



MR. BONZAI

Frankly, It's Dweezil

By Mr. Bonzai

Zappa the younger on engineering his new CD, revamping his dad's studio, and the "Tour de Frank."

The year 2006 has shaped up to be a big one for Dweezil Zappa. He's releasing his first solo album since 2000's *Automatic* (Favored Nations), he completely remodeled the control room of the renowned Zappa studio—the Utility Muffin Research Kitchen—and he launched a full-scale tour of entirely Frank Zappa compositions, called "Zappa Plays Zappa" (aka the "Tour de Frank"). Joining the touring band are Frank Zappa alumni Steve Vai, Terry Bozzio, and Napoleon Murphy Brock (see **Fig. 1**).

Dweezil and I met in the studio as he was finishing two months of rehearsals and putting the final touches on the album, *Go with What You Know* (Zappa Records, 2006; see **Fig. 2**), which comprises Dweezil's compositions as well as Frank Zappa's "Peaches en Regalia," a tune originally recorded in 1969 and altered in 2006 with the Dweezil touch. The album will be released during the final leg of the tour, which stretches throughout Europe and America.

I was listening to you playing a part that Frank wrote. Is that in preparation for your tour?

Yes, we are preparing for the "Zappa Plays Zappa" tour. It's the first official event that we've been able to put together where we're actually going to go out and play Frank's music. We'll have other elements as well. The 25-minute opening of the concert will include excerpts from a documentary film about Frank's work as a composer as well as some rare FZ concert footage.

The goal is to have a new audience enjoy Frank's music but hear it from an unfiltered perspective. When you see the movie and hear him talk about the music and hear other people talk about his serious music, the classical music—some of which was played by the rock bands through the years—I think it does so much more than we could ever say. We are very excited about presenting the music to younger generations.

Will you be entirely faithful to the original compositions?

Frank wrote all of his music. It sounds the way it does because that was his intent. He had the ability to hear music in his head and write it down on paper, then teach it to other musicians. The sound is not the result of the players; it's the result of the composer. He certainly had exceptional musicians articulating his music, but that's merely execution. He hired people who were at the top of their skill level and trained them to do extraordinary things under his baton.

He would always allow them to have some space in the show to present what he called "body commercials." That was his terminology for solos. If someone was capable of something unique, he would always find a way to expose and exploit it. He wrote a lot of incredible compositions that are extremely challenging but with beautiful melodies and really interesting rhythms.

When you referred to what I was just playing, I was learning a part from "Inca Roads" that was a keyboard line and was also doubled on marimba. It was never intended to be played on guitar, because the interval stretches are not set up for guitar. But it's great to learn stuff like that

because it makes you a better player, and it gives you an entirely different look at the instrument. It's been a great challenge for me to learn hard interludes of songs like that.

FIG. 1: On this summer's "Zappa Plays Zappa" tour, Dweezil's band includes Frank Zappa alumni such as Steve Vai (right) and Napoleon Murphy Brock (left).



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"You hear Frank on the left side and me on the right side."

You mentioned that when you asked Frank back in 1985 if he had ever witnessed a miracle, he replied that one time one of his bands played several bars correctly from his composition "The Black Page." That is a song that we're going to learn as well, and it is definitely not easy on guitar. Steve Vai did a great job with that when he was in Frank's band, but it's very hard to articulate Frank's complex rhythms and the melodies that go with them.

Let's talk about your new album, *Go with What You Know*. Did you do all the engineering?

Yes, I did, except for "Peaches en Regalia," which was a unique situation. I went to the master tapes from Frank's *Hot Rats* album [Rykodisc, 1969]. We were getting ready to do a project with that album and listened to the master tapes for the first time. They've been sitting in boxes for a long time—the last time Frank used them was for some remixing on CD in the mid-'80s.

I heard the tape when you were soloing material and listening, and it was amazing how Frank got those sounds, with tape speed changes and such, all done in the predigital world.

What was so impressive was that the piece of music itself is a great composition and the arrangement is unique. What he was able to accomplish using that studio technology was to take instruments and embellish their personalities in very subtle ways. You wouldn't necessarily know what was being done unless you soloed the individual tracks.

