

Chapter 10
Zappa and Modernism: An Extended Study
of 'Brown Shoes Don't Make It'

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Introduction

Frank Zappa is an outstanding figure in Western musical, cultural and even political life of the twentieth century, with a musical legacy of extraordinary stylistic breadth and complexity. His musical universe comprises an abundance of styles and genres across historical, artistic and musical boundaries, yet still constitutes an intellectual whole, a cohesive musical oeuvre that can rightfully be acknowledged as Modern. Modern not just in its everyday sense, but also ideologically, it contests tradition, resists norms, neutralises the morally good and functionally useful, and insists on staging the dialectic continuum between secrecy and scandal.¹

Taking the collage-composition 'Brown Shoes Don't Make It'² as an exemplar, this article weaves a mosaic of analyses, ranging from strictly structural, to purely discursive and hypertextual, constructing the case that Zappa's work, rather than being a wild profusion of styles, is instead a highly coherent and stringently complex work of meaning. It is an oeuvre in which subtle correspondences between music styles, titles, lyrics, texts and more, critically reflect central aspects of modern culture and human life in a psychological, sociological as well as philosophical exposition. In addition to a close reading of the primary text and citations of other artists' work, the article includes references to much of Zappa's discography and aims to point out how the musical coding in Zappa's work takes on a decisive modernistic role in an almost Adornian sense, expressing the historical necessity of complexity and opposition.

¹ Jürgen Habermas, 'Die Moderne – Ein unvollendetes Projekt', in Jürgen Habermas (ed.), *Kleine Politischen Schriften I–IV* (Frankfurt am Main, 1981), pp. 444–64.

² The Mothers of Invention, *Absolutely Free*, Verve, V6-5013 (1967). A slightly rearranged live version was released on Frank Zappa, *Tinsel Town Rebellion*, Barking Pumpkin, PW237336 (1981), whose last part – as opposed to the original – matched the piano score published in 1973 (see later). Unless otherwise noted, all discussion refers to the 1967 instance of the song.

Preamble

It could – as for example Berger³ and Lowe⁴ have done – seem relevant to understand the work of Frank Zappa as an early manifestation of postmodernism in popular music: his music is unmistakably eclectic, incorporating ‘elements of free jazz; modern composers like Ellington, Varèse, Stravinsky, and Stockhausen; late fifties doo-wop; guitar-dominated jazz-rock fusion of the seventies; and his own brand of social and political satire and outrageous humour’.⁵ As such, it conforms to a general notion of postmodernism as disloyal to any specific idea or practice, in addition to being open towards a reservoir of styles, each of which, regardless of their historic anchoring, can be combined to enable different forms to stand out in their heterogeneity. However, Zappa’s work is loaded with ideological and political implications ‘using every musical ingredient he could find to undermine nostalgia’.⁶ This supports Ben Watson’s understanding that Zappa must be regarded as a modernist artist in the perspective of Adorno’s concept of negative dialectics,⁷ in as far as he, in line with Marx and Freud, had a strong materialistic perspective, did not believe in metaphysics of any kind, was hostile towards religion, and was convinced that human reason is capable of understanding and changing the world and the human mind.⁸

The body of Frank Zappa’s work bears witness to an extraordinarily erudite approach towards musical composition. Musical means and compositional techniques are chosen for specific aesthetic impact that often deepens and supports textual elements such as titles, lyrics, introductions etc. Zappa’s approach endows his work with a patina of the cunning and intentional, of intellectual stigmata. There is a clinical distance, a sense of the academic and learned, of irony and arrogance but also of reason and purpose that is fundamentally inconsistent with the core of not just popular music in general, but also with much of the music that falls under the classical tradition.⁹

Instead of merely offering the listener an aesthetic object for immersion, reassurance and identification, Zappa’s work challenges its audience to critical

³ See Arthur Asa Berger, *The Portable Postmodernist* (Oxford, 2003), p. 49.

⁴ See Kelly Fisher Lowe, *The Words and Music of Frank Zappa* (London, 2007), p. 37.

⁵ Peter Lavezzoli, *The King of All, Sir Duke, Ellington and the Artistic Revolution* (New York, 2001), p. 93.

⁶ Kevin Courrier, *Dangerous Kitchen: The Subversive World of Zappa* (Toronto, 2002), p. 13.

⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* (Frankfurt am Main, 1966).

⁸ See Ben Watson, *Frank Zappa: The Negative Dialectics of Poodle Play* (New York, 1993), p. xiii.

⁹ See discussion in Watson, *Frank Zappa: The Negative Dialectics of Poodle Play*, p. 415 and p. 421.

reflection. It is not just for what Zappa entitled ‘entertainment purposes’.¹⁰ His musical concoctions are laced with an acidity and detail that prevent musical immersion or passive sexual submission, instead requiring the listener’s full and active attention. Zappa’s aesthetics are filled with details that are deeply associated with Western music and art, seeking to fulfil artistic demands identified by the avant-garde since at least the second part of the nineteenth century. As such, it consistently bears the hallmark of the modernistic artefact, aiming to take part in cultural and political processes by engaging in dynamic interaction with the ethics and knowledge of a given time. However, this attribute poses quite a paradox as Zappa never expressed high hopes for modern culture nor did he, according to Watson, expect anything but stupidity from its citizens:¹¹ ‘Zappa believed we were Dumb All Over’.¹² Thus it is hard to believe that he himself saw his work as a vital part of modernistic discourse. On the contrary, with his often quoted credo: ‘Anything, Any Time, Anywhere – for No Reason at All’¹³ he seemed to renounce all associations with any ideological – or other – discourse entirely.

