

**It Can't Happen Here:
Social and Political Commentary in the
Works of Frank Zappa**

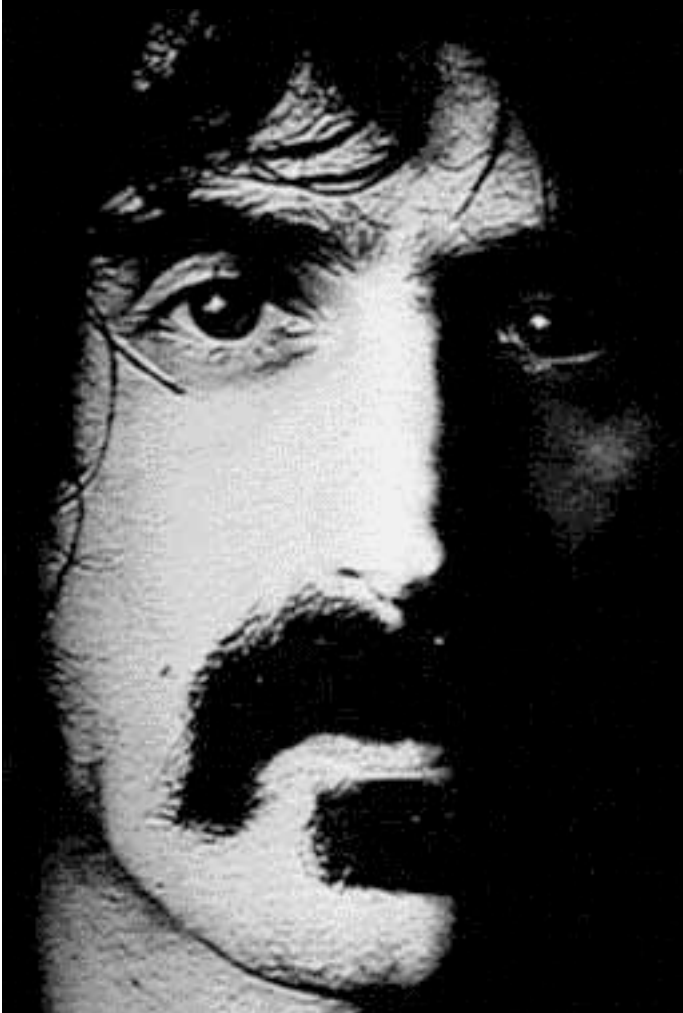


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Polish translation provided by **Grzegorz Gras**

It Can't Happen Here: Social and Political Commentary in the Works of Frank Zappa

- Biographical Sketch
- Contextualization
- Politics within the **Project/Object**
- Politics as **Conceptual Continuity**
- Case Studies of Sociopolitical Commentary



Frank Zappa: Biographical Sketch

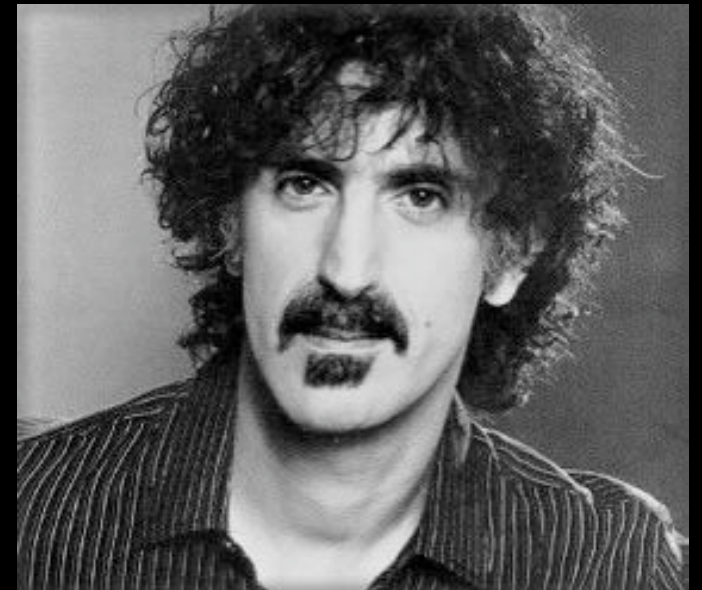
- American composer, guitarist, band leader, conductor, film maker, record producer, political activist, and outspoken social commentator; born **December 21, 1940** in Baltimore, Maryland
- Early musical influences include **rhythm & blues** and **avant-garde classical music**.
- Formed original **Mothers of Invention** band in 1964; for the next three decades FZ performed and recorded with dozens of rock, jazz, blues, and classical musicians.
- Died of prostate cancer on **December 5, 1993** in Los Angeles, California, just short of his 53rd birthday.



