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Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention in the '60s
(review)

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Notes, Volume 66, Number 3, March 2010, pp. 651-653 (Review)

Published by Music Library Association

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/not.0.0284>

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Leonard Cohen Live in London. DVD. Recorded Live in Concert at the O₂ Arena, London, England (July 17, 2008). [S.I.]: Sony BMG Music Entertainment, 2009, 2008. 88697405039. \$18.98.

"It's been a long time since I've stood on a stage in London . . . was about, uh, 14 or 15 years ago, I was 60 years old . . . just a kid with a crazy dream (laughs) . . . since then, I've taken a lot of Prozac, Paxil, Wellbutrin, Effexor, Ritalan . . . I've also, uh, studied deeply in the philosophies and the religions, but cheerfulness kept breaking through (more laughs)."

With these words, Leonard Cohen sets the tone for his London concert with humorous acknowledgment of the low points in his life, and uplifting hope for those issues he has worked through over many years. Perhaps this is most clear in his lyric "Anthem" where he clearly juxtaposes positive energy with negative:

"Ring the bells that still can ring,
forget your perfect offering,
there is a crack in everything;
that's how the light gets in."

It is difficult to approach Leonard Cohen's art without understanding at least some aspects of his personal life. His recent tour schedule, at the age of seventy-five, has largely been for financial reasons. As Cohen retreated to a Zen monastery for five years, his business manager absconded with nearly all of his money. Although the courts sided with Cohen in a 9.5 million dollar lawsuit, it is not known if or when he will see any of that money. So Cohen resorted to "turning tricks" as he refers to it: perform for money. Regardless of his mis-

fortunes, there is never self pity or mawkish sentimentality exhibited in the twenty-six song set on this DVD. Quite the contrary: he champions positive messages throughout this program, and he seems to nurture an amicable reconciliation with the sad, depressing songs he composed during the 1970s. While the songs are no less sad or depressing, Cohen seems to have assimilated the severity of his lyrics with genuine reverence for his audience, his band, and his life. Cohen's vocal limitations are many, but it is the charisma with which he delivers his songs that is the attractor. "Hallelujah" is the only song where Cohen's voice ventures out of its very limited range. But this isn't a DVD about singing; it's a DVD about stories, people, places, things, experiences. And, while his vocal limitations for singing are evident, they all seem to fade when he recites his poetry, as when he speaks "A Thousand Kisses Deep."

Cohen remains a gentleman through and through, and has since given up unpredictable behaviors, formerly fueled by the consumption of three bottles of wine before a performance. His genuine acknowledgement of the audience has kept his songs alive for many years, and continues to handle his emergence back on "Boogie Street" as he would say, with dignity, grace, and deep appreciation of his audience.

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Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention in the '60s. DVD. New Malden, Surrey UK: Sexy Intellectual, 2008. SIDVD545. \$19.95.

In 1965, bass player Roy Estrada invited his friend Frank Zappa to join his R&B group, the Soul Giants. A short time after joining, Zappa convinced his new band mates Estrada, drummer Jimmy Carl Black, and singer Ray Collins to devote themselves instead to his own outrageous, irreverent, unpredictable, flat-out weird music. He promised them wealth and fame. The Soul Giants were game, and so began the Mothers of Invention.

Four years and a few added band members later, the Mothers of Invention had staked out their own piece of turf in the music world, owing as much to the band's chemistry, daring, theatrics and musicianship as it did to Zappa's leadership, drive and creativity. The Mothers played sold-out shows to a rabid following. And then Zappa broke up the band.

He continued performing for another two decades, up to his death of prostate

cancer in 1993, fronting an ever-changing lineup of stellar musicians. But the documentary *Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention in the '60s* argues that the original Mothers of Invention were the best and the most memorable of all the Zappa bands.

The documentary moves steadily forward, paced with a rich collection of photos, home movie footage, TV show clips and audio recordings. For every anecdote or comment there's a corresponding image or song. Some of the narration is by on-camera comments from Zappa biographer Ben Watson, music writer Richie Unterberger, journalist Alan Clayson, author and musician Billy James, and producer Kim Fowley. But the juiciest moments, though, are the recollections and anecdotes from some of the Mothers themselves, Jimmy Carl Black, Bunk Gardner, Don Preston, and Art Tripp.

In high school, Zappa played drums with an R&B band and he had a passion for blues and doo-wop. But when he discovered an Edgard Varèse recording, that set him off on a lifelong course of experimental composition. In footage from the old *Steve Allen Show*, a young, nerdy, clean-cut Zappa in a suit and short, slicked-back hair, grins an "aw, shucks" grin at Allen's joshing but still exudes confidence as he directs Allen's band in a piece of experimental chance music. Zappa plays a bicycle with drumsticks while Allen "brapps" trumpet-like into the handlebars.

The Mothers' first album in 1966, *Freak Out*, was a Pandora's box of odd, fragmented music, a Dadaist Spike Jones concoction. Schmaltsy lounge music segued into rock licks, *musique concrète*, surf, *Sprechgesang*, light teen pop, free jazz, doo-wop, bebop, and beyond.

The documentary deftly contrasts the Mothers' deranged image and music with vintage '60s footage of strobe-lit white kids—girls with heavy mascara and tight Capri pants and boys with long bangs and bell-bottoms—dancing in that ecstatically herky jerky mod, "a go go" way to a soundtrack of Farfisa organs and surfy Stratocasters.

