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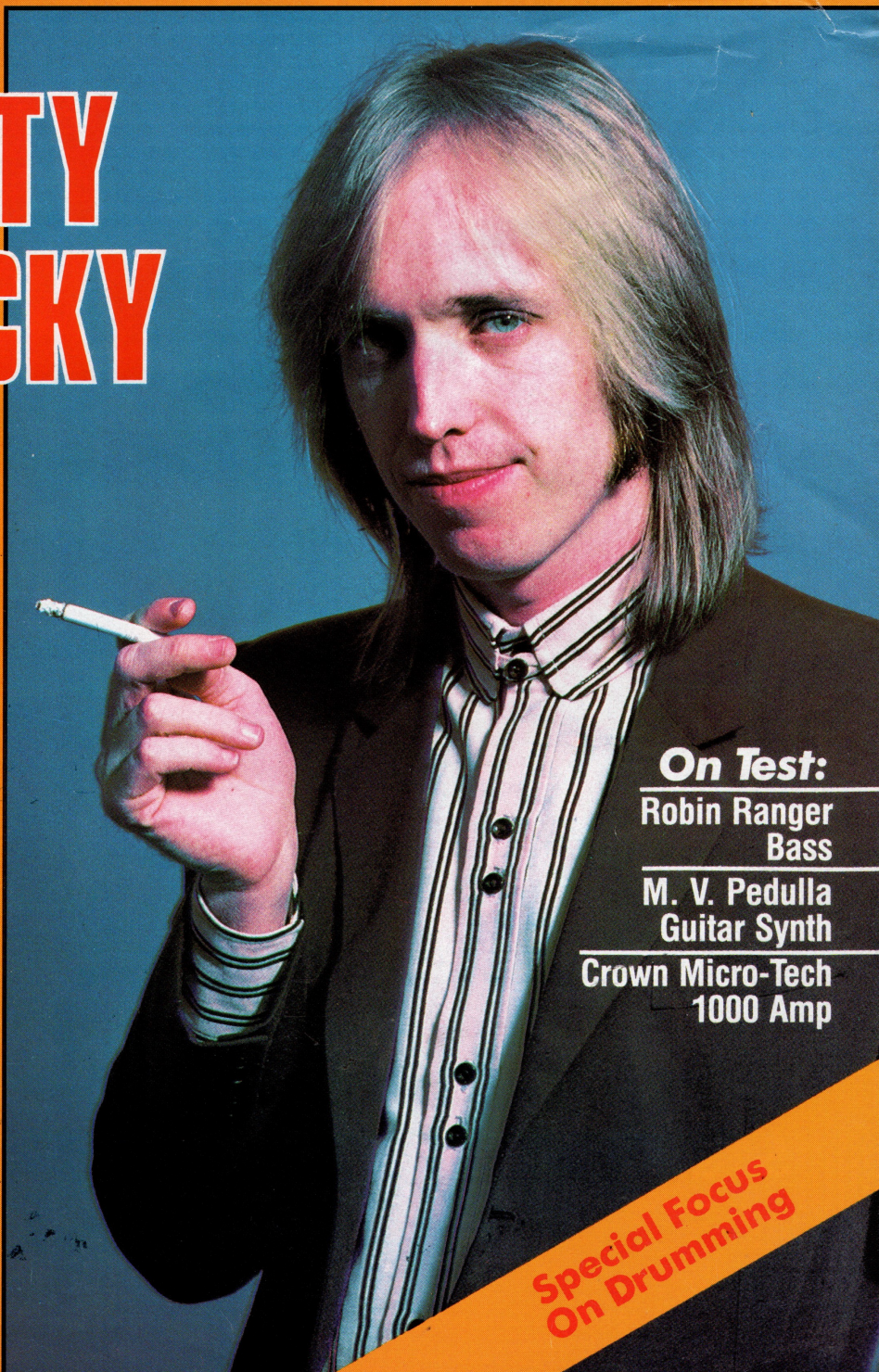