One example was the bass guitar. The initial melody in the first verse has multiple bass parts that were recorded at a slower speed so that it could be pitched up when you heard it at normal speed. It enabled Frank to have this sound in the right pitch register, but the tone had this rubbery, lower, smooth character. But it doesn't really exist in the real world. It's a unique sound. Now we are used to synthesizers, and you might think it must have been a synthesizer, but it was 1969 and there wasn't anything invented that sounded like that. He's making up a sound that doesn't exist.

Another example: there's one melody line that's clearly played on a saxophone. It's in an upper register, and you know it's there because of the way it sits in the mix, but you can't be sure what it is. He's altered the range of that instrument by recording at a slower speed and making it able to play this part an octave higher, which is well out of the range of the instrument. It had a unique sound. Very different from merely substituting an instrument that can play in that range. If you took that out of the arrangement, that melody wouldn't sound nearly as interesting.

He had all these ideas about how to make the music sound unique and special, and he was able to use technology to make that happen. What I did with the version for my album—I wanted it to sound like it did in 1969, add elements that are modern, but to take a similar approach to Frank's. I thought, Well, what can I do in the studio now that's technologically equivalent to that? What kind of instrument can I modify using technology and make it sound like something other than what it is? I took acoustic guitar and I recorded multiple parts, and then I cut them all up on the beat, on each transient, and then I reversed them so I was able to alter the sound. Acoustic guitar has a lot of transient information, so when you turn it around backwards, it sounds like a bowed instrument. But it also has an eerie backwards quality. The result is a mysterious orchestral sound.

So you didn't use backwards tape?

No. When you run something backwards, you can do it in several ways. With a tape machine, you flip the tape over and play it backwards, and then you record it again on a different track and flip the tape back over. With a computer, you have a couple of options. You can take something and flip it backwards, but if you want to play a specific part that has to work with the music playing forwards and be in time—it's hard to learn to play something backwards that you can then turn forwards. The way you get around that in a computer is you can prep all the transients and it will reverse all of those notes in place. It's not taking the whole phrase and reversing it; it's taking each note and reversing it. When you play it forwards, it's playing in time with what you want, each note, but it's swelling up into it. It's a confusing thing that will bend a lot of people's minds when they try to figure it out.

Do your new elements appear throughout the piece?

They make several appearances, but I'm also playing all of the main melody lines on guitar. I was trying to use the guitar to mimic the instruments that were originally played. I took out the original instruments and replaced them with my guitar parts. Another interesting thing: Frank's guitar solo is doubled by a flute on the record. It is still doubled by a flute, but I also learned the guitar solo and played that. So you hear Frank on the left side and me on the right side playing in unison, which is slightly equivalent to Natalie Cole singing with her father, Nat King Cole. That is also a good example of what might be happening on this tour.

FIG. 2: Dweezil's new CD, *Go with What You Know*, comprises mainly original material but also includes a revamped version of Frank Zappa's "Peaches en Regalia."



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FIG. 3: Dweezil with a guitar of his dad's, which he thinks is not actually a Gibson SG but a high-quality copy. It features extremely low action and a preamp with an 18 dB boost.

You open the album with your only vocal track, "Love Ride." It's a very "summer fun" pop song. Have you been taking vocal lessons?

I haven't, and I would never say I'm a singer, but I can sing well enough to harmonize with myself and make something interesting on occasion.

Who recorded the jet engines that open the album?

That's a sample from a NASA rocket plane. I found it on a sound library I own, but I altered it and beefed it up with some subinformation.

Do you have to pay royalties to NASA?

I don't think so, but I heard they're getting into the record business. I think they're negotiating with Michael Jackson.

How many tracks did you have in that song?

That song has a lot of tracks, over 50, but that's because in my working process in [Steinberg] Nuendo I like to separate things out. Even if a track only comes in for 2 seconds in the song, it has its own track. In an analog world, you would be track sharing a lot of stuff, but I could fit it on 24 tracks.

The second track is virtually a 1-minute-and-30-second guitar solo called "Noitpure."

