

## THE TORTURE NEVER STOPS: FZ and the Mental Hygiene Dilemma

by Simon Prentis [delivered in London at ICE-Z, January 2004]



Not being an experienced public speaker, I have brought with me a small Japanese good-luck charm – complete with its own tiny pillow – to help steady my nerves (since this is being filmed perhaps we can insert a close-up later on for those of you not blessed with 20/20 vision) but as some of you may already be able to see, this is in fact a miniature replica of a golden turd. You can buy these tasteful little doodads from the stalls that line the entrances to shrines and temples all over Japan, and they come in a variety of sizes and applications – I used to have another one that doubled as a device for scraping wax out of your ear – but the reason why they are so popular, the source of their magic charm, is that the pronunciation of the characters used to write *luck* 「幸運」 (ko-un) resonates pleasingly with that of the slang word usually used for *shit* 「うんこ」 (un-ko). The Japanese take a special delight in the sympathetic magic of such fortuitous homonyms, but there is evidently a particular pleasure in the *luck / turd* interface due to the sheer absurdity of the pairing. In its own way, it is very Zen: an arresting image that simultaneously celebrates and subverts the tradition it is part of. I hope it will also serve as a useful symbol for what I have to say about Frank Zappa, a man whose own deft pairing of *doody* with *duty* is distinctively Zen – not to mention the happy retro-continuity with the concept behind the characters famously uttered by the barking pumpkin: 「聖糞」 *Holy Shit*, or – more literally – *sacred turd*.

Zappa once said of *Who Are the Brain Police* that it was a religious song <sup>1)</sup>, a comment that – as far as I am aware – has received very little critical attention. Given his views on organised religion, it is highly unlikely that he meant this in the conventional sense of the word, and yet it points to a serious intent. So who exactly *are* the brain police? The song often seems to be taken as some sort of reference to 1984-style state

surveillance and/or as a comment on the pernicious influence of manufactured mass culture, but in fact the song is asking a very personal question: What would you *do*? What would *you* do if your familiar world broke down? If you saw through the plastic and chrome, and woke up one day to the realisation that everything about your life was fake? Or that the reason you were beat was because you had played the game? The answer of course, is that you would probably freak out – an eventuality for which the middle section of the song conveniently supplies the soundtrack, a cartoonishly scary evocation of the panic that would doubtless ensue in such a case.

But this was not the kind of freak-out that Zappa had in mind when he named the album. It is merely a prelude, a necessary preliminary to an act of self-liberation defined by the liner notes in what amounts to a manifesto: “On a personal level, ‘freaking out’ is a process whereby an individual casts off outmoded and restricting standards of thinking, dress and social etiquette in order to express **CREATIVELY** his relationship to his immediate environment and the social structure as a whole.”<sup>2)</sup> As he remarked on several other occasions, people tend to police their own brains<sup>3)</sup>; so the key is to recognise this tendency in yourself and reject it – to realise that the mind is the ugliest part of the body, and the only person who can clean it up is you.

Which brings me to mental hygiene – a favourite Zappa concept – and its relationship to the teachings of Zen. Many years ago I spent 8 years in Japan, partly in pursuit of the golden turd at the end of the Zen rainbow, and it intrigued me that there appeared to be so many true Zen sayings embedded obliquely in Zappa’s work. One day I finally got the opportunity to talk with him about it. He told me that reading about Zen had been the catalyst that changed his mind about Catholicism, of which he had been a devotee until the age of about 18 – even to the point of wanting to become a monk (a factoid that I believe has never been revealed before). I asked him if he had ever tried any of the practices commonly associated with Zen: whether as pure meditation or through any of the other traditional disciplines. “No,” he said, “I got the picture straight away. And if you can see what it’s all about, why bother with all the shit in between?”<sup>4)</sup> Now that could be taken as an extremely arrogant thing to say. Perhaps it was. On the other hand, it might simply be an unvarnished statement of fact. For if the enlightenment that Zen offers is a state of being, not a state of mind, the following description of a Zen master does sound spookily familiar: ‘The Master in the art of

living makes little distinction between his work and his play, his labour and his leisure, his mind and his body, his education and his recreation, his love and his religion. He hardly knows which is which. He simply pursues his vision of excellence in whatever he does, leaving others to decide whether he is working or playing. To him he is always doing both.’<sup>5)</sup>