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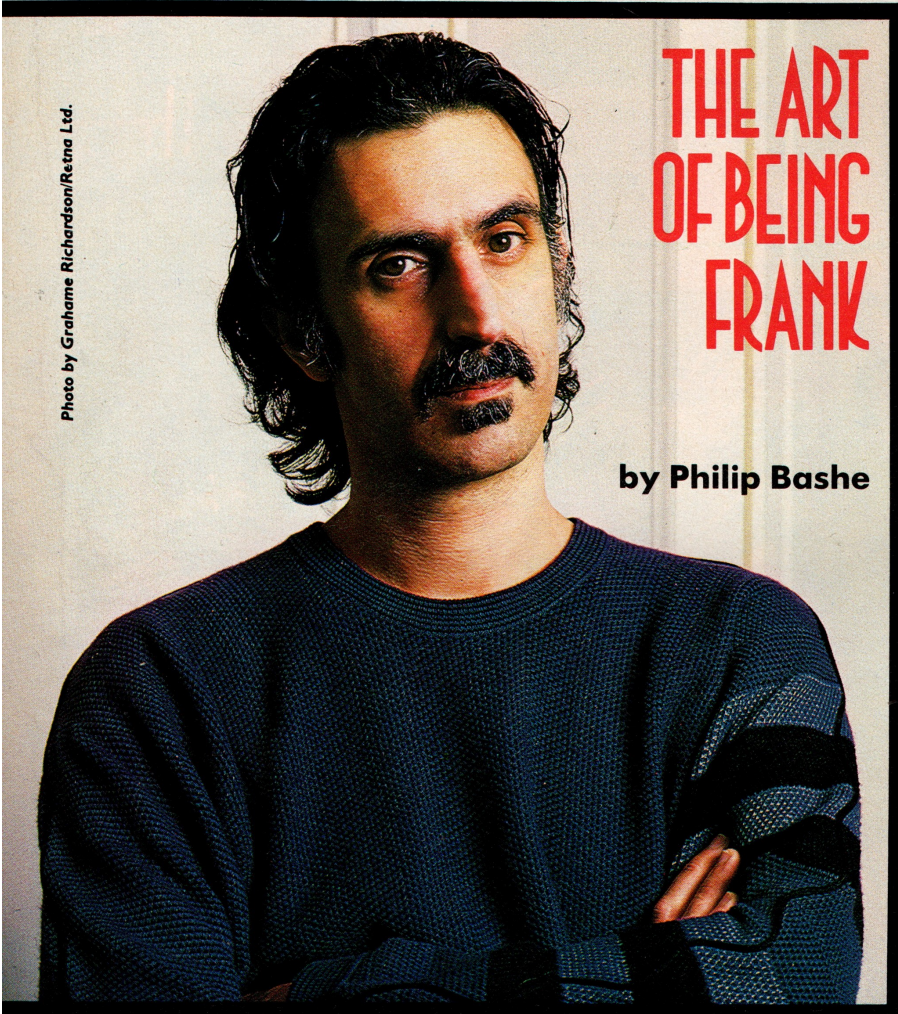
Getting Frank  
With  
Zappa



