

MAGAZINE
SECONDS

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GAIL ZAPPA



GAIL ZAPPA — proprietor of the Barking Pumpkin and Zappa record companies; wife of Francis Vincent (Frank) Zappa (1940-1993); mother of Zappa scions Dweezil and Ahmet (of the Rock Band Z), Moon (of “Valley Girl” fame) and Diva; spiritual administrator of Frank’s enormous musical legacy; ninth-largest individual entertainment-related donor to the Democratic Party, 1991 through 1996 (\$218,000, according to The New York Times); and living repository of much of Frank’s ambiguous bitterness and calculated irony (but not so much of his sense of humor...). Gail, thanks for taking care of Frank through thick and thin so that he could take care of us.

“For the most part, groupies in Rock & Roll are a lot more fun because they’re open about getting the job done.”

SECONDS: *Can I kick this off by talking about The Real Frank Zappa Book and a few other books?*

ZAPPA: It depends. Let me say this: I don’t want to promote any book we don’t have anything to do with.

SECONDS: *I’m also interested in your opinion of the Nigey Lennon book —*

ZAPPA: I don’t want to discuss that one. I haven’t read that book but let me say this: I think the means by which she decided to promote it says much more about the author than it does about the subject.

SECONDS: *So you haven’t read it.*

ZAPPA: And I won’t.

SECONDS: *It does allude to a relationship between her and Frank —*

ZAPPA: That’s as close as she’ll ever get to a relationship with Frank — an allusion. I anticipated books like that and I’m sure other people are thinking of doing them. It doesn’t necessarily imply there was an ongoing relationship.

SECONDS: *I’m very interested in you and I’m not trying to use you to get Frank Zappa anecdotes. Were you not the secretary of the Whiskey A-Go-Go?*

ZAPPA: I was a secretary for the guy who owned the Whiskey. I worked directly for Elmer Valentine, yes.

SECONDS: *And that was the point at which you met Frank?*

ZAPPA: There was another girl who worked in the office part-time and did filing. I went to her house for dinner and, coincidentally, she shared a house with Frank. He called that evening and said, “I’m at the airport. Come and get me — and don’t bring anyone.”

Of course, she disobeyed and brought me. I met him at Los Angeles Airport.

SECONDS: *Was it love at first sight?*

ZAPPA: Yeah. Well, I have to say I always knew I was going to meet someone extraordinary. I just knew that.

SECONDS: *When you saw him, you knew he was the one.*

ZAPPA: I heard a chorus of voices and they said, “This is it.”

SECONDS: *He was a sex symbol in those days, if I’m not mistaken.*

ZAPPA: I think you’re into some fantasy. I never thought of him as a sex symbol. Frank promoted himself and the band as a bunch of ugly guys who played fantastic music.

SECONDS: *But, as he relates in his book, he was a subject for the Plaster Casters —*

ZAPPA: No, he doesn’t say that, and he wasn’t. He just brought Pamela Des Barres together with Cynthia Plaster Caster because they both had a common interest, which was Noel Redding.

SECONDS: *Did you ever meet Noel?*

ZAPPA: Yeah.

SECONDS: *I don’t want to offend you by placing you in the groupie scene —*

ZAPPA: Why? I was a groupie.

SECONDS: *Tell me about that.*

ZAPPA: Every culture produces its own groupies — whether you’re a sailor, doctor, or movie producer — name a profession and it has its equivalent groupies. Talk to Zubin Mehta — even a symphony director has their groupies. For the most part, groupies in Rock & Roll are a lot more fun because they’re open about getting the job done.

SECONDS: *Had you any conquests as a groupie prior to Frank?*

ZAPPA: There were some people who seriously defined themselves as groupies and were devoted to honoring the people who were involved with producing the music. There were two types of groupies in those days: the ones who wanted to run away with the English Pop Star and have a castle, and then there were the ones who just liked music and were devotees of particular bands and they would literally service those bands. It was a religious experience for most of those girls. The altar was Rock & Roll, the guys were the gods and the women

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were the high priestesses. The idea that we were exploring sexuality in the Sixties — what that meant was there was no pressure to have any kind of intimacy on a spiritual level. Physical intimacy doesn't translate into real intimacy. It was very easy to sleep with somebody and much more difficult to get to know them. What's interesting to me about the Nineties is that people are learning how to become intimate with each other before they have sex. One of the plusses about AIDS, if you can call it a plus, is that it's made it imperative for people to establish relationships and take responsibility for what goes into that relationship, which didn't happen in the Sixties at all.

SECONDS: *Then you became pregnant with Moon around 1967.*

ZAPPA: Yes, and I met Frank around 1966.

SECONDS: *And you got married —*

ZAPPA: Right before Moon was born.

