that might be said, vehemently urging '*I doubt it*' upon suggestible listeners⁸⁾. Even his so-called '*mini-manifesto*' is essentially a series of negative statements, the very notion of music being the best turning out to be a fill-in-the-blank template "*so you get to figure out what your idea of music is and plug it into that*⁹⁾." Nonetheless, it is possible to read selected observations scattered through the oeuvre as a kind of self-help manual which addresses some of the more conspicuous mental health dilemmas that afflict our species.

A quote often attributed to Zappa is that *the mind is like a parachute, and only works when open*. Whether or not he actually said it, or said it first, the observation is apt; the consequences of failing to pull the ripcord are ultimately the responsibility of the operator. Though it is undoubtedly true that "*somebody is helping to shape this imaginary box you live in*¹⁰⁾", not only does it not have to be that way, the notion that the culture industry and/or its capitalist masters are solely responsible for inflicting the social evils we all wish to rise above onto an unsuspecting and innocent mass of undifferentiated proles is as patronizing as it is dis-empowering. *Evolution will*

*always be more effective than revolution*¹¹⁾. Recent studies with macaque monkeys show they will choose to view images of high-status individuals and 'female hindquarters' rather than images of low-status individuals or less-stimulating body parts even if offered greater rewards to do so¹²⁾. The proprietors of such organs as *Hello* and *Mojo* may be justly censured for *skimming the cream*, but the *cesspools of excitement* they trade in are firmly located in what Zappa used to call the *chimpanzee part of the brain*. And whether a person will choose to succumb to that option depends on how *swift they are to behold* the nature of the problem. A swiftness that will be determined in part by access to better quality information; a service Zappa's art is designed to provide.

One other disclaimer, before I embark on my list of putative commendments: there are those who complain that too much is made of the lyrics in discussing Zappa's work. Ben Watson has been the butt of much criticism of this ilk. There are several answers to this. First and foremost, the classic rebuttal from Packard Goose: "*Well fuck all you people I don't need no excuse!*" No one's forcing you to come to this particular party, and so far there hasn't been a murder. Secondly, and from a more technical standpoint: "*Talking about music is like dancing about architecture*¹³⁾" (or *fishing* about it, if you prefer.) Though persons with a proper musical training will doubtless be able to offer structural insights or *academic suppositions* into how his music works, it's not clear that the sausage will necessarily taste better as a result. Thirdly, as I have already suggested, though the music itself is undoubtedly the best – not least from the standpoint of Victor Hugo's remark that "*it expresses that which cannot be said and on which it is impossible to remain silent*¹⁴⁾" – in Zappa's case the lyrics provide a significant structural counterpoint to the *therapeutic shockwaves* of the music.

And now, without further ado, my list of ten Zen 'commendments' – statements extracted more-or-less at random from the body of work but which hopefully work together as some kind of cheap Po-Jama Person's Progress toward the goal of ultimate enlightenment:

1) *Your mind is the ugliest part of your body*

To point at the ugliness of the human mind may not be the most original of insights. The future Queen Elizabeth 1 even composed a poem in 1554 along these lines, found written in the back page of her French psalter. *“No crooked leg, no bleared eye, No part deformed out of kind, Nor yet so ugly half can be, As is the inward suspicious mind.”* But what gives Zappa’s lyric its punch is the implication that the mind is actually a part of the body, along with toes and noses, and equally deserving of critical attention. For if you think you have cosmetic issues, not only are they nothing to the reasons why you think you have them in the first place, they are entirely secondary to the main business at hand, which is to *un-feature your hurt* and cease inflicting your personal problems either upon yourself or the rest of the world. Or, as he put it more succinctly in another context: *“Don’t mind your make-up; you’d better make your mind up.”*

2) *You is what you am / A cow don’t make ham.*

Dealing with the incipient ugliness involves owning it. As Zappa told *Oui Magazine* in 1979, *“If you’re going to deal with reality, you’re going to have to make one big discovery: Reality is something that belongs to you as an individual. If you want to grow up, which most people don’t, the thing to do is to take responsibility for your own reality and deal with it in your own terms. Don’t expect that because you pay some money to somebody else, or take a pledge, or join a club, or run down the street, or wear a special bunch of clothes, or play a certain sport or even drink Perrier water, it’s going to take care of everything for you. Because it all comes from inside. As a matter of fact, that’s where it stays.”*