Special Focus  
On Drumming

# ZAPPA INTERVIEWED

Photo by **Grahame Richardson/Retna Ltd.**



## THE ART OF BEING FRANK

by **Philip Bashe**

It's early Friday evening, and most of his neighbors who reside along the twisting Laurel Canyon road are probably just home from work, relaxing on the veranda with a cocktail or two.

For Frank Zappa, however, the workday is about to begin, in his 24-track home studio, better known as the Utility Muffin Research Kitchen. The studio is cluttered but homey, and Zappa—clad in gray sweater and sweats, pink shirt, red socks and white Nikes—motions for you to follow him into the tape library, where canisters are piled high and a film-editing machine sits against the far wall.

It's in this environment that Frank Zappa often spends 16 hours a day. He may be disdainful of the music business and pragmatic about the business of making music, but he's passionate about his work, which these days includes projects outside rock & roll: a book

of fiction, *Them or Us*; two potential Broadway shows, *The Works* and *Thing-Fish*; and a 60-minute video from his recent 20th anniversary tour.

At age 44, Zappa seems obsessed with conserving time, which helps explain his sometimes brusque demeanor during interviews—floundering journalists can expect to be tossed a large rock rather than a life preserver by their subject. On this particular day he proved to be engaging, though on occasion his brown eyes glared, as if to say, "Here's another asshole."

But for the most part, the eyes softened as he reflected on his lengthy, prolific career. Zappa's orbit has always been at the edge of the rock & roll universe, which today he largely ignores except to pilfer some inspiration for one of his biting parodies on the rock biz. He's grown increasingly self-sufficient,

making most of his work available via mail order. And while he claims to still enjoy recording rock records, his love for composing has cultivated a deepening interest in classical music. In the past two years, Zappa has had his orchestral music recorded by the London Symphony Orchestra, his chamber compositions performed by conductor Pierre Boulez's Ensemble Intercontemporain, and has received several invitations to conduct an orchestra himself.

That would certainly come easily to Zappa, who's always considered himself a conductor, albeit in the context of a rock band. He's employed over 100 musicians in the past 20 years, providing a springboard for such players as Jean-Luc Ponty, George Duke, Aynsley Dunbar, Steve Vai and Missing Persons' Patrick O'Hearn, Terry Bozzio and Warren Cucurullo. While some have left the band disgruntled over Zappa's rigid artistic control, most regard their tenure spent in his employ as invaluable. "Working with Frank is great," says Cucurullo, a band-member from 1978 to 1981. "He's very businesslike, but at the same time he's a very personable guy, so he's both your friend and your boss."

The way in which Cucurullo wound up in Zappa's band is typical of Zappa's penchant for giving auditions to unknowns. On Halloween 1976, he hopped on a Brooklyn subway to see his hero headline Madison Square Garden. "I was introduced to Frank by one of his old soundmen," he recalls. "I was a printer at the time and was wearing this bathrobe with all these pictures of Frank that I'd printed up and was selling at the show, just so that I could make enough money to afford the tickets. I gave him this tape of me jamming, just playing solos in odd time signatures. He seemed pretty impressed."

"Then I played together with Frank backstage at a show the following year, and a friendship developed. About two months after that, he said to me, 'Get ready to audition.' He had a European tour coming up, so I assumed he meant in six months or so, but he called me the next week and told me to fly out to Los Angeles the next day. I went up to his house, and he was playing guitar, all these odd-time and atonal types of things. He'd just throw lines at me and say, 'Play that,' to see how fast I could pick up things. I passed the audition and was in the band."

Zappa's latest obsession is one that would enable him to record by himself: the New England Digital Corporation Synclavier digital synthesizer. So far he's used it exclusively only once, on last year's *Francesco Zappa*, an album of computer-generated music allegedly by an obscure 18th-century composer bearing the same name. But Zappa insists he won't be discarding his expansive file of musicians' names just yet and calls his latest aggregation one of the best he's ever assembled: singer/guitarist Ike Willis, guitarist Ray White, keyboardists Bobby Martin and Alan Zavod, bassist Scott Thunes and drummer Chad Wackerman.

Some final notes from the interview: For a man whose music is infused with such sca-

thing wit, Frank Zappa rarely smiles. The only time he permitted himself a grin was after he'd clicked off the lights in the library to screen a rough cut of his live video. With son Dweezil (at 15 the second oldest of Zappa's brood of four) sitting across from him, Zappa seemed transfixed by his own image on the screen, and finally, the famous drooping mustache and square patch of beard raised in a smile. It was a nice sight indeed.

**In 1970 you disbanded the original Mothers of Invention so that your audience could appreciate what you'd done up to that point. That's been a constant throughout your career, hasn't it—having your work misinterpreted or accepted on a superficial level?**

Well, there are certain people who have ears and enough background so that they can hear something and understand what's happening, and there are other people who are baffled by it.

