





The Real

FRANK  
ZAPPA

Book

by

Frank Zappa

with

Peter Occhiogrosso

A TOUCHSTONE BOOK  
Published by Simon & Schuster



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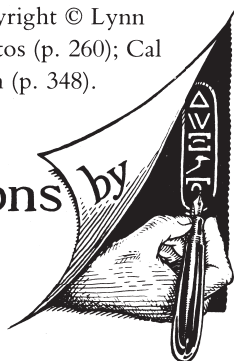
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THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO GAIL,  
THE KIDS, STEPHEN HAWKING AND KO-KO.

*F.Z. August 23, 1988 06:39:37*



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# INTRODUCTION

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## Book ?

## What

## Book ?

I don't want to write a book, but I'm going to do it anyway, because Peter Occhiogrosso is going to help me. He is a writer. He *likes* books—he even *reads* them. I think it is good that books *still exist*, but they make me sleepy.

The way we're going to do it is, Peter will come to California and spend a few weeks recording answers to '*fascinating questions*,' then the tapes will be transcribed. Peter will edit them, put them on floppy discs, send them back to me, I will edit them *again*, and *that result* will be sent to Ann Patty at Poseidon Press, and **she** will make it come out to be '**A BOOK.**'

One of the reasons for doing this is the proliferation of stupid books (in several languages) which purport to be **About Me**. I thought there ought to be *at least ONE*, somewhere, that had **real stuff** in it. Please be advised that this book does not pretend to be some sort of 'complete' oral history. It is presented for consumption as entertainment only.

**SO, A FEW PRELIMINARY NOTES:**

[1] *An autobiography is usually written by somebody who thinks his life is **truly amazing**. I do not think of **my life** as amazing in any sense—however, the opportunity to say stuff **in print** about **tangential subjects** is appealing.*

[2] *Documents and/or transcriptions will be labeled as such.*

[3] *The epigraphs at the heads of chapters (publishers love those little things) were researched and inserted by Peter—I mention this because I wouldn't want anybody to think I sat around reading Flaubert, Twitchell and Shakespeare all day.*

[4] *If your name is in the book and you didn't want it to be there (or you don't like my comments)—my apologies.*

[5] *If your name isn't in the book and you feel 'left out'—my apologies.*

The Real

FRANK  
ZAPPA

·Book·





## CHAPTER 1

# How Weird Am I, ANYWAY?

---

*“I never set out to be weird. It was always other people who called me weird.”*

Frank Zappa (*Baltimore Sun*, October 12, 1986)

This book exists on the premise that somebody, somewhere, is interested in *who I am, how I got that way, and what the fuck I’m talking about.*

To answer Imaginary Question Number One, let me begin by explaining **WHO I AM NOT**. Here are two popular ‘**Frank Zappa Legends**’ . . .

Because I recorded a song called “Son of Mr. Green Genes” on the *Hot Rats* album in 1969, people have believed for years that the character with that name on the *Captain Kangaroo* TV show (played by *Lumpy Brannum*) was my ‘real’ Dad. No, he was not.

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The other fantasy is that I once *'took a shit on stage.'* This has been propounded with many variations, including (but not limited to):

[1] I ate shit on stage.

[2] I had a 'gross-out contest' (what the fuck is a '**gross-out contest**'?) with *Captain Beefheart* and we **both** ate shit on stage.

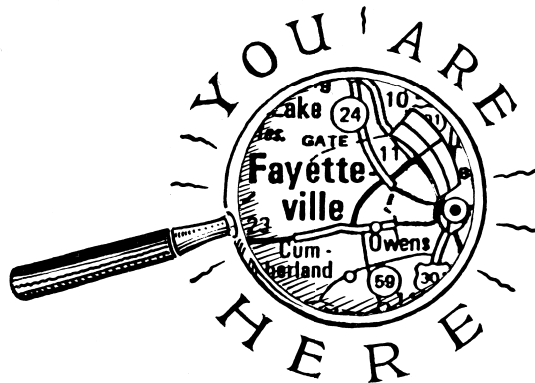
[3] I had a 'gross-out contest' with *Alice Cooper* and he **stepped on baby chickens** and *then* I ate shit on stage, etc.

