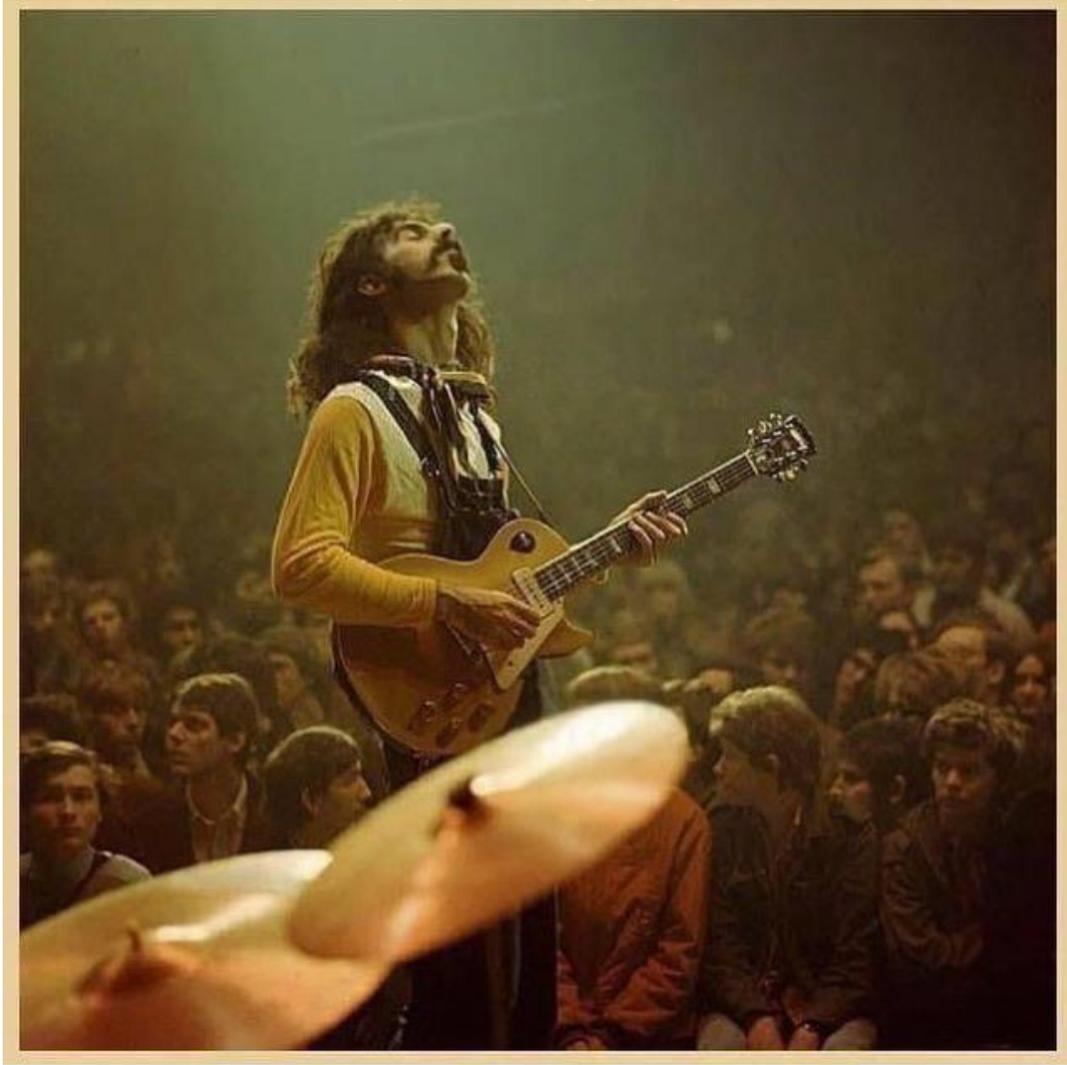


The Youth Counter-Culture Movement?

By: Pablo Sastoque Vega



(Frank Zappa performing live circa 1970)

Introduction:

During the late 50's and 60's the Rock & Roll genre experienced unprecedented growth that led to the creation of different subgenres and categories within which bands gained fame and recognition. For instance, The Mothers of Invention, otherwise known as The Mothers, were a group of Psychedelic Rock formed out of Los Angeles, California in 1964 and led by the recognized artist and revolutionary Frank Zappa. Many would describe Frank Zappa and, in

consequence, The Mothers, as avant-garde and experimental in the genre of Rock, especially when it came to the overall theme of their projects and the message they intended to promote. The band led by Zappa are credited with creating a musical style that was under the wing of Rock but pulled tools from genres like folk, or even jazz and evolved into a more modern serious music that would be accompanied by highly satirical lyrics that often criticized the system and society as a whole.

During the time the band stayed together, they had multiple line-ups coming up to nine members at certain points in time, however, when it came to recording their third album "*We're Only In It For The Money*" the members were; Frank Zappa (Lead guitarist, lyricist, composer, vocalist), Roy Collins (Vocalist), Roy Estrada (Bassist), Jimmy Carl Black (Drummer), Billy Mundi (Drummer), Don Preston (Keyboardist) Bunk Gardner (Wind Instrumentalist), Jim "Motorhead" Sherwood (Saxophonist), and Ian Underwood (Saxophonist, Pianist). The album was therefore recorded from May to September 1967 in between Europe and New York as the band toured the UK, Denmark and Sweden, (However it would not be released until 1968 due to the controversy that it would bring to the scene) with a clear topic in mind; Criticizing the youth counterculture movement.

