

## Open your head

Frank Zappa, *Dance Me This*, Zappa Records, 2015. 48 mins 20.

In June 2015, twenty-two years after Frank Zappa's death in 1993 and just before dying herself, his widow Gail released *Dance Me This*, his last completed album. While he was alive, Zappa's each release mauled a fan's idea of 'good music', exposing a previous identity as partial and bigoted, trashing personal taste in order to open new vistas. Since his death, however, the Zappa Family Trust's catalogue of 'gems' from the archive (live shows, rehearsal tapes, aborted projects) has been woefully disappointing. Lacking Zappa's perverse and pointed meddling with value, the CDs have lacked sting, precision and polemic, often sounding merely dull. They don't make you *think*. Until, that is, *Dance Me This*, which – I can reliably inform readers of *Radical Philosophy* – is bona fide Zappa. True, the cover with its charcoal of doe-eyed, mascaraed elephants is kitsch (it would never have passed by Zappa, a relentless *saboteur* of mawkish collusion), but the 48 minutes within will pummel your musical aesthetic and make you consider afresh what is true and what is false in modern life.

As early as 1967, Zappa – garbage king of the freaks and rejects, famed for shock, obscenity and loud guitar – took his 'bizarre' shtick to the brink with his solo LP release *Lumpy Gravy*, described on the cover as 'a curiously inconsistent piece which started out to be a BALLET but probably didn't make it'. Twenty-six years later, *Dance Me This* is quite literally a ballet: a soundtrack composed at the request of Québécois dance troupe La La La Human Steps. It was realized on the Synclavier, a digital music editing console. Although conversant with ballet music proper (Debussy's setting of an erotic poem by Mallarmé, *L'après-midi d'un faune*, vehicle for Nijinsky, was a recurrent motif for Zappa), Zappa obviously wanted to offer La La La Human Steps something jarring: hence, his sonic depiction of Wolf Harbor, the polluted river declared 'dead' by environmental scientists in 1970, sandwiched between Synclavier tracks built around vocals by Tuvan shamans.

Writing about *Läther*, a four-LP set which segued orchestral music, rock blasts, backstage chat, cartoon soundtracks and *musique concrète* in one delirious package, composer David Aldridge showed how all

its music derived from the power chord of Led Zepelin's 'Whole Lotta Love'. *Dance Me This's* musical cell is provided by a recording Zappa made of Anatolii Kuular, 'throat singer' from the Republic of Tuva in southern Siberia. His guttural G, replete with the harmonics repressed in trained voices, is expanded in Zappa's accompaniment to a full harmonic series, becoming the kind of scale Béla Bartók transcribed from Transylvanian gypsies. This scale ends the album in a wild dance ('Calculus'). According to European notions of *bel canto*, Kuular's throat singing is 'ugly', but acolytes of Howlin' Wolf, Captain Beefheart and Etta James (and flamenco and rai vocalists) will relish its intense physicality. As Roland Barthes put it, Kuular is all 'grain'.

Anatolii Kuular, Kaigl-Ool Khovalyg and Kongar-ol Ondar were recorded by Zappa at his home studio in 1993, taking part in a 'world jam' filmed by the BBC, with Paddy Moloney of the Chieftains, Indian violinist L. Shankar, drummer Terry Bozzio and Johnny 'Guitar' Watson. At the time, the Tuvan vocal trio were the darlings of the global rock aristocracy, also making an appearance on *Chill Out* by the KLF: their vocals are arresting, sounding to first-time listeners like nothing on earth. One guessed some digital device, but none was required. The Tuvan trio opens *Dance Me This*.

Zappa indicated ecological concern in his oeuvre as early as 1969, titling a guitar improvisation 'Nine Types of Industrial Pollution'. In 1972, his album *Apostrophe* (') invoked Robert Flaherty's documentary film *Nanook of the North* with lyrics aimed against 'strictly commercial' seal-trappers. Today, Zappa's Tuvan shamans have us thinking about global warming and the Arctic ice cap. The high 'freak' note achieved by their throat singing is uncanny, nearly beyond our hearing range, and so far above the musical stave it feels as if the top of your head is spinning, or maybe even levitating. Konrad Bayer's *Der Kopf von Vitus Bering* (published shortly after his suicide in 1964) speculates about the North-West passage and what traversing the 'top' of the globe does to your sense of self. The book's *Wiener Gruppe* surrealism is founded on psychic fact: when the world

