

We Made Our Reputation Doing It That Way...

Frank Zappa

[FZ:]

The story of the . . . the music of the Mothers is the story of , uh . . . a combination of what I knew about music from . . . from my studies plus the musical capabilities of the players in the group as I found them, you know, which had Somewhere along the line, I had to teach them a lot of what they didn't know about music.

I started out playing rhythm & blues when I was about 14 or 15 years old in San Diego. And, uh . . . I was playing nothing but blues 'til I was 18 and, you know, I was really honking and I started out playing drums with a band and got tired of listening to other people's guitar solos. Took up a guitar and started playing lead right away. Then I spent, uh . . . the early part of my musical teen childhood doing the same thing that most of the, uh . . . uh, white blues bands are, uh, pulling down heavy bread for. But in those days it was, you know . . . it was the underground music, uh . . . the unpopular underground music because the kids, uh, then wanted to hear, uh . . . you know, sweeter, easier stuff. They didn't go for hard, screaming blues or Chicago, uh, you know, weirdness. Nobody knew who the Howlin' Wolf was, nobody . . . you know, Muddy Waters, what the fuck is that? And, uh, so I grew up on that stuff but simultaneously buying, uh, classical albums and, uh, going to the library to study music. I had albums of Stravinsky and Varèse and Webern and Bartók. And I never bought anything else . . . I never bought any Beethoven or, uh, Mozart or anything like that because I didn't like the way it sounded, it was too weak.

So . . . eventually I started hearing a little folk music. I didn't like most of the commercial folk music that was around. My taste in folk music was, uh, sea shanties and, uh . . . uh, Middle Eastern stuff. I like Indian music, I like, uh . . . Arab music. So, that . . . that was all my own personal taste-making, uh, influences.

The original guys in the band had been brought up on nothing but rhythm & blues. Now, rhythm & blues branches out into about four different categories the way we grew up with it. There was the ooh-wah ballad, you know, with the high falsetto and the grunting bass and all that stuff. That type. There's a Chicago blues type with the harmonica and, you know, and the funky-ness. There was a Texas type with a, you know . . . rock, uh, Bobby, uh, "Blue" Bland type thing. And then there was the hard drive type James Brown shit. And offshoots of the, uh . . . of each one of those, like in the ooh-wah classification you've got the uptempo singers where the . . . like Hank Ballard and the Midnighters and the Royales. They had a different type of a thing.

Uh . . . all the other guys in the group grew up with just that and had no knowledge whatsoever of any kind of classical music , uh, or serious music, the . . . uh, above and beyond Mozart or, uh, Beethoven or, you know, standard concert hall, uh . . . warhorses. And even that, they didn't give a shit about and they weren't interested at all in folk music. And, uh . . . so I had quite a bit of trouble in the beginning, eh . . . just making them aware that there were other kinds of music that we could be playing. To top it off, we were in a, uh . . . very sterile area. We . . . we kept getting fired because we'd playing anything other than "Wooly Bully" or, uh . . . you know . . . uh, "Twist and Shout" or the rest of that stuff. We'd lost job after job.

[Interviewer:]

When . . . when is this that you're talking about exactly?

[FZ:]

Two years ago.

[Interviewer:]

In '65?

[FZ:]

Yeah. And, uh . . . so it was . . . it was rough keeping it together because there's lots of times that, uh . . . the guys wanted to quit, I mean, everybody's quit at least 200 times. So . . . we finally got a chance to come into L.A. and the reason we stood out from the bands in Los Angeles, you know, why we would attract any attention at all at that point . . . 'cuz, uh, we were working out in the sticks, this whole thing was developing out, uh, away from any, uh . . . you know, any urban civilization. We were really, you know, just out there with the Okies.

And we got to town, we expected to find all kinds of, you know . . . uh, all the bands gotta be really far-out. Well, they weren't, they were bullshit and they had no balls, you know, they weren't funky, they weren't, uh, tasteful, they weren't nothin'. They were just, you know, plastic, folk-rock, teenage puker bands. And they were making a lot of bread. And we came on the scene . . . and, uh, we were loud and we were coarse and we were strange and if anybody in the audience ever gave us any trouble, we'd tell 'em to fuck off. And . . . we made our reputation doing it that way