

ISN'T IT NECROMANTIC, PUNKY...

(A review of 'The Bizarre World of Frank Zappa' at the Palladium, London, May 14, 2019)

by The Semantic Scrutinizer

Well, I didn't arrive with the highest of hopes. I'd seen various of the preview and review snippets that have been appearing over the last few months, and they'd left me feeling much the same way I feel about many of the things the Zappa Family Trust has released since Frank ceased to have control over the content himself: conflicted. On the one hand, it seemed set to be a rather tacky way of exploiting what remains of the fan base; on the other, well, the band sure looked tight, and – hell – the music is still the music.

And 25 years since his untimely demise, Uncle Frank can still pack 'em in. The event had been sold out for some time, and even if the audience was mostly made up of the usual suspects (white, male, aging, and not always well...) it was a crowded and even rowdy house. It always used to puzzle me that Frank also seemed to attract the kind of people who looked like they'd just got lost on the way to a football game – all boozed up and boisterous – but then they too have a place on the bus. The pre-event lobby was awash with fond fan re-unions and glad-handing of the principals, who to their credit were making themselves available for handshakes and conversation. The vibe was expectant.

So there was a palpable air of relief that the show kicked off with *Cosmik Debris*, a firm fan favorite and a rocking blues number that never fails to deliver the goods. The preamble featured the first sight of the hologram, which introduced itself authentically enough as 'Frank, your resident buffoon' – but there was a sense that the image and its movements, even the audio itself, had been doctored to fit the occasion. As well they might: the fact that we were seeing it at all was minor miracle of cutting-edge technology. But things improved when the solo arrived and the Frank-o-gram got funky, its right leg – replete with seventies flares – suddenly stepping out of the two-dimensional plane of the screen to stomp on the wah pedal and wail accordingly. Even without the visuals, this

was hot stuff – an unreleased and hitherto unheard version that was worth the price of entry all on its own, as were the other solos scattered throughout the show.

But this was a show laden with visuals. Things have come a long way since 1974, and bands who might otherwise struggle to shine can now fill whole stadiums with apparently satisfied punters. So the sky is the limit, and someone had clearly put a lot of time, thought and budget into the design. The next song up, Montana – another previously unreleased version – featured what looked like a line-drawing on acid, eating itself alive as it mutated through scenes intended to illustrate the song. But there was a downside to all of this. The need to project the hologram centre stage meant the band were crowded out to both sides, and as they were essentially just playing to a recorded track, it soon started to feel stiff and flat – barely mustering any more charisma than you'd expect from a pit orchestra. Not their fault, of course – these are some of the best *mu-zishnin's* on the planet – but when you're dealing in resurrection, there needs to be some oomph.

And that oomph cannot be delivered by volume alone – another problem for the band, as the mix was bass-heavy, muddy and mostly too loud to allow all the parts to be heard. But things were redeemed somewhat by the next track, Trouble Coming Every Day. This is a song that retains its relevance more than most – as the visuals were keen to remind us, projecting newspaper clippings both archive and contemporary against black and white footage of Frank in what looked like unseen (or at least clean) excerpts from A Token of My Extreme. This was a welcome reminder – if not necessarily quite so wise, given the context – that conventional footage of a live performance still has the ability to deliver a presence and an edge that a quasi-necromantic 3D image summoned through the magikal conjurance of stage-kraft can never really hope to achieve.

Or so I was starting to think. But the next number, Apostrophe, made me think again. This track, my least favorite of the tracks on the album after which it is named, was essentially a studio jam between Frank and Jack Bruce that never really worked for me. But by utilizing another previously unreleased nugget, this was an opportunity for Scott Thunes to step up to the plate and show why he got the nod for the band, shining in a duet with

Frank that came close to seeming live at times. With Thunes on bass turned to face the Frank-o-gram on rhythm, you could almost sense the connection between them as they leaned in to each other as they played, complementing each other's grooves.

Almost; but not quite. Even without considering the quality of the image, the xenochrony Zappa practiced so promiscuously in the audio realm just doesn't have the same authority – and authenticity – in the visual medium. Perhaps it's the obvious sartorial clues, the evident mismatch between the mid-seventies Frank in his prime and his post-punk, post-millennial proteges dressed accordingly (to say nothing of the ravages time has inflicted upon them). Perhaps it's just the inevitable unnaturalness of juxtaposing a live human being with an image forever fixed in aspic, unable to respond – all the more so since one of the great joys of seeing Zappa in concert was the agility with which he responded to time, place and occasion, always alert to the potential of the moment.

Whatever the reason, this was the last we saw of the hologram in the first half, which carried on with Penguin in Bondage, overlaid with hyperactive images that veered into Ren and Stimpy territory – not entirely inappropriate, given Frank's fondness for the show. This was followed by a bravura version of The Evil Prince, introduced by Joe Travers as one of his favourite songs – and rightly so. One can only hope that the irony of the lyrical content was not lost on the band as Ray White stepped forward to exhort his zombies to make their return against the backdrop of a scabrous review. Fancy! The performance was also overlaid with a collage of animation excerpts from Baby Snakes, a reminder that sensitive visual surrealism can be fully realized using nothing more than plasticine.

Absent an animated Ampex Frank, Mike Keneally contributed a sterling performance in the solo slot, a feat he reprised in the final song of the first half, Zomby Woof. Mike is an astonishingly versatile musician who can play two or more instruments simultaneously better than most can hope to play one, but somehow he fails to hit the spot when it comes to invoking the spirit of the Master – which is surely what a show such as this should be about. This is not a criticism that can fairly be directed at him personally, as it applies to anyone with the requisite audacity to step into those pungent python boots. Despite an

incredible dedication to detail when it comes to playing the compositions, no one – not even Dweezil – seems willing to play a Zappa solo as it was performed, always falling back on some generic aroma that fails to capture or even really hint at the distinctive cadences and colouring that make Frank's guitar so instantly recognizable.

