

'Conceptual continuity' can be a vexed issue for Zappa fans. It's a phrase we're all familiar with in the context of the work, but when it comes down to it, what does it actually mean? Is it about the recurrence of certain symbolic motifs – poodles, Louie Louie and blow-jobs – hidden references and secret words, or something else entirely? In 1971, the 'MOI Customized Press Kit' announced that "*There is, and always has been, a conscious control of thematic and structural elements flowing through each album, live performance, and interview.*" But still, like the hapless Mike Nesmith posing as Frank Zappa in that notorious episode of *The Monkees*, our attempts to locate the soul of the music ("*Is it on the one and the seven or the one and the five?*") can leave us badly wrong-footed: not only is it sometimes to be found on the three and the five, it can also turn out that we're asking the wrong question altogether. For the continuity connecting the *AAAFNRA* concept is less about symbols than symbiosis – the interaction between organic pieces of the puzzle is always going to be more interesting than any particular pooch, paean or perquisite.

So what the hell has an apostrophe(') got to do with it, then?

In the song *Stink-foot*, Fido the dog famously responds to his human interlocutor by explaining that this pesky little punctuational peccadillo is the very crux of the conceptual continuity's biscuit. How so, indeed? The only time Frank seems to have been asked directly about the entanglement in question, he agrees that what he had in mind was the function that "denotes ownership"; but we should probably not allow ourselves to take that too seriously. For one thing, Fido's assertion is immediately challenged by a blizzard of commonly apostrophized words that have nothing to do with possession (*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...*) For another, Frank was way too fond of the multivalent (not to say malevolent) possibilities lurking in almost every aspect of reality to tie himself to a single interpretation, and neither should we. And to be preposterously pedantic about it, an apostrophe does not in fact 'denote' ownership: its possessive function actually derives from a contraction of the so-called 'Saxon genitive', so the only thing an apostrophe unambiguously signals is that something has been omitted, whether or not that something implies ownership. Check it out.

But omission can have many virtues: it's not just the minimalists who knew that less can turn out to be more. Knowing what to omit is the essence of successful editing, and the skill of editing is what lies at the heart of Zappa's art. His well-documented (if still shockingly intense) hatred of bootleggers was not just about ownership of his output: as he told me back in 1982, it was more about aesthetic control and maintaining the quality of what was released in his name. So the question arises: in presenting the contents of Zappa's cutting-room floor in an album such as this, and exposing his apostrophic omissions to public view, are we doing him a service? He'd probably not be best pleased were he still around: the vault was always only ever a *resorz* to draw on, raw material for the pancakes of his flock. But for those of us still wrestling with the staggering immensity of his output, omission is an option we are less willing to embrace: with so much that's still delicious, we can't bring ourselves to look away – and as with so many of his albums, the art of *Apostrophe(')* can be glimpsed not only in what was left behind, but in what it went on to be. And both of those elements are well represented in the package you now hold in your hand.

The genesis for this particular disc was sparked by a find made during one of the Vaultmeister's more fruitful speleological expeditions, wherein it was discovered that Frank had first started to sequence an *Apostrophe(')* album in June 1973 – even though the idea for an album of that name seems to have been around since 1971 – and that it was quite different to the album he eventually released. So far, so normal: nothing was ever set in stone until the master tape was delivered, and things could, would and did change all the time. But among other things, what made this different was the realization that the track now known as *Down In De Dew* (first released on the *Läther* album) and the title track *Apostrophe* were originally two parts of a single piece with the surprisingly straightforward title (for a Zappa composition) of *Energy Frontier*, laid down separately on the same day in November 1972 with Jack Bruce, Jim Gordon and Tony Duran. The first part of this piece was what became *Down In De Dew*, and the second part, named *Energy Frontier - Bridge* (though with no indication as to what it might be the bridge to) went on to become *Apostrophe*. These two were sequenced by Frank to make up the last part of side one of the album's build reel, placed to follow *Cosmik Debris* and *Uncle Remus* – whose last line would seem to have given *Down In De Dew* its name – although by this stage the 'bridge' section of *Energy Frontier* had become *Skin-Head*. Confused enough yet?

