

An Experiment in Interdisciplinary Teaching:
The Music Theatre of Frank Zappa

Paul Carr and Richard Hand, University of Glamorgan

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The global aim of this project was to investigate the viabilities of interdisciplinary teaching with undergraduates in the area of Drama and Popular Music: these are separate programs of study at the University of Glamorgan albeit within the same Department of Performing Arts. Popular Music is a relatively new degree scheme that commenced delivery in 2004, while Drama is well established, having been a single subject since the early 1990s. This report will examine the process of our multidisciplinary teaching experiment, and measure its effectiveness against the project aims set out below:

- Enable staff and students from different disciplines to work together
- Assist the assimilation and awareness of sister disciplines in order to discover commonality, and to learn from each other
- Present a challenge for teaching staff who have extensive teaching experience in their own discipline but are new to academic investigation of colleague's expertise
- Begin the experimental and radical extension of the curriculum, with a view to develop other interdisciplinary modules and, ultimately, degree programmes

The units chosen for this experiment were a final level module on the BA (Hons) Drama entitled *American Theatre*, and *Ensemble Studies 3*, drawn from the BA (Hons) Popular Music degree. The former module runs for a whole year and covers American theatre and live performance from the early twentieth century until the present day. A substantial and traditionally popular area of study within the module is the study of 1960-80s drama and performance which covers dramatists and theatre-makers like Sam Shepard, August Wilson and David Mamet and addresses topics such as the Vietnam war, the Civil Rights movement and AIDS. *Ensemble*

Studies 3 is a level 2 Popular Music module which enables students to examine and experience either ‘*audience led*’ (Dinner dance, Social Club, Tribute band, etc) or ‘*production led*’ contexts (Theatre, Cabaret). Particular emphasis is placed upon the development and interpretation of music notation skills, alongside stylistic awareness, rehearsal technique, and organisational preparation for an end of year performance.

Initial discussions located a point of focus for this experiment. Figures such as Bob Dylan, Jimi Hendrix and the 1969 Woodstock Festival were considered closely as resonant icons of the chosen era. However, when attempting to find a suitable conduit for both disciplines, our discussions led to one figure who, it was realised, had great resonance and relevance for both music *and* drama: Frank Zappa (1940-93). Zappa’s comparative longevity as a creative force in popular music presents a figure whose work reflects and responds to everything from Vietnam through to censorship issues and the rise of AIDS. Zappa was not just an icon but an outspoken and active individual who imbues his lyrics, his autobiography and his numerous interviews with a social, satirical and political consciousness equivalent to any contemporaneous playwright.

Widely regarded as one of the most prolific¹ and versatile composers of the rock idiom, Frank Zappa’s unerring ability to fuse late 50s do-wop, rhythm and blues, rock, jazz, disco, reggae, new wave, *musique concrète*, electronic, and serial techniques make him a fascinating and totally unique study in musicological intertextuality². One of the few composers to successfully and consistently engage with both low and high cultural forms, Zappa’s oeuvre is now gradually beginning to be recognized as one of the most eclectic, prolific, and original in the history of the popular music canon. The uniqueness and complexity of Zappa’s genre classification is emphasized by a number of “external” contexts, such as the packaging of his albums, the promotion of his live concerts, the polemical political views outlined in his interviews, the behavioural patterns and dress code of both his band and audience, the bilateral social function of his music, the hierarchical relationship of himself to his group members, and the principal focus of this report, the visual presentation and complex theatrical gestures of his performances. Indeed, many of the numerous

¹ All Music Guide (www.allmusic.com) currently has 78 official albums on its database. This does not include the numerous bootlegs, many of which are now being released by The Zappa Family Trust’s “Beat the Boot’s” series.

² 184 of Zappa’s numerous musical and intellectual influences are annotated on the inner sleeve of his debut album - *Freak Out*.

musicians who worked with Zappa were required not only to be virtuoso performers, but also be capable of participating in what were essentially theatrical stage shows. This engagement ranged from the obligatory “rock and roll stage presence”, to stand up comedy (For example “Room Service”, *The Dub Room Special* 1982) to satirical radio plays such as “Billy the Mountain”.

