

## **AS ABOVE, SO BELOW: ZAPPA, FRACTALS AND 'ONE SIZE FITS ALL'**

***by Simon Prentis [delivered in Paris at ICE-Z 69, July 2008]***

When Bob Marshall asks Zappa in 1988 to define '*conceptual continuity*' in terms of the conversation they have just been having, he answers simply '*As above, so below*'. This piquant little epigram, the comestible crux of the legendary Emerald Tablet and widely held by mystics of diverse persuasions to contain the key to all mysteries, is frequently glossed as meaning the following: "*That which is Below corresponds to that which is Above, and that which is Above, corresponds to that which is Below, to accomplish the miracles of the One Thing*". A similar insight is expressed more poetically by William Blake in '*Auguries of Innocence*' with his evocation of '*A World in a Grain of Sand / And a Heaven in a Wild Flower*'; but in its day job as a magical incantation, the phrase distils the essence of a medieval mind-set attempting to articulate a quality that the mathematician Benoit Mandelbrot eventually termed 'fractal' – the property of self-similarity that underlies most naturally-occurring patterns in the universe. At different scales and in different domains the forms in which they manifest may appear to be entirely unrelated; but in the big picture they are simply special cases of the same formula or 'concept', all ultimately generable through the appropriate application of a recursive algorithm. It's about standing back far enough to be able to spot the pattern.

In hindsight at least, it's the fractal quality of Zappa's work which is its most definitive trait – the extraordinary diversity of his output only begins to make sense when you see individual songs or albums as special cases of the same methodology, with the specific expression being governed by the ambient noise, the 'when' determining the 'what'. Growing up in 'real time' with Zappa's output from *Uncle Meat* onward, it was usually the case that I was thoroughly confused by the apparent 'change of direction' as each new album was released; it would take a large number of listenings before I could overcome my desire for the new album to sound just like the last one, and understand that this derailment of expectation was precisely the point. What was less immediately obvious was the extent to which each new phase usually emerged from an aspect of something that could be found in earlier work; the extraordinary and apparently still unique characteristic of Zappa's oeuvre is the astonishingly

diverse range of musical and other influences that inform the output macrostructure. As Ben Watson put it in his 2003 paper on the *Phenomenology of One Size Fits All*, “every part contains enough information to reconstruct the whole. You investigate any song or tune or lyric, and find Zappa's whole universe inside it.”

But this is not the only sense in which it is appropriate to consider his work as being fractal. The original word comes from the Latin *fractus* meaning broken or fractured, and this too is a key characteristic of Zappa's work. Andy Hollinden once said to me that he thought of Zappa's albums as ‘installments’ in an ongoing work in progress, which is certainly a helpful concept in grasping the idea that, as Zappa himself said, it's actually all one album. Now that it's so easy to load all the CDs on an iPod, it's an instructive exercise to listen in shuffle mode as if it was indeed all one album, a monstrously expanded version of *Läther* which assembles itself differently each time you listen to it. And it's amazing how this can throw up hitherto unexpected insights into fractal similarities between songs you would perhaps not ever otherwise think of listening to back-to-back. The corollary of this, however, is that none of the albums are really ever complete in themselves: they were only ever a ‘best read at the time’, not necessarily to be taken as the final word, though as consumers we may become attached to a particular format. Zappa once told me he never used to listen to his own albums once he'd signed off on them, and this attitude can be seen at work in the way in which he constantly re-wrote and rearranged old material to suit new circumstances, often to the disappointment of his fans. The organizing principle of *Anything Anytime Anyplace For No Reason At All* means that anything will do; it's just a question of applying the appropriate attention. It's the concept that is continuous; the form is not. The use of iconic images such as poodles is merely the surface manifestation of a process that is about finding the similarities within apparent difference. And this is the process embodied most conspicuously in *One Size Fits All*, which is fractal down to its very toenails.

Coincidentally or otherwise, Mandelbrot's insight about fractal patterns was offered up to an unsuspecting and initially unappreciative world in 1975, the very same year that *One Size Fits All* was released to a chorus of appreciation that was equally muted. Not that the album didn't sell; it reached the giddy heights of No 26 in the US charts for a brief period before disappearing without trace, if remaining a firm favorite

with fans. But although better received than *Overnite Sensation*, it was certainly not as successful as *Apostrophe*, and Zappa was not pleased, noting testily that he'd spent 4 months of 12-hour days in the studio, and he wanted people to hear it. Indeed, he took the highly unusual (for him) step of name-checking it on *Zappa In New York* with the express hope of 'guid[ing] a few curious listeners back in that direction to check it out." Even assuming a commercial consideration, there must have been more to it than that; what was it he wanted us to check out?