is presented to us as globe, our primitive, unscientific self (our 'unconscious') thinks of it as a *head*, our head. Hence, the disappearance of the arctic ice cap is imagined today as trepanation, something practised by Siberian shamans, and brought by them to the Maya when *Homo sapiens* first migrated north from Africa, across the Arctic and then down into the Americas. Specialists in Nordic history often show a map which places Scandinavia at the centre: Vikings have apparently penetrated the globe in every direction, resulting in contact with Celts, Anglo-Saxons, Gaels, Slavs, Arabs and the Byzantines. In contrast, the Anglo-American map of the world is a stable oblong with the same proportions as a landscape oil painting. Voyages across the Atlantic and beneath the continents of America and Africa appear as the inevitable and obvious pursuit of 'trade routes'. Maps looking down from the North Pole imply something entirely different (no wonder the Arctic fascinated the Nazis). On *Dance Me This*, Zappa left us with a song of the world as old as the Stone Age, an archaic throwback. But it was designed to open your head to new relations – new relations which are being forced on us willy-nilly.

Zappa was acutely aware that evoking ancient ritual through modern technology is absurd (in the decades after *Dance Me This*, this Riefenstahl tactic was reprised ad nauseam in Metal, Ambient and Trance). His opener (the eponymous 'Dance Me This') begins with a resonant F chord which is utterly pop, utterly commercial, utterly 'mainstream'. The piano's repeated phrase is common to Country, Soul, Rock and Reggae, deriving ultimately from the hymn book. You expect a West Coast singer in the mould of Linda Ronstadt to pipe up: the Tuvan vocals therefore come as a shock. Then Zappa's dependable pursuit of musical extension/deviation takes over. The piano figure repeats, but the rhythm track is asymmetrical and non-repeating, out of sync, and becomes a *piquant* spur to the vocal, which, while weird, is nevertheless breathtakingly infectious. There's a brief outbreak of Zappa's stadium-rock guitar (his son Dweezil's guitar rig was set up in the home studio at the time) dubbed over the digital Synclavier collage. This is the sonic equivalent to pasting a sixteenth-century woodcut of a cloud over a modern colour photograph. You are not allowed to hear *Dance Me This* as anything but an artificial concoction.

The monumental shamanic introduction of 'Dance Me This' cannot last; it's segued into 'Pachuco Gavotte' (the title itself a typical Zappa yoking of disparates: a Mexican-American street style encounters

classical form). 'Pachuco Gavotte' brings in a strict beat, a schoolmaster interrupting play with raps on his lectern. Its key changes are purposefully irrational, like Roni Size's Represent or a theme-tune for a television game show which tests 'intelligence'. Zappa once pointed out that he liked to construct easy songs as 'garden paths', but the point was the 'brick wall' it led you to smash into (it's the lack of this sensitivity to the segue, the attempt to fit Zappa into the mould of the songwriter rather than composer, which vitiates the ZFT's posthumous releases). In *Dance Me This*, the garden path is the rhythmic velocity of 'Pachuco Gavotte': when 'Wolf Harbor' starts up, you feel you've been ejected head-first from some sewer outfall into the bottomless depths of a city's murky effluent, with no rational harmonic explanation or rhythmic argument to cling onto.

If you examine a score of Wagner's *Ring*, the time line represented by the bar divisions sweeps through the layers of instructions as inexorably as the playback cursor moving through a digital sound file. This concept of time is two-dimensional and mechanical, with no inkling of the multiple contingencies of real objects in space (only in the 1950s and 1960s did composers emulate jazz by experimenting with different tempi in single pieces). As with *The Lord of the Rings*, Wagner staged archaic trappings via a nineteenth-century illusion mechanism. With Tolkien, it's the omniscient narrator (so effectively challenged by Philip K. Dick); with Wagner, *Herr Zeitmeister der Komponist*. Both were definitively pre-Einstein.

In 'Wolf Harbor' – the 28-minute, 5-movement suite which occupies the central part of *Dance Me This* – Zappa explodes this two-dimensional concept of musical time. Unabashed scatology pictures the movement of waste in three-dimensional space; the bumps and scrapes and contingencies of disgusting and dangerous things underwater – clouds of sewage, rotting carcasses, rusting and torn metal. This is not the overture to *Das Rheingold*, where (as Adorno points out) the Rhinemaidens' song in praise of the gold sounds like a jingle for margarine.

Zappa famously derided the hippies for idealist evasion of hard fact: scientific, political and sexual. His surrealism is the opposite of the wishful thinking serviced by the Fantasy genre. In his recording sessions with the Tuvans, he was vastly amused that their vocal sound 'mearrhhhh!' resembled a comical noise his 1984 band discovered on the synthesiser. Zappa's amusement is as infantile as a baby learning to blow a raspberry, but in his universe (as in Asger Jorn's, with his iconographic research into sticking-out-tongues)

such absurdity is not negligible, it's cosmic. Like *The Simpsons* (and the CDs and writings of Eugene Chadbourne), the gag reflex becomes a critical instrument, a perpetual pressure for invention.

