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### **Interview with Frank Zappa**

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*I met Frank Zappa at his home in Los Angeles several months ago. Our discussion ranged over a variety of issues on which Mr. Zappa expressed very definite opinions. He has been an active and highly visible opponent of efforts to label record albums and a strong proponent of freedom of artistic freedom. His musical works often test the bounds of that freedom, sometimes exceeding them according to his critics. His autobiography, *The Real Frank Zappa Book*, written with Peter Occhisgrosso, was published by Poseidon Press in 1990.*

**[Author's Note:** *It wasn't long after I interviewed Frank Zappa at his home in late 1991 that the world was told he was sick with cancer. Up to that time I had attributed the tone of the interview, often hostile, to Frank's possible displeasure at having to endure the questions of a snotty young lawyer. He and I bandied back and forth with considerable vigor on the issue of "absolute" free speech, the limits of censorship, and the artist's role in society. His views were well-informed, as I had expected, and well-entrenched. There was no swaying him, and I felt afterwards a certain disappointment that there was not more of a give-and-take between us.*

*I suspect now that his mien must have been a function of his having discovered his condition. In retrospect, his spirit seemed wounded, "pessimistic" was the word I used during the interview, something I definitely did not expect given what I knew about him. In rereading the interview I can see the fighting spirit; I had thought it was over the state of affairs in our country, especially in relation to the direction civil liberties and freedom of expression had taken, but it could have been personal, too. His decline, and ultimately his demise a little more than a year later was a great loss, to be sure. But the spirit Frank Zappa expressed – in his art and in his life – survives.]*

**DMG:** I have heard it said that the worst thing that can happen to an artist is to be ignored, the best thing is to be censored.

**FZ:** I don't think that being censored is necessarily the best thing that happens to an artist and I don't agree being ignored is the worst thing that can happen to an artist. I actually don't agree with that summary.

**DMG:** You speak from personal experience because you had people pursue you in a censoring capacity in the past.

**FZ:** Well, nothing like what's happened to 2 Live Crew. I mean I've never had any of that kind of stuff. Basically, my experience with censorship has been little piddling things by a regional record company who tried on the early albums to cut out a word here and there.

**DMG:** In your book you talk about framing the artistic creation, that an artist creates the boundaries for his work and then he wills it to become art. Can an artist frame anything?

**FZ:** Sure. That doesn't mean he's going to get away with it. Anybody can sue anybody for anything. That doesn't mean that they're gonna prevail in their suit. A person who claims to be an artist and takes any object or concept or whatever can frame it and claim it as a piece of art.

**DMG:** What does it mean to get away with it?

**FZ:** To convince enough people that he is actually doing art rather than just trying to hoodwink them. Unfortunately, there are probably too many people functioning in the world of art, especially in the visual arts that have abused that and basically served up to the public a piece of shit with a frame around it. If it weren't for the fact that there are always enough art critics someplace that will say, "My, isn't that clever," that's what lets these guys get away with doing stupid art.

**DMG:** So if an artist fails to will his art, to convince enough people that it is in fact an artistic creation, does that artist's effort deserve the type of protection that is typically afforded to good art?

**FZ:** Absolutely. I think the way I view free speech: it is to protect everybody's speech; artists and everybody else. Good, bad, and indifferent. It's not a question of whether or not it's art as to whether or not you should be protected. I don't see it that way. I think if a society claims to be a free society, then one of the things that must be free in the society is the exchange of

ideas. Good ones, bad ones, and otherwise. And it should be up to the individual to make his own personal decision as to whether or not that art or that idea or that political statement or whatever it is has value or merit. And the whole idea if there is such a thing as a dirty word is a fiction. It was manufactured by people of superstitious nature. And to shut off certain ideas from the marketplace because they purport to contain dirty words is a juvenile practice.

**DMG:** How about an artist who frames something or puts his boundaries around something, an event or occurrence, that really poses a serious danger in terms of somebody's life or liberty?

**FZ:** Describe that.

**DMG:** Snuff films, for instance. You call snuff films art?

**FZ:** No, and I doubt whether or not.... First of all, I'm not sure that there are such things as snuff films because there has been a debate as to whether or not they ever really did exist. But let's say that there are such things as movies of people being killed in the sexual context. Do you really believe that people who made these films are making a claim of art in these films? I doubt it.