Frank Zappa: Contextualization

Before discussing the sociopolitical elements of FZ's work, it is important to understand the context in which they occur. The following concepts informed all of FZ's creative work:

- **Project /Object:** FZ considered each individual *project* as an organic and integral part of the *object*.
- **Conceptual Continuity:** a number of thematic elements may be found in FZ's work throughout his career. FZ referred to the use of these themes and obsessions within the Project/Object as "conceptual continuity."
- **Intercontinental Absurdities:** FZ's term for *Dadaism*, a guiding principle in the way he constructed his works out of the disparate elements above.

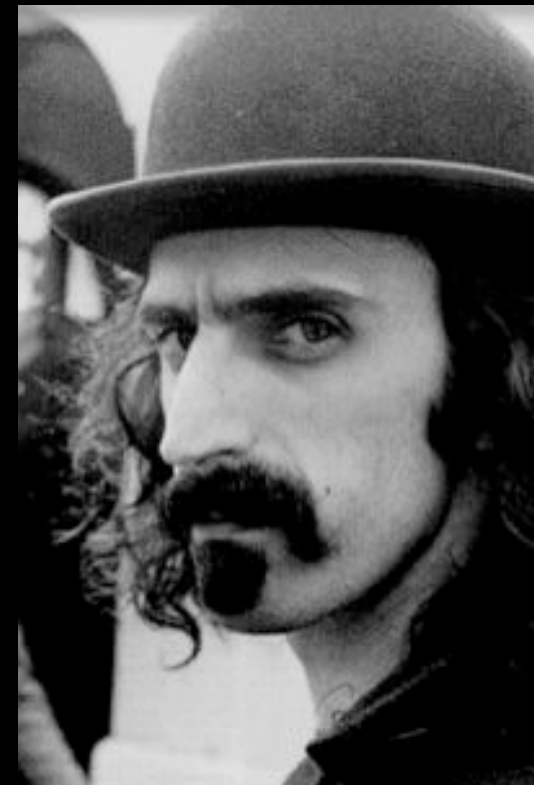


Frank Zappa: Politics within the Project/Object

FZ was politically engaged throughout his entire adult life. However, the nature and degree of his political activism transformed over the years.

1960s:

- FZ's distrust of "the system" may be traced to his arrest in 1962 on charges of obscenity and pornography, when he was entrapped by undercover vice squad agents in San Bernardino, California.
- Frequent targets in the 1960s were **hippie subculture** ("Flower Punk", 1967), California Governor **Ronald Reagan** ("The Chrome-Plated Megaphone of Destiny", 1968), **conformity** ("Plastic People", 1967), **race relations** ("Trouble Every Day", 1966).
- Very few direct political references occur during this period; most of the themes are more universal.



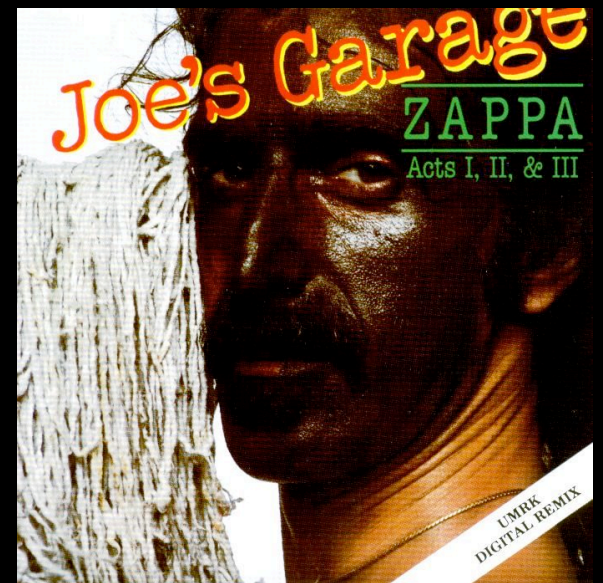
Frank Zappa: Politics within the Project/Object

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1970s:

- FZ's **libertarian** point of view begins to manifest itself primarily as a result of the quest for complete control of his own creative work.
- Targets include US President **Richard Nixon** (“Dickie’s Such an Asshole”, 1973), **cultural stereotypes** (“Jewish Princess”, 1979), **religion** (“Catholic Girls, 1979), and **totalitarianism** (*Joe’s Garage*, 1979).

