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SOUND

No tours but lots of music coming from Frank Zappa

Don't hold your breath waiting for Frank Zappa's next tour. The outspoken composer hasn't picked up his guitar in more than two years, and says he has no intention of hitting the road again. "I'm not physically capable of doing it anymore," he said in a recent telephone interview. "The style I play is as unfashionable as you can get in today's market. On a good day, I might miss the feeling of playing a guitar with a band behind me. But the rigamarole of touring, rehearsing, putting a band together . . . There's no need to go through that torture again."

On the other hand, fans can expect a deluge of Zappa music over the next few years. The local Rykodisc label is issuing

his catalogue on compact disc, from restored '60s classics ("We're Only In It for the Money," "Lumpy Gravy") to new instrumental music. Zappa is now sifting through two decades worth of live tapes, to be released on video and CD. Meanwhile he's recorded five new albums of computer music; the first, "Jazz From Hell," was released last year. In effect, Zappa is dealing with his entire career at once. He might restore a '60s album one morning, edit a '70s videotape in the afternoon, and write a new computer piece at night.

"It would seem weird if I thought of time the way Republicans do," he says. "But I have a different concept of the way time works, I don't think it travels from one place to another. I think that everything is happening at the same time - always has, always will. I've been lucky, because I've managed to record hundreds of hours of the bands I've worked with."

Much of that history will come out on "You Can't Do That Onstage Anymore," a 10-CD set planned for release later this year. "It's a collection of all the musical and social activities that were unique to the bands I've had over the years. For example, I've found a tape of the Berkeley Symphony Orchestra giving the world premiere of two of my pieces, 'Sinister Footwear' and 'Mo 'n' Herb's Vacation,' with ballet happening onstage. It's a great tape because the orchestra is playing pretty well, but the dancing is so bizarre that the audience is laughing at this complicated music. Even then you usually couldn't see that kind of thing at rock concerts, and you certainly won't in the future."

Equally intriguing are the compact discs of the old albums. Zappa has changed some of the records around; adding never-before-released songs, and in some cases, re-recording the original music. His most acclaimed '60s album, "We're Only In It for the Money," features new bass and drum parts; as will the forthcoming CD of his '50s rock take-off, "Ruben and the Jets." "I did that because the master tapes had deteriorated, you could even see through them. So it made sense to give it a better drum sound. Some of the songs wound up at slightly different speeds; that was a matter of guessing wrong with the computer. I had to reconstruct the album from scratch, putting all the bits and pieces back together, so sometimes I just used intuition."

Along with touring, Zappa says he's given up writing songs with lyrics. From now on, his only new music will be instrumentals programmed on the Synclavier. "As far as topical songs go, for any given social situation between now and the end of the century, I've already done a song about it. So I'd rather not repeat myself. Besides, there's no use dealing with complex, pointed issues in a song lyric, because the radio won't play it anyway. I'd rather deal with those things in interviews."

Zappa is still speaking out against rock censorship, even though many consider it a dead issue. "I'm sure the average guy in the street sees it as a tempest in a teapot, the deranged squealings of a bunch of bored housewives in Washington. But the PMRC (Parents' Music Resource Center) is still in business, and people are still making a profit off this frogwash. I'd like to know how much of this Iranian Contra business went on behind our backs, while the media was concentrating on the PMRC." Have Zappa's anti-censorship efforts paid off? "I think they have. Because if these Washington wives want to alert people that rock 'n' roll is a danger to society, then I can alert them to the fact that some of their elected officials are out of their minds." □

- Brett Milano