**DMG:** Well, then there are musicians who describe murder and mayhem. Rappers like Geto Boys.

**FZ:** So what. Let them describe murder and mayhem. Most of the films that are big hit movies not only describe it, they serve it up to you on a silver platter. If it's okay to go see a movie like Lethal Weapon with people being shot and blown up or Die hard or one of these kinds of things that are major box office events, and most of what's going on is mayhem and destruction, and you not only see it taking place before your eyes but all the appropriate words are being used in that context and that's okay because it makes millions of dollars at the box office, why shouldn't some groups be allowed to use words to describe it? I don't have a problem with that.

**DMG:** So the deference to artistic creation begins at the point where the artist frames his work; not at the point where he has convinced enough people to "get away with it."

**FZ:** The whole business about convincing enough people to get away with it has to do with whether or not the guy gets to call himself an artist. Whether or not people will regard him in the community as a person who does art. But I believe that person, whether he receives that certification or not has the right to free speech and the right to express the ideas. Whether they are accepted as art or whether somebody laughs at it and says that it is garbage later on, he still has the right to say it and do it.

**DMG:** Are there any censoring endeavors that work in art? Censoring endeavors by third parties?

**FZ:** Can't imagine.

**DMG:** How about the artist? Doesn't the artist often engage in forms of self-censorship?

**FZ:** Only under duress.

**DMG:** Where's the duress?

**FZ:** The duress is from ... if you use a situation where he must deliver a product, an art product to his gallery or to a patron or whatever, and he knows that there are political or economic restrictions that would apply to certain ideas that he would do, sometimes artists under those circumstances will change what they do in order to comply with a political or an economic need. That's duress.

**DMG:** So it's economic duress.

**FZ:** Or political duress.

**DMG:** Do you think it's an accurate statement that censoring by the community is simply corrective of an artist's decision that ultimately proves wrong? I mean, don't artists make mistakes?

**FZ:** Everybody makes mistakes. But I go back to the point you can't have a free society if you're putting a lid on ideas. Period.

**DMG:** You sound like a real absolutist. Like a first amendment absolutist.

**FZ:** I base that on my gut instinct about how I would interpret the First Amendment and what I believe the framers really

intended by allowing the freedom of speech in a new country which they were inventing for themselves. And I can't imagine a situation where there would be any quibbling over it. You should have the right to express ideas freely no matter what those ideas are and then logical discussion will follow: whether or not the idea has any value or whether or not the person who brought the idea into the marketplace is to be cheered or scolded for doing it. But to keep him from bringing the idea into the marketplace is a type of behavior that one would associate with authoritarian forms of government.

**DMG:** Well, it was the same framers who wrote the First Amendment who were also the ones who passed the Sedition Act. Do you think they were just confused? How do you reconcile those two actions?

**FZ:** Well, there are a few other little discrepancies in the Constitution, too, like the way in which slaves were treated. But I don't believe it is my job to try and phase up all of the things that might have been wrong with the original writings of those men. I'm concerned, basically, with that one concept in the First Amendment that I believe guarantees people the right to express their ideas freely and that also guarantees that there will not be the evil influence of any form of religion imposed on secular law. And I think that we've gotten too far away from that basic concept during the '80s, and the '90s don't seem to be much better.

**DMG:** Give the '90s a chance. Morality seems to be broader than religion. Are you saying that all morality is religious based?

**FZ:** Discussions of morality, in the United States anyway, seem to be tied to Christian theology, and if you look at Christian theology in practice you'll see it's really not very moral at all. It has actually been detrimental to the cultural and mental health of just about every society. I believe their services are not required as protectors of children. They are not qualified to protect anything, and especially if they're spinning their wheels over something like dirty words. That's like protecting somebody from the bogey man or the Easter bunny.

**DMG:** What's your view of the efforts that are being mounted against groups like 2 Live Crew?

**FZ:** There's a lot of religion and politics involved in that. It's got nothing to do with protecting children or anything else. A

whiff of racism. A little whiff of stupidity as a result of inbreeding.

**DMG:** There are other efforts that are principally the efforts of the industry to take a role in policing itself rather than have the policing done by a third party.

**FZ:** Well, this is reminiscent of what happened with the Hays Office and motion picture censorship. And the reason they did it, the reason they went to the policing situation was they didn't want to have regional boards of censorship that would keep a motion picture from being able to go into general distribution. Unless there was a national standard, you couldn't have block bookings of films because there would be some little squirt in some town that would keep their movie out. And that's why they went for it. It's not for any moral reason. It's all down to bucks. And if the record industry decides to do it, it's gonna be for the same reason.