Suppression of free thought is perhaps best represented in the album *Joe’s Garage*, the theme of which is life in a society where music has been deemed illegal.

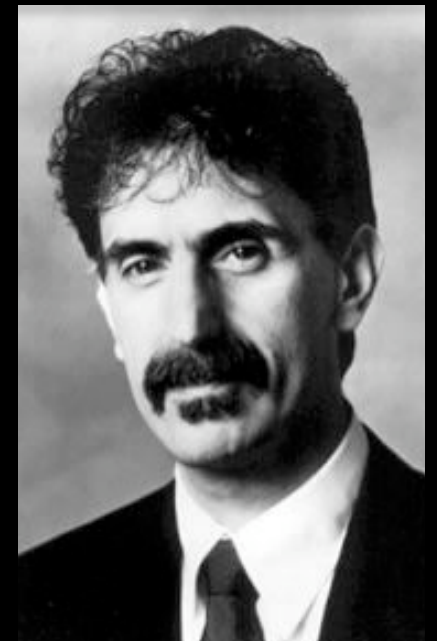


Frank Zappa: Politics within the Project/Object

FZ was politically engaged throughout his entire adult life. However, the nature and degree of his political activism transformed over the years.

1980s:

- FZ becomes more politically active as the result of Ronald Reagan's ascendance to the US Presidency in 1981.
- Frequent targets during the 1980s were US President **Ronald Reagan** and members of the Reagan administration (*Broadway the Hard Way*, 1988), **religious fanaticism** ("Dumb All Over", 1981), **labor unions** ("Stick Together", 1983), **political correctness** (*Thing Fish*, 1983), and **censorship** ("Porn Wars", 1986).
- Voter registration booths at concert venues and admonition to "Register to Vote".
- 1985 appearance before the US Senate Commerce, Technology, and Transportation Committee concerning record labeling; 1988 tour which featured several new politically-motivated songs.



Frank Zappa: Politics within the Project/Object

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1990s:

- FZ became a reporter with the Financial News Network (FNN).
- Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, FZ became increasingly aware of his impact as a cultural icon to the people of the former Soviet-block countries. In 1990 he met Czech President Vaclav Havel.
- New political issues include **environmentalism** (“Outrage at Valdez”), **poverty**, **abortion** (“Food Gathering in Post-Industrial America”), and **immigration** (“Welcome to the United States”), all referenced in the final album released during his lifetime, *The Yellow Shark* (1993).
- FZ continued his political activism in spite of deteriorating health, including a proposed run for the US Presidency during the 1992 election season.

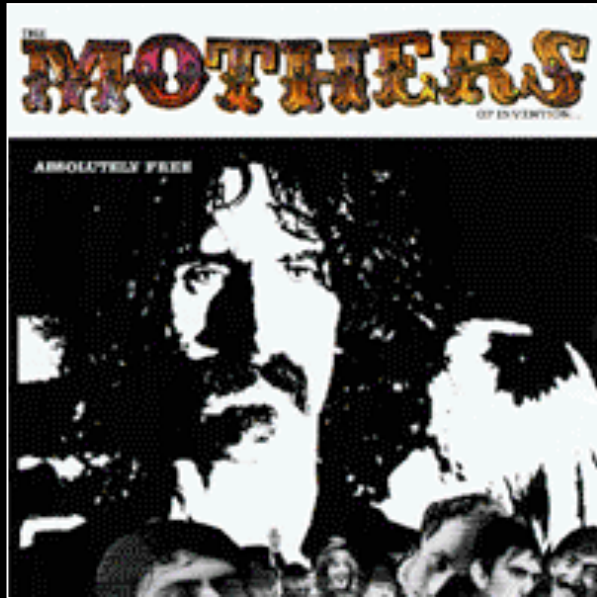


Frank Zappa: Politics as Conceptual Continuity

Social and political references abound in FZ's work, manifested in a number of ways:

- **Titles:** “One Man, One Vote” (1985), “The Beltway Bandits” (1986), “Star Wars Won’t Work” (1988), and “Pentagon Afternoon” (1992).
- **Program notes:** “The Chrome-Plated Megaphone of Destiny” (1968) and “Love Story” (1984).
- **Lyrics:** “Brown Shoes Don’t Make It” (1967), “Hot Plate Heaven at the Green Hotel” (1988), “Dickie’s Such an Asshole” (1973), “Promiscuous” (1988).
- **Album design:** *Absolutely Free* (1967), *Frank Zappa Meets the Mothers of Prevention* (1985), and *Broadway the Hard Way* (1988).
- **Music:** FZ’s most abstract approach to sociopolitical commentary occurs in the music itself, including
 - **Quotation:** “Rhymin’ Man” (1988), “Jesus Thinks You’re a Jerk” (1988).
 - **Extended performance techniques:** “Porn Wars” (1985), “Food Gathering in Post-Industrial America” (1992).
 - **Stylistic and technical diversity:** “Brown Shoes Don’t Make It” (1967).

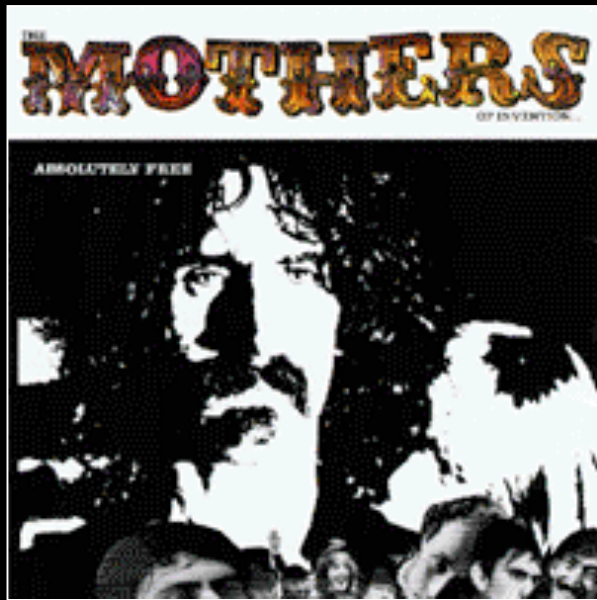
Frank Zappa: Case Studies of Sociopolitical Commentary



“Brown Shoes Don’t Make It”
(*Absolutely Free*, 1967)

- Targets corrupt politicians by emphasizing their deviant sexual behavior and phony “public” lives.
- Other themes include conformity, television culture, futility of the educational system, and the drudgery of life in the labor force.
- Sharp juxtapositions of widely contrasting musical styles.
- The following excerpt has no fewer than six distinct musical styles within about two minutes: atonality, “spy movie” jazz, 1950s doo-wop, 1920s vaudeville, 1960s “beach pop”, *musique concrète* .

Frank Zappa: Case Studies of Sociopolitical Commentary



“Brown Shoes Don’t Make It” (*Absolutely Free*, 1967)



We see in the back of the City Hall mind
The dream of a girl about thirteen
Off with her clothes and into a bed
Where she tickles his fancy all night lonnnnnnnng

His wife's attending an orchid show
She squealed for a week to get him to go
But back in the bed, his teen-age queen
Is rocking & rolling & acting obscene
Baby baby
Baby baby

And he loves it! He loves it! It curls up his toes
She bites his fat neck and it lights up his nose
But he cannot be fooled, old City Hall Fred
She's nasty! She's nasty! She digs it in bed!

Do it again and do it some more
That does it by golly, it's nasty for sure
Nasty nasty nasty, nasty nasty nasty
(Only thirteen and she knows how to nasty...)

She's a dirty young mind
Corrupted, corroded
Well she's thirteen today
And I hear she gets loaded.

Frank Zappa: Case Studies of Sociopolitical Commentary



“The Chrome-Plated Megaphone of Destiny”
(*We're Only In It for the Money*, 1968)

- Original album cover was a parody of The Beatles *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* album from the previous year.
- Includes references to Franz Kafka's story “In the Penal Colony”, Japanese internment camps in California during World War II, and then California Governor Ronald Reagan's solution to “the hippie problem.”

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- FZ's program notes request that the listener read Kafka's story before listening to the music.
- Music heavily influenced by composer Edgard Varèse and *musique concrète*.