SECONDS: *Did married life change your relationship?*

ZAPPA: No, because he named me "Gail Zappa" from the very beginning. It didn't change much.

SECONDS: *Was your first name Adelaide?*

ZAPPA: It still is.

SECONDS: *It's a very lovely name.*

ZAPPA: Thank you. That was my grandmother's name.

SECONDS: *What is your ethnic background?*

ZAPPA: My father's side is a lot of European mixtures, with some French and Irish but mostly Danish; I don't know what else. His grandfather had come over from a little part of what is now Germany. They didn't want to be German, so they got on a ship and high-tailed to Pennsylvania and became potters. My mother's background is that her family came from the island of Madeira, a Portuguese territory off the coast of Portugal. They went to Hawaii

to work in the cane fields. Frank, of course, is Sicilian and Italian.

SECONDS: *When Moon was born, did Frank become more of a homebody?*

ZAPPA: He was extremely prolific and he always enjoyed working on his craft. He became more financially able to explore different ways of recording and different musical ideas. It's expensive to be a composer and Rock & Roll is what paid for his habit. It was a by-product of his real interest — writing music. Both Frank and I are straight-ahead and conservative in terms of what we consider the appropriate way to raise a family and conduct a stable environment.

SECONDS: *How about your relationship with some of his associates?*

ZAPPA: Which associates?

SECONDS: *My first inclination would be to say bandmembers.*

ZAPPA: I thought it was a good idea to keep my distance. I didn't want to get involved with the private lives of the band members. I had my children, I had my own priorities to take care of. Remember, everyone in the band was hired by Frank. I never sought any of them out as best friends. Some were far more amusing than others and some of them have become friends over the years but I usually kept a solid distance.

SECONDS: *Early on, there was a scene at your house where Motorhead, Sherwood and Pamela Des Barres lived with you. Was that Frank's scene and separate from you?*

ZAPPA: Frank and I were very careful about having our relationship not be part of the entertainment.

SECONDS: *How would his music have been different had he not met you?*

ZAPPA: I have no idea. Dweezil, Ahmet and Moon keep getting asked, "What was it like having Frank as your father?" Compared to what?

SECONDS: *Did you have a tangible input into the music?*

“If you leave your door open, eventually people show up, but that doesn’t mean there’s a scene.”

ZAPPA: I ran the business but Frank wrote the music for himself. Never at any time did it occur to me to comment on his musical ideas. The only thing I ever commented on was how much I loved his music.

SECONDS: *Was there anything you didn’t like about his music?*

ZAPPA: No.

SECONDS: *Did you like the jokes and the verbal pictures that he painted?*

ZAPPA: I liked everything.

SECONDS: *Frank presented songs about sex and love —*

ZAPPA: Actually, Frank was always very clear that he did not do love.

SECONDS: *How would you describe songs like “Titties And Beer”?*

ZAPPA: It’s based on a relationship. Almost everything he wrote with a story line was based on fact. He was an observer of human nature.

SECONDS: *Who is a typical Zappa fan?*

ZAPPA: Anyone who was disenfranchised. First of all, you have to realize that a lot of the appeal was that you could go and see Frank. You could see him do things onstage no one before or since had ever done. Every year, a new batch of eighteen-year-old guys became fans and they stayed with him throughout their lives.

SECONDS: *But it can’t only be alienation that’s common to the fans.*

ZAPPA: I didn’t say alienated; I said disenfranchised. In other words, you don’t feel you’re represented and there’s no one out there you can identify with. Frank was always the guy who said what you wish you could have said. You

always knew he would say the right thing to the right person at the right time and it would represent something you felt deep inside of you. I don’t know that there is a typical fan, but I think most of them have a great musical appreciation and they are certainly in touch with their feelings about what is right and what is wrong. That’s what defines a Zappa fan.

SECONDS: *How did your life change when the kids became musicians? Were you now looking out for them, too?*

ZAPPA: Looking out for them, yes. I’ve never managed any member of the family.

SECONDS: *What role did you play in the development of Z?*

ZAPPA: I was Frank’s assistant.

SECONDS: *Are you a Z fan?*

ZAPPA: Absolutely. It just resonates with me.

SECONDS: *What commercial obstacles does Z face? Are there labels that don’t want*

anything to do with them because Frank had previously sued the labels?

ZAPPA: Most of those people aren’t there anymore. The industry is very different from when Frank first started. It’s run by people who don’t have ideas; they’re just looking at the bottom line now. It’s not a healthy environment for people who are creative.

SECONDS: *How would Frank fare today if he were twenty years old and wanted to cut a record? What obstacles would he be facing?*

ZAPPA: Accountants and packagers.