Despite Zappa’s renunciation of an explicit ideology, his music is imbued with an implicit modernist philosophy that derives, in part, from his idiosyncratic magpie approach to composition and, in part, from his distrust of ideology: ‘I use the formula to make fun of itself’.¹⁴ Nevertheless, the following analytical disquisition will discuss how Zappa consistently turns, regardless of his credo, to modernistic approaches and techniques in order to infuse his music with increased depth and dimensionality, an ambiguity and dialectics that demand an alert listener. By examining the constitutive elements of every section of ‘Brown Shoes Don’t Make It’ against a mainly cursory reading of the textual content, the chapter will examine how both lyrics and spoken text interact and support each other in pursuit of the modernistic aesthetic.

In the Cesspool of Excitement

It is apparent that Zappa’s music covers an enormous spectrum of musical styles and genres and the extensive blend of these is a compositional idiom particular to Zappa, a manifestation of his artistic approach – what Kountz describes as a ‘serious effort at synthesis’.¹⁵ The often oratorically organised suites and collage-

¹⁰ Frank Zappa with Peter Occhiogrosso, *The Real Frank Zappa Book* (London, 1989), p. 185.

¹¹ See Watson, *Frank Zappa: The Negative Dialectics of Poodle Play*, p. 354.

¹² Courrier, *Dangerous Kitchen*, p. 55.

¹³ Zappa with Occhiogrosso, *The Real Frank Zappa Book*, p. 163.

¹⁴ James Riordan, ‘Frank Zappa. Formula Perfecto’, *Musician’s Guide*, 8 (1977): pp. 27–31, at 31.

¹⁵ Peter Kountz, ‘Frank Zappa and the Enterprise of Serious Contemporary Music’, *Popular Music & Society*, 4/1 (1975): pp. 36–51, at 38.

compositions such as 'The Adventures Of Greggery Peccary',¹⁶ 'Drowning Witch'¹⁷ and 'When The Lie's So Big',¹⁸ stand out as musical sculptures composed of a large variety of styles and genres with often just a few structural bridges. This bears similarity to a film music aesthetic whereby elements of musical collage are individually anchored in a particular dramatic episode but where each element embodies the drama so accurately that the musical style and genre become significant elements of expression themselves. As such, the affiliation between style/genre and the drama implicit in the lyrics gains significance equal to, or even anticipating, the treatment of the concrete musical material.

As noted elsewhere in this publication, Zappa's music refers to traditions that depend upon generative principles themselves, based on representation and on the notion of the note as the primary constructive element. His preoccupation with the note is evident already in his use of the Big-Note¹⁹ as metaphor for (his) music and, even in his experiments with what he described as 'numerical dust',²⁰ he focused on the delimited event, the note as the primary building material.²¹ Except for his work within the framework of *musique concrète*, present since the very first recordings, and for some of his electronic pieces, primarily released on *Jazz From Hell*²² and *Civilization Phase III*,²³ Zappa did not explore beyond standard Western notational and tonal/atonal systems.²⁴ The identity and nerve of his music are engraved into the material as nucleus themes, motifs and through-composed complexes that maintain identity and particularity even when subject to transformation and variation. Thus, examining implications of the musical structure is required when analysing his compositions to comprehend how the complex expressiveness of the music is achieved. A deeper understanding of his aesthetics, however, cannot emerge by identifying the structural implications alone. Zappa's music tends towards the polymorphic and it would be impossible to reveal the global core of it through local, structural observations alone.²⁵

¹⁶ Frank Zappa, *Studio Tan*, DiscReet, DSK 2291 (1978).

¹⁷ Zappa, *Ship Arriving Too Late To Save A Drowning Witch*, Barking Pumpkin, FW 38066 (1982).

¹⁸ Frank Zappa, *Broadway The Hard Way*, Barking Pumpkin, D1-74218 (1989).

¹⁹ See David Walley, *No Commercial Potential, The Saga of Frank Zappa, Then and Now* (New York, 1980), p. 122.

²⁰ At 23:10 of Henning Lohner, *Frank Zappa - Peepeeatko*, WDR 3 (1991).

²¹ See Michel Delville, Andrew Norris, *Frank Zappa, Captain Beefheart and the Secret History of Maximalism* (Cambridge, 2005), p. 5.

²² Frank Zappa, *Jazz From Hell*, Barking Pumpkin, ST-74205 (1986).

²³ Frank Zappa, *Civilization Phase III*, Barking Pumpkin Records, UMRK 01 (1994).

²⁴ See Don Menn, Matt Groening, 'The Mother Of All Interviews Part 2', *Guitar Player* (May 1994), at <http://www.afka.net/mags/Best%20of%20Guitar%20Player.htm> [accessed 28 November 2011].

²⁵ Some of Zappa's work is, however, very economical in terms of musical material, see for instance Martin Knakkegaard, 'Cruising for Burgers. Om kød og kodelighed i

This deliberate stylistic heterogeneity and consequent lack of clearly identifiable similarities in musical structure across Zappa's oeuvre begs an approach to musical analysis that focuses beyond the search for structural similarity to the quest for stylistic differentiation: musematic inspired analysis serves this need precisely.²⁶ As a semiotics, the museme theory, broadly speaking, presupposes a cultural discourse inside which a museme, the smallest meaningful musical unit, in comparison to other musemes can be understood as a symbol or metaphor which, by established cultural practices, signifies real world references. In its strict form, the museme theory requires that the extra-musical meaning be tested 'through commutation or what Philip Tagg describes as 'hypothetical substitution'.²⁷ This element is not explicitly included in the following analysis which instead relies on subjective considerations and deductions. Since the metaphoric element in Zappa's work is almost too dense, practically mocking the very idea of the metaphor, the notions of the allegory and the metonym seem generally more relevant, leaving space for Zappa's predilection for the composite fable. Through its constitution as a blend of contrasting expressive means, much in the same sense as Brechtian epic theatre, the allegory becomes a dialectical panopticon through which Zappa exposes his projections and views.