People are going to have to think about what that means.

The third track reminded me of "Frankenstein" by Edgar Winter, juxtaposed with a kind of Asian vibe—from heavy guitar to playful sounds.

There's a weird little sitar moment. That one is titled "Fifty

Bitey,” which was the name of a cat with a feisty personality we had for 21 years and who recently passed away.

And then we have “CC \$,” with a *whoop-whoop* sound I thought was a synthesizer.

Well, that sound comes from a TC Electronic effects unit, FireworX—basically a noise generator, like a feedback loop. Just that one sound inspired the whole song. I had recorded that little *whoop-whoop* sound and asked Joe Travers to play drums to it. Then I had my friend Blues Saraceno play acoustic guitar on it. After that, I created all the other stuff on top.

So there are real drums on the album, played by Joe Travers, who also happens to be your “Vault Meister” and is archiving all of Frank’s tapes.

Yes, and he will also be playing drums on our tour.

Is anyone else playing on the album?

I had two guitar solo spots open, so I invited my friend T.J. Helmerich to play a crazy solo on “The Grind,” and I have a guitar duel with Blues Saraceno on the song “Thunder Pimp.” Pete Griffin plays bass on “All Roads Lead to Inca.” He’s playing bass on tour with us, and Aaron Arntz, our touring keyboardist, also plays on

that track. Mark Meadows plays bass on the final track, “Audio Movie,” but I did everything else.

The final track reminded me of science-fiction sounds and Hawaiian music. Is that a slack-key guitar in it?

No, the weirdo guitar melody that starts and ends the song is a fretless guitar. There’s a little bit of a jungle rhythm background sound going on that might remind you of Hawaii. That song itself sort of inspired the rest of the record to have this continuity with sound effects. The record evolved like one long audio movie, starting with the feeling that you’re being taken away on a spaceship, and it ends with the ship landing, with a number of departure points along the way—being kidnapped in a van, going underwater—with lots of things happening at the beginnings and endings of songs that set a certain tone.

On *Go with What You Know*, the elements jump here and there, unlike many albums that are put together to create one mood only.

Record companies try so hard to market popular-music records as one specific thing, so most aren’t allowed to have songs that deviate from what the hit single is supposed to be. I like Beatles records or Led Zeppelin

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records that show and embrace different influences. The media today would call that “unfocused.” I find that [characterization] extremely irritating.

For me, I just wanted my record to be a listening experience, a ride—you go somewhere from the first song to the last song. It's definitely rock-guitar oriented, but there are acoustic elements and electronic elements that I haven't touched on in my music before. Mainly, it's because when we redid the studio, I had to force myself to become computer literate. I tried to use technology as an instrument on this record, and it really did help form the project. Once you know how to use the technology, you can hear something in your head and then make it happen. It would be very difficult for me to explain to someone how to make these sounds. It gave me the opportunity to use a lot of sounds that I could adapt and mutilate, and twist and turn into whatever I wanted. Why not have fun and play around with it? And that's what I did.

Talk about the renovation of the Zappa studio, the Utility Muffin Research Kitchen.

In the control room, we have JBL speakers, which we discovered were the right monitors for this space. The big recording room has always been a great-sounding room, with two live chambers. One chamber is big enough to record in, and the other one is narrow but longer and taller, giving you natural ambient reverb. But the control room is quite a bit different now—it's got a higher ceiling and the colors are good for long working hours. Before, it was sort of a burlap look with a dark ceiling. The main console is a Euphonix System 5.

FIG. 4: This shot from inside the Utility Muffin Research Kitchen shows a rack full of signal processing gear, much of which (such as the Neve 1073 modules and the Avalon AD2022 mic pre) Dweezil uses when recording his guitar. The studio's new Euphonix System 5 console is in back.

Was it sad to see Frank's old console leave?

Well, the studio has evolved quite a bit since its original design. The original console was a Harrison that was heavily modified—sort of an API style—and that was in here

from 1980 until about 1990. Then we got the Neve V series console, and Frank liked it because at the time it gave him opportunities to use his Synclavier and have multiple tracks with automation. It was before the digital console era; he would have loved all the possibilities that exist now. The studio was dormant for 11 years before we rebuilt it.