When *One Size Fits All* first hit the record stores, I had no idea that the title itself was a found object, like the ultimately-unused phrase Crush All Boxes – which Zappa allegedly spotted on the back of a garbage truck, or alternatively, on a dumpster at the back of the building where his lawyers had offices. Unaware that this formulation was actually a piece of marketing chicanery designed to sex up an otherwise transparent attempt to squeeze maximum profit from minimum effort at the expense of both consumers and workers (the same people, in reality), the full nature of the joke escaped me until the expression crossed the Atlantic and started to appear in retail outlets in the UK some years later. So I simply had to assume that he'd coined the phrase to express the essential concept of the album, which I took to be ways of seeing and the inevitable constraints they impose on their proponents. The thesis is straightforward enough; *Inca Roads* is a parody of the 'Chariots of the Gods' idea that life as we know it must have been influenced and/or informed by contact with extra-terrestrial beings; *Can't Afford No Shoes* deals with the perspective of people whose daily struggle for survival is so acute that such speculative questions are totally irrelevant. *Pojama People* lampoons those who are unable and/or unwilling to behold the nature of the problem in the first place. *Florentine Pogen* and *San Bernadino* are a matching pair of songs dealing respectively with the phenomenon of the poor little rich person and the rich little poor person, implying that the opportunities and obstacles that infest people's lives and our assumptions about them are not always what they seem; and *Evelyn* offers the balloon-bursting canine perspective on reality.

So far, so good; but what of *Sofa* and *Andy*? Whose perspectives do they represent? And what, in any case, was the relation of all this to the cover, which seemed to be illustrating Zappa's spoof creation myth, familiar to me from having seen him play at

that fateful concert at the Rainbow in 1971? Clearly, it was sending up the whole notion of God and the idea that some all-powerful being could have created the universe, a suggestion that most cultures on the planet seem to have found expedient to propagate at some stage in their development. But if the cover is all about the idea of God, with appropriately punning associations to his creation, symbolised by the sofa – thereby transformed into the ‘Divine divan’ – surely there should be some reference to this in the album. And of course there is; *Sofa* is God’s perspective. But the God who is singing in German to his creation is not the sternly distant deity of Abrahamic monotheism. In fact, he identifies strenuously with his handiwork, and not just the best parts of it either – the voice is at pains to point out its identity with all the cheaper cuts of reality, the dirt beneath your rollers, the cracks, crannies, secret smut and lost metal money. He is eggs of all persuasions, the fecund, self-replicating essence of life which contains within itself the seeds of everything that’s ever bin. So where is the voice of his creation, the self-identical consciousness to whom he is apparently speaking?

The only track that is otherwise unaccounted for is *Andy*. Despite Nigey Lennon’s eyebrow-tweezing claim that it is about her, most of those who have ventured to comment on this song seem strangely unconcerned to make any consistent sense of it. In the most recently published book about Zappa’s work, Kelly Lowe states somewhat incongruously that *Andy* is “either about Hollywood star Andy Devine, rock star Todd Rundgren, or an old road manager of Captain Beefheart’s”, though apart from the obvious point that the song mentions Andy Devine by name, he supplies no evidence for these assertions, nor any reasoning as to why they might make any sense. Kevin Courrier advances the novel concept that the song is about “personal disillusionment with a possible drug burnout” citing the line ‘Have I aligned with a blown mind?’, but again, does not attempt to argue the case, and seems happy to put it down to ‘absurdist wit’. Ben Watson suggests more subtly that the theme is “human consciousness as innerness”, remarking cryptically that Zappa “faults the fake by reference to externals” but essentially confines his speculations to the implications of the song, and does not address the question of what its putative subject might have done to merit being selected for such an honour.

So let's consider more carefully what Mr Devine's portly presence might be bringing to this song. The lyrics begin with a question; '*Is there anything good inside of you, if there is, I really want to know...*' Who is this question addressed to? It seems most unlikely that Zappa would be so urgently concerned about the moral rectitude of a roadie whom almost nobody else would either have heard of or care about, or even that of Todd Rundgren, who he clearly had little respect for. Andy Devine was of course a famous B-movie cowboy actor with a distinctive raspy voice, and latterly a popular guest on TV shows, but he cuts a distinctly cheesy swathe through life. Why would anyone want so desperately for him to show a sign that there was something – anything – good inside of him?

