

“We're Only In It For the Money”--Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention (1968)

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Essay by Dweezil Zappa (guest post)*



Frank and Dweezil Zappa

My Father once said:

“Information is not knowledge.
Knowledge is not wisdom.
Wisdom is not truth.
Truth is not beauty.
Beauty is not love.
Love is not music.
Music is THE BEST.”

I think he meant that music has the intangible power to inspire all of us and connect on a deeper level than any other substance in the known universe. Most of us don't know why we love it so much, we just feel it. I think that's the point. Without question, that's the power of music. It can be felt both viscerally and emotionally in the rhythms and the melodies with and without words. It can calm and soothe or spark our curiosity and imagination or move us to tears and inspire change, all whilst making us want to move and heighten our senses.

When it comes to the creation of music there are very few that have ever operated at the level of a genius. I'm talking about quantifiable genius, the kind of skill and creativity that cannot be matched in a lifetime. They may inspire imitation or permutations thereof but there will always be a distinct honor bestowed on them for being vanguards and honing their originality. My dad was a bona-fide composer who used a rock band as his orchestra for the most part and he truly was a genius musician. While he did work with classical ensembles and orchestras as well, his musical gifts are best represented in his classical compositions. They will continue to be respected and deconstructed for years so that they may be better understood. His other music was so diverse it cannot be classified except as Zappa music. He was able to continuously mix

styles throughout his career, utilizing many layers of details from every aspect of music as well as music production and recording. The totality of his music is best known for having rhythmic complexity and harmonic sophistication but the majority of his music is still widely overlooked mainly because it's not "commercial." Only a few of his songs made it on the radio and those that did had a comedic focus. It's fair to say that my father's music is often portrayed as novelty music or even cartoon music (until you try to play it!). If you take the time to dig deeper, there is a vast world of musical treasures to be discovered.

The thing about "genius stuff" is that not everyone can recognize or understand it straight away. Some may never understand it and not even care about it. For those who do, "genius stuff" is what makes us aspire to greatness ourselves. It's the benchmark for our own musical journey. Here's the thing though, when you break music into its basic components, it's so simple. At its core there are only two ingredients, rhythm and melody. Sounds easy right? Why then is it so difficult to write something that elevates those attributes into an art form?

We are all equal when we start with a blank canvas but it ends there. There are a few other subtleties that the masters could manipulate better than anyone else. I'm referring to the limitations inherently imposed in music and how statistically, it makes it harder to be original. For example, there are only 12 notes available (in western music) and it's how they are arranged in order of pitch and rhythm that transforms it into music. So 12 notes with almost infinite rhythmic possibility is what we all have at our disposal yet there are still those who excel way beyond others in terms of their ability to organize those components in compelling and iconic ways.

What we can learn from the geniuses is how to use the available notes and rhythms and structure them with dynamics, tones and timbres that make us feel things we never knew we could. The question then becomes, how can we all create our own unique voice and endlessly mix those ingredients in ways that stand out? It is precisely this question that has fascinated me my whole life. As an aside, when it comes to my dad's music, it seemed like he had a whole other box of notes available to him. He loved to orchestrate the notes in different densities and was adept at perversely using all 12 tones at once within certain arrangements.

Beyond the notes and rhythms, he infused his music with sarcasm and satire in varying degrees of severity. Ever ready to predict the future social and political trends, his prescient warnings of abuse of power still ring alarm bells today. Any topic was fair game and he was quick to attack narrow minded phoniness wherever it lurked. "We're Only In For The Money" does just that.

The album still stands in stark relief against the backdrop of pop culture, especially when viewed in the context of music from the same era. When heard today, the concept album is still remarkably relevant to social and political agendas. His scathing lyrical assessments and avant-garde musical experiments were all part of a broad concept he called "project object." He composed his music in a way that connected every composition with a thread of thematic coherence. I know of no other musician who thought this way or was able to execute such an overwhelming idea.

Which leads me back to music in a general sense, it can be enjoyed on many levels and interpreted uniquely by each individual who listens. It's weird and it's powerful but at its core,

with an open mind and a blank canvas, a new musical landscape is waiting for all of us to paint. Be as creative as you possibly can on every level from the music itself to the sounds and textures you use and even your lyrical point of view because as my dad said, “music is the best!”

Dweezil Zappa is an actor, songwriter and acclaimed guitarist. He is also the son of Frank Zappa.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.