SECONDS: *Wasn’t that prevalent back in 1967, too?*

ZAPPA: No, not at all. People played music in clubs and then somebody said,



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“Hey, maybe we should put a record out.” It was run by guys who liked the music and said, “Yeah, I’d like to do something with this band.”

SECONDS: *So how would Frank have fared today?*

ZAPPA: He wouldn’t and that’s why he’s not here now. He was of his own time.

SECONDS: *Where do you place him historically?*

ZAPPA: As an American composer.

SECONDS: *Was he someone that stood outside existing musical forms?*

ZAPPA: Yes, he’s an original thinker.

SECONDS: *He brought Avant-garde music to many people’s attention.*

Thanks to him I found Varese; I even found the Emil Richards Microtonal Blues

Band record. Perhaps, you’re aware this magazine has spoken to many of Frank’s cohorts, like Cal Schenkel —

ZAPPA: These are people who worked for hire; they’re not cohorts. Let’s be clear about that. Frank recognized talent in people that they didn’t even know they had. He had his own personal vision and he hired people to play his music and he hired people to render the images he wanted to use to sell his product. He was his own marketer; he even did the design of the packages. From early on, he said, “A package needs to tell the audience what they can expect musically.”

SECONDS: *To whom was Frank close? Who did he work with out of passion?*

ZAPPA: He admired people who were good at their craft and he loved working with people who had a sense of humor. For a brief time in history, Mark Volman and Howard Kaylan were great fun and he loved working with them. He always

said his favorite band was whoever he was working with at the time. He worked in his own universe; he didn’t have any mentors.

SECONDS: *If I name people from Zappa history —*

ZAPPA: Your version of Zappa history, not ours.

SECONDS: *Mine I think reflects the public interpretation of it. But I feel like anyone I could name you’d say, “That was just a hired gun.” Who did he not*

feel was a hired gun? Was there anybody about whom he said, “I have to work with them no matter what”?

ZAPPA: No.

SECONDS: *Alright — how were you treated over the years?*

ZAPPA: By who? Cabdrivers?

SECONDS: *How about by the wives of*

other Rock Stars?

ZAPPA: I never hung out with anybody. My best friends are my kids. My best friend was Frank but my kids and their friends have always been my closest friends. I mean, I have a couple of long-term friends, but they’re not wives of bandmembers or anything like that. We weren’t part of any scene. If you leave your door open, eventually people show up, but that doesn’t mean there’s a scene.

SECONDS: *All the renditions of Frank’s life with which I am familiar speak of his studio as being an “open house.”*

ZAPPA: Well, a lot of work got done there. There weren’t a lot of people cavorting and playing around.

SECONDS: *What do you see in the future for the kids?*

ZAPPA: What do you mean what do I see in the future? What do you see in your future?

SECONDS: *Where do you see Z winding up?*



“Frank was always very clear that he did not do love.”

ZAPPA: I don't think Z is designed to go on interminably. Like The Mothers, it has a certain time of place. Z are very competent musicians, which is hard to find in most groups. The reservoir of musical knowledge most groups have isn't as deep as Z's. The real interesting thing to me about Z is that Dweezil has managed to create an environment to bring out Ahmet's talent. I don't think Ahmet realized how talented he is. Now, Ahmet has developed his own musical ideas. They'll both continue to explore music. Dweezil is a composer interested in film scores. Frank wasn't interested in that.

SECONDS: *But Z is not the next Soundgarden.*

ZAPPA: What does that mean? I don't think anybody should aspire to be the next Soundgarden.

SECONDS: *I guess what I should ask is, do they aspire to reach that commercial level?*

ZAPPA: It makes it easier. It's very hard to work as a musician. As Frank always said, “Being a composer is an unrequired job in America.” If you want to be a musician or composer, there's nobody actively seeking people who do that. You have to stay true and hope you'll

eventually be commercially successful. Without that success, you're going to have to find a job and that's painful for someone who expresses themselves artistically.

SECONDS: *What do you listen to?*

ZAPPA: Howlin' Wolf.

SECONDS: *What else do you listen to?*

ZAPPA: I like Z and I listen to Frank's music. I listen to stuff Diva plays me, I listen to things the kids bring me and I like to listen to what some of their

friends are working on.

SECONDS: *What's your favorite music of Frank's?*

ZAPPA: Things that have always been favorites are “Sofa” and “Inca Roads,” absolutely. *Lumpy Gravy* was always a personal favorite from the beginning. There's a lot —

SECONDS: *Anything you don't like?*

ZAPPA: No.

SECONDS: *Were you on any of his records?*

ZAPPA: Uh-huh.

SECONDS: *Wanna tell me where?*

ZAPPA: No. Let them speculate.

SECONDS: *Hmmm —*

in conclusion, what was the funniest thing that ever happened between you and Frank?

ZAPPA: We got married and managed