The answer is, of course, that they wouldn't. For if you close your eyes to the printed lyrics and open your ears to the sound of what's being sung, you begin to notice that there's a parallel reference going on. The song is not about Andy Devine. It's about 'the divine', the supernatural entity otherwise known as God. Note too, that Zappa spells Devine in the lyrics as two words *de vine*, both lower case. We will probably never know at what stage the phrase 'And the divine' morphed into Johnny Guitar Watson's superbly slurred 'Andy Devine' (with those deliciously cheezoid overtones), but from our knowledge of Zappa's fondness for such phonetic mutations (*Zut alors* transforming to Zoot Allures, to take but one example) it's a highly characteristic manoeuvre, a chance semantic fracture that blooms into a separate fractal universe. *Andy* is a song addressed to God, and true to form with all his most 'serious' themes, Zappa clothes it in the garb of absurdity. As if aware that the thrust of the song is likely to be misunderstood, he even throws us a heavy-handed hint: '*Do you know what I'm really telling you, is it something that you can understand?*' There's another clue to the religious aroma too, in the fact that Zappa pointedly signs off the album on Easter Sunday, the traditional date of the Resurrection.

So *Andy*, then, is a 'religious' song – perhaps the ultimate religious song in the sense that it deals with a crisis of belief and a mind coming to terms with the absence of God. Let's not forget that Zappa was brought up as a Catholic, and only became disabused of such specious notions in his late teenage years. The song sketches a cartoon version of the disappointment and anguish of discovering that belief in God is misplaced. It's the plaintive, desperate plea of a mind unwilling to face up to the

prospect of existential emptiness, an illustration of how scared you can be when it gets too real. Until you get over it, of course; for as Blake puts it in the less-well-known coda to the *Auguries of Innocence*: “*God appears, and God is light / To those poor souls who dwell in night; / But does a human form display / To those who dwell in realms of day.*” It could be a motto for the album.

With that in mind, let’s see how this interpretation plays out in context:

*Andy Devine had a thong rind*

*It was sublime, but the wrong kind...*

Even though I felt sure that Andy Devine represented the concept of God, ‘thong rind’ had always bothered me. I didn’t know what a thong rind was, for one thing. Jumping to exactly the sort of unsubstantiated conclusion that any Zappa obsessive worth their salt is unfortunately prey to, I assumed it referred to some kind of failed structure for the universe, a cosmic Moebius strip like the peeled rind of an orange that didn’t work out, in much the same way that God is seen to reject an early model of Saturn with square rings on the front cover of the album. Luckily for me, I eventually got a chance to ask the man himself [though stupidly, I never thought to confirm the Andy Devine thesis. However, I noticed on going through our correspondence for this paper, that I had mentioned my delight that the song was ‘an antidote to specious areas of teleological concern’, and that he did not demur]. He faxed back a reply which informed me that a thong rind was “*the mutated condition of the skin in the region between the toes irritated by the friction of a thong sandal*” but then continued: “*The deeper philosophical meaning of the line refers to that special disappointment one might experience after seeing an attractive woman only to discover she has poorly maintained feet – as if she had just dug her way to the surface performing as an extra in ‘Superman vs the Mole People’.*”

It’s my contention that this elaborately fractal metaphor encodes the moment at which a rational person begins to doubt a system of belief which insists on the perfection of God and his creations. You could perhaps argue that the song still refers to Mr Devine and his poorly maintained feet. But it makes much more sense to assume that we’re talking about God and the manifestly imperfect nature of creation

which appears not to be under his or anyone else's control. Hence the ensuing concern: Have I aligned with a blown mind? Wasted my time on a drawn blind? If God exists, and yet creation is imperfect, is it because the mind that made it is faulty (in which case God is not God) or because there is nothing there? Either way, it's not looking good... Which is why, bang on cue, we get *Sofa*, which is God's (and Zappa's) answer. God is not 'out there', he is everything, everywhere (and we are his sofa, because shit happens...) It's OK. Despair not. Dwell in realms of day.

But, you might ask, why would Zappa, a self-confessed 'devout pagan', devote a whole album to the notion of God? And what has this got to do with fractals and the Emerald Tablet anyway? Because at the end of the Inca Road it's the crux of all ponderings concerning the behavioural significance of persons of short or any demeanour: if you haven't ever asked yourself the G-question, you're always going to be in danger of falling for it, unless you're a dog, in which case you just bark. The way in which you deal with the question of how and why we come to be alive, and whether that question needs answering, will determine not only how you deal with everything else, but if you sign up to the religious solution, will impact adversely on other people as well. But it's not just the religious solution. Any and all conceptual boxes carry the seeds of their own destruction, and the potential for conflict with others. Whether you obsess about flying saucers or escape to trailer-park heaven, the extent to which your vision precludes all others will blind you to the pan-chromatic resonance of the miracles of the One Thing.

In referencing the Emerald Tablet for Bob Marshall, Zappa was pointing up the essential identity of all processes, which are ultimately mere fractal subdivisions of the Big Note. At that level, the Universe is indeed the one size – it fits all – and the album both celebrates that fact through *Sofa*, the 'arousing waltz' that forms its triumphantly bravura conclusion, and simultaneously sends up the partial perspectives that preclude such an understanding in the songs that precede it.

It's also probably the finest studio album with the finest studio band you ever heard in your life, but then I don't need to tell you that.