But before getting into more detail about the dining and dancing delights to come, let me briefly divert the proceedings with a different species of apostrophe: *Oh. My. God.* [recalling that an ‘apostrophe’ is also “an address to an imaginary or absent person”] The deployment of a rhetorical appeal to the divine at this juncture is a cue to remind ourselves just what an astonishingly good album *Apostrophe(')* was and still is: the most commercially successful of all Frank’s releases, not only did it eventually go gold, within the space of 11 weeks it had hit the giddy heights of #10 on the Billboard album charts. This is a year in which the running was being made with records like Eric Clapton’s *461 Ocean Boulevard*, Paul McCartney’s *Band On The Run*, and Elton John’s *Caribou*. The top Billboard spot in the week that *Apostrophe(')* appeared was in fact taken by Barbara Streisand and *The Way We Were*: so to have reached #10 with an album of material that rode roughshod over almost every contemporary social, sexual and musical norm was an extraordinary achievement.

As has been widely reported, Frank was so delighted at this that he hired a 50-piece marching band to parade up and down with signs in front of the Warner Bros offices in Burbank, one reading “*Warner Bros you got one HELL of a team,*” and another saying “*Anybody who can get a Frank Zappa LP even to the bottom of the Top Ten is OK in my booklet.*” But this unprecedented (if sadly unrepeated) success probably had little to do with the promotional skills of Warner Bros: its unexpected journey up the charts can more reasonably be put down to an unauthorized re-edit of the first two tracks into a ‘novelty record’ by a radio DJ in Pittsburgh that saw significant radio play in the station’s region. Never slow to spot an opportunity, Frank quickly released his own edit as a single, nimbly paired with *Cosmik Debris* on the B-side.

His version of the ‘*Don’t Eat The Yellow Snow*’ single actually combines segments from the first three tracks of the album, tailing off with a teasing glimpse of the aural fireworks of *St Alfonso’s Pancake Breakfast* – no doubt a stealthy attempt to draw more attention to the musical appeal of the record. In that sense it works as a compressed version of what became known as the *Yellow Snow* suite – an expanded and embellished version of the released album’s first four tracks that was such a staple of the 1973-74 tours, later revived for the 1978-80 touring band (a fine version of the latter is found on *YCDTOSA Vol 1*, replete with audience participation).

It's not hard to see why: apart from the obvious crowd-recognition factor, it's a superb showcase both for his writing and the stupendous musical chops of the band, and features some of Zappa's snarkiest and most surreal lyrics, all marshalled to the service of gleefully dissing the idiocies of convention, commercialism and organized religion. And this is really the core of the project as far as the lyrics are concerned, a focus that comes to bear most obviously in *Cosmik Debris*.

So what we have on this disc is a snapshot of the *Apostrophe(')* album project as it was developing in mid-1973: a first draft of the first side of the album, featuring a very different sequence and different mixes to the tracks that eventually appeared on the finished record; a complete version of the *Yellow Snow* suite as it had evolved on the road and which Frank himself describes in the accompanying interview as 'two songs' – even though by the time it came to the album he divided them into four tracks; a mix outtake for *Excentrifugal Forz*; and a medley of other outtakes and basic tracks from the recording sessions, all of which had taken place at this point and were merely awaiting the alchemy of mixing and editing that would transmute their base material into the gold of *Apostrophe(')*.

Let's take a look at them in turn. Apart from six extra seconds of brass intro, the version of *Cosmik Debris* on this disc is essentially the one released on the album: same mix, same instrumentation, same take. But in considering it for pole position, Frank underlines its importance to his overall theme. Religious hokum and New Age charlatans had been in his sights before, but by 1973 the rampant espousal of self-proclaimed gurus by pop stars and other celebs was in need of serious satirical attention. It was a deficit that Frank was only too happy to fill, and he went straight for the jugular: "*He said, for a nominal service charge, I could reach nervonna t'nite*" is a line that absolutely nails the crass commercialism of a mystery man whose grasp of detail is so poor he can't even pronounce 'nirvana' correctly. The whole idea of 'debris' as a descriptor for the lazy assumptions and dodgy cosmology of such spiritual snake-oil salesmen is a theme later enthusiastically revisited in the artwork for *One Size Fits All*, and explored further in *The Adventures of Greggery Peccary*.