I like to experiment, and most Americans don't like to listen to experimental things. Plus, the climate today is very dance oriented; everybody's been told to jog a lot and be healthy and live forever, and things that fit into that lifestyle are the things that are accepted. That's not what I do.

So I just do what I do for the people who like it.

**You must have found it ironic that with "Valley Girl," your biggest hit ever, the very thing you were satirizing inspired a whole new fad.**

That's the best thing about that record: It was a social commentary that the market carried to its ultimate, ridiculous extreme. Anything I could say about a female person from the San Fernando Valley with air in her head was magnified to the nth degree when that character was adopted as a role model for young ladies all over the country. "Valley Girl" proved that a lot of people were hurtin'.

**You've been composing more and more on the Synclavier digital synthesizer. Why that and not, say, a Fairlight C.M.I.?**

I'd tried the Fairlight a few years ago and didn't like the sound of it, so I bought the Synclavier instead. I don't want to denigrate the Fairlight, because I understand they've made a lot of improvements to it since the time I heard it. And that's also not to say that the Synclavier is the ultimate computer instrument, because I've heard others capable of doing things it can't. But the main feature is its music-printing program, SCRIPT. After all those years of scoring with pen and pencil, it's a blessing to be able to write your own composition, push a button and have all the parts printed out.

**Do you do all your own programming?**

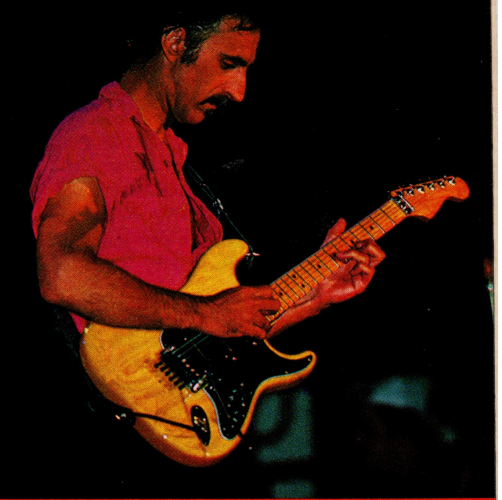
The compositions themselves are loaded in by me playing things on the keyboard, and I do all the editing myself. Until recently, I used a guy named David Ocker to do all the

## The Zappa Strat

Since 1982, Frank Zappa has been playing a Fender Stratocaster customized by Performance Guitars of Los Angeles. Neither Zappa nor Performance's Bob McDonald can pinpoint the year of the alder body, though McDonald estimates it's from the 1960s. "The neck is one of ours," he says, "very thin with a flat back and a very flat maple fingerboard. We've made about four or five Strat and Telly necks for Frank and Dweezil; he swaps parts like crazy."

The guitar has been fitted with a Floyd Rose tremolo, a built-in parametric EQ and three Seymour Duncan humbucking bar-magnet pickups. Strings are Ernie Ball stainless-steel; picks are either stainless-steel or copper.

Photo by David Allen



cleanup work, such as putting in clefs and performance marks. He was like a musical secretary, typing in specific rhythms and stuff in SCRIPT language. I just hired another guy to do that job.

**Most of your compositions call for a virtuoso on each instrument. Is that why you continue to record with a band, except for the Francesco Zappa album?**

Actually, a Synclavier, or any kind of computer, is easily more virtuosic than any

musician. I can type-in rhythms, and you'll have a hard time finding anybody on the planet capable of playing them. Push a button and it comes out right every time.

**Tell us a bit about your home studio. When was it built?**

In 1980 as a 24-track, though we didn't get the Sony digital machine until later. It's got a Harrison 48-channel console, a 24-track Studer multitrack, the 24-track Sony digital, a 16-track PCM-1610 Sony, a four-track, a 1/2" two-track and a 1/4" two-track Studer.

## Chad Wackerman: Putting the Zap Into Zappa

Photo by Paul Jonason Photography

When asked "What have you learned as a Zappa band-member?" drummer Chad Wackerman chuckles softly. "There's so much," he replies after several seconds of thought. "In fact, a couple of the guys in the band refer to it as Zappa University because you pick up so much with Frank."