In Barthes' notion of the writable text, 'a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination',²⁸ and the reader takes part in constructing the text, 'writing' the text while reading. Zappa's music challenges the listener to take part in its construction and to forge links between different means that are not pre-connected and which do not necessarily belong to the same expressive categories. The writable text in Zappa's case is an indication of idiosyncratic preferences in the same way that the text obtained by reading the modern hypertext is a manifestation of choices made by the reader. The difference is that the audience does not get to undertake the first reading, but initially only gets to look over Zappa's shoulder. The text has already been re-written by Zappa functioning not just as the reader of objects that are embedded in his work but also as his own reader.

The need for this composite and subjective analytical approach derives from the fact that Zappa's aesthetics is a dichotomy holding the principal two meanings aesthetics can assume in present-day vocabulary: a technical or material approach, how an artefact is constructed, and an intentional or phenomenological

Frank Zappas Uncle Meat', *Akademisk Kvarter/Academic Quarter*, 01 (2010): pp. 61–71, at http://akademiskkvarter.hum.aau.dk/pdf/vol1/Martin_Knakkegaard_Vol1.pdf [accessed 3 January 2012].

²⁶ See for instance Philip Tagg, 'Fernando the Flute: Analysis of affect in an ABBA number which sold more than 10.000.000 pressings and was heard by over 100.000.000 people', *DMT*, 3 (1979), pp. 125–56.

²⁷ Philip Tagg, 'Introductory notes to the Semiotics of Music', 1999, at <http://tagg.org/xpdfs/semiotug.pdf> [accessed 28 November 2011], p. 38.

²⁸ Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text* (London, 1977), p. 148.

approach, how an artefact is perceived. In Zappa's case this dichotomy evolves into a dialectics that permeates virtually all elements of his oeuvre, pointing to the existence of a unique, but very spacious, methodology.

Brown Shoes Don't Make It

With its 22 sections, each with a different stylistic provenance, the collage composition 'Brown Shoes Don't Make It' is an exemplar *sans pareil* of this heterogeneity. The composition is a satire on American petite bourgeoisie, their idea of the cosy, nuclear family and 'the people who run the governments'²⁹ exemplified by the power-seeking, highly alienated local politician City Hall Fred's paedophilic dreams. The musical setting and its performance are presented with all the surprising brute rudeness of an email written in uppercase letters.

Although it is difficult to ascertain if the piano score for 'Brown Shoes Don't Make It', complete with tempo, section titles and character remarks, and its descriptions were developed uniquely for the Frank Zappa Songbook,³⁰ this analysis will use the satirical and even hyperbolic section titles as headings. Some of the section titles are quite ambiguous and, taken together, eclectic in their terminology. Nevertheless, they do provide descriptors of both the form of the piece and clues to Zappa's probable stylistic intentions.

Boogie Shuffle – Moderato – Tempo 1 (shuffle)

'Brown Shoes Don't Make It' opens with a little tripartite form (A–B–A) that serves as an introduction or a narrator's prologue to the entire piece.³¹ Section A, entitled Boogie Shuffle,³² is built exclusively of repetitive figures, with the backing being composed of ostinatos (performed by guitar and bass in unison) whose formal design places the section within the blues influenced rock idiom of the time. The melody consists of a simple two-part rhythmic motif that combines a single pitched vocal on F# with an unpitched half shouted vocal – a *Sprechstimme* around C#. The two pitches – root and fifth – are maintained consistently in the same significant rhythmic pattern throughout the whole section. The vocal lines also function as an ostinato and are placed in such a way that they act as an antiphonal call to the chord-ostinato. As a whole, Section A takes on a rhythmic,

²⁹ Courier, *Dangerous Kitchen*, p. 116.

³⁰ Frank Zappa, *The Frank Zappa Songbook Vol. 1* (Los Angeles, 1973).

³¹ Please refer to Table 10.1 below in order to reference a snapshot of CD timings and bar numbers.

³² Bars 1–14; [A] 0:00; [T] 0:00. [A] indicates start time positions with reference to the production released from 1967; [T] indicates similar references to the live-version released in 1981.

almost mechanical character, leading to a theatrical effect, a musical imperative constructed to underline the text: 'Brown Shoes Don't Make It'.

Almost all elements of Section B, entitled Moderato,³³ contrast sharply with the A Section. While the tonality of the latter is centred around F# Dorian, the former begins a tritone away in C major. The rhythmic character is changed from a swing-based boogie shuffle to straight eighths, in a significantly slower tempo. Additionally, the rhythmic-melodic motifs are replaced by a cantabile melody, though still tied up in a simple identifiable motif. Finally, the setting is changed radically from the strictly ostinato-built, clear-cut voice complex to the soft and fluid accompaniment of broken chords.

As was the case in Section A, the form is closely linked with the text: The pseudo-classical *Singspiel*-like setting: a smooth melody – constructed of a single one-bar motif – accompanied by broken chords, evokes the sense of a peaceful scenario, an almost chamber-like atmosphere of the homely cosiness and innocence, which are echoed in the opening lyrics: 'TV dinner by the pool'. However, the succeeding bar's movement from C to D, and the unison doubling of the melodic motif indicate a turn from simple satire on the bourgeois family, unified in its material paradise, to an ambiguous and more suggestive position: 'Watch your brother grow a beard' – and two bars later: 'You're O.K. – He's too weird...'