But that's a small quibble – and who am I to complain? I can't do it either. Let us merely be thankful that, unlike for Bach, Mozart or Beethoven, we have actual recordings of how Frank did play – lest we should ever forget. Musing such matters or otherwise, during the interval the crowd traipsed enthusiastically off to the bar – but in search of a more perfect union with the occasion, your reviewer found himself slipping into the whispering breezes of the evening to partake of some herbal refreshment. It was an excellent decision.

The second half kicked off in a more liberated mood (and not just because of the aforesaid herbal refreshment). Spared the restriction of having to work with a piece of tape, the band plunged into a wide-screen version of *Why Does It Hurt When I Pee*, its inherent operatic qualities oddly emphasized by a holographic rear-view of a man with long hair in white tails apparently 'conducting' the performance. As a gag, this worked well enough for a few moments, but when it carried on through a robust version of *Peaches En Regalia*, the joke began to wear a bit thin – especially since the conductor was clearly not Frank, and even more so given the ironic origin of the title, an overblown bowl of peaches he once took exception to in the lobby of the equally overblown Royal Garden Hotel.

However, things soon looked up with the arrival of *Stinkfoot*. Like *Cosmik Debris*, this is another reliable vehicle for a really stinky solo, and so it proved here. Culled from a live performance where Frank first perorates on the iniquities of a poodle too stoned to fetch his slippers, the slowly bubbling visuals offered a subtler yet admirably sharp counterpoint to the melody – before lurching into Terry Gilliam territory as we were invited to follow the adventures of a joint-taking pooch who ends up trading solos with a naked Frank ensconced on his infamous toilet (also at the Royal Garden Hotel). It may be that the excesses of the interval were kicking in at this point, but this was a particularly memorable moment of the show – a blisteringly blasphemous solo, ably abetted by the band.

But they had been saving the best. After a moving paean of praise for Frank and all his works, Mike Keneally announced that the band were going to attempt a version of Farther O'Blivion, a tune never officially recorded as such, but which subsequently metastasized into several pieces familiar to the faithful in various other guises: the 'steno pool' segment of Greggery Peccary, The Be-Bop Tango (of which Frank once said "if you can hum along to that, just go and get yourself hospitalized right after the show" – advice that probably applied to at least half the audience), Cucamonga and – for this performance only – a snatch of Inca Roads. This time there was no conductor, no Frank-o-gram, just the band – and they absolutely nailed it. The unmitigated exuberance with which they handled the jaw-droppingly abstruse and technically demanding music was a sheer joy to witness.

After that, there was nowhere to go but the ridiculous, a slot filled by a previously unheard version of Dangerous Kitchen complete with bizarro visuals; a version of City of Tiny Lites headlined by Ray White that was probably as good as it ever got (I write as someone who saw five performances at the Hammy Odeon back in the day); and, perhaps inevitably, Dinah-Moe Humm. This latter piece was accompanied by the prancing of a particularly inappropriate animated mannequin of Frank with all the awkwardness of Gary from Team America delivering the 'dicks and assholes' speech, and without any of the irony. But it had the audience singing along and cheering for more, as it always did. Just in case I'd forgotten the words, a drunken contingent in the row to my left had it covered.

Finally, the 1974 Frank-o-gram was summoned back to the stage for one last appearance, this time for a version of Dirty Love on which he sang but did not play the guitar (an honour which fell once again to Mike Keneally). And then, in a puff of smoke he was gone – only to be replaced in person by his son Ahmet, who at 45 is now ten years older than his father was at the time of the Frank-o-gram. With the announcement of his forthcoming birthday as a proximate excuse, Ahmet promptly launched into The Dead Girls of London, literally bouncing his way across the ribbon of stage in front of the band, looking for all the world like an overweight Freddie Mercury impersonator at a hen party.

Not the best look – any more than that of his sister Diva, who appeared from the wings wheeling on a large birthday cake before being exhorted by her brother to do cartwheels across the stage to an improvised musical accompaniment. Now call me picky, old-fashioned or just downright churlish, but that doesn't seem like the best tribute that could be offered to the spirit of her father, especially in the context. It's true that Frank did things that lead many – perhaps even including his children – to conclude that anything zany is authentically Zappa, but any old shit only works if it is genuinely insane, and delivered with a bite and an attitude that does not suffer fools gladly.

But perhaps I am asking too much of human nature. The band came back to complete the evening with a bionic version of Cheepnis before the Frank-o-gram returned to top things off with a somewhat lackluster Camarillo Brillo. And then it was all over. It's not an evening I would have missed, and there were many moments of extraordinary and previously unheard music that made it all worth it, but – as Frank often complained – music is to be heard and not seen. Beyond the mere curiosity of a three-dimensional representation of a dead icon, the real truth about the world of Frank Zappa is not how bizarre it was, but how remarkably sane. This was a man who brought steely commitment and style to everything he did, and the fetishizing of the creative confusement of others starts to border on the necromantic, and not in a good way – if there is a good way.

That said, the band were fantastic, and I'd swallow my pride to see them again any day. And yes, however conflictedly: thank you Ahmet, for making it happen. In many ways.

Set list: Cosmik Debris, Montana, Trouble Coming Every Day, Apostrophe, Penguin in Bondage, The Evil Prince, Zomby Woof -- interval – Why Does it Hurt When I Pee, Peaches en Regalia, Stinkfoot, Farther O'Blivion, The Dangerous Kitchen, City of Tiny Lights, Dinah-Moe Humm, Dirty Love.

Encore: The Dead Girls of London, Cheepnis, Camarillo Brillo