Wackerman gleans his lessons from behind a Drum Workshop acoustic kit: 22" x 16" bass drum, 14" x 6 1/2" brass snare, 10", 12" and 14" rack toms, and 16" and 18" floor toms. Cymbals are Paiste: (left to right around the kit) 15" Rude hi-hat, 13" splash, 17" crash, 16" Rude crash, bells (Wuhans, from China), 22" medium ride, 14" heavy hi-hat, 18" crash, 22" China and 14" crash. All hardware is DW, including Wackerman's 5002 double bass-drum pedal and 5502 remote hi-hat stand for the 15" Rude. Sticks are Vic Firth 5B wood.

Wackerman also plays a Simmons SDS7 electronic kit with snare, hi-hat and bass-drum modules (the latter used as a floor tom), two cymbal and five tom-tom modules, and a Clap Trap. It's augmented with a DW acoustic snare and bass, plus several Paiste cymbals.



Two prerequisites for drumming in Zappa's outfit are sight-reading for recording and the ability to adapt to Zappa's abrupt and unorthodox onstage cues. "They change every tour," sighs Wackerman, with Zappa since 1981. "For example, if Frank wants a Weather Report-like beat, he'll wiggle his fingers above his head. If he pulls a clump of hair, that signifies a reggae rhythm, but if he pulls on both sides, it means ska. And then there's one for heavy metal..."

"Anything can happen at any time, for no reason," he laughs. "That's the approach."

The analog multitrack also has eight- and 16-track headblocks, and the two-track machine plays at any speed, from 3/4 to 30 ips and all points in between. I can put on tapes that I made back in 1955 and re-EQ them and stuff. Right now we're remastering my albums from *Sheik Yerbouti* to *Ship Arriving Too Late to Save a Drowning Witch*, which are going to be rereleased on EMI America.

**What with your interest in computer instruments and recording technology, are you still interested in the guitar? To a lot of people, you're a bona fide guitar hero.**

Well, people in the United States view guitar playing as a form of exercise; it's like whoever does the most pushups wins. I'm not really interested in being a competitor in some contest to see who can do the most

pushups.

**Let's go over your guitar history a bit. For years you were associated with**

**"Frank's one of our foremost composers, but he's usually viewed more as a rock & roll musician. He's got some incredible music that a lot of people don't even know about."**

**—George Duke**

**the Gibson SG. When did you switch to Fender Stratocasters?**

About three years ago. I got my first SG in

1970, after hearing one for the first time at a party on the Riviera. Before that, I was playing a Gibson LS-5. When I got back to L.A., I went down to the guitar shop and picked out a secondhand SG, which I used until about 1975. A guy showed up at a concert in Phoenix with a homemade version of an SG, with a 23-fret neck, special inlays and stuff. I bought that from him and started using it shortly thereafter.

**What's your current stage setup?**

On the last tour I used two 100-watt Marshalls for main amps and two small Acoustics to run my three MXR digital delays through. The only other effect I use is a stereo chorus.

**Ever since you disbanded the Mothers of Invention, your lineups have been in a constant state of flux. Is that instability intentional?**

I don't call that instability. The bands I've had were usually designed to perform certain types of music, and all musicians have to audition to get the job. As far as I know, it's the only major performing group that gives someone from east of nowhere the opportunity to join a band that's going to give him a chance to play in front of hundreds of thousands of people on a major tour and stake a reputation for himself.

## We asked Billy Sheehan to endorse one DiMarzio bass pickup.....and he endorsed three!



This ad was supposed to feature Billy endorsing the DiMarzio Model P™ bass pickup. When we talked to him to find out what he likes about it, he said, "it's easy to make a bass loud, but it's hard to make a bass heard." He likes the DiMarzio Model P™ because it slices through the other instruments without covering them up, and does it in a way that's powerful yet tonally pleasing. Then, he went on to tell us how much he likes the new DiMarzio Active Model P™. He thinks it's the best active system he's tried, and he especially likes the fact that it uses miniature lithium batteries that hardly ever need changing. Next, he told us how much he likes the DiMarzio Model One™, particularly in the neck position. He says it's got great clarity with a super-deep low end.