Through simple development of the one-bar motif mentioned above, now in the key of A, Zappa supports and sharpens the satire whilst simultaneously creating a line that with great intensity leads up to the concluding peak of Section B. The pompous, almost sinister character is achieved by the sudden change from the delicate broken chords to a majestic parallel organum setting, which, except for the use of parallel fifths, in character and sonorous quality is close to the recurring 'Promenade' from Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*.³⁴ Emphasis on the passage is further strengthened by the false ending that comprises a return to the A section's tonality of F# minor, but Zappa desists from the inherited lack of conflict and installs a four-bar insert starting in B,³⁵ before returning to Section A. Along with the substantial increase in tempo, this disposition gives the insert the flavour of an agitated recitative, a powerful enhancement of the text: 'Smile at every ugly – shine on your shoes and cut your hair'.

This four-bar insert closes in F major, with a clear cadence (F–C–F) forming a hard return to the F# minor of the final A section. This section is constructed similarly to the first section except that the motifs are modified in accordance with the lyrics. The latter approach leads to a double-caricature, in which the metaphorical finger is pointed towards the protagonist: 'Be a jerk', and, ecstatically falsetto, 'And go to work'.

³³ Bars 14–27; [A] 0:20; [T] 0:22.

³⁴ Modest Mussorgsky, *Pictures At An Exhibition*, Suite for Piano, 1874.

³⁵ Bars 24–7; [A] 0:47; [T] 0:51.

Moderate Waltz

The lyrics of the initial tripartite form end with: 'Do you love it, do you hate it? There it is the way you made it – (belch)'.³⁶ The prologue is thus terminated with a colon, leaving the impression that the following section, *Moderate Waltz*,³⁷ will bring clarification. However, this section's harmonic outline is surprisingly ambiguous, largely due to the incongruence between the B → C# harmonic framework and its bass line. The melody though, is oriented unambiguously around B through the persistent and heroic fourth motif F# → B supporting the functional connotations of Dominant → Tonic.

Example 10.1 'Brown Shoes Don't Make It' – bars 47–50

Source: Transcription from *The Frank Zappa Songbook Vol. 1*, Copyright © 1973 Frank Zappa Music, Inc. and Munchkin Music Co. Los Angeles, Calif. p. 14.

The melodic peaks coincide with the alternations to C# revealing how Zappa carefully (re) designs the peaks in accordance with the – implicit narrator's – lyrics again: In the first occurrence, 'hunger' is stressed by the appoggiatura, endowing it with the character of a sigh, a Seuftzer supporting lament. It is also important to note how the appoggiatura is prolonged and as noted in Example 10.2, the first note (F#) is repeated on the 3rd beat stressing the importance and power of the ability to 'Make your laws'. Finally, the phrase 'Hidden away' gains a closing and dense, almost covert, character by the sudden use of a triplet, that repeats the first note – F#.

In the second part of the *Moderate Waltz* section³⁸ the focus on a tonal centre, ambiguous or not, is almost suspended. The passage is harmonised by means of a note-by-note principle, working vertically rather than horizontally, suspending

³⁶ Bars 38–9; [A] 1:10; [T] 1:18.

³⁷ Bars 43–92; [A] 1:22; [T] 1:25.

³⁸ Bars 59–68; A: 1:49; T: 1:54.

Example 10.2 'Brown Shoes Don't Make It' – bars 53–54 and 57

Source: Transcription from *The Frank Zappa Songbook Vol. 1*, Copyright © 1973 Frank Zappa Music, Inc. and Munchkin Music Co. Los Angeles, Calif., p. 14f.

most of the implicit tension typically associated with harmonic work, with the effect that each syllable of the lyrics is accentuated separately.

Underneath the *Sprechgesang* of the lyrics 'walk and drool', the chord density increases from five to six notes, implying an atonality that contrasts with the modal melody and thus illustrating the essential restlessness of the narrator.

The sonorous quality of the last two phrases of the *Moderate Waltz* section³⁹ resembles that of Messiaen's harmonic writing albeit, compared to Messiaen's 7th mode, Zappa uses a tone too many. Messiaen's Modes of Limited Transposition lead to a 'static harmony, where the chords are not driving the music forward, but induce and maintain certain musical modes'.⁴⁰ Similarly, Zappa produces a *freeze-frame* effect (but whether he was familiar with Messiaen's compositional strategies in 1967 is another question).

Clear Your Throat – Sprechgesang

A two bar 4/4 rhythmic insert in clusters, *Clear Your Throat*,⁴¹ marks the end of the *Moderate Waltz* section and leads to the entry of a new scene. This *Sprechgesang* section⁴² is in a Schönberg or Webern-inspired style with relatively clear serial succession. The accompaniment (see Example 10.3) is made up of two contrapuntal voices, each containing all 12 tones (each tone occurs at least twice), while the melody is confined to just 10 different tones.

As shown in Example 10.3, the structure is almost entirely made up of simple three-tone motifs. The similarity between these motifs in terms of both interval and rhythm suggests that just one subject (a) forms the foundation of all other motifs. The (b)-motif has the same contour (non-inverted) as (a), the same rhythmic form (only diminished), and the same number of notes. Additionally, there is a similarity regarding intervals, as the last note of the motif forms a dissonant second interval with one of the preceding notes. Regarding the (c)-motif, the contour is similar to (a), but smoothed and inverted, and again the number of notes are identical. Even though the three motifs are all part of the background, it is tempting to claim that

³⁹ Bars 66–8; [A] 2:02; [T] 2:08.