Next up is *Uncle Remus*. Juxtaposed in this way, the lush funk of the piano makes a sharp contrast to the smart-ass cynicism of *Cosmik Debris*, which strikes down its

target in such uncompromising and unanswerable terms. The version unveiled here is an alternate mix from the session at Paramount Studios on May 24, 1972, which took place toward the end of the *Grand Wazoo* recordings. The backing singers – Tina Turner and the Ikettes, lest we forget – are mixed more to the fore, and George gets an extra chorus to showcase the pathos in his piano work (so ably abetted by the wistful tone of Frank’s guitar), adding 75 seconds to the album edit. Interestingly, this session was not originally intended for release on an FZ album. Let George Duke take up the story, from an unreleased interview in 1997 with Andy Hollinden (whom I hereby thank): *“‘Uncle Remus’ came about as a result of Frank producing a demo for me... I already had a record deal with a label called MPS Records in Germany but their distribution here in the States was not very good. So he was going to do a demo for me. We did three songs and ‘Uncle Remus’ was one of them. Frank decided, after we recorded it - I didn’t get a deal out of it, by the way - but, basically, he said, ‘I think I’d like to use this track on my album and I’m going to write some lyrics to it.’ And so I said, ‘Hey Frank, you paid for it. Go ahead.’ ... I would never have written a lyric like that. I really wouldn’t have, but Frank saw the humor in it. He just decided for some reason to put it on his record. A lot of people like that song. I was very happy and honored by the fact that he’d even consider doing it, because I didn’t think it’d be the kind of song that he’d be interested in.”*

Which just goes to show, you can’t tell: anything, anytime, anyplace – for no reason at all. At the same time, it’s not hard to see what might have drawn Frank to it: this is a song that brims with humor and compassion in equal measure, asking how much progress has really been made with civil rights since the Watts riots (the subject of *Trouble Every Day*) if all it amounts to is the freedom to ‘look sharp in these clothes’ and the aspiration to grow out a ‘fro. It’s a question that still resonates in the US today: if you’re liable to get squirted with a hose if you step out of line, hard work isn’t going to buy redemption when the playing field is tilted against you by rich (white) people with little jockeys on their lawn [Stunning to note: the entrance to Zappa’s studio was once guarded by just such a jockey – overpainted with a stylish Z – whose battered features suggested he’d already been knocked off someone’s lawn.]

The third track is *Down In De Dew*, which, as already noted, appears to have been conceived as part of a larger work. This version is both a different mix and, at 20

seconds longer, a very different edit to the version eventually released on *Läther*. What's interesting is just how different it is to the two other outtakes that Joe has found [tracks 8 and 9]. These are essentially the original studio recordings (though track 9 has some overdubs) and apart from showing that the basic structure of the track was already quite clear, the significant discovery is not so much that Jack Bruce was part of the session, but just how thoroughly his contribution has been erased: as released, *Down In De Dew* features Frank alone on guitars and bass, and Jim Gordon on drums.

Now for the 'bridge', which again has a clear underlying structure despite ending its days as a bridge to nowhere on the second side of the album. Full disclosure at this point: I should confess that I never liked this track from the get-go. Frank himself complained that Bruce was too 'busy', and to my ear that's exactly the problem – he needed space to move around and swoop in, and Bruce is playing without extending the room that Alex Dmochowski afforded him earlier that year on *Big Swifty*, for example. Whether or not this is because he's ignoring the bass's root functions – as Frank later claimed – he definitely seems to have had other things on his mind. To that extent it's interesting to hear this back to back with the other outtake (track 10), where Frank is constantly feeling his way but failing to take off amid a repetitive storm of high-end bass notes. It's also instructive to compare this track with *The Ocean Is The Ultimate Solution*, where Patrick O'Hearn's equally densely-woven bass platform allows Frank to fly effortlessly to the far end of the universe. But as a fan of Cream, Frank perhaps felt the jam was still interesting enough to make the cut, even when the cut reduced it from eight minutes to five. He may even have had one eye on attracting the ear of other Cream fans. It still doesn't do it for me, though.

Track 5 is a brief spoken interlude in which Frank outlines the story of the *Yellow Snow* suite to an Australian journalist, during which he also reveals the inspiration for *St Alphonzo's Pancake Breakfast* – a TV commercial for Imperial Margarine that was so 'loathsome' he felt compelled to memorialize it in song. It's a telling example of his penchant for placing found material center stage in some of his most apparently absurd inventions: if you're looking for insanity, there's nothing better than reality itself. It remains unclear whether or which St Alphonzo actually is or was the patron saint of the smelt fisherman of Portuguese extraction, but the Columbia River delta is

without doubt a popular location for the entrapment of smelt (otherwise known as candlefish, hooligan, or the Pacific eulachon. But then you probably knew that.)