I was in a London club called the Speak Easy in 1967 or '68. A member of a group called the Flock, recording for Columbia at the time, came over to me and said:

*"You're fantastic. When I heard about you eating that shit on stage, I thought, 'That guy is way, way out there.' "*

I said, *"I never ate shit on stage."* He looked really depressed—like I had just broken his heart.

For the records, folks: **I never took a shit on stage, and the closest I ever came to eating shit anywhere was at a Holiday Inn buffet in Fayetteville, North Carolina, in 1973.**



## More Important Information for People Who Wonder What I Eat

I wasn't crazy about most of the food my mother made—like *pasta with lentils*. That was one of the most hated dishes of my childhood. She would make enough to last a week, in a big pot. After a few days in the icebox it used to turn black.

My **favorite** things to eat then were blueberry pie, fried oysters and fried eels—but I also used to love *corn sandwiches*: white bread and mashed potatoes with canned corn dumped on it. (Every once in a while, we'll come back to this fascinating topic, since it seems to matter so much to certain people in the audience.)

## The Boring, Basic Stuff

*“Be regular and orderly in your life so that you may be violent and original in your work.”*

Gustave Flaubert

How 'bout that epigraph, huh? Peter, you're cracking me up already. Okay, here we go. . . . My real name is *Frank* Vincent Zappa (not *Francis*—I'll explain it later). I was born on December 21, 1940, in Baltimore, Maryland. When I popped out, I was all black—they thought I was dead. I'm okay now.

My ancestry is Sicilian, Greek, Arab and French. My mother's mother was French and Sicilian, and her Dad was Italian (from Naples). She was *first generation*. The Greek-Arab side is from my Dad. He was born in a Sicilian village called Partinico, and came over on one of the immigrant boats when he was a kid.

He used to work in his Dad's barbershop on the Maryland waterfront. For a penny a day (or a penny a week—I can't

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remember), he would stand on a box and lather the sailors' faces so his Dad could shave them. *Nice job.*

Eventually he went to college at Chapel Hill, in North Carolina, and played guitar in some sort of '*strolling crooner*' trio. (I still get birthday cards from the insurance company owned by Jack Wardlaw, the banjo player.)

They used to go from dormitory window to dormitory window, serenading coeds with songs like "Little Red Wing." He was on the wrestling team and, when he graduated, he took a job teaching history at Loyola, in Maryland.

Both my parents used to speak Italian in the house so the kids wouldn't know what they were talking about—which was probably money, since we never seemed to have any. I guess it was convenient for them to have a '*secret code*'—but not teaching the kids the language may have had something to do with their desire to assimilate. (It was not fashionable to be of 'foreign extraction' in the U.S. during World War II.)

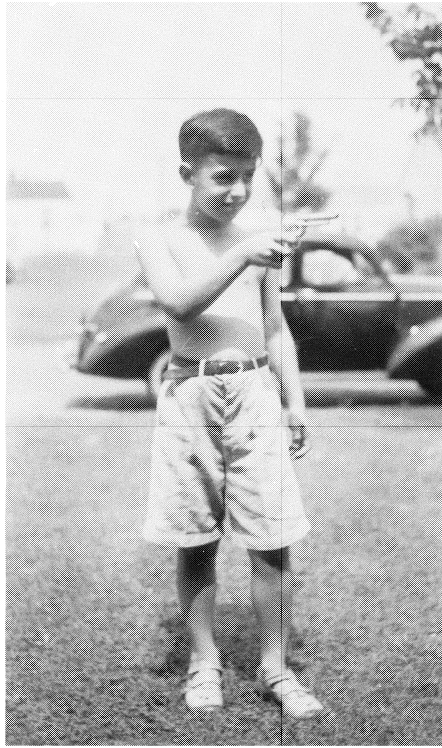
We used to live in the Army housing facility in Edgewood, Maryland. There was a family—the Knights—to whom my Dad referred as "*that hillbilly bunch over there.*" One day Archie Knight got into an argument with my Dad, and the next thing I knew, Dad was running toward the house, shouting, "*Get the gun, Rosie! Get the gun!*"

That was the first time I knew that he had a gun (a chrome .38 pistol, stuffed in a sock drawer). My mother was pleading with him not to shoot the guy. Fortunately, he had the good sense to listen to her.

Because of that incident, I knew where the gun was. I took it out one day and remember thinking: "*This is the best-looking cap pistol I've ever seen!*" So, when nobody was looking, I used it to shoot *single-shot caps*, and the 'blue dots' I had chopped off the end of some wooden kitchen matches.