⁴⁰ Poul Borum and Erik Christensen, *Messiaen – en håndbog* (Egtved, 1977), p. 43.

⁴¹ Bars 69–70; [A] 2:07; [T] 2:14.

⁴² Bars 71–92; [A] 2:13; [T] 2:20.

they constitute the building blocks that make up this layer, a feature reminiscent of Varèse's 'Density 21.5'.⁴³ It is also noteworthy that the use of both real and tonal motif imitation⁴⁴ suggests that Zappa's approach to 12-tone technique is characterised by a contrapuntal freedom, indicating a somewhat liberal approach towards serial organisation not unlike Berg or Bartók.

The melodic line is liberated from the backdrop's serial procedure and is pseudo-sequentially organised around yet another motif (e), which at first appears to differ significantly from the other motifs but proves to be a derivative of the (a)-motif. Disregarding the extension of the motif with a fourth note, (e) shows similarity in terms of interval to (a), except that the second tone is transposed down an octave.

Example 10.3 'Brown Shoes Don't Make It' – bars 85–92

Source: Transcription from *The Frank Zappa Songbook Vol. 1*, Copyright © 1973 Frank Zappa Music, Inc. and Munchkin Music Co. Los Angeles, Calif., p. 16.

⁴³ Edgar Varèse, *Density 21.5*, 1936.

⁴⁴ The distinction between real and tonal imitation derives from the treating of the theme in polyphonic forms such as fugues. Real imitation implies that the interval proportions of the theme are unaltered even though that theme has been transposed to another degree. Tonal imitation, however, implies that the inner intervals are altered in order to comply with the new key.

Comparing the compositional progression thus far with the concurrent development of the lyrics, it is striking that musical trends do not take place in an isolated fashion. The lyrics have been transformed from the tripartite form's – two-sided – introductory level, to the Moderate Waltz reflection on general characteristics of City Hall lives. They gradually change to a more local and detailed description of the scene, revealing the psychological implications of these characteristics. Simultaneously the musical background is changed from a rock musical expression to a musical aesthetics characterised by idioms whose relation to serious music is evident. The Moderate Waltz section, however, already shows a remarkably close correlation between text and music: where the text speaks of world, the music preserves tonality, but as soon as the content of the lyrics changes from a general/global situation to the more specific/local – the Office – the music loses its tonal centre, although retaining a certain modality. Finally, as the lyrics start dealing with the psychological drives behind the facade of the City Hall mind – they are mirrored by atonality.

There are two different explanations for this strategy. Zappa might be speculating on the broad public's generally alienated attitude towards serious contemporary music, aiming to achieve a spontaneous idiosyncratic reaction towards everything the City Hall mind stands for. However, by using these modern techniques to accompany the suggestive lyrics about 'a dream of a girl about thirteen' (see Example 10.3), Zappa also manages to excite a dialectic field of tension endowing the passage with a seriousness and importance that overrules its surface of plain satire and mockery.

Slow Shuffle

Zappa continues the dream of the City Hall mind in the subsequent sections. The Slow Shuffle⁴⁵ resembles the initial Boogie Shuffle structurally in the first five bars – this time with a hint of big-band swing. The tonality of this section qualifies as poly-modal, as the bass/guitar ostinato is loosely centred around A major and the keyboard ostinato unfolds around G Mixolydian, with F \sharp in the melody not relating directly to either of the two. This element of pan-tonality is supported by the musical description of the woman's shriek or howl, 'She squealed for a week', where all 12 notes appear in four successive quintuplets.⁴⁶

The pan-tonality matches the closure of the previous section thereby limiting the contrast. However, the structural setting in the continuation⁴⁷ demonstrates a tendency towards specific tonalities – respectively A \flat and B – which seem to correspond with the lyrics' perversely intimate qualities: 'back in the bed his teen-age queen'. These lyrics combine with the subsequent chamber music-

⁴⁵ Bars 93–101; [A] 3:03; [T] 3:00.

⁴⁶ Bars 97–8; [A] 3:15; [T] 3:17.

⁴⁷ Bars 99–100; [A] 3:21; [T] 3:23.

like instrumental section (mainly a string quartet) to conjure a fiercely satirical comment on the idealised notion of family.

The picture of domestic bliss is completely torn apart in the next bar.⁴⁸ The lyrics' reckless vulgarity – 'is rocking and rolling and acting obscene' – is almost surpassed by the music: sneered *Sprechgesang* with a backing composed of a vamp – F → Dm → B_b → C – (on keyboards) and a strongly contrasting (dissonant) 'pseudo-vamp' (on bass and guitar) – G_b → E_b → C_b → A_b. The passage is carried out in a violent *sforzando* and the effect is one of hyper-excitability, an abandon that symbolises the primitive, brutish and perverse instincts smouldering in the City Hall mind.

Fast Motown

The excitement continues undisturbed into the Fast Motown section: 'Baby, baby'⁴⁹ in A_b Mixolydian. Again ostinato technique governs the section and the bass/guitar riffs symbolise the 'teenage queen' that rocks and rolls in bed. The ostinato, which has a striking similarity to that used by the Spanish pop group Los Bravos, in their 1966 hit 'Black Is Black',⁵⁰ is interrupted from bar to bar, by tutti clusters in quavers. The context gives these strongly emphasised clusters an unmistakably associative pumping character – heavy – light – heavy – light, etc. – with the auditory result being – Baby, Baby, pumping – pumping – pumping – pumping.