The recording of the *Yellow Snow* suite that forms the heart of the disc on track 6 is a performance from the day before the recording released as *Australian Snow* on *One Shot Deal*. That was an edit of the full version featured here (it omits the Sal Marquez vocal on *Father O'Blivion*) but this is the one in which FZ first comes up with the idea of a hyphen standing for “*something that might be used for erotic gratification by a very desperate stenographer*” (a formulation that pleased him so much he repeated it the following day.) This suggests – in case we hadn't guessed it – that his daily association of words that spell out the letters MAR-JUH-RENE was ad-libbed on the spot. Those of you who already appreciate his bravura performance on *Australian Snow* (noteworthy items being *M for marsupial*, *H for homunculus* and *R for rebus*) will be further thrilled by *A for Australopithecus* (how many people even know that what that is, let alone can pronounce it properly?) *H for horny in America and randy in Australia* (he'd clearly been doing his research) and *E for the 'extended, overwhelming, obnoxious, ubiquitous, comestible' e to the nth degree* (followed by ‘*and N which is the n of the nth degree of the E that you just heard*’).

Where did he get this stuff from? What didn't he know? Pole-vaulting seamlessly from palaeoanthropology to pure mathematics by way of semi-semiotic argot – all this over a deliberately *rong* spelling of a stick of margarine that some deranged fur trapper was using to heal his deflicked eyes? It's too good, as Cap'n Beefheart was wont to say. And then the very next day, after some idiot looses off a firecracker in the audience (this after the fire at Montreaux... seriously?) he unhesitatingly retorts with: “*The 'M' of the mystery mar-juh-rene must stand for moron, which is the kind of person who lights fireworks in a crowded room, and the 'A' of mar-juh-rene stands for asshole, as if moron was not a good enough word to describe the motherfucker and 'R' in this case stands for rat, which is also what that guy is for lighting fireworks in this room and there is a hyphen, ladies and gentlemen, 'M-A-R-hyphen' the hyphen should be stuffed up his ass, 'M-A-R-hyphen-J' and 'J' is for juvenile hall, which is where they would send him if they caught him in Los Angeles and 'U' is for unguentine, which is a remedy for burns which might be used for a potential victim of his stupidity over there, folks...*” Unguentine? But yes indeed: of course it is.

Nor is it just the lyrical invention. The brief flourish from the band at the start of this version of the *Yellow Snow* suite is notable for two ridiculously compressed renditions of the “the big Nanook motif” – a musical theme almost as much quoted in Zappa’s work as Louie Louie. And here’s the thing. Despite its day job as a melody that meanders improbably up and down a quirky scale that seems so quintessentially Zappa (*doo-DEE-doo-dahdy-doodly-dahdy-doo-dah, dee-do-da-do-DAH-dee-doo*), this wholesome little ditty turns out to be none other than a sublimely depraved take on the opening line to Lionel Hampton’s *Midnight Sun*, a well-known jazz-standard to those in the know. If you’re not in the know – and I wasn’t, until far too recently – I heartily suggest you check out the original. To discover the ‘strictly commercial’ pedigree of this historic tune is perhaps the most extraordinary of the many jaw-dropping musical moments on the *Apostrophe*(¹) album: managing in plain sight to smuggle a twisted version of *Midnight Sun*’s classic theme into a song about the frozen north and dog-doo snow cones is both a monstrously clever counter-cultural coup and a cheeky homage of the highest order (if you ever find yourself looking for a name to blame for the vibraphone sound that is such a signature aroma in Zappa’s music, you need look no further than the legendary ‘Hamp’.)

And speaking of ridiculous compression, another notable moment in this deliciously modulated version is the “very, very, very very fast” reprise of *St Alphonzo’s Pancake Breakfast* delivered at bionic speed by a band that really had the material under its belt after two months on the road and a whole set of studio sessions. As always, Ruth’s mallet runs are exemplary in their extraordinary precision, but kudos must also go to Bruce Fowler and Sal Marquez as they push hard up against the limits of the possible. And then just as the piece closes, this fantastically tight rhythm section is spurred to newer heights by Frank’s cryptic instruction “*Join the march and eat my starch!*” – which triggers a dizzying 28-second virtuoso performance of the otherwise un-named composition that precedes the ‘steno pool’ segment of *Greggery Peccary* (still doing business at that time as the front end of *Farther Oblivion* – an early version of which can be heard on *Imaginary Diseases*.)

