



Electric Don Quixote: The Definitive Story of Frank Zappa

Neil Slaven

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Frank Zappa's reputation as one of rock's maverick geniuses has continued to grow since his death in 1993. This comprehensive chronicle of Zappa's extraordinary life and career is for Zappa fans and rock music fans in general.

Electric Don Quixote: The Definitive Story of Frank Zappa Details

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From Reader Review Electric Don Quixote: The Definitive Story of Frank Zappa for online ebook

Andy says

I've always been interested in learning more about Frank Zappa and set out to do this in honor of the 20th anniversary of his death. As in the case of many other artists, Zappa was a bit too ahead of his time - in his views of the music business, U.S. politics and embrace of technology. My only criticism is the book focused too much on the music and not the person. I likely will read one more Zappa book before moving on to either some good fiction or tackling another subject.

Karl says

On the whole, some interest in Zappa is probably a pre-req for enjoying this book. The good news is that it is better (and better informative) biography than either The Real Frank Zappa Book — the 'autobiography' which Peter Ochiogrosso assisted Zappa in compiling . . . which, while it has its certain (in Zappa's phrase) 'folkloric' significances, gives the reader to understand that Zappa was prepared to focus for hours getting the music right, but didn't have the patience to apply to 'proper autobiography' (which was probably the right balance of attention for Zappa) — or the Barry Miles bio, which thinly veils the author's hostility to the subject in places (count the times he uses the phrase "Sicilian patriarchal control freak" or its variants — no, really, count 'em).

Waceted says

I don't remember this book all too well (I enjoyed the autobiography much more). However, it definitely was insightful. I believe there were lots details regarding his bands and records which is ALWAYS a good thing. Recommended, but read the autobiography first.

Bradley says

Slaven, a record producer and renowned expert on blues music, has been a fan of Frank Zappa since hearing about the Mothers of Invention in 1966. There are a few books on Zappa out there, but most are considered substandard or inaccurate by fans and music historians. Slaven's document on rock's great iconoclast is considered to be the best currently available.

Zappa was born in Baltimore, but his family would eventually head west to California where Zappa would begin his career in music. He started playing in rhythm & blues bands for little pay playing the hits. While Zappa was a huge fan of blues and doo-wop, he also was an avid fan of dada orchestral music. He wanted to combine these two to create a style of music that not only represented what he wanted to hear, but what he felt was important for the youth to hear so as not to be brainwashed by commercial garbage curated by men in suits.

His first band, the Mothers of Invention, releases their first studio album in 1966. Zappa quickly earned the reputation as one of the hardest people in rock to work with. Over the years, Zappa's demands to have only the best would test the limits of any musician's patience that worked with him. His melodies were complex, his attitude as cynical, and he could never be satisfied.

Over the years, between disbanding the Mothers and becoming increasingly cantankerous and anti-Establishment, Zappa became increasingly vocal about the scum infesting the music industry and politics. He would use his guitar, synclavier, and his imagination to protest them all over policy, taste, and decency.

Zappa passed away at the end of 1993 after battling prostate cancer. However, he remained an always antagonizing force against the music industry and religious right. He has a vision of America that spelled doom for young people and culture that many would say has unfortunately come true since his death. Zappa was regarded as a genius by many, but he was still largely misunderstood. Two a half decades after his death, that remains to be true.

This was my first biography on Zappa apart from his own autobiography. It was great and I learned a lot, but this edition was full of editing errors. I've been a fan of Zappa for about a decade and he is someone who continues to fascinate me more and more.

Jason West says

In 1982 when my peers were just leaving Two Tone and getting into Duran Duran and the Human League (who aren't half bad BTW) I (somehow) stumbled upon Frank. I think it happened when I was on a rugby tour in Toronto and they took us to a record shop and I bought Live in New York.

Well, the lyrics had an instant puerile appeal to a teenage boy but the music was amazing, like nothing I'd heard before.

This book is helping me to finally understand exactly why I love Frank Zappa and his music. It's because he was his own man and never wavered for a single moment. He managed to make a living without selling out one little bit. Which is an admirable achievement in my eyes.

Also, he really didn't give a fuck!

The text is very factual with discography (which I actually like) but amongst it are some blinding quotations from the man and those who knew him best. No compromise.

Anne-Marie says

My old man got this for x-mas about a million years ago from his lovely wife. He is still on page 75 a decade later. I thought I would show him a thing or two and finish it in a few days. Turns out, I like this book about Zappa even less than I like Zappa's music. It was a pretty good time when I told Kevin that Zappa's maternal grandmother was a conjoined twin though. I will never ever understand.

Butzi says

It's no doubt that Frank Zappa's complex personality informed his singular musical talent. This book captures that multi-faceted personality and sheds light on some of his beliefs and attitudes, which also helps our understanding and appreciation of his music. But the one thing that really stands out is his work ethic and one can only feel humbled by such passion and the dedication he had for his music. This book will certainly make the reader want to revisit Frank Zappa's entire output, from Freak Out! right up to Civilization Phase III and then into the many posthumous releases we are so lucky to have.