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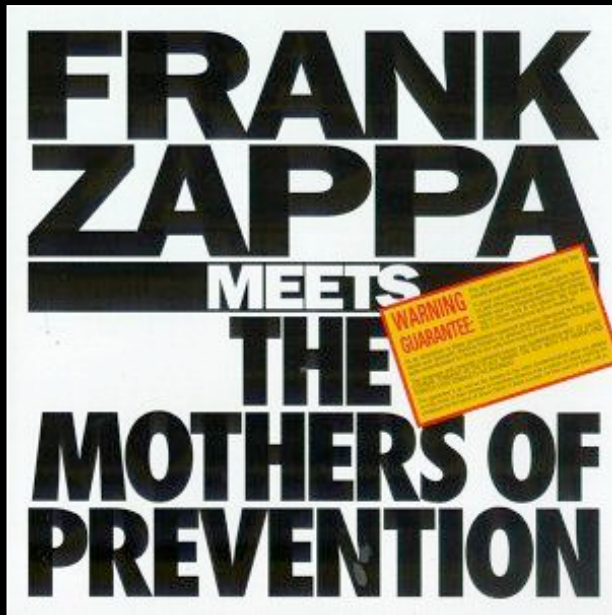


“The Chrome-Plated Megaphone of Destiny”
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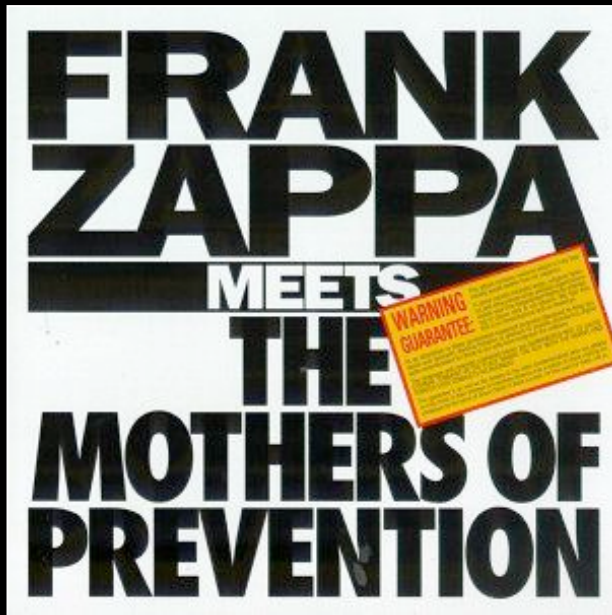
Frank Zappa: Case Studies of Sociopolitical Commentary



“Porn Wars”
(*Frank Zappa Meets the Mothers of Prevention*, 1986)

- FZ’s response to censorship and the PMRC’s attempt to label albums.
- Music is entirely electronic, utilizing the Synclavier and *musique concrète* manipulations of recorded testimony from the 1986 PMRC Senate Hearings.
- Recordings are layered in a surrealistic collage emphasizing the more salacious details from the proceedings.
- Includes several references to other FZ albums as part of the **Conceptual Continuity**.

Frank Zappa: Case Studies of Sociopolitical Commentary



“Porn Wars”

(Frank Zappa Meets the Mothers of Prevention, 1986)



Senator Hollings: ...But in all candor, I would tell you it's, it's outrageous filth. So, I'll be looking from this Senator's standpoint, not just to bring pressures but to try to see if there is some constitutional provisions to tax, or approach that can be used on the Congress to limit this outrageous filth.

Chairman: Senator Tribble.

Senator Tribble: Rape, incest, sexual violence . . .

Senator Hollings: It's outrageous filth . . .

Senator Tribble: Is like sandpaper to the soul . . . Now, the effects of such lyrics on a well adjusted child may not be cataclysmic

Senator Hollings: It's outrageous filth!

Senator Tribble: Rather the emotional damage is more subtle

Senator Hawkins: Fire and chains and . . .

Senator Hollings: It's outrageous filth!

Senator Hawkins: Other . . . objectionable . . . tools of gratification in some twisted mind . . .

Johnny Guitar Watson: YEAH!

Senator Tribble: Now, the effects of such lyrics on a well adjusted child may not be cataclysmic . . .

Senator Hollings: Porn Rock . . .