My parents were disturbed when they discovered that I had gummed up the firing pin.

## HOW WEIRD AM I, ANYWAY?



My mother's parents had a restaurant—also on the Maryland waterfront. She used to tell a story about a guy who came in and started a fight. I believe it was my mother's Dad who took one of those big forks they used for taking potatoes out of boiling water and stabbed the guy in the skull with it. He didn't die—instead, he ran off, with the fork sticking out the top of his head like an antenna.



My Dad's Dad seldom bathed. He liked to sit on the porch with wads of clothes on. He liked to drink wine, and started off every day with **two** glasses of *Bromo Seltzer*.

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My mother's mother didn't speak English, so she used to tell us stories in Italian—like the one about the *mano pelusa*—the hairy hand. “*Mano pelusa! Vene qua!*” she would say in a scary ‘grandma voice’—that was supposed to mean “*Hairy hand! Come here!*”—then she would run her fingers up my arm. This is what people used to do when there was no TV.

My first memories of childhood include wearing a little sailor suit with a wooden whistle on a string around my neck, going to church all the time and kneeling down a lot.

We lived in a boardinghouse one time when I was very little. I think it might have been in Atlantic City. The lady who owned the boarding house had a *Pomeranian* and the *Pomeranian* used to eat grass and vomit things that looked like *white meatballs*.

Later, we lived in one of those row houses on Park Heights Avenue in Maryland. We had wood floors, heavily waxed, with throw rugs on them. The tradition in those days was that you waxed everything until you could see your face in it (remember, there was no TV, so people had time to do stuff like that)—and the other tradition was: *when Dad came home from work, you ran to meet him at the door*.

Once, when Dad was coming home from work, my younger brother, Bobby, ran faster than I did, and arrived **first** at the door. (It was a door with little panes of glass in it.) He opened it, hugged Dad, then closed it. I came running and skidded on the throw rug, crashing my left arm through the glass. I heard them talking about how they should get a doctor to stitch it up. I complained so much they didn't stitch it up—just stuck a bunch of Band-Aids on it and I wound up with a scar. I can't stand needles.

I had horrible teeth, so my parents used to take me to an Italian dentist who had a unique piece of equipment—a cross between a chainsaw and a sewing machine. He'd stick the thing in my mouth and it would go **voodn-voodn-voodn-voodnnnnnn**—no *novocaine*. I learned to dread the sound of the word ‘**dentist.**’

My parents felt that they **had** to go to an **Italian dentist**—because they couldn't trust one of those 'white-person' [*possibly-related-to-some-sort-of-hillbilly*] dentists, and so it was that I made the acquaintance of the nefarious **Dr. Rocca**. He would have been sensational as an evil monk in *The Name of the Rose*.

## My First Space Helmet

My Dad was employed as a meteorologist at the Edgewood Arsenal. They made poison gas there during World War II, so I guess it would have been the meteorologist's job to figure out which way the wind was blowing when it was time to shoot the stuff off.

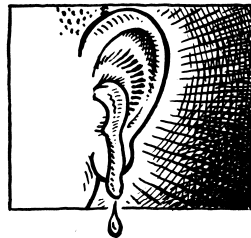
He used to bring equipment home from the lab for me to play with: *beakers, Florence flasks, little petri dishes full of mercury—blobs of mercury*. I used to play with it all the time. The entire floor of my bedroom had this 'muck' on it, made out of mercury mixed with dust balls.

One of the things I used to like to do was pour the mercury on the floor and hit it with a hammer, so it squirted all over the place. I **lived** in mercury.

When **DDT** was first invented, my Dad brought some home—there was a whole bag of it in the closet. I didn't eat it or anything, but he said that **you could**—it was supposed to be 'safe,' it *only killed bugs*.

Sicilian parents do things *differently*. If I said I had an earache, my parents would heat up some olive oil and pour it in my ear—which *hurts like a motherfucker*—but they tell you it's supposed to make it feel better. When you're a kid, you don't get to argue about it.

I spent the first five or six years of my life with cotton hanging out of my ears—*yellow*, from olive oil.