Ballad Rock

As a humorous comment, textually and musically, Zappa now introduces a Ballad Rock section in the careless meter of 6/8.⁵¹ This section is essentially a sing-along-song resembling a German Bierstube event in which both melody and harmony moves untroubled around C (mixolydian), with the melody line as tonal centre and the voicing as parallel chords (C, Dm, Em, Dm, F, G, F, Em, Dm, Em, C, Dm, C, B_b, C, D₉, E₉). Once again the setting is the perfect accompaniment to the lyrics: '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'.

Grandioso

'Brown Shoes Don't Make It' could have ended with the earlier Ballad Rock section. Instead, a whole new part emerges,⁵² with an entirely instrumental,

⁴⁸ Bar 100; [A] 3:26; [T] 3:28.

⁴⁹ Bars 102–9; [A] 3:28; [T] 3:31.

⁵⁰ Los Bravos, 'Black Is Black', Press Records, 45 PRE 60002 (1966).

⁵¹ Bars 110–17; [A] 3:41; [T] 3:42.

⁵² In reality this part turns up just about in the middle of the whole piece.

almost joyful section.⁵³ As the title suggests, the section is (pseudo) pompous with a constant fanfare-like character achieved by tremolo violins, continuous rolls in timpani marked especially by the anacrusis in the trumpet line. The tonality is highly ambiguous and polytonal, but, after a short rhythmically dense passage, the section comes to rest in an expansive cadence to C major: $\flat[\text{II}^{\flat 5\flat 9}] \rightarrow \text{I}^{\text{sus} 9 \text{add} 11} \rightarrow \flat[\text{VI}^{\flat 9}] \rightarrow \text{I}^{\text{add} 9}$,⁵⁴ a formula not too far away from romantic harmony of the late nineteenth century and thus a highly appropriate setting to sustain the opulence of the petit-bourgeois scene.

To claim that this is pure functional harmony would be going too far, but the compositional expression here – and similar harmonic features in later sections – suggests that Zappa flirts with functionality in order to induce associations of conservative western European culture.

Table 10.1 Form Chart of 'Brown Shoes Don't Make It'

Parts	Section Scenes	Section	Bar	Time	
				1967 Recording	1981 Recording
A	Boogie Shuffle	1	1	0:00	0:00
	Moderato	2	14	0:21	0:22
	Faster (recitative)	3	24	0:47	0:51
	Tempo 1 (boogie shuffle)	4	28	0:56	0:56
B	Moderate Waltz	5	43	1:22	1:25
	[Texture Change]	6	59	1:49	1:55
C	– (clear your throat)	7	63	2:07	2:14
	– (<i>Sprechgesang</i> (2))	8	69	2:13	2:21
D	Slow shuffle	9	93	3:03	3:01
	Fast Motown	10	102	3:29	3:31
	Ballad Rock	11	110	3:43	3:44
E	Grandioso	12	118	4:04	4:05
	Tempo di Cocktail Lounge	13	129	4:29	4:30
F	Tempo di Beach Boys	14	137	4:53	4:53
	No tempo	15	146	5:13	5:10
	Corny Swing	16	147	5:34	5:29
	Slow – relaxed time	17	163	6:06	5:58
G	– strict time	18	165	6:13	6:04
	– (reprise)	19	167	6:21	6:12
	Slower	20	169	6:31	6:22
	Fast as possible	21	174	6:46	6:32
H	(fraudulent dramatic section)	22	178	7:08	6:45
	Total		188	7:30	7:15

⁵³ Bars 118–28; [A] 4:04; [T] 4:05.

⁵⁴ Bars 126–7; [A] 4:18; [T] 4:18.

Tempo di Cocktail Lounge

Via a simple ascending scale the piece hesitantly progresses into yet another comic section.⁵⁵ Again, Zappa chooses a popular musical expression which by its use of jazz harmonies and somewhat difficult melodic leaps, forms a distinctly American Songbook style.

The stylistic expression conveys the text: 'Do it again, and do it some more, that does it by golly, it's (she's) nasty for sure', but after only four bars the setting begins to dissolve by the repetition of 'nasty, nasty, nasty'.⁵⁶ The immediate effect is a highlighting of the lyrics leading up to a *Sprechgesang* spot, which confidentially addresses the listener with the text: 'Only thirteen and she knows how to nasty'.⁵⁷

Tempo di Beach Boys

Zappa again resorts to popular musical expressive means in a short rounded Tempo di Beach Boys section,⁵⁸ a pastiche on the Beach Boys' 'Little Deuce Coupe'⁵⁹ with the morally indignant text: 'She's a dirty young mind, corrupted, corroded. Well, she's thirteen today and I hear she gets loaded' – the tension between the slap-happy musical style and the lyrics once again being evident.

Ballad Rock, Tempo di Cocktail Lounge and Tempo di Beach Boys are all sections in which Zappa mainly uses straight popular musical forms of expression. Comparing this observation with the respective lyrics – and the text in general – it is striking that the use of popular musical styles coincides with the text's most humorous or hilarious satires. City Hall Fred's infantile arousal and lasciviousness becomes far more satirical through the affinity between text and music than by the text alone.

No Tempo

The Tempo di Beach Boys section concludes with a small intermezzo No Tempo⁶⁰ that starts with a brief atonal, pointillist construction of one and a half bars' length after which an unaccompanied,⁶¹ dreamlike (Kafkaesque) dialogue occurs: 'If she were my daughter I'd... What would you do daddy?' – repeated three times.

⁵⁵ Bars 129–36; [A] 4:29; [T] 4:30.

⁵⁶ Bar 133–4; [A] 4:41; [T] 4:42.

⁵⁷ Bars 135–6; [A] 4:47; [T] 4:48.

