

PTTAOASAGM: FZ and the OMG factor

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One of the enduring pleasures of listening to Frank Zappa's music is that you can always be sure that there's another surprise waiting somewhere down the line. No matter how well you think you know the music, it seems you never exhaust the store of stones that turn to reveal an astonishing new connection hidden in plain sight, a little musical joke or reference that draws the whole edifice even tighter together, blowing you away when you discover it. It's almost as if you can hear FZ sniggering to himself in whatever corner of the space-time continuum he inhabits these days.

And it can happen like this: A few weeks back, my brother (also a Zappa fan) sent me a text message enquiring whether I was familiar with "a modest hit song from the 60s" called 'My Empty Room' that he'd just happened to hear someone play on the radio. I was not. As the tone of his text suggested that he was onto something, I immediately googled 'My Empty Room' and came up with this:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-eus0q7JNrs>

Not very promising, and not very like my brother either. It was quite puzzling, until I realized that I had the wrong decade (well, I was driving at the time...). Adding '1960' into the search criteria led me to another song called 'My Empty Room', by a doo-wop group called *Little Anthony and the Imperials*. Though I'd never heard of them before, that sounded more likely – and sure enough, when I finally got a decent internet connection, I realized he'd hit pay dirt:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I53NUBqK0VI>

In fact I was so surprised I nearly drove off the road. What? The very melody that Don Preston (presumably it is he) plays at the end of *Prelude To The Afternoon Of A Sexually Aroused Gas Mask*. That was it? Did anybody know? Did Don Preston (famously not a fan of doo-wop) even know himself? And anyway, why that song? And come to think of it, what is the original title all about anyway? Not difficult to spot the connection with Debussy – *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, a staple of music appreciation classes throughout the fifties and sixties, but however much sanctified

by Pierre Boulez himself as ‘the awakening of modern music’ that doesn’t explain why Zappa chose to reference it here. There is nothing about Zappa’s composition that bears any conceptual or structural resemblance to Debussy’s composition, although it has been suggested that the opening melody is somewhat similar to what Don Preston is playing. But that’s altogether too thin. Especially once you discover that what Don Preston plays is actually ‘*My Empty Room*’. So it can’t be that.

I decided to investigate. It turns out that ‘*My Empty Room*’ is itself a steal from a theme in the first movement of Tchaikovsky’s 6th Symphony, the so-called “*Pathétique*”. Listen up from 5.26 onward in this version (doing your best to avert your eyes from von Karajan’s sexually-aroused penguin-in-bondage routine) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wHAfvUFtCIY>). I think we can agree that Little Anthony is pretty much bang to rights here, barring a few grace notes. So was Zappa/Preston quoting Tchaikovsky, not Little Anthony? Well, perhaps; but then again, knowing what we do about Zappa’s proclivities, it’s highly unlikely – especially since the title is clearly sending up the Debussy, so he’d hardly be quoting another even less modern classical piece written six years earlier.

So what could it be? As you study this phenomenon, you discover that *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* is not some mood music about a sweet little Bambi frolicking in the woods, much as Disney might want you to think so. First of all, it’s about a *faun*, not a fawn. And a faun (for those of us without the benefit of a classical education) is a mythical creature who is half-man and half-goat – and it’s desire his eyes be rollin’ with, not wide-eyed innocence.

Secondly, he’s a horny little devil with just one thing on his mind: getting some action with the nymphs (Greek for ‘*hot chicks*’) who also inhabit the forest glades, and are partial to skinny-dipping in those pools of shimmering water found in secluded groves ‘n’ such.



Now Debussy's music is apparently based on a poem by the famous French Symbolist poet, Stéphane Mallarmé (stay with me, here). It describes in some detail the imaginary cavortment that might ensue in such a place – imaginary not just because it never happened in the first place, but because his particular faun has not got lucky. Hardly for want of trying, but he's failed to get some nookie: "*For I'd scarcely begun to hide an ardent laugh... Than from my arms, undone by vague dying, / This prey, forever ungrateful, frees itself and is gone*" (translation by A. S. Kline) The whole poem is a long, extended wail of sexual frustration dressed up as classical decorum.

So what has that got to do with "*My Empty Room*"? Well, everything, as it turns out. In case you didn't catch them as you were listening just now, the lyrics go like this:

*Why must I sit here in my empty room
Why did you leave me darling, oh so soon
Was it a game dear
Am I to blame dear
You're memory lingers on like sweet perfume...
Every time you'd touch me
I would chill
Every kiss you gave me
Was a thrill*

*I sit here in my empty room and cry
My heart is breaking since you said goodbye
Oh how it's yearning
Oh how it's burning
I need you oh so much that I could die
Please set me free dear
Come back to me dear
Don't leave me here dear
In my empty room*

By now I probably don't need to point out that this is a pretty good summary of the essence of Mallarmé's poem. And much more than that, it's a whole lot more honest. And given Uncle Frank's irrepressible satirical tendencies... well, what a gift of a song to send up the classical pretensions he so despised.

Really? Are you serious? Can Zappa have gone to all the trouble of researching that and sticking it under the rock of a throwaway moment at the end of one of his less well-known (or listened-to) compositions? Well, perhaps he'd just found it out, like me, out of curiosity. Besides, in what other way does it make sense to call the track *Prelude to the Afternoon of A Sexually Aroused Gas Mask*? The gas mask, of course, symbolic of Zappa's less-than-idyllic childhood amid the stores of poison gas his family lived next door to. The gas mask, of course, classical apparatus for sexual fetishists, being manipulated here alas by the now-serially-convicted paedophile Roy Estrada, a man clearly no stranger to frustrated sexual arousal. But Debussy? There's no other plausible link beyond the random, and Zappa didn't do random.

Then there's the cryptic "Blow your harmonica, son", the conceptual continuity clue Zappa tosses casually into the mix as Don plays the *My Empty Room* melody. Is he just encouraging the general mayhem, or is it a knowing nod to the ancient myth on which Mallarmé's poem is originally based, the story of the god Pan's attempt to seduce the beautiful nymph Syrinx – wherein it is written that just as Pan has caught Syrinx, fellow nymphs come to her rescue and magically turn her into a sheaf of reeds, whereupon in his sigh of regret at losing Syrinx, Pan breathes air into the reeds and discovers – what else? – the Beauty of Music. Which is exactly the

moment at which the *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* begins, with the plaintive tones of a flute: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9_7loz-HWUM. *Blow yer pan-pipes, son.*

Far-fetched? Of course. But, to quote the famous MOI customized press kit:

Imagine the head of a pin. On the head of this pin is an amazingly detailed illustration of some sort. It might be a little thought or a feeling or, perhaps, an obscure symbol. It might just be a picture of a sky or something with birds in it... but it's on the head of this pin, remember, and it's infinitely detailed. Now, imagine this pin is not a pin...it's a musical note with a corresponding physical action, like the secret raising of an eyebrow to add special emphasis. Even in a recording studio where nobody can see you.

Now, imagine enough of these abstracted pins (with the needle part chopped off to save space) to fill an area as large as the North American Continent and most of Central Europe, piled to a depth of 80 feet. Now, imagine this area is not geometric space. Imagine a collection of decades (the exact number to be disclosed eventually). Pause.

The reason for explaining this process is to simply let you know it exists, and to give you, as an executive, some criteria by which to rationally judge what we do. It is not fair to our group to review detail aspects of our work without considering the *placement* of a detail in the larger structure.

And Little Anthony and the *Imperials*, too? I rest my case.