Meanwhile, after the excoriation of religious and pseudo-*relijermus* chicanery in *Cosmik Debris* and the *Yellow Snow* suite, *Excentrifugal Forz* arrives almost as light relief, though it can also be read as an autobiographical vignette tracking something

of Frank's personal cosmology. The version here is a mix outtake that's no more than a hairbreadth from the final edit; but it's still worth the price of entry. If the title sounds like a collision between 'centrifugal force' and 'eccentric', it's a phrase that fits: as well as meaning someone who is strange or unusual, 'eccentric' also literally means "off-center"; and a standard definition of centrifugal force is "a force that causes an object moving in a circular path to move out and away from the center of its path". However appropriate it may be to conceive of Frank's path as circular (given his belief that time is a spherical constant) his trajectory certainly took him far from the center, and happily so: "*I'm never really lonely in my Excentrifugal Forz*".

The lyrics continue in the dreamlike vein of the *Yellow Snow* suite sequence with all its apparent non-sequiturs and abrupt changes, but the vortex of images still bears down on classic Zappa themes: the masturbation parallel with Father O'Blivion's pancakes may be overcooked, but from within the portholes of the capsule (shades of Studio Z's spaceship and *The Blue Light?*) it's cheapness all the way down as he casts a cold eye on sports and assesses the microbiological implications of jamming with Korla Plankton and his bejewelled turban (a reference to the genuinely fake Korla Pandit, a cheezy staple of monocultural 1950's television exotica). And if we really let our speculation run wild, we can perhaps even see that Pup Tentacle and the enquiry about his chin resonate both with the monster in *Cheepnis* and the teenage dilemma in *Tryin' to Grow a Chin*.

The presence of John Guerin on drums has led some to conclude that the basic tracks were laid down as part of the *Hot Rats* sessions in 1969, but the Vaultmeister has been able to confirm that this was also recorded at Paramount Studios in July 1972, with Guerin making a rare comeback for a jam session. Only his drum track survives into the final version; Frank's driving overdubbed bass and George Duke's spooky evocations of Korla Pandit were added later.

The remaining tracks are outtakes and offcuts from the actual recording sessions at Ike Turner's Bolic Sound studio at the end of May 1973: tantalisingly brief excerpts from the basic tracks used in the construction of *Cosmik Debris*, *Don't Eat The Yellow Snow* and *Nanook Rubs It*. It's fascinating to see the process of assembly taking place as if before your very ears, with Frank's weary voice at the end of the

Don't Eat The Yellow Snow excerpt hinting at all the unseen work and very human graft that went into producing these fabulous recordings. [Note to ZFT: much more of this, please – this be the stuff that gets us the hottest...]

But as with any album, the downside of prising *Apostrophe*(¹) apart to see how it hangs together is that it can begin to seem less of an album than an ad hoc assemblage – much more like, say, *Weasels Ripped My Flesh* or *Man From Utopia*. And that's knowledge you can't undo: any continuity that might have been divined from the placement of the tracks will forever now seem more conceptual than structural. But despite the way we may have come to perceive them, the fact is that most of the albums were put together like that. Jimmy Carl Black once told me he had no idea what form the music that eventually became *We're Only In It For The Money*, *Ruben and The Jets* and *Uncle Meat* would actually take until the albums were released, because the material was all worked on together in the studio. Ultimately, it's all in the edit: addition by omission.

So there we have it, a smorgasbord of alternative versions and basic tracks rescued from the shelves where the tapes go to die, able at last to cast their glow of insight back down the line from later on to way back when. But it's not quite over yet. Lest it be we that become those suckers that fell right in, there's one more task to perform – an act of ownership. To make this album into something more than just a sneak peek behind the scenes – just another cheap thrill – it's your turn to participate. Make your way back to the original album and listen to it straight through, as it was meant to be heard – but with ears now primed for the crux of the biscuit, the essence of the apostrophe, more finely tuned to the art of Frank's skill: omission accomplished.