⁵⁸ Bars 137–45; [A] 4:52; [T] 4:53.

⁵⁹ The Beach Boys, 'Little Deuce Coupe', Capitol, 5009 (1963).

⁶⁰ Bars 146–50; [A] 5:13; [T] 5:10.

⁶¹ In the 1981 version the dialog is accompanied by semi-electro-acoustic and pointillist sounds and 'Daddy' is replaced by 'Frankie'.

Corny Swing

The lyrics of the subsequent Corny Swing section⁶² form a response to the little girl's question above: 'Smother my daughter in chocolate syrup and strap on here again, Oh, baby...'⁶³ The musical setting is kept entirely within an early 1930s swing style with blues and ragtime connotations. It is thus in line with the strategy of the previous section and the musical setting stands out as a humorous ironic dressing of the lyrics turning the scene into an allegory that reveals a hedonistic carelessness typically associated with the decadence of upper-class life between the two World Wars.

Slow

With the Slow⁶⁴ section the closure of the entire piece commences – lyrically and dramatically, as well as musically. The melodic material maintains a certain jazz-like character, while the harmony changes from traditional triads in the Corny Swing section (concluding in B \flat), to a series of chords that, although sustaining a sense of B \flat , have a much freer relation to conventional harmony.

The Slow section switches from the swing feel (Relaxed time) of the previous section, to straight quavers (Strict time)⁶⁵ supporting the separation of the melody line and the accompaniment into different tonalities, respectively, C major (with a single chromatic addition) and B \flat major (as a camouflaged circle of fifths).

The following two-bar passage is a small slightly slower reprise of the Moderato part of the very first section,⁶⁶ but here the D \flat , instead of progressing to C, is reinterpreted into the dominant of G \flat which is substituted by a false ending in E \flat minor thus blurring the notion of C as a tonal centre.

Slower

Whereas the lyrics in the previous section have a slightly sentimental touch, almost a metaphorical sigh at having to leave the dream: 'Time to go home, Madge is on the phone, got to meet the Gurneys and a dozen gray attorneys [sic]; T.V. dinner by the pool, I'm so glad I finished school',⁶⁷ the Slower section becomes sharper in its satirical portrayal of City Hall Fred's smugness, hereby directly warning about Fred's corrupt nature and potential abuse of power.

The pathos of the lyrics – 'Life is such a ball, I run the world from City Hall' – is highlighted by the ridiculous, pompous musical setting: a stepwise descending

⁶² Bars 147–62; [A] 5:34; [T] 5:29.

⁶³ Bars 147–62; [A] 5:34; [T] 5:29.

⁶⁴ Bars 163–4[A] 6:06; [T] 5:58.

⁶⁵ Bar 165; [A] 6:14; [T] 6:04.

⁶⁶ Bars 167–8; [A] 6:22; [T] 6:12.

⁶⁷ Bars 163–4; [A] 6:06; [T] 5:58.

melody accompanied by parallel chords, underlines the serenity of the passage just as the sudden trembling in the lower frequencies of the music⁶⁸ corresponds to the melody's heroic, masculine close: a fourth-note leap followed by a five-note leap.⁶⁹

Again there is a circling around C as tonal centre and again no confirmation of a regular authentic cadence – as the passage otherwise sounds determined to attain. In contrast the passage concludes with the relative minor of C – Am9.

Fast As Possible

Despite the otherwise finale-like quality of the slower section, yet another section, *Fast As Possible*,⁷⁰ is added. A hectic ostinato passage in 5/8, repeated four times which, has B_♭ (the rival to C) as centre. The passage completely destroys the pathos of the previous section and works, as does the *Bullad Rock* section described above, as a comment on the preceding section. The tenor of the section is like an agitated reference of 'Danses des Adolescents' from Stravinsky's *Sacre Du Printemps*.⁷¹

In the score as well as on the Tinsel Town recording⁷² the section culminates in fermatas with implications of harmonic moves that can be regarded as conclusive in either C or B_♭. The number of dissonances prevents either tonic concluding in a traditional sense and the continuation⁷³ fosters no solution. Although the sequence of chords in the next two bars – B_♭ superimposed on B–F_♯ dyad and C superimposed on B_♭–F dyad – leans towards a cadence in C it dissolves, quietly, into G major in an almost impressionistic intermezzo made of simple triads and a single naïve motif comprising all degrees of the G major scale.⁷⁴ The intermezzo confirms the tonal undertones while not providing any solution to the conflict, the tonal dualism, between C and B_♭. Neither does the final chord which, much like the chords of the 'Danses des Adolescents', is built of two simultaneous chords: E_♭^{7(add)3omit3} and D. Zappa chooses to let the composition be undecided or unresolved: *Brown Shoes Don't Make It...*

⁶⁸ Bars 172–3; [A] 6:42; [T] 6:30.

⁶⁹ Bar 171; [A] 6:40; [T] 6:28.

⁷⁰ Bars 174–7; [A] 6:45; [T] 6:32.

⁷¹ Igor Stravinsky, *Le Sacre du Printemps*, 1913.

⁷² Bar 178; [A] 7:08; [T] 6:45. On the 1967 version the concluding passages of the score are replaced by a fairly compact sound mass made up of "God Bless America", "The Star-Spangled Banner" and one or two other patriotic songs ... all at the same time' (Zappa quoted in Courier, *Dangerous Kitchen*, p. 117) and an up-tempo boogie backing.

⁷³ Bar 180; [T] 6:52.

⁷⁴ Bars 182–7; [T] 6:59.