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Along with my earaches and asthma, I had sinus trouble. There was some 'new treatment' for this ailment being discussed in the neighborhood. It involved stuffing *radium* into your sinus cavities. (Have you ever heard of this?) My parents took me to *yet another Italian doctor*, and, although I didn't know what they were going to do to me, it didn't sound like it was going to be *too much fun*. The doctor had a long wire thing—maybe a foot or more, and on the end was a pellet of radium. He stuffed it up my nose and into my sinus cavities on both sides. (I should probably check to see if my handkerchief is glowing in the dark.)

One of the other wonder remedies that had just come out then was *sulfa*. Winter was freezing cold in that house at 15 Dexter Street. The walls were so thin—it was like a cardboard house. We used to wear flannel trapdoor pajamas. In the mornings, to get warm, we stood by the coal stove in the kitchen.

On one occasion, the trapdoor on my younger brother's pajamas caught fire. My Dad came running in and beat the fire out with his bare hands. Both his hands and my brother's back were totally burned. The doctor put *sulfa* on them and neither of them got scarred.



My Dad used to help pay the rent by volunteering for human testing of chemical (maybe even biological) warfare agents. These were called 'patch tests.'

The Army didn't tell you **what** it was they were putting on your skin—and you agreed *not to scratch it, or peek under the bandage*—and they would pay you ten bucks per patch. Then they would take it off after a couple of weeks.

My Dad used to come home with three or four of those



## HOW WEIRD AM I, ANYWAY?

things on his arms and different parts of his body every week. I don't know what the stuff was, or what long-range health effects it might have had on him (or on any of the children that were born after the time that they did it).



Daddy



Mommy



Franky



Bobby

There were tanks of mustard gas within a mile of where we lived, so everybody in this housing project had to have a gas mask in the house, for each member of the family.

Mustard gas explodes the vessels in your lungs, causing you to *drown in your own blood*.

We had a rack at the end of the hall with a family's worth of masks on it. I used to wear mine out in the backyard all the time—it was my space helmet. One day I decided to find out how it worked, so I took a can opener and opened up the filter (thereby *ruining* it). In any event, I found out what was inside it—charcoal, paper filters and different layers of crystals, including, I think, *potassium permanganate*.

Before they would squirt mustard gas onto a battlefield, they had some other stuff called *chloropicrin*, a dust that induced vomiting—they called it “*puke stuff*.” The dust would creep around the edges of the soldier's mask, causing him to vomit. If he didn't take his mask off, he could drown in his own spew, and if he did—to *let the chunks out*—the mustard gas would get him.

I was always amazed that people got paid to figure out how to do this stuff.

## The Second Part of My Childhood

The second part of my childhood (are you **sure** you want to know this stuff?) takes place mostly in California, when I was

## THE REAL FRANK ZAPPA BOOK

about ten or twelve. First, I'll tell you how we got there.

I was sick so often in Maryland, Mom and Dad wanted to move. The first time I managed to escape from the state was when my Dad took a job in Florida—another civil service position, this time in *ballistics*, something about shell trajectories. It was still World War II.

### MY MEMORIES OF FLORIDA INCLUDE:

[1] Opa-Locka had a lot of mosquitoes and if you left the bread out overnight, green hair grew on it.



[2] Every once in a while we had to hide under the bed and turn all the lights off because somebody thought the Germans were coming.

[3] My Dad 'made margarine' by squeezing a red dot sealed inside a plastic bag with white stuff in it which, when smushed up, caused the white stuff to turn yellow, giving the illusion of 'butter.'

[4] My brother got a boil on his butt, and my Dad had to squeeze stuff out of it (margarine training probably helped), and there was a lot of screaming.



[5] I was told to watch out for alligators because they sometimes ate children.

[6] Everything looked like it was in Technicolor compared to Baltimore.

[7] I got to play outside a lot, climbing trees, which eventually led to a fungus on my elbow.

[8] Except for that, my health improved, and I got about a foot taller.

[9] My mother got homesick and, since I was taller, figured it was okay to go back to Baltimore.



[10] We went back to Baltimore and I got sick again.

Edgewood, Maryland, was sort of out in the country. It had a little woods and a creek with crawdads in it, just at the end of Dexter Street. I used to play down there with Leonard Allen.

Even though I was sick all the time, Edgewood was sort of fun, but when we moved back to Maryland, we didn't go to Edgewood—we moved into a rowhouse in the city and I hated it.