But you had a small room for your own work, didn't you?

Yes, I had my own room for my projects. I was studying engineering, and experimenting. This room was in disrepair, and when gear isn't used, the gremlins usually like to come in and modify it for you.

What is your recording medium these days?

It depends: Most of the time for a brand-new session, my preference is to use the Euphonix R-1 hard-disk recording system and then bump that over to Nuendo. But we have also refurbished some of the analog machines, and I'm looking forward to using them as well and then transferring over to the R-1 or Nuendo. The R-1 is a great-sounding digital recorder, but it doesn't have fantastic editing capabilities as of yet. Nuendo is also a great-sounding digital recorder and has fantastic editing.

What analog machines do you have?

We have a 24-track Studer A80, a 2-track A80, and two Ampex machines, one 4-track and another 2-track. We have various headstacks for the machines. We even have an unusual 5-track headstack that was a special invention from the '50s, created by Paul Buff.

You also recently refurbished Frank's microphone collection.

Yes, we have a nice vintage mic selection, but for years we haven't had the opportunity to use them, because we didn't have the right power supplies and I didn't want to ruin them in any way by experimenting. It was fortuitous to have Toni Fishman and Joe Sanborn here, from Telefunken North America, to solve our problems. Among others, we have three Telefunken U47s, four Neumann M 49s, a matched pair of Neumann M 50s, circa 1950, four AKG C 24s, circa 1960, and a new U47 built by Toni's company. Now we have a lot of options. It all comes down to the microphones as to what gives you the sound of your record. The better the microphones, the better the sound. I'm really looking forward to using those mics on all the new projects.

At the rehearsal for the tour, you were playing a Gibson that you referred to as a “Frank's guitar.” Is it a special model?

It's funny because it says Gibson, but I believe from the stories that Frank told that someone had copied a Gibson



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SG (see Fig. 3). Frank liked the feel of it and bought it. It's got some special detail work that was never offered in a Gibson. But Frank's guitars were all unique in that they had extremely low action, and they had specialized electronics. That guitar has a preamp that has 18 dB more output than a normal guitar. Frank would use the guitar to overdrive his amplifiers as opposed to using a preamp gain stage in an amplifier.

He used effects as well, but he would rely more on the power section from the amp and use the guitar for the gain and tonal changes. He didn't play particularly hard, so he liked having the dynamic range. With the extra output coming from the guitar, you can really articulate dynamics.

He was very astute when it came to EQ in the signal path. He had the electronics built into his guitars so that he would be able to equalize his sound over the band. He didn't necessarily have one signature tone. He adjusted it to fit the moment. He was essentially mixing from the stage, creating guitar tones that were unique but would cut through the arrangement that he created.

He knew the range of the instruments in the accompaniment and the tones that they were creating, and he balanced his guitar tone to smoothly sit above everything. That's why his live recordings always sounded

so good. They are consistently good from tape to tape, which is very difficult to achieve.

What is your typical guitar signal chain for recording?

What I like the most is to use these Neve 1073 modules. I use two microphones on the cabinets. I have a stereo guitar rig now, so I've been using a Shure SM57 and a Sennheiser 421, making sure that they are in phase on each cabinet. The 57s usually go through the 1073s, and I also have this Neve 1272 stereo microphone preamp that we put the 421s through. Sometimes I'll use the console mic pres, and sometimes I'll use these Avalon mic pres (see Fig. 4). The console and the Avalon mic pres are clean, so for a distorted guitar, I'll sometimes want it to have a little bit more of an edge, and the Neve can give me the edge. I also have some API mic pres that I'm fixing up because they tend to overload right now. I'm still looking for the ideal chain, but things are sounding good. **EM**

Mr. Bonzai is an award-winning photographer and writer. His new book, Faces of Music: 25 Years of Lunching with Legends (Thomson CoursePTR/ArtistPro, 2006), includes over 400 photographs and 160 interviews. Visit www.mrbonzai.com to learn more.

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