'Wolf Harbor' is a weightless, undriven tone poem with huge events passing by ... water samples, percussive explosions at various degrees of proximity, bring-out-your-dead bell tolls, whine of starting siren, violins skittering like rats, unnatural colours staining distant waters, percussion as thought (*tabla*) rather than its opposite (the military). There is a vocal sample which directly recalls one used by Paul Minotto (the Zappa follower responsible for The Prime Time Community Orchestra), an 'ay yo', which is incongruous in the manner of... garbage heaps: a pink plastic pig mounted on a Rothko.

In 'Wolf Harbor' the regular space-time grid of 'music' is twisted and whorled. Our immersion in freely associated detail begs comparison to the dream emulation of *Finnegans Wake*. Brass samples induce the sense of pre-orgasmic *waiting* familiar in the 'spectral' music of Iancu Dumitrescu and Ana-Maria Avram: animal tension without human comprehension, the sensation that 'something' is going to erupt, but you cannot tell when. Erotics become knowledge of actuality, economic and military. In 'Wolf Harbor', water samples are integrated so closely with the writing for percussion that the ear cannot tell the difference between a water drop and a *tabla* tap. This suggests another parallel with Dumitrescu/Avram: abolition of the difference between 'sound as documentary' and 'sound as composition'. In 'Wolf Harbor' sound events are allowed to decay, so there is a real sense of space, yet rational accountancy still pursues each phrase with analytical zeal. Mathematics at the service of life! We become nature under scrutiny; *we* are the event unfurling, melting the ice caps, altering the globe.

After 'Wolf Harbor', 'Goat Polo' returns to the shamanic vocal, with brief echoes of 'Strictly Genteel'/'Tuna Sandwich', a melody Zappa wrote when a teenager and which threads its way through everything he made. So 'Wolf Harbor' takes the listener to the brink of incoherence, but we're not left there: we return to Kuular's voice and we experience his vocal, ugly and shocking at the start, as relief and confirmation. Adorno criticized jazz players for returning to a tune, arguing it cancelled all their variations. Zappa didn't admire jazz, but he didn't agree with Adorno on musical discomfort. When his engineer Todd Yvega traced the rhythms of Kuular's vocals with obvious drum samples ('foom fap'), Zappa

and percussionist Ruth Underwood loved the result. Zappa chose to close the album using Yvega's drum track ('Calculus'): 'By that point in the album after all the preceding escapades, some relief by way of mindless foom-fop is exactly what we need.' Adorno's taboo on romantic cliché works well when applied to modernist orchestral composition, but fails when recording brings in other voices and different pleasures. When Freddie Hubbard reprises 'Backlash', it's the sound of proletarian pride, not bourgeois timidity.

Zappa raided swathes of music from every social station in society and every region of the world. He praised the avant-garde and the obscure and the marginalized in every press interview, but never gave up hopes of finding enlightened listeners in the mass market. 'Piano' here follows Conlon Nancarrow's player-piano works in proposing an impossible bionically enhanced performer beyond even the likes of Ian Pace. It digests the music, percussion and effects of 'Wolf Harbor' and the dark reverberant chord established by the throat singing into written note values, insisting that musical rationality cannot only understand unwritten music, but embellish and extend it. Where *Id* was *Ego* shall be, and this is a human and personal triumph, not a tragedy.

*Dance Me This* finishes with 'Calculus'. Its setting of Kuular's vocal recalls Zappa using Art Tripp's avant-garde percussion to reveal advanced music inside the hoarse ditties of Wild Man Fischer. Zappa finds, variously: Greek wedding dance twirls, Celtic harps, the *pizzicati* of Versailles fountains and the tuba used in Germa oompah waltzes. *Dance Me This* finishes on a harmonically embellished G chord that contains elements of the F chord the album starts with: if this seems like an echo of the circular construction of *Finnegans Wake*, this is not so much a cute literary reference as a similar refusal of chronological time and the hierarchical aspect of calendar systems. Any theme or detail may suddenly burgeon into an entire universe. Like Joyce's writing, Zappa's music is fractal, perpetually insisting on the same thing: that the actual state of things is the 'imagination' you aspire to, and it's happening all about you right now. Most pop music which appeals to intellectuals can be 'justified' only by erecting unwieldy scaffolds of politics and morals from market illusions concerning the efficacy of images. Zappa, in contrast, was the counterculture's great iconoclast: he laid down the ground points of a critical philosophy by dealing with history and politics at the level of the recorded notes themselves.

**Ben Watson**