I don't think my folks liked it very much either, because the next thing I knew, they were talking about moving to California. My Dad had gotten another offer to work at the *Dugway Proving Ground* in Utah (where they made nerve gas), but we got off lucky—he didn't take it. Instead, he took a position at the *Naval Post-Graduate School* in Monterey, teaching *metallurgy*. I had no idea what the fuck that meant.

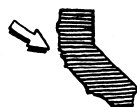
So, in the dead of winter, we set out in our 'Henry-J' (an extinct and severely uncomfortable, small, cheap car manufactured then by *Kaiser*), via the Southern Route, to California. The backseat of a 'Henry-J' was a piece of plywood, covered with about an inch of kapok and some stiff, tweedy upholstery material. I spent two exhilarating weeks on this Ironing Board From Hell.

My Dad believed (as I'm sure everyone on the East Coast did) that California was all sunshine and warm weather. This led him to stop the car somewhere in the Carolinas and present, to a somewhat amazed black family standing near the highway, **all** of our warm winter clothing, convinced as he was that we would **never** need any of that shit again.

When we arrived in Monterey (a coastal town in Northern California), it was freezing cold, and it rained and fogged all the time. Oops.



## Chemistry in Northern California



Because of my Dad's work, I switched from school to school fairly often. I didn't enjoy it, but then, I didn't enjoy much of **anything** in those days. A 'weekend outing' of that period occasionally meant piling into the 'Henry-J' and driving toward Salinas, a place nearby where they grow lettuce, and following the trucks, waiting for some to fall off. When it did, my Dad would stop the car, pick it up, brush away the asphalt chunks, toss it in the backseat with me, take it home and *boil* it.

I didn't enjoy being poor. It seemed like everything that I wanted to do, that would be *fun*, cost too much money—and when you're a kid and you can't do *fun stuff*, you're either going to be bored or dissatisfied or both.

For instance, I would have loved to own a chemistry set. In those days if you got the large-size *Gilbert Chemistry Set*, the booklet that came with it would teach you how to make stuff like *tear gas*.

By the time I was six years old I knew how to make gunpowder—I knew what the ingredients were, and I couldn't wait to get them all together and make some. I had all that chemical paraphernalia around the house, and I used to *pretend* to mix ingredients—dreaming of the day when one of my little concoctions would actually **explode**.

Once I thought I had come up with a formula for a new poison gas when the liquid potion I was working on (based largely on Windex) came in contact with some zinc.

My Dad wanted me to be an engineer. I think he was disappointed that I didn't have an aptitude for arithmetic and the rest of the stuff that was required.

They used to give kids in the sixth grade something called

the *Kuder Preference Test*. You had to stick a pin in the page, in boxes that you selected. The test was supposed to determine *what you would be best suited for, in terms of employment, for **the rest of your life***. My test results indicated that my destiny was to become a secretary. I scored highest in ‘clerical.’

My biggest problem, throughout school, was that the things they were trying to teach me tended not to be the kinds of things I was interested in. I grew up with poison gas and explosives—with the children of people who built these things for a living. Did I give a fuck about algebra?

## The Stuff in the Old Garage

We moved from Monterey to Pacific Grove, a quiet town nearby. I spent my recreational hours building puppets and model planes and making homemade explosives from whatever ingredients I could find.

One day, a friend said, “*See that garage across the street? It’s been locked **for years**. I wonder what’s inside of there.*”

We burrowed under the side wall. There was a pile of crates, full of fifty-caliber machine-gun bullets. We stole a bunch, removed the bullet heads with pliers, and extracted the ‘*gunpowder*’—only it didn’t look like ‘*gunpowder*,’ it looked like little greenish-black sequins (I think it was called *ballistite*). It was a member of the smokeless powder family (nitrocellulose)—I’d never seen any of that before.

We put it in a toilet-paper tube and stuffed it into a mound of dirt in the middle of a vacant lot and lit it, using *gimp* for a fuse (that shiny, flat plastic stuff you make keychain holders out of in summer camp).

When loosely packed, *ballistite* produces a shower of little yellowish-orange fireballs.

The other thing that turned out to be rewardingly explosive was *powdered Ping-Pong balls*. We used to spend hours filing Ping-Pong balls into dust with a rat-tail file. I got the idea when I read about a guy who escaped from jail by making a bomb out of playing cards. The article said that the playing cards were coated with some kind of cellulose material, and the convict had scraped it all off and accumulated a *plasticized dust*.