But whether or not Frank Zappa could or should be considered to have the mind of a Zen adept (and in this context one should never forget that other true Zen saying: “If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him!”<sup>6)</sup>) his famous principle of *Anything Anyplace Anytime For No Reason At All* is undoubtedly pure Zen in action. And the more you start to look for it, the more you find a distinctive philosophical sub-text running like a purple thread throughout his work, tirelessly working to crush the boxes of convention and conformity with which we voluntarily police ourselves into a state of unfreedom. This is the ‘dirtiness’ that Zappa is drawing our attention to, a somewhat different species of dirtiness to the one he often stands falsely accused of.

For there are people out there, even within the Zappa community, who apparently think *Ms Pinky* is about how much fun it can be to have sex with an inflatable doll, or that *Dinah-Moe Humm* is an incitement to the chauvinist abuse of females of the species. I’m sorry, but it’s time to get a life. Despite any number of irrational prejudices to the contrary, it is – and will doubtless continue to be – quite possible to describe an unsavoury attitude without being in favour of it. Furthermore, it is also possible to imaginatively locate oneself as the subject of the experience for the purposes of artistic expression and not thereby endorse it. And while we’re at it, it is quite legitimate to exaggerate or distort the true nature of a circumstance in order to draw attention to its intrinsic absurdity. This does not mean that you necessarily like it. It is called satire.

It’s really quite astonishing how pervasive the *knob gag* heresy is amongst those who claim to appreciate Zappa’s music. Charles Shaar Murray’s recent memorial barbecue series of broadcasts and articles<sup>7)</sup> continued to peddle the hoary old platitude that “Frank’s music was fantastic, if only he’d just cut out that puerile humour.” Well let’s just get this straight. The knob gag is the province of Benny Hill and the Carry On films; a tradition that lives on in such classics as the 12-inch pianist joke, the Bishop of Birmingham limerick, the Good Ship Venus and all the venerable variations on that

theme. Jokes such as these rely on the snigger factor, the sad fact that the mere mention in a public place of the pleasures than can be had by the owner/operator of a male genital is apparently enough to induce irrepressible laughter in the minds of the socially retarded. Knob gags are all “Nudge, nudge, know what I mean” stuff -- the sole agenda being to insinuate, not to mock. But the songs that excite such wrath amongst Zappa’s detractors are specifically designed to undermine the behaviour being described, not to encourage or celebrate it. Bringing it out into the open, openly stating what others merely insinuate, actually helps to achieve some closure, to allow us to acknowledge and thereby perhaps overcome some of our sicker urges. Suggesting that the members of a rock and roll band, whilst posing as heroes of our time, are often obsessed with casual sex of the most gross and demeaning kind is not about endorsement, or even about denigrating some wholesome image that the youth of today might otherwise aspire to: it is about recognising that this image is a lie that only helps foster the very perversities it denies. To anyone who has read accounts of what really went on behind the scenes on Beatles tours, the fact that Zappa was able to persuade Ringo Starr to appear in 200 Motels is an even more delicious irony.

And yet the illusion persists. I remember being at UMRK once when some Japanese record company types showed up to discuss forthcoming projects. On the table in the basement was a copy of a specialist piercing magazine, the very same one that was later to feature in *Everything is Healing Nicely*. Someone had sent it to Zappa, thinking (correctly, as it turned out) that it would amuse him. Whilst we were waiting for Frank to arrive, we flipped through it together, marvelling at some of the bizarre extremities on display in the organ in question. His visitors were convinced that this was definitive proof that he really was a pervert with a sick and twisted mind. Much teeth-sucking and highly scrutable disappointment ensued when I explained it was much more likely that his interest was that of a disinterested observer of human foibles than that of an enthusiastic participant.