Actually, it's not surprising that Billy uses 3 DiMarzio bass pickups, because he sounds like three players in one. His playing breaks tradition and furthers the evolution of the electric bass, and so do his DiMarzio pickups. If you care about your sound, don't settle for anything less than DiMarzio.



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Billy Sheehan, is the bass player for the band, **Talas**. Look for the new **Talas** lp, coming soon.

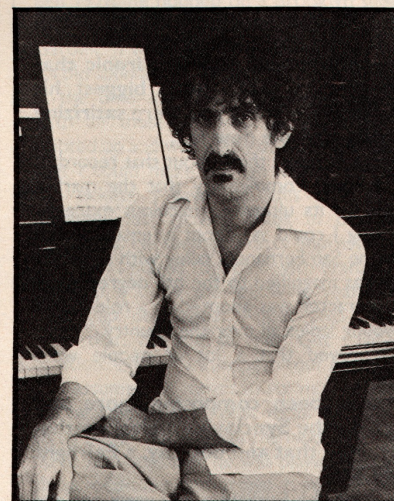


Photo by Chris Walter/Retna Ltd.

**Zappa has recently been composing on the Synclavier, with its SCRIPT music-printing program.**

**How much creative freedom do your musicians have?**

I don't tell people what to play in a solo, although if we're playing a certain type of song and a guy suddenly has an urge to play a polka in the middle of it, he may not like the consequences of that. And I generally don't assign choreography.

**How important is theatricality to being a band-member?**

It's not inflicted on anybody. But, for example, the guys I had on the last tour were just plain hams, so when it was time to ham it up, they had a certain amount of latitude to

Continued on page 56

do whatever they wanted. But when the hand comes down to start the song, you'd better be playing your instrument.

**How did that lineup compare to previous ones? What was its main strength?**

Showmanship, but not at the expense of musical ability. Probably the band with the greatest amount of showmanship was the one I had with Flo and Eddie [1970-71], but I certainly wouldn't rate it very highly musically; it was more of a vaudeville show. This band can put on a great show and still play its buns off.

**Of all the musicians you've employed over the years, who would constitute an all-star band?**

George Duke, who's probably one of the best all-around musicians I've ever worked with, just in terms of a real love of music as an art form, but without the ego involvement that usually comes with guys that can really play. Also on keyboards, Tommy Mars definitely had his own harmonic concept.

On drums, I'd say Aynsley Dunbar, Chad

Wackerman and Vinnie Colaiuta; on bass, Arthur Barrow, for studio chops and technical precision, but for all-around playing, Scott Thunes gets the nod. He's really a spectacular talent.

Steve Vai was probably the most virtuosic

**"Frank can either bring out the serious side or the humor in a classical piece. He has a way of manipulating music to evoke different emotions."**

**—Warren Cucurullo**

on guitar, and on percussion, Ruth Underwood.

**Having worked with both rock & roll musicians and classical musicians, what's the main difference?**

My band's better.

**Have you had to overcome any prej-**

**udices in working with orchestras like the London Symphony? Are you sometimes still perceived as just some long-haired rock & roll musician?**

Of course there's always that type of prejudice, but frankly, digital technology is making it possible to do away with these people. I'm hoping that in the future I can just go into my studio, push a button and get it played right, and not have to put up with some bullshit from someone in a tuxedo.

**Is there the same struggle between artistry and economics in the classical world as in the rock world?**

Americans have this funny idea about symphony orchestras, that just because these people are dressed like penguins, they're somehow closer to God, playing this pure, beautiful, perfect music. Well, they have the same problems with counting rhythm and staying in tune that rock musicians do. The only difference is, rock & roll is louder.