Final Remarks

The musical artefact 'Brown Shoes Don't Make It' is an extraordinary event even in the context of Zappa's extensive oeuvre. Its form is additive in a radical sense. New sections are added like tableaux or scenes as a function of the dramatic plot. As this analysis – or subjective reading – shows, the musical setting and structural implications shift drastically from section to section. They bring together expressive means and generative techniques inspired by and collected from a plethora of styles and genres, to accommodate the intentional implications of the work – 'there's just so many different kinds of musical formulas that you can use. They're all valid. They are all worthwhile to experiment around with ... in the service of the lyric that you're saying'.⁷⁵ The whole compositional apparatus provides the launch pad for the critical satire to deepen out social, ideological and psychological aspects of the narrative and the situations depicted.

Lyrics to pieces like 'Brown Shoes Don't Make It' were the exception when Zappa confessed that '[a]part from the snide political stuff, which I enjoy writing, the rest of the lyrics wouldn't exist at all if it weren't for the fact that we live in a society where instrumental music is irrelevant'.⁷⁶ To claim that the piece 'stays fairly rooted in basic blues'⁷⁷ as Lowe does, is, as shown, misleading. Instead it is a complex aggregation of expressive means that has an uncompromising stance. It establishes a theatrical form not far removed from Brechtian epic theatre in its use of *Verfremdung*, as the composition's musical setting is designed to widen, to comment, and to distance, rather than merely to support and accompany the lyrical contents.

Ben Watson claims that 'Frank Zappa's pursuit of modernism is intuitive rather than theoretical',⁷⁸ and, unlike for instance Brecht, Zappa was never interested in any kind of cultural radical uprising or modernist agitation – the closest he ever got to this was probably his insistent fight for freedom of speech at the Senate hearings in the 1980s.⁷⁹ Nevertheless, despite his disavowal of any ideology, Zappa's approach *must* be identified as modernist, not just because '[t]he art of connecting apparently antithetical styles and items usually seen or experienced in radically different contexts has long been a feature associated with the international avant-garde'⁸⁰ and its rebellion against false rationality is seen as a hallmark of modernism. More important, as this analysis suggests, is that his approach implies seriousness and intentionality, a dedicated effort to evoke alertness towards oppression and manipulation in modern society – or maybe

⁷⁵ Riordan, 'Frank Zappa. Formula Perfecto', p. 31.

⁷⁶ Zappa with Occhiogrosso, *The Real Frank Zappa Book*, p. 185.

⁷⁷ Lowe, *The Words and Music of Frank Zappa*, p. 41.

⁷⁸ Watson, *Frank Zappa: The Negative Dialectics of Poodle Play*, p. xvii.

⁷⁹ Zappa with Occhiogrosso, *The Real Frank Zappa Book*, p. 263 ff.

⁸⁰ Delville, Norris, *Frank Zappa, Captain Beefheart and the Secret History of Maximalism*, p. 2.

just to mirror his own concerns. Rather than just being intuitive, and despite his striving toward transcendence, modernism is immanent in Zappa's psyche – as he himself is a product of history and culture.

What Zappa described as the overall concept of his work using the term *Project/Object*⁸¹ was actually a strategy that resembled the unresolved work of art – the work in progress and one of the early signs of modernist trends in the twentieth century – and Zappa's provocative artistic style honoured the Adornian negative identification of modern art. To quote Adorno – 'What the enemies of modern art, with a better instinct than its anxious apologists, call its negativity is the epitome of what established culture has repressed and that toward which art is drawn'.⁸²

⁸¹ Zappa with Occhiogrosso, *The Real Frank Zappa Book*, p. 139.

⁸² Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London, 1997), p. 19.

Chapter 11

Zappa and the Avant-Garde: Artifice/Absorption/Expression

Michel Delville

In an oft-quoted passage of his poem-essay 'The Artifice of Absorption',¹ former Language poet Charles Bernstein, one of the most influential representatives of the post-war American avant-garde, writes that 'a poetic reading can be given to any piece of writing; a "poem" may be understood as writing specifically designed to absorb, or inflate with, proactive- rather than reactive-styles of reading'.² 'Artifice', he adds, 'is a measure of a poem's intractability to being read as the sum of its devices and subject matters'.³ Bernstein's target here is the so-called 'voice' poem, which he considers as 'based on simplistic notions of absorption through unity, such/as those sometimes put forward by Ginsberg (who as his work shows/ knows better, but who has made an ideological commitment to such simplicity)'.⁴ Bernstein's attacks against the voice-based poem can be usefully extended to the study of popular music, which perhaps more than any other musical genre relies on the immediacy and transparency of voice as both the origin and the spontaneous vehicle of feeling and self-expression. More specifically, in the context of this essay, Bernstein's definition of artifice also urges us to reconsider Zappa's experimental poetics within the history of contemporary radical art, raising the issue of the relationship between alternative, underground pop culture and the avant-garde while simultaneously questioning the boundaries that allegedly separate experimental music from mainstream music. Zappa's music and lyrics, far from committing themselves to simple notions of unmediated self-expression, rely on complex strategies of manipulation and disfigurement which include the use of various forms of collage, close-miking, bruitism, sped-up cartoon-like voices, found spoken material, rehearsal and backstage conversations, etc. Such techniques of disfigurement are bound to make Zappa's songs sound foreign and, to extend Bernstein's metaphor, 'impermeable' not only to mainstream audiences but also to his most devoted fans. The latter's eagerness to follow the meanders of Zappa's cultural and intertextual labyrinths is often defeated by the sheer complexity and elusiveness of the composer's dense allusiveness and his private

¹ Charles Bernstein, *A Poetics* (Harvard, 1992), p. 9.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., pp. 38–9.

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