In early 1967, the Mothers—which now included keyboardist Don Preston and woodwind player Bunk Johnson—moved from Los Angeles to New York and landed a steady six-month gig. Despite the com-

plexity of Zappa's compositions, he did not want the band reading music on stage, so the Mothers memorized everything. They practiced the dense music eight bars at a time until they could nail a piece in time for that night's show. The morning after a show they were back at the theater rehearsing for hours. Bunk Gardner looked exasperated as he said, "Whatever I learned one day was changed the next day." Jimmy Carl Black said, "We were certainly the most rehearsed band in the world."

In 1968, the Mothers released a sort-of straight-laced recording, *Cruising with Ruben and the Jets*, a tongue-in-cheek but sincere recording of pure '50s doo-wop. The songs were so authentic-sounding that many people thought it actually was an old album. Still, here and there amid the vintage falsetto and bass lines are Zappa touches, such as at the end of "Fountain of Love" where the wordless background vocals quote the oboe line from the opening of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*.

By 1969, the Mothers had several recordings out and they were touring worldwide. Zappa had formed two record labels and he was producing other acts. Yet even though the Mothers had achieved the fame that Zappa promised the Soul Giants, the band members weren't taking home any significant amounts of money. And then Zappa fired the band.

The shock and betrayal is evident as Black, Gardner, and Preston retell the story. Black is clearly bitter and hurt as he said, "That was pretty heavy. And pretty cold, man." In a perverse visual touch, displayed prominently behind Black is a large oil portrait of Zappa.

Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention in the '60s is a well-told story and a window into the Mothers' creative process. While it true that Zappa was a groundbreaking composer and bandleader, the rest of the band were groundbreakers with him. The Mothers not only had the chops, they also had a camaraderie and playfulness that fit the bizarre burlesque of the tunes. They helped give birth to a sound that didn't exist before.

The documentary benefits from an abundance of footage and photos. There are no full performances but it is rich with snippets of music. The focus of the film is on the interviewees; the music punctuates

their statements. And while the opining and anecdotes by the critics gives the story its context, it's the Mothers' reminiscences that add value. It's a pleasure to hear the band members' stories and to savor the in-

redients that each tossed into the musical stew.

MICHAEL ASHENFELDER
Library of Congress

Bruce Springsteen Road Trip, 40 Years Of The Boss. DVD. [Surrey, UK]: Pride, 2009. PGDVD117. \$26.95.

This 2009 DVD set from the British company Pride contains two discs; the first is a biography concentrating on Springsteen's early days and the second an overview of his early recordings. The disclaimer at the beginning of the first disc states that the documentary was not done with the cooperation of the Bruce Springsteen conglomerate and that it contains no original music by him.

The first DVD is a compelling documentary of Springsteen's beginning years as a musician in Freehold, New Jersey through his first great successes in the early 1980s. Skillfully weaving commentary and interviews with numerous formative musical associates like Richard Blackwell, Frank Marziotti, Vini Lopez, Robbin Thompson, and Albee Tellone, this documentary examines many of Springsteen's first musical influences while giving very little information about his family or private life. None of his family was interviewed, nor were some other early band mates such as George Thiers or Danny Federici. The only words spoken by the artist himself come from an interview done apparently in the early 1980s.

Aside from those mentioned above, the best of the interviewees are *Village Voice* reviewer Robert Christgau, Carl "Tinker" West (manager of Springsteen's early group Steel Mill), and former drummer Lopez. Each of these give interesting commentary from some very different perspectives. No interviews with managers Mike Appel, Jon Landau, or perennial E Street Band members such as Clarence Clemmons, Max Weinberg, or Steve Van Zandt are included, suggesting perhaps that current Springsteen employees were off limits during making of this film (Appel and Springsteen had a rancorous parting in the early 1980s).

The strength of this film is in its explication of the music scene that surrounded Springsteen during his apprenticeship

years and how it introduced him to styles as varied as folk, heavy metal, art rock and an array of classic performers such as Elvis Presley, Van Morrison, and the Beatles. John Hammond's stewardship of his career at CBS is glossed over to some degree, but the focus here is clearly on the evolution of the artist, not the businessman. The weakness of the product is in its distance from its subject—not only are there no direct words from Springsteen, there is no music at all other than some occasional background sounds which have nothing to do with the music being discussed.

The second DVD is a survey of Springsteen's major recordings from *Born to Run* (1975) through *Nebraska* (1982). Springsteen's growth as an artist is explored through the examination of the increasing conceptual integration (musical, lyrical, and photographic) of each album. *Darkness on the Edge of Town* (1978) is presented as a jumping off point in this move towards concept—a technique pioneered by Frank Sinatra in the 1950s on his Reprise album series. The close attention to lyrics and lyrical progression throughout *Darkness* demonstrates Springsteen's commitment to the art of storytelling. *The River* (1980) is seen as the next step—a double album exploring several different directions, while offering conflicting opinions on its ultimate success. *Nebraska* (1982) represents a step back—not to his roots, but to the perceptions of what his roots might have been: a Bob Dylan disciple. This album put the whole focus on Springsteen as a singer/songwriter accompanied by nothing but his own guitar and displays the results of his voluntary withdrawal from the business of popular music, driven to some degree by his depression over the state of society during the early Reagan years.

The weakness of the first DVD is somewhat corrected in the second by the inclusion of at least a small dose of music,