And if you think rock & rollers are poseurs when they dress up to go to a Boy George show, just imagine what type of poseur you're dealing with in the classical world: These people go to see what is, in most cases, a slipshod performance, because classical music in America is underfunded. They pretend they're there to hear the works of the great masters when in fact they're just there to see the guy with the sticks swoon around. It's the same type of star syndrome except that it's got this hypocritical patina to it.

**Your recent tour celebrated your 20th anniversary since the formation of the Mothers of Invention. Any observations on how rock & roll has progressed over the past two decades?**

I don't think it's progressed in any kind of aesthetic sense, it's just gotten more cut and dried. When I first started making albums, there was more of a marketplace for experimental, oddball stuff. What passes for oddball stuff today is more fashion stuff—girls with waffle hair. It has nothing to do with music.

**In the '60s you satirized hippies on "Flower Punk"; in the '80s punks provoked your ire on "Tinseltown Rebellion." Which generation has provided more fodder for songs?**

Well, basically, what we're talking about is the same syndrome: the willingness of people to adopt behavioral patterns that are specified for them by some outside source. Somebody tells you, "Be a hippie," "Be a punk," and you're dumb enough to do it. One era isn't riper than the other, and there'll be another era coming along right after this: Be a . . . fake Christian.

**Do your children provide insight into the '80s generation, or are they pretty atypical of their peers?**

My kids are not typical.

**In general, you speak disparagingly of the present creative environment. Is there some other period in time that might have been more conducive to you as an artist?**

To me? [Laughs] I doubt it.

## Classic Tracks

**"Who Are the Brain Police?" (from *Freak Out!*, 1966)**—Fender Stratocaster guitar, Fender Deluxe amp, fuzz-tone.

"That was the second song we recorded for the album. The producer, Tom Wilson, had come to see us at the Whisky-a-Go-Go, saw us playing a blues number and thought, 'Ah, a white blues band, how hip.' He never really bothered to find out what kind of band we really were.

"The first track we cut was 'Anyway the Wind Blows': nice, safe, fine. The second was 'Who Are the Brain Police?' He immediately got on the phone to the record company: 'Uh-oh!'"

**"Willie the Pimp" (from *Hot Rats*, 1970)**—Les Paul guitar ("since stolen from me"), Fender Deluxe amp, wah-wah pedal.

"I was overdubbing the solo while standing in the control room. The guitar was going into the board, out of the board, into the studio, into the amp, picked up by a microphone and back into the board.

"I'm playing my wah-wah pedal and wailing away, and this guy from the union comes in. He's standing behind me, tapping his pencil on his clipboard, waiting for me to get done so that he can ask me whether or not I've filed some kind of union paper about how many musicians I'm using. That's the solo on the record, and the whole time there was this union pood-head standing behind me."

**"Montana" (from *Overnight Sensation*, 1973)**—Gibson SG guitar, 100-watt

Marshall amp.

"I played the SG through this special compressor I'd had built for me: into the board, into the studio and into the Marshall, which eventually exploded."

**"Rat Tomago" (from *Sheik Yerbouti*, 1979)**—23-fret Gibson SG guitar, 100-watt Marshall amp.

"That song was never written down; it was a guitar solo recorded on a four-track. And it was nominated for a Grammy for Best Instrumental Composition. Now, it's not a bad solo, but a Grammy nominee? That should tell you how fake the Grammys are."

**"Valley Girl" (from *Ship Arriving Too Late to Save a Drowning Witch*, 1982)**—Fender Stratocaster guitar, 100-watt Marshall amp.

"Valley Girl" started off at the end of an overdub session, just me on guitar and Chad Wackerman on drums. The tape sat around for months while I did a tour. Then I sat down and wrote some lyrics, and the tape sat around again.

"One day at a vocal session, I got out the track and had the guys in the band sing this chorale thing I'd written, so now we had guitar, drums and chorale background. A few days later, I woke up Moon in the middle of the night and had her come down and do a monologue. She did five separate ones, all of which I ping-ponged together to make the one version that's on the record. Finally, the bass was added last."