

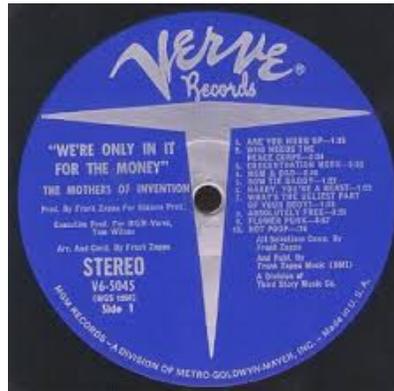
“We’re Only In It For the Money”--Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention (1968)

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Essay by Ed Komara (guest post)*



Original album cover



Original label



Frank Zappa

In 1967, California rock was concentrated in two contrasting cities. One was San Francisco, home of the Grateful Dead and the Jefferson Airplane, and of the then-new magazine “Rolling Stone.” The other was Los Angeles, where lived the Beach Boys, including Brian Wilson, and the Mothers of Invention led by Frank Zappa (1940-1993). In the first two Mothers of Invention albums for MGM-Verve (“Freak Out!” [1966] and “Absolutely Free” [1967]), Zappa chronicled the local “freak” scene while it thrived through 1966. After the crackdown on the music venues that freaks patronized, Zappa and the Mothers went to New York City for several performing residencies. From there, Zappa looked with distaste on the San Francisco “hippie” scene, and had concerns for the youths participating in it.

“We’re Only In It For The Money” was what Zappa made of what he observed of the hippie scene. From the disembodied voices that begin the album to the fading last tone of the closing track, “The Chrome Plated Megaphone of Destiny,” Zappa held up a musical mirror to mock every hippie and hippie-wanna-be who migrated to San Francisco during the Summer of Love. “What’s the Ugliest Part of Your Body?” Zappa asks twice on the album as a doo-wop question. His answer each time was “I think it’s your mind.” Zappa appropriated without apology two of the most-played records of 1967, the Beatles’s album “Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band” and Jimi Hendrix’s single “Hey Joe.” Yet “We’re Only In It For The Money” is not a hodgepodge but rather a complete molten statement, and arguably Zappa’s first masterpiece.

Zappa was 26 when he recorded this album, but for some lyrics and music he went as far back as his childhood to draw from several personal experiences. He was born in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1940, but at an early age, his family moved to California. While attending high school, he knew other misfits like Don Van Vliet (later known as Captain Beefheart) and two brothers named Kenny and Ronnie Williams whose mother worked in a local diner. In 1964, with money earned from composing a film soundtrack, Zappa made a down payment for a recording studio that he soon called Studio Z; it was located in Cucamonga, California, and its equipment was capable of recording in five tracks.

Mostly forgotten, yet most significant for the themes of “We’re Only In It For The Money,” were the camps in which approximately 110,000 Japanese and Japanese-American residents were interned in California, Utah, Colorado, Arizona, Idaho, Arkansas, and Wyoming during World War II. More recent events also shaped the album’s concept. The crackdown of the Los Angeles “freak” scene and the ascent of San Francisco’s hippie scene were already mentioned.

In 1966, Ronald Reagan was elected Governor of California in part on a vow “to clean up the mess at Berkeley,” referring to the student protests at the University of California campus there.

“We’re Only In It For The Money” begins with engineer Gary Kellgren whispering threats to erase Zappa’s recording tapes (“Are You Hung Up?”). “Who Needs The Peace Corps?” is a full-on mocking of how trendy San Francisco had become to young people. “Concentration Moon” and “Mom and Dad” describes two kinds of police enforcement on young people, the first by internment, as was done to the Japanese-Americans, the second by violence as reported to parents. Parents are also referred to in “Telephone Conversation,” “Bow Tie Daddy,” and “Harry You’re A Beast/What’s the Ugliest Part of Your Body?” During the last of those songs, Zappa confronts the parents by preaching, “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 “Absolutely Free” and “Flower Punk,” Zappa returns to bashing hippie aspirations. “Flower Punk” was sung to the melody of “Hey Joe,” a folk song whose rock adaptation by Jimi Hendrix was sold and played widely in 1967. The collage “Hot Poop” ends side one. Beginning side two is “Nasal Retentive Calliope Music” which incorporates a bit of a surf instrumental that Zappa had recorded a few years before at Studio Z, and it heralds the nostalgic songs that follow. “Let’s Make The Water Turn Black” and “The Idiot Bastard Son” are about his high school friends Kenny and Ronnie Williams making raisin alcohol, flicking snot on a window, and urinating into pots and jars in which swimming “little creatures on display” eventually appear. With “Lonely Little Girl,” Zappa returns to 1967, building musical momentum through “Take Your Clothes Off When You Dance” to the reprise of “What’s the Ugliest Part of Your Body?” “Mother People” is Zappa’s assertion of himself and his rock band: ugly in appearance, undesirable socially, but unafraid to endure public opinion. “Mother People” has barely ended when “The Chrome Plated Megaphone of Destiny” cuts in with electronic crackling and screeching. The title of this closing instrumental refers directly to the metal cones found in the hips of Barbie figure dolls, one of which is blown to produce one of the unearthly tones heard on this track. In his inner album notes, Zappa explains the true intent of this track, which was to give a musical approximation of Franz Kafka’s short story “In The Penal Colony,” thereby providing an instrumental counterpart to “Concentration Moon.” Throughout the album, Zappa parodied the structure of the Beatles’s “Sgt. Pepper,” contrasting their faux-live audience frame with his engineer’s recurring studio-ambient whispering, and using their reprise device. The last track, “The Chrome Plated Megaphone of Destiny,” ends with a fading tone, as did the Beatles’s “A Day in the Life,” but on tone F# instead of the Beatles’s E.

Zappa worked quickly on “We’re Only In It For The Money,” but its release was delayed until March 1968. Reportedly it was due to EMI/Capitol’s objection to Zappa and Cal Schenkel’s parody of the “Sgt. Pepper” album sleeve, which replaced the Fab Four with Zappa and his six Mothers in drag, the blue sky with a thunderstorm, and the notables behind the band with notorieties and nobodies. More serious were the alterations that Zappa had to do to the music at MGM-Verve’s request before the first release, and the additional cuts that the label imposed for the later pressings. For that reason, variants abound among the vinyl pressings. In 1984, Zappa remixed the album with new tracks for bass and drums, using that for the last vinyl pressings and the first CD issues. Since 1995, the 1967 edit and mix has been used as the official release.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.