3) *You oughta know now all your education / Won’t help you no-how*

Krel Philssen of the esteemed Arkansas avant-noise band Reagan’s Polyp insists that the *no* of ‘no-now’ should be spelt *know*; but whether or not, the point is clear – if you listen to anyone else telling you how to do your shit,

don't complain if you don't like the results. Zappa's recommended procedure, based on available technology at the time, was *"If you want to get laid, go to school; if you want an education, go to the library"*, but his own body of work was clearly intended to function as a public service announcement in this regard: *"Everybody else writes songs about beautiful girls who make you fall in love, and groovy guys that are so wonderful, and heartbreak and all that shit - that's everybody else's department. I'm alternative information on specimen behaviour¹⁵⁾."*

4) *Whatever you can do to have a good time, let's get on with it, so long as it doesn't cause a murder*

Taking responsibility for your own reality, of course, includes acknowledging and accepting what you are and what you need to do to work out your personal demons. Barring homicide, it's clearly important to get into the paraphernalia of whatever it is that turns you on. *"As long as you don't do anything to damage anybody else's body or mind in the procurement of your sexual gratification, then go on ahead. If you want to fuck a dog and the dog likes it, you're in business; if you fuck a chicken and it dies, you're naughty¹⁶⁾."* The question of his own libidinal involvement is irrelevant; Zappa's documentation of what goes on is driven by sheer delight at the diversity of specimen behavior; not by the need to seek or supply endorsement.

5) *You might be surprised at what you find out when you go.*

The classic quote in this context is *"There is no progress without deviation"*, but Zappa's penchant for pushing envelopes was much more of an active quest. As he told Playboy in 1993: *"I like taking things to their most ridiculous extreme because out there on the fringe is where my kind of entertainment lies."* Entertainment, of course, being the name of the game. *"The crux of the biscuit is: If it entertains you, fine. Enjoy it. If it doesn't, then blow it out your ass."* And then move on, because...

6) *You should be diggin' it while it's happening*

Though *you can be scared if it gets too real*, with *death valley days* staring straight ahead, the solution is to celebrate the time left until you're a *cinder*, doing *"whatever you can that makes your particular life more beautiful, and you get involved in art. 'Cause that's what makes things beautiful"¹⁷⁾*. In the face of collective collusion in the decision to choose cheese, Zappa's implied suggestion for improving quality of life is to *"think of this matter in terms of how much of what we individually consider to be beautiful are we able to experience every day"¹⁸⁾*. For even if time turns out to be a spherical constant, it doesn't alter the fact that *"you've got X number of moments of your undead state to deal with whatever you're going to deal with. And I think that the best way to do it is to deal with as much as you can deal with while you're alive, not as little"¹⁹⁾*.

7) *When you pay the bill, kindly leave a little tip to help the next poor sucker on his one-way trip*

Though apparently unconcerned about what posterity might make of his music, if anything at all, Zappa's remarks about the usefulness of what he might be able to say through his work indicate that he saw an educational value in 'art' aside from its intrinsic entertainment value. And in the particular context of football: *"I think that if you had to choose between playing football or doing art, you'd probably be better off doing art, because if everything does disappear, the only thing that is going to be worth digging up later on is the art, not the footballs. To me that would be a better way of spending your waning hours, and that is what we're talking about"²⁰⁾*.

8) *Music is the best*

The culmination of the mini-manifesto, the ultimate tip is to tune in directly to whatever subdivision of the Big Note suits your factory rate. If, as Walter Pater said, *"all art aspires to the condition of music"* then the *decoration of time* through music is as good as it gets. And, as previously noted, anything can be

music. Zappa's working definition was "*the organization of any data*". But there has to be active participation: "*It doesn't become music until someone wills it to be music, and the audience listening to it decides to perceive it as music*²¹." A dialectical dance between subject and object. And speaking of dancing:

9) *There will come a time when you can even take your clothes off when you dance*

Once you figure out that it's not only hair that not where it's at, but everything else as well, you are finally free. *Only if you want to be*, of course, but it should be noted that this song, Zappa's prescient prequel to *Imagine*, manages to upstage John Lennon in advance by not only positing a world which has risen above all possible evils, including (but not limited to) discrimination based on race, religion, gender and greed, but doing so without a prescriptively po-faced PC agenda. Those still inclined to believe that this song is a parody of hippy banality might like to ponder the inverse square law that applies almost universally in Zappa's music: the stupider the music the meatier the lyrics and vice versa. It's his answer to the question "*Shall we take ourselves seriously?*" and further proof that "*despite all evidence to the contrary it is theoretically possible to be 'heavy' and still have a sense of humor*²² ."