Fraser says

I didn't enjoy this book as much as Barry Miles biography of Frank. It was very technical in terms of his music, and you cannot criticise Slaven for knowing his Zappa inside out.

I wanted to learn a lot more about the man behind the music and Miles biography delivered that. Taken both books together, you do end up with a great and complete picture.

Robert says

This is a well-written biography. Slaven did a fantastic job deconstructing the lyrics/songs/albums. He ties in short historical information that kept the time-line relevant. The book doesn't get into the salacious stuff that follows rock musicians during their careers. This biography is respectfully written and covers the life of one of the most interesting composers of the 20th century.

Bob says

Slaven does a decent job providing insight into one of the most misunderstood and inaccessible geniuses of the 20th Century. Not short of references, this book is well-researched, but tends to run adrift at times. recommended for FZ fans.

Jeffrey Brown says

very informative. I got a little choked up when he passed away. so much was going on and the dude was possibly gonna enter into politics. Would have been great if he got that chance. Highly recommended for any one interested in this man's story and his music. All around great for any one interested in forward-thinking and innovative music composition or listening.

Tim Bold says

To be honest, this was a bit of a struggle. There were some fascinating insights into Zappa's music, but the book was very 'listy' - who was in the band, what did they play, where did they go on tour, which bits of the tour later appeared on which albums etc. Considering Neil Slaven's credentials, I would have expected a lot more narrative - the book is woefully short on anecdotes (which make the on tour bits interesting) and interviews etc with the man himself or those that surrounded him. More from the Mothers would have been helpful to get a flavour of the times. In the end, I don't feel that I have much more insight into what made Zappa tick or why his music was as complex, exciting, diverse and chaotic as it seems. I Suppose it did get me listening to all of the albums again, which can only be a good thing in itself, but as a biography it basically sucked!

Sean says

This being the only book about F.Z. that I've read so far, I'm not sure how it stacks up against the growing volume of muso-lit concerning him.

Slaven is clearly a mega-fan and his writing shows it. He seems reluctant to criticize even Zappa's lyrical excesses, such as in "Jewish Princess" and "Dinah-Moe-Hum"...and possibly his nadir, "The Jazz Discharge Party Hats" (don't ask). The only time he even dares to is when he's discussing the almost-universally panned "Thing Fish" album.

There are some fascinating insights into Frank's childhood and his schooldays. I found the anecdotes about the early years of the Mothers Of Invention quite interesting as well. I was hoping for more detail on F.Z.'s contentious relationship with Don Van Vliet (a.k.a. 'Captain Beefheart'), but the little that's there seems (naturally) more slanted in Zappa's favour.

The chapters on the '80s and '90s just seem a treadmill of album, tour, album, tour, band personnel change, album, tour, etc. and didn't hold my attention as much. The only highlight being Zappa's fights with Tipper Gore's "Parent's Music Resource Center". It was funny to me, reading about that again - and almost how quaint some of the musical "evil" that the P.M.R.C. was concerned about seems now (remember W.A.S.P.'s "Animal (Fuck Like A Beast)"? or Twisted Sister?).

Slaven does treat Zappa's bout with cancer and untimely death with reverence and poignance. Even if you don't like his personality or his music, one does feel that F.Z. had a lot more music to create and was stopped too soon.

"Electric Don Quixote" moves along at a good pace and would probably be good for the casual F.Z. fan. The hardcore may want to try one of the other books on offer.

Ola says

This book provides a concise source for facts about Zappa, presented in a straight forward and chronological manner. It is a fairly easy and compelling read, even though I feel it is lacking in analysis and depth. It worked for me as a "short introduction" to his thoughts and music, but not much more than that.

Nick says

Not just another Zappa biography. A labour of love, and one that needed to be done. Clearly Slaven is not going to do as good a job as Frank Zappa (in the Real Frank Zappa Book), who has an unfair advantage in being able to remember most of this life better than everyone else. However, he does have one advantage over FZ - he can also write about his death, and the impact that that had. The usual cast are there, and the events that surrounded Zappa's life are narrated in good detail.

What Slaven also does is to look at all of the albums that Zappa created and evaluate them in their context. Zappa fans, like myself, know that they were much more than 'comedy music', as Amazon.com would have you believe. Zappa was constantly juggling his desire to work as a composer with the need to keep his family in food and clothes, and a working band on the road so that he could develop his craft. Not until he discovered the Synclavier did he find a musician flexible enough to play it like he wrote it (but I honestly think he still preferred the band because they could not only play the stuff, they could also 'put the eyebrows on it'). Slaven also discusses Zappa's experiments with classically-trained musicians, and we can all rue the fact that he had not met the Ensemble Modern, or something similar, much earlier.

I can't say I was surprised or astonished by anything I read here, but the combination of well-written prose and familiar subject matter felt very comfortable - reading Electric Don Quixote was not unlike drinking hot chocolate: warming and satisfying, unthreatening and relaxing. Not something you could often say about Zappa's music.