**DMG:** But if the record industry does it, it at least mutes the calls of people like the PMRC [Parents' Music Resource Center].

**FZ:** It will never mute it. Because you give them an inch and they take a mile. When the record industry agreed to put labels on records on November 1, 1985, the following year the PMRC complained that there weren't enough records with labels on them. Once you start, you can't satisfy these people because their goal is to have everything phase up to scripture. And there's no way you're going to take AC/DC and phase it up with scripture.

**DMG:** What does phase up with scripture mean?

**FZ:** Phase up with scripture means if you're a fundamentalist you have absolute literal belief in the Bible, and only what is in the Bible is real. You can't have an industrial society based on literal deployment of biblical phrases as translated and retranslated and mutilated down through the ages from what some guy originally wrote a couple of thousand years ago. It doesn't work. So, because the people who are doing this are of that persuasion, they can't be true themselves unless all of their actions are phased up to scripture. Equal phased up is an electronic term. It's like coherent with scripture. So in order for them to have a perfect world, all of their influence must be exerted on people who don't believe like they believe. And so they have to influence people who don't share their belief to act

in a way that makes their perfect world. There's no way you're going to take the wild and woolly rock 'n' roll industry and make it phase up with scripture.

**DMG:** But isn't it true that all political actors are attempting to phase up the real world to their vision of what the world ought to be?

**FZ:** No, that assumes the people who are engaged in politics actually have a vision, and it also assumes that politicians are in politics in order to achieve something other than self-aggrandizement. They have a right to express themselves. I just don't believe that religion automatically has the right to prevail over secular needs. It can't work. I mean this is a nation. It's not a monastery. And if you want to allow for diversity, which is the only thing that we've got to offer here, you have to be willing to tolerate other people's points of view. I think that if a person wants to be a fundamentalist, that's fine. You can have as much superstition as you want. Just keep your superstition out of secular law.

**DMG:** Isn't everything superstition? How do you get outside collective myth making?

**FZ:** You went to college, didn't you?

**DMG:** Yeah, I went to college.

**FZ:** You talk like a person who went to college. How am I supposed to respond to something like that?

**DMG:** Do your best.

**FZ:** Talk to me in real words. I mean, what does that mean?

**DMG:** Well, okay, you're talking about superstition. Right?

**FZ:** Yeah.

**DMG:** What's not superstition?

**FZ:** Did you ask for water?

**DMG:** Yeah.

**FZ:** Did you get water?

**DMG:** Yeah.

**FZ:** That's real. That's not superstitious. You got water. I can make a distinction between that and not stepping on a crack when you're walking down the sidewalk. Can you do that? Or did college f\_\_k you up?

**DMG:** But in terms of collective decision making, I mean deciding how goods and services are distributed or allocated. Deciding what ideas are going to be broadcast to the public for instance.

**FZ:** I think it's the broadcaster's obligation to have a broader range than what is being broadcast now. The problem is that we are supposed to have a free media. But we don't because the prejudices of the guy who owns the media outlet always permeate the content of the outlet.

**DMG:** But how can you ever have a situation that's other than that?

**FZ:** I don't know if you can. You know the thing that irritates me is the hypocrisy involved. I mean, let's face it, we're not free. Let's stop saying we're a free society. Let's just call it the way it is. You know we're well on our way to having a police state. Let's just call it that and be honest about it. I would feel more comfortable with that than going around with the myth of democracy and the myth of freedom in the United States because it ain't there.

**DMG:** What about the Judas Priest case in Nevada? Did you follow that at all?

**FZ:** A little bit.

**DMG:** What do you make of all of that? Now that's a very different situation. That's not really a situation where a government entity pursues a musician or an artist.

**FZ:** Well, I think the government is involved in that they allowed it to go to trial. This is a case where a fanatic in search of financial reward uses public facilities to persecute people from the rock 'n' roll business. It was an absolutely fictitious case as far as I can see and if the judiciary was doing its job, it would look at that case and say, "You've got to be kidding," and



throw it out on face-value. Same thing with the Ozzie Osbourne case.