The casing for the bomb was a toilet-paper roll wrapped with tar tape. He blew his way out of a jail with it, so I thought: "*There's a clue here somewhere.*"



## How I Almost Blew My Nuts Off



You used to be able to buy *single-shot* caps at the hobby store. These were better than the ones on the little rolls because they had more powder in them and made a bigger bang. I spent hours with my X-Acto knife, cutting away the extra paper, saving the trimmed charges in a jar. Along with this, I had another jar full of the semilethal Ping-Pong dust.

One afternoon I was sitting in our garage—an old rickety one with a dirt floor, like the place with the machine-gun bullets. It was after the Fourth of July and the gutters in our neighborhood were littered with *used fireworks tubes*. I had collected a few, and was in the process of reloading one of them with my own *secret formula*.

I had it propped between my legs, filling it with a layer of this and a layer of that, packing each layer down with the butt end of a drumstick.

When I got to the layer of single-shot caps, I must have pressed too hard and the charge ignited. It blew a large crater in the dirt floor, blew the doors open, and blew me back a few feet, balls first. Why, I could have *almost* escaped from jail with that one.

## The End of My Scientific Career

I continued to be interested in stuff that went **boom** in spite of that incident.

I had a friend in San Diego around 1956 who was also interested in explosives. We had been experimenting for about a month, finally collecting a quart mayonnaise jar full of stuff that was a combination of *solid rocket fuel* (fifty percent powdered zinc, fifty percent sulfur) and *stink-bomb powder*.

On Open House Night, we hitchhiked to school with the jar, borrowed some paper cups from the cafeteria, poured the powder into them, passed them out to our friends and started little fires all over the school (while everybody's parents sat in the classrooms, reenacting their offspring's daily schedules).

The next day, I found my locker (where I had stored the jar with the leftover formula) wired shut.

A short time later, in Miss Ivancic's English class, I received an invitation to visit the dean's office, so that I might be introduced to the fire marshal.

They threw me out of school and were going to put me on probation, but my mother pleaded with the probation guy (who happened to be Italian) and explained that my Dad was about to be transferred out of San Diego to Lancaster—and they let me go. This concluded Phase One of my scientific career.





## CHAPTER 2

# There Goes the Neighborhood

Around the age of twelve (1951 or '52) I started getting interested in the drums. I guess a lot of young boys think the drums are exciting, but it wasn't my idea to be a rock and roll drummer or anything like that, because rock and roll hadn't been invented yet. I was just interested in the sounds of things a person could beat on.

I started off with orchestral percussion, learning all the *rudiments*—things called *flams*, *ruffs*, *ratamacues* and *paradiddles*. I had taken a summer-school group course in Monterey with a teacher named Keith McKillop. Instead of drums, he had us practicing on wooden planks. We had to stand in front of the planks and practice the *rudiments* used in Scottish drumming.

After that I begged my parents to get me a snare drum, which I used to practice on in the garage. When they couldn't afford to rent the snare drum anymore, I started playing on the furniture—beating the paint off bureaus and things like that.

By 1956 I was playing in a high school R&B band called the Ramblers. We used to rehearse in the living room of the piano player, Stuart Congdon—his Dad was a preacher. I practiced on pots and pans, held between my knees like bongos. I finally talked my folks into buying a *real drum set* (secondhand, from a guy up the street, for about fifty dollars). I didn't take delivery on the drum set until a week before our first gig. Since I had never learned to coordinate my hands and feet, I was not very good at keeping time with the kick-drum pedal.

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The bandleader, Elwood “Junior” Madeo, had gotten us a job at a place called the Uptown Hall, at 40th and Mead in the Hillcrest district of San Diego. Our fee: *seven dollars—for the whole band.*

On the way to the gig, I realized that I had forgotten my drumsticks (my only pair), and we had to drive back across town to get them. Eventually I was fired because they said I played the cymbals too much.

It’s hard to be a drummer-in-training, because there are very few apartments that are soundproof enough to practice in. (Where do good drummers *really* come from?)

### Varèse



December 22, 1883–November 6, 1965

Rock and roll albums didn’t appear in the marketplace until several years after rock itself was invented. In the early fifties, teenagers bought 78s or 45s.