10) *One size fits all.*

Now we are able to wander round free from uniforms or shame at our new-found nakedness, the essential oneness of the universe is revealed. Snatching profundity from the jaws of banality, like the unused title *Crush All Boxes* this phrase encodes the ultimate esemplastic vision, a Zen-like resolution of the many as one, the details as whole, the 'Not Two' of the *Hsin Hsin Ming*²³). The album offers a parody of partial perspectives of all persuasions, from spurious extra-terrestrial speculations on the origins of life on earth to the more immediate concerns of those who *can't afford to buy no shoes*, contrasting the poor-little-rich girl misery of the theoretically happy and

advantaged Florentine Pogen with the unexpected lust for life of the supposedly unhappy and disadvantaged Bobby and his girl in trailer park heaven -- before plunging in to Andy, the key song in what is, essentially, an album about religion (completed, Zappa notes, on Easter Sunday, 1975). Disenchantment with the rind-encrusted *cowboy* is a punning metaphor for disappointment with the *Divine* whose imperfections cause the specious dreams of religious longing to founder on the eponymous divan, its *cracks and crannies* replete with *secret smut and lost metal money*. And to top it all off, the absurdities of the extraneous verbiage washing over Evelyn are shattered by the poodle's sharp bark of enlightenment, a canine salutation Zappa once told me was "*suitable for all festive occasions as it possesses a certain interspecial comprehensibility*²⁴."

When Bob Marshall asks Zappa in 1988 if there is an idea behind his work, he answers unhesitatingly: "*The Emperor's not wearing any clothes, never has and never will*". Asked who the Emperor is, he replies "*Fill in the blank*", transforming cliché to template, even seeming to surprise himself as he realizes its potential as a vehicle for the ultimate audience participation: "*It's like name your poison... why, that's almost elegant...*" A master at the art of advanced pattern recognition (an ability he once cited as a key qualification for anyone wishing to join the band), it's not so much that Zappa has something to say, as that he supplies a methodology for grasping the interconnectedness of *everything that's ever bin*. Just like the book *Them or Us*, designed to answer the question "*How do all these things which don't have anything to do with each other fit together, forming a larger absurdity*²⁵?" his art is a paradigm for the ensuing awareness, which plays out to its best effect in the gorgeously maximal music he bequeaths for the *dining and dancing pleasure* of his friends.

Notes and References

- 1) Germany vs. Costa Rica, June 9th, 2006
- 2) FZ interviewed by Bob Marshall, October 22, 1988
- 3) "Frank pointed out that whenever I quoted Theodor Adorno he lost the thread." Ben Watson, *TNDOPP* p. 551
- 4) Udana 68-69: *The Parable of the Blind Men and the Elephant*
- 5) Preface to *Them or Us*, the book
- 6) *dhyān* in Sanskrit, *jhan* in Pali, *ch'an* in Chinese.
- 7) Ben Watson, op.cit. p.549
- 8) "If I have to admit there is really a message... it's this: every American boy and girl with matching moms and dads should walk around every day vehemently screaming "I doubt it!" FZ / *1966 Fanzine questionnaire*.
- 9) FZ interviewed by Bob Marshall, October 22, 1988
- 10) FZ interviewed by Don Menn in *Zappa!* p.64
- 11) "You people need evolution, not revolution." FZ to German students in Berlin, 16 October, 1968.
- 12) See *Current Biology*, March 2005
- 13) Frequently attributed to FZ; the 'fishing' version is more plausibly zappoid.
- 14) *William Shakespeare*, 1864 (l.2.iv)
- 15) Interview with Michael Bloom in *Trouser Press*, February 1980
- 16) *Y'Know Magazine*, 1969
- 17) FZ, 1985, attribution pending
- 18) FZ sleevenote, *YAWYI*
- 19) FZ interviewed by Bob Marshall, October 22, 1988
- 20) FZ, 1985, attribution pending
- 21) FZ interviewed by Bob Marshall, October 22, 1988
- 22) *MOI Customized Presskit*, 1971
- 23) 信心銘: *Verses on the Faith-Mind*, Seng-ts'an 606 AD
- 24) Correspondence with author, February 6, 1992
- 25) Preface to *Them or Us*, the book