For if ‘dirty’ is sinful, it is only so because it is locked in, hidden away and fetishized. Copulation and defecation may be acts that humans generally prefer to perform in private, for reasons of feigned delicacy or otherwise, but to pretend that humans do not do them, or do not enjoy them even when they admit to doing them, is a recipe for a dirty mind. And what you hide away from yourself will eventually find you out and eat

you like the worm in William Blake's rose. To complain that Zappa is dirty is like complaining that Hieronymous Bosch, Hogarth or the Chapman Brothers are obscene: it is to profoundly misunderstand their motives.

*The Torture Never Stops* seems to be one of those songs that most conspicuously gets people going. Opinions divide down the fault line of political correctness: it's either offending against feminist shibboleths or down & dirty with its bad self. Am I the only one who hears something else entirely? Let's take a look at the title of the album it appears in, *Zoot Allures*. Whilst Ben has done his usual fine job in drawing attention to the deeper meanings lurking here <sup>8)</sup>, I beg to differ on the conclusion: Zoot, symbolising the flashy and trashy aspect of the world out there, is alluring: we are all suckered down the primrose path at some time or another, and whether your poison is sex, drugs or plain ol' rock & roll, you'll run into the brick wall at the back of the theatre in the end. But so long as we fall for the allure, the torture will go on; and the night of the iron sausage turns from pleasure to pain when you can't get off. The orgasmic squealing in the background, far from being the soundtrack to some dodgy S&M bondage fantasy, is a metaphor, symbolic of the agony on the flip side of the ecstasy, the torture chamber that lies just the other side of the disco.

All is suffering, said the Buddha, but the message of Zen (and Zappa) is that there is a way out. "Some of you may not agree / But you probably likes a lot of misery"; Broken Hearts, whether resulting from cheap romance or an otherwise unsustainable view of reality, are indeed for assholes. The flies may be all green & buzzin' in the dungeon of despair, but – just like a sin – all that is needed to create a dungeon is the act of locking something in. And we hold the key. It's a voluntary thing. Let's not forget that we're talking about the dungeon of Despair, the last refuge of a miserable self still unwilling to accept that the deal we're dealin' in ultimately involves taking full personal responsibility, 'cos if you fall for the game not only will you get beat, you will probably end up working in a gas station, working out with Ms Pinky to blot out your disco sorrow. And in the harsh but true words of the sage, "If you wind up with a boring, miserable life because you listened to your mother, your Dad, your priest, to some guy on television, to any of the people telling you how to do your shit, then you deserve it."

9)

Here's the big picture: Despite the myriad improvements that might be effected by applying concepts hitherto unacted upon in our philosophy, we still have no idea what we're involved in. We arrive in ignorance and depart little the wiser. It has never been explained, since at first it was created. We may be crazy, we may be sainted, we may be nothing more than pointless zeroes someone just painted. But sometimes you can be surprised to discover that the universe works whether or not you understand it. And since it just might be a one-shot deal, you'd better be digging it while it's happening...

I have taken your time / I have sung you my song  
Ain't no great revelation / But it wasn't too long

*“Jeder Mann sein eigener Pudel!!!”*

Notes:

- 1) Interview with Frank Kofsky, September 1967
- 2) Liner notes, *Freak Out* 1966
- 3) E.g. Interview with Bob Marshall, October 1988
- 4) Interview with the author, October 1986
- 5) Unattributed Zen Buddhist text
- 6) Attributed to Rinzai (Lin-chi I-hsuan)
- 7) Radio 3 *Jazz File* and article in *Mojo*; December 2003
- 8) Ben Watson, *TNDOPP*
- 9) Frank Zappa, *The Real Frank Zappa Book*