Zappa had always been a dire critic of drug use and its promotion within the youth counterculture movement of the 1960's. Therefore, as the so-called "Summer of Love" approached and many of his peers packed their bags to spend this critical moment in time at Haight-Ashbury in San Francisco, he decided to write, compose and produce what would be a satirical record pointed towards what he argued was an excuse to do drugs, under the auspice of a fight for peace and human rights, an opinion he shared with the legendary George Harrison. He continued to fuel this argument through the cover of the record, which shows a clear mockery of

the 1967 album by The Beatles “*Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*” in order to represent their rejection towards the psychedelic era of pop culture.



(Cover of “We’re Only In It For The Money” by The Mothers Of Invention)

TRACK #1: Are You Hung Up?

The album begins with a very interesting dialogue by Eric Clapton, in which he repeats
the
title while a distorted voice expresses their desire to eliminate all of Frank Zappa’s masters from
existence. It ends with a small distorted guitar riff that serves as foreshadowing for the

psychedelic themes and aura of the record especially when it comes to its musicality.



(Eric Clapton and Frank Zappa circa 1970)

TRACK #2: Who Needs The Peace Corps?

This track features a very interesting and, in my opinion, catchy hook, that is built around a joyful melody almost like a lullaby for kids, accompanied by very soulful horns and a jazz progression to make it more sophisticated and even a doo-wop feeling. Additionally, the lyrics serve as a mockery of the “hippies” and their migratory movement to San Francisco, specially by calling them the “Peace Corps”. All this satirical lyrics and idealism is exemplified in the songs chorus which reads:

*“Every town must have a place
Where phony hippies meet
Psychedelic dungeons
Popping up on every street
Go to San Francisco, hotcha”*

TRACK #8: What's The Ugliest Part of Your Body?

One of my personal favorites, despite having no real contribution to the overall theme of the record it has a beautiful melody which mocks the harmonies adopted by groups like The Beach Boys or even The Beatles, but also exemplifies in a sarcastic way the message of peace and love portrayed by youth counterculture movement. However, Zappa ends the song by contrasting the melody with a very dark and imposing voice (clearly meant to be a mockery of what older generations said about the youth counterculture movement) that says:

*“All your children are poor unfortunate victims
Of systems beyond their control
A plague upon your ignorance
And the gray despair of your ugly life”*

In my opinion this song shows that Zappa did not oppose the pursuit of peace and a social change, but merely disagreed with the methods as he believed that things like the eccentric fashion or use of drugs only took attention away from the real social fight and gave oppositors something to criticize about the movement, this idea would be later developed during the record like in Track #9: Absolutely Free. Finally, this son has a distorted more avant-garde version later in the record on Track #17: What's The Ugliest Part of Your Body (Reprise).



(Alternative cover of the album)

TRACK #10: Flower Punk

The title of this track is a clear mockery of the youth counterculture movement and how they used flowers as a sort of symbol for love and reconciliation. Furthermore, it brings back themes of discrimination against the young activists and the effects of police brutality, which are very present in the record and Zappa makes sure we understand he is fiercely against them.

In addition, this track is a clear example of the advances the band made in the studio, being one of the pioneers in the use of stereo audio to bring different messages through the left and right side of the listeners headphones. This is shown during the outro that heavily criticized the motivations of the so-called “voices of a generation”, Zappa argues that these bands that claim the youth counterculture movement are, like the title suggests, only in it for the money in the following verse:

Boy, this is really exciting, making a rock & roll record. I can't even wait until our record comes out and the teen-agers start to buy it. We'll all be rich and famous! When my royalty check comes I think I'm going to buy a Mustang.

Once again, we as listeners are given the chance to understand that Zappa is not against the peace and love that the youth counterculture movement seems to defend, but opposes the appropriation of these noble causes for the lucrative benefit of rock stars as well as the methods used to achieve social change.



(Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention on July 23rd 1968)

Conclusion:

I would have liked to keep expanding in the social and musical contributions of this record, however, the lyricism and production diffuses into a state of mere psychedelia that would require excessive research and time to be broken down. That is my one criticism for the record, it lacks cohesion and sometimes feels all over the place, making the message harder to understand and agree with. Nonetheless, I believe that this exploration of one of the most important moments in Rock & Roll history and pop culture is key for understanding the different views people had at this time. Zappa's attitude towards the youth counterculture movement is fascinating and goes hand in hand with his dire criticism of drug abuse and its promotion within the genre. It provides insight to a different approach of peace and social change as the endgame for Rockstars.



(Alternative cover for the album)

In my opinion this is a great record production wise but it shines brighter when the lyricism takes the main stage and we understand Zappa's criticism towards the good, the bad and the ugly of the youth counterculture movement and how it changed the way we approach social change as a society. It does all this incredibly well while mocking the many criticisms directed towards the genre itself and exposing the flaws in it, allowing the listener to build a personal perspective detached from the public opinion and its influence. I would recommend this album to anyone seeking a different view of the 60's movements in musicality, social change and even production, but I would warn them about the vagueness of some songs and the lack of order that makes the concept of this record harder to understand.

3.5/5 ★