The first rock and roll album I ever saw was around 1957—*Teenage Dance Party*. The cover showed a group of VERY WHITE TEENS, dancing, with confetti dangling all over the place near some soda bottles. Inside was a collection of songs by black doo-wop groups.

Back then, my record collection consisted of five or six rhythm-and-blues 78-RPM singles. Since I was a lower-middle-class teenager, the retail price of any kind of slowly rotating hi-fi vinyl seemed entirely out of the question.

## THERE GOES THE NEIGHBORHOOD

One day I happened across an article about Sam Goody's record store in *Look* magazine which raved about what a wonderful merchandiser he was. The writer said that Mr. Goody could sell **anything**—and as an example he mentioned that he had even managed to sell an album called *Ionisation*.

The article went on to say something like: "*This album is nothing but drums—it's dissonant and terrible; the worst music in the world.*" Ahh! Yes! That's for me!

I wondered where I could get my hands on a record like that, because I was living in El Cajon, California—a little cowboy kind of town near San Diego.

There was another town just over the hill called La Mesa—a bit more upscale (they had a 'hi-fi store'). Some time later, I was staying overnight with Dave Franken, a friend who lived in La Mesa, and we wound up going to the hi-fi place—they were having a sale on R&B singles.

After shuffling through the rack and finding a couple of Joe Huston records, I made my way toward the cash register and happened to glance at the LP bin. I noticed a strange-looking black-and-white album cover with a guy on it who had frizzy gray hair and looked like a mad scientist. I thought it was great that a mad scientist had finally made a record, so I picked it up—and there it was, the record with "Ionisation" on it.

The author of the *Look* article had gotten it slightly wrong—the correct title was *The Complete Works of Edgard Varèse, Volume I*, including "Ionisation," among other pieces, on an obscure label called **EMS** (*Elaine Music Store*). The record number was **401**.

I returned the Joe Huston records and checked my pockets to see how much money I had—I think it came to about \$3.75. I'd never bought an album before, but I knew they must be expensive because mostly old people bought them. I asked the man at the cash register how much EMS 401 cost.

"*That gray one in the box?*" he said. "\$5.95."

## THE REAL FRANK ZAPPA BOOK

I'd been searching for that record for over a year and I wasn't about to give up. I told him I had \$3.75. He thought about it for a minute, and said, "*We've been using that record to demonstrate hi-fi's with—but nobody ever buys one when we use it. I guess if you want it **that bad** you can have it for \$3.75.*"

I couldn't wait to hear it. My family had a genuine *lo-fi* record player: a **Decca**. It was a little box about four inches deep, sitting on short metal legs (because the speaker was on the bottom), and it had one of those clunky tonearms that you had to put a quarter on top of to hold it down. It played all three speeds, but it had never been set to 33⅓ before.

The record player was in the corner of the living room where my mother did the ironing. When she bought it, they gave her a free record of "The Little Shoemaker," by some middle-aged white-guy singing group on Mercury. She used to listen to "The Little Shoemaker" while she was ironing, so that was the only place where I could listen to my new Varèse album.

I turned the volume all the way up (in order to get the maximum amount of 'fi'), and carefully placed the *all-purpose osmium-tipped needle* on the lead-in spiral to "Ionisation." I have a nice Catholic mother who likes to watch Roller Derby. When she heard what came out of that little speaker on the bottom of the Decca, she looked at me like I was *out of my fucking mind*.

It had sirens and snare drums and bass drums and a lion's roar and all kinds of strange sounds on it. She forbade me to play it in the living room ever again. I told her that **I** thought it was really great, and I wanted to listen to it **all the way through**. She told me to take the record player into my bedroom.

My mother never got to hear "The Little Shoemaker" again.

The record player stayed in my room, and I listened to EMS 401 over and over and over, poring through the liner notes for every bit of information I could glean. I couldn't understand all the musical terms, but I memorized them anyway.

All through high school, whenever people came over, I

## THERE GOES THE NEIGHBORHOOD

would force them to listen to Varèse—because I thought it was *the ultimate test of their intelligence*. They also thought I was out of my fucking mind.



### “Deserts”



On my fifteenth birthday, my mother said she would spend five dollars on me (a lot of money for us then), and asked me what I wanted. I said, “*Well, instead of buying me something, why don’t you just let me make a long-distance phone call?*” (Nobody in our house had ever made a long-distance phone call.)