**DMG:** What's the Ozzie Osbourne case?

**FZ:** It was another one of those things where a parent claimed that the child committed suicide because of a song on an Ozzie Osbourne album. They had one trial and they got thrown out; and then they came up with yet another legal theory. This legal theory was that the suicide had been caused, not by backwards masking, but a secret 11-cycle tone tucked away in the grooves of this phonograph record and the judge actually heard the second case. Now, the fact is that the human ear functions between 20 to 20,000 cycles. It doesn't hear 11 cycles. Furthermore, there are very few speakers that will produce 20 cycles, let alone 11 cycles. So even if there was an 11-cycle tone in those records, how are you going to reproduce it in order for somebody to experience an evil influence from it. It was like the whole thing flew in the face of physics where somebody should have known from grammar school, you know, where they teach you what's what. The judge should have looked at that and gone, "11 cycle-tone? Get the f\_\_k outta here." But no.

**DMG:** The theory in the Judas Priest case is that the actual product was liable for the death or suicide of the two kids.

**FZ:** Well, you can make a claim. Certainly, anybody can make any kind of claim they want in the United States. And they always do because people believe in easy money, and there's a certain aspect in the U.S. judicial system that has perpetuated that and made it possible for people to think that they can ream a corporation for zillions of dollars by proving a theory which is being countenanced by a judge who will allow this kind of a stupid case to go to trial. I mean it's ludicrous.

**DMG:** Well, what do you make of CBS's inability to come up with the master tape? I mean, was that just inadvertent error? I don't know if you heard anything about that but they were fined by the judge.

**FZ:** That doesn't surprise me because having dealt with CBS and other major record companies, they're not all that good about their library technique. I'm not surprised they didn't find the master tape. We had a contract with CBS for a number of years and when that contract expired we were supposed to have received back all of our master tapes which had been leased for

a period of years and along with it all of the art work for the covers. You don't know what we went through just to get the art work back. They couldn't find it. We got the tapes back. But nobody knew where the art was.

**DMG:** You've been real outspoken and up front on the issue of music censorship. What motivates you?

**FZ:** Because I hate to see the bad guys win. I really believe that any efforts to change this country into a police state is something that ought to be resisted, and if it's manifesting itself in terms of record censorship, okay, that's one way; but there's plenty of other ways that you see it popping up. Like Oliver North and his self-financing, off-the-shelf secret government and plans to do away with the Constitution and the construction of a ready-made concentration camp for Arabs in Louisiana. The rest of this kind of stuff, it just whizzes by and nobody cares about it. I have no desire to live in a police state. It troubles me to see that people are so busy entertaining themselves that they can't see it coming in the United States.

**DMG:** Well, a lot of people are busy making a living too.

**FZ:** Yeah, okay. There's nothing wrong with making a living, but where are you going to, if you're going to wind up in a police state by the time you've made your living, then what did you gain? You're gonna have your little house with a picket fence, but there's gonna be a little device installed in your house to spy on you. Or your next door neighbor will be in the U.S. equivalent of the Stasi.

**DMG:** You really think it's coming to that?

**FZ:** It's well on its way. How about all of these people during the Reagan administration that were persecuted if they had any tangential connection with Nicaragua? Look, I call them the way I see them. If you don't like the way I see them, then you can argue with me ... There has to be a certain amount of lumping together just in order to describe a general social phenomena. I don't think that what I've described is unfair or inaccurate in terms of who these people are, what they want, what they'll do to get it, why they want it, and what will happen if they do get it. I mean the hippies didn't do so good, did they? You give a hippie enough acid, he turns into a yuppie. It's a powerful drug.

**DMG:** When you perform that function, I mean it's not an illegitimate thing to do but it does devalue individuals.

**FZ:** Of course it does. But how could I possibly be any more devastating at it than our very own government. I mean, nothing will devalue an individual quicker and more efficiently than our government. In really essential ways the government is what devalues, not the words of any author describing any group of people.

**DMG:** Does an artist feel devalued when an artist is censored?

**FZ:** I doubt whether artists can come to that conclusion. I mean which artists are you talking about? CBS artists on a record label or moody stars or Picasso-type people? The Picasso kind of a guy, he wouldn't feel devalued because he doesn't give a f\_\_k. He's in his own world, he's an artist, okay? I can do what I can do. That's that. A guy who is in the American sense of the word "artist" who is basically an entertainer, maybe he feels threatened, his earning power is threatened ...