Senator Tribble: Rather the emotional damage is more subtle

Senator Hollings: Willy nilly over the air

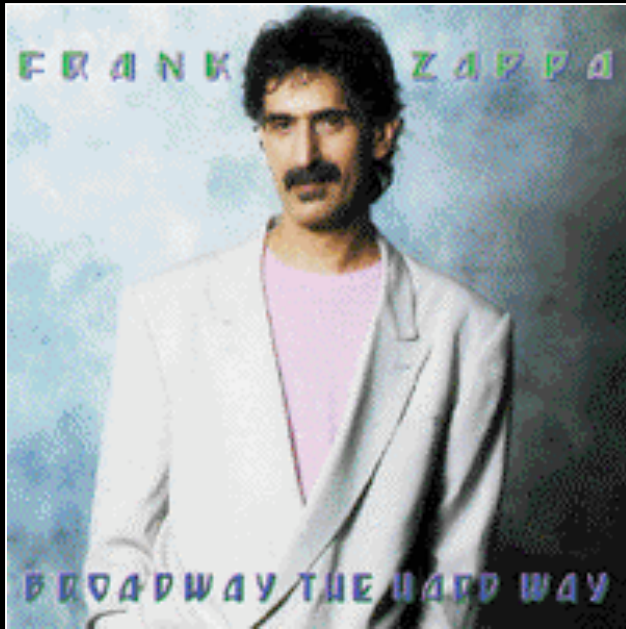
?: (And hear it now . . . hear it . . . hear it . . .)

Senator Hollings: If I could find some way constitutionally to do away with it, I would.

Senator Hawkins: Fire and chains and . . . other . . . objectionable . . .

Senator Hollings: Rock porn [etc....]

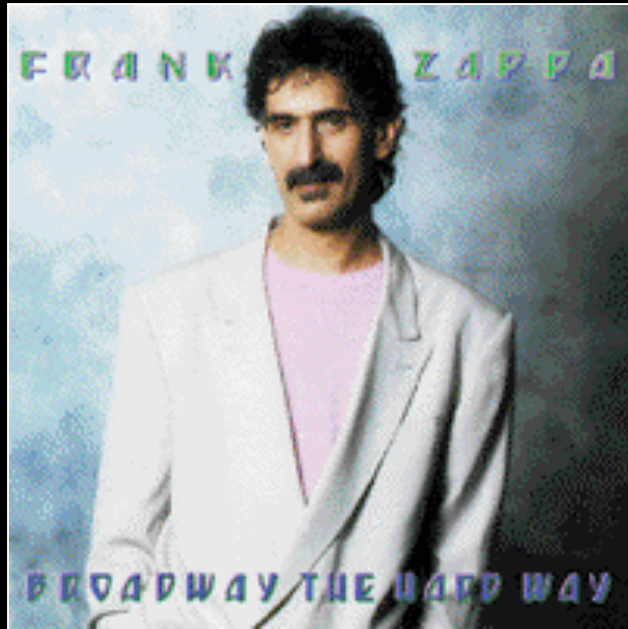
Frank Zappa: Case Studies of Sociopolitical Commentary



“Rhymin’ Man”
(*Broadway the Hard Way*, 1988)

- Commentary on Reverend Jesse Jackson.
- Music is a parody of Country & Western music.
- Includes over a dozen musical quotations directly related to the content of the lyrics; e.g., Chopin’s *Marche funebre*, the themes from “Mission Impossible” and “The Untouchables”, “Happy Days Are Here Again”, “Hail to the Chief”, “Hava Nagila”, “La Cucaracha”.

Frank Zappa: Case Studies of Sociopolitical Commentary



“Rhymin’ Man” (*Broadway the Hard Way*, 1988)



They say when Doctor King got shot,
Jesse hatched an awful plot,
Dipped his hands in the doctors blood,
'n' rubbed his shirt like playin' with mud
Looked around for all the press
'n' said: check me out, my name is Jess!
Ill be known from towns 'n' farms—
Doctor King died in my arms!

Rhymin' man,
Tall and tan,
Rhyme or reason,
Play your hand—
Rhyme on this—rhyme on that
Oh, you naughty democrat!

A few years later, legend says,
Rhymin' man made a run for prez
Farrakhan made him a clown,
Over there near Hymie-town
Said he was a diplomat—
Hobbin' an'-a-knobbin' with Arafat
Castro was simpatico,
But the U.S. voters, they said: no!