I decided that I would call Edgard Varèse. I deduced that a person who looked like a mad scientist could only live in a place called Greenwich Village. So I called New York information and asked if they had a listing for Edgard Varèse. Sure enough, they did. They even gave me the address: 188 Sullivan Street.

His wife, Louise, answered the phone. She was very sweet, and told me he wasn’t there—he was in Brussels working on a composition for the World’s Fair (“*Poème électronique*”)—and suggested I call back in a few weeks. I don’t remember exactly what I said when I finally spoke to him—probably something articulate like “*Gee—I really dig your music.*”

Varèse told me that he was working on a new piece called “*Déserts*,” which thrilled me since Lancaster, California, was in the desert. When you’re fifteen and living in the Mojave Desert, and you find out that the World’s Greatest Composer (who also looks like a mad scientist) is working in a secret Greenwich Village laboratory on a **‘song about your hometown’** (so to speak), you can get pretty *excited*.

I still think “*Déserts*” is about Lancaster, even if the liner notes on the Columbia LP insist that it is something more *philosophical*.

All through high school I searched for information about Varèse and his music. I found one book that had a photo of him

as a young man, and a quote, saying he would be just as happy growing grapes as being a composer. I liked that.

## Stravinsky & Webern

The second 33⅓-RPM record I bought was by Stravinsky. I found a budget-line recording (on Camden) of *The Rite of Spring* by something called ‘The World-Wide Symphony Orchestra.’ (Sounds pretty official, eh?) The cover was a green-and-black abstract whatchamacallit, and it had a magenta paper label with black lettering. I loved Stravinsky almost as much as Varèse.

The other composer who filled me with awe—I couldn’t believe that anybody would write music like that—was Anton Webern. I heard an early recording on the Dial label with a cover by an artist named David Stone Martin—it had one or two of Webern’s string quartets, and his Symphony op. 21 on the other side. I loved that record, but it was about as different from Stravinsky and Varèse as you could get.

I didn’t know anything about twelve-tone music then, but I liked the way it sounded. Since I didn’t have any kind of formal training, it didn’t make any difference to me if I was listening to Lightnin’ Slim, or a vocal group called the Jewels (who had a song out then called “Angel in My Life”), or Webern, or Varèse, or Stravinsky. To me it was **all good music**.



## My All-American Education



There were a few teachers in school who really helped me out. Mr. Kavelman, the band instructor at Mission Bay High, gave me the answer to one of the burning musical questions of my youth. I came to him one day with a copy of “Angel in My Life”—my favorite R&B tune at the time. I couldn’t understand why I loved that record so much, but I figured that, since he was a *music teacher*, maybe **he** knew.

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“Listen to this,” I said, “and tell me why I like it so much.”

“Parallel fourths,” he concluded.

He was the first person to tell me about twelve-tone music. It’s not that he was a fan of it, but he did mention the fact that *it existed*, and I am grateful to him for that. I never would have heard Webern if it hadn’t been for him.

Mr. Ballard was the high school music instructor at Antelope Valley High. He let me conduct the orchestra a couple of times, let me write music on the blackboard, and had the orchestra play it.

Mr. Ballard also did me a big favor without knowing it. As a drummer, I was obliged to perform the gruesome task of playing in the marching band. Considering my lack of interest in football, I couldn’t stand sitting around in a stupid-looking uniform, going ‘Da-ta-da-da-ta-ta-taaaah; CHARGE!’ every time somebody kicked a fucking football, freezing my nards off every weekend. Mr. Ballard threw me out of the marching band for **smoking in uniform**—and for that I will be *eternally grateful*.

My English teacher at A.V. was Don Cerveris. He was also a good friend. Don got tired of being a teacher and quit—he wanted to be a screenwriter. In 1959, he wrote the screenplay for a super-cheap cowboy movie called *Run Home Slow*, and helped me get my first film scoring job on it.

## My Other Obsession

While other guys in high school were spending their money on cars, I spent my money on records (I didn’t have a car). I went to *used record outlets* to buy jukebox records of rhythm-and-blues songs.

There was a place in San Diego on the ground floor of the Maryland Hotel where you could buy R&B singles unobtainable elsewhere—all those Lightnin’ Slim and Slim Harpo sides on the Excello label. (The reason you couldn’t order them in the ‘white-person record stores’ was that Excello had a policy that