**DMG:** Right.

**FZ:** He might feel devalued in that sense of the word.

**DMG:** Right.

**FZ:** A real artist, they're beyond caring. They're lunatics, and they're ready to go all the way. They'll die for it. And those people are few and far between. Of course, it was announced yesterday that the FBI has kept a file on Picasso; his file is still open even though Picasso is dead. Because Picasso is a communist and even though he never came to the United States, the FBI kept track of him. They had him under constant surveillance, wrote down everything he said, and the file still isn't closed. You know, it's still there.

**DMG:** It's interesting because the rise of the national security state is really relatively, historically speaking, a recent phenomenon.

**FZ:** It's a Republican kind of a thing. Democrats are too stupid to do it. They would have if they could have. You know what? let me tell you something. We were facing the same kind of a problem they had in Czechoslovakia.

**DMG:** Have you been over there?

**FZ:** Yeah. When Havel took over, he discovered that there were 50,000 Czechs employed as secret policemen. He couldn't fire all of them. He only fired 500. That means there are still a lot of people employed as secret policemen. Now we had this cold war which we believe has been brought to an end unless the cold warriors bring it back. You have a whole system that was set up to spy on people and to do this stuff. You can't fire them. They have to find things for them to do. With budgetary restraints, maybe it's cheaper instead of sending them overseas to spy on people. We just send them all over the United States and they keep filing reports.

**DMG:** Among the musicians and artists that you know and communicate with, is there a sense of impending doom? I mean you sound very pessimistic.

**FZ:** I think the country's in big trouble and that the whole record censorship business is just another symptom.

**DMG:** A symptom of what?

**FZ:** This country is being turned into a police state while trying to pretend that it's not. And part of the problem is the legal profession. We have too many lawyers. In order for them to perpetuate their existence, they manufacture trouble.

**DMG:** Well, sometimes trouble is a good thing, right? Doesn't trouble sometimes lead to change?

**FZ:** That's the thinnest rationale for supporting the existence of so many lawyers I ever heard.

**DMG:** I'm not trying to support the existence of every lawyer in America. Lawyers are agents. Some lawyers are agents of change and some of that change is good change.

**FZ:** There's always an exception to the rule. But I think that maybe I can get you to agree that there are too many lawyers and not enough real cases to go around and a whole lot of bullsh\_t that could be real big money-making things that these guys get involved in. And the courts are plugged up with stupidity just like the Judas Priest case. That was stupidity. Now, if you were an abused child, you might want to commit suicide whether or not you heard Judas Priest. Don't you think that it's a

great way for those people to assuage their conscience and pick up a few million dollars from CBS along the way? Just like getting a lawyer who is willing to take it to court and a judge dumb enough to hear it? In the Ozzie Osborne case, the guy killed himself with his father's gun, which should have been put away. Besides, he'd drunk eight beers. And yet they were claiming that the suicide was a result of hearing a rock'n' roll record. I mean, it's all pretty thin. Furthermore, the legal defense was paid for by the Robertson ministers. If you look into the background of who's paying to mount these things, there's always a slush fund from some fundamentalist ministry that's going to buy the lawyer.

**DMG:** What would you tell other artists? Is there a political agenda?

**FZ:** The only artist I talk to is Captain Beefheart and I talked to him the other day and he doesn't give a sh\_t about this country. As far as entertainers, the entertainers are too busy worrying about their careers to think about the political implication of the rest of that stuff. If most of the people who are engaged in the artistic process of entertainment, if we make that distinction, if they really cared about this, they'd all be screaming about it like I am. But they've kept their mouth shut for five years. They're conspicuously absent from any debate involving their stuff. Why? Because their managers say keep your mouth shut. Don't invite trouble. And what would I say to these people? Ignore your manager?

**DMG:** Well. You see the entertainers; I mean there are other entertainers that are out there that are influenced by personal managers and then there are others that do take a stand and draw a line and say enough is enough.

**FZ:** Where are they? I mean usually you won't get a squeak out of them unless they are personally attacked. You think that any of those guys in 2 Live Crew would have said a thing about censorship if somebody hadn't gone after them? I doubt it.

**DMG:** Is it the responsibility of these guys before they get attacked to speak out in support of First Amendment freedom?

**FZ:** I think that they ought to at least have a passing acquaintance with what the First Amendment says. I mean, how can they miss it if it's taken away if they didn't know what they had before it got taken away? My impression is that most of the

people engaged in the entertainment business are more familiar with the group's chart standing than the wording of the First Amendment.