In preparation for our experimental combined rehearsals on 27 February and 6 March 2006, both drama and music students worked independently (with close staff guidance and supervision) on the musicological and dramatic aspects of a work devised by the team entitled *Zappa-Fish: An Anti Off Off Off Broadway Musical*. Although the text is heavily influenced by Frank Zappa’s *Thing-Fish*, the music is derived from a broad range of Zappa’s whole portfolio as follows:

- “Love of my Life” (*Cruisin’ With Ruben And The Jets*)
- “Who Needs the Peace Corps” (*We’re Only In It For The Money*)
- “Elvis Has Just Left The Building” (*Broadway The Hard Way*)
- “Montana” (*Overnite Sensation*)
- “The Idiot Bastard Son” (*We’re Only In It For The Money*)
- “What’s The Ugliest Part Of Your Body” (*We’re Only In It For The Money*)
- “My Guitar Wants To Kill Your Mamma” (*Weasels Ripped My Flesh*)

In order to avoid being too proscriptive and to assist creativity and improvisation, students were not exposed to the original version of *Thing Fish*. Music students were given lyric sheets with associated harmonies alongside the recordings outlined above, and were instructed to capture the spirit of the original, but not necessarily copy them precisely. It appears that the working practice of using pre-existing musical material with an otherwise unrelated script, and developing both simultaneously is in congruence with the methodology Zappa employed when devising *Thing-Fish*. Indeed

long time Zappa side-man Ike Willis, who played the eponymous character in *Thing-Fish* confirmed the malleable nature of the original script, stating:

We put everything together in song form first, and things were structured like that, but the thing was, it changed every day, because the script grew every day (Slaven 1996).

Our background research has in fact revealed the existence of an important “pre-release” version of the album that substantiates this claim. Although the majority of the work is unchanged, the alterations that are made more clearly elucidate his working practices and inspiration for both text and music. The implications of incorporating this methodology for an interdisciplinary project crossing the border between music and drama are both far-reaching and rewarding. Our initial experiments certainly confirmed that this process encourages both cohorts to work together on a collective goal, as well as developing a more holistic awareness of the impact of dramatic narratives/musical textures on the work of art.

As well as documenting the play, transcribing the music, and leading the preparatory workshops, we also invested a considerable amount of time researching Zappa’s discography, interviews, polysemic influences, academic texts, and numerous biographies. This enabled us to increase our knowledge of the subject for the purposes of teaching and, more specifically, obtain a more thorough understanding of his working practices, which we intended to encourage students to broadly adhere to. Throughout the rehearsal process we attempted to additionally encourage students to engage with his, in the widest sense, “Ellingtonian” approach to composition. He stated:

But for me it was always more interesting to encounter a musician who had a unique ability, find a way to showcase that and build the unusual skill into a composition. So that afterward that composition would be stamped with the personality of the person who was there when the composition was created (Slaven 1996)

Needless to say, this principle works very well in the areas of music *and* drama. Preparatory workshops in music and drama enabled staff and students to engage with the raw materials within the remit of our individual art forms prior to working together. This intensive working environment was vital in terms of discovering the

“unique abilities” outlined above. Although all students displayed a commitment to the project, specific examples of interest include one student’s capacity to both sing and play drum patterns with his voice during “What’s The Ugliest Part of Your Body” and, in Drama, some students discovered an impressive aptitude for comic monologue and a surprising conduit for physical improvisation in Zappa’s narrative lyrics

After the series of individual sessions, students were brought together for two interdisciplinary workshops, during which they performed sections of the work, examined musicological and dramatic challenges as well as the bilateral potential for integration into each other’s contexts. Examples of initial points of discussion included the potential for individual art forms to substantiate the *meaning* of the other, the *emotional* effect specific rhythmic vamps have on both audience and performer, and the potential to incorporate musicological techniques in theatrical settings. Further questions were highlighted during the rehearsals, all of which will be discussed later in this report.

In terms of Zappa’s philosophical approach to his art, it is important to verify that many of his works are in fact a realisation of what he called “Conceptual Continuity”, and part of wider philosophy he entitled “The Big Note”. When asked how he regarded his portfolio in 1968 he commented:

It’s all one album. All the material in the album is organically related and if I had all the master tapes and I could take a razor blade and cut them apart and put it together again in a different order, it still would make one piece of music you can listen too. (Slaven 1996)

Zappa upheld this ideological perspective throughout his entire career, his portfolio not only referring to earlier works, but actually including the recorded “object” in his developing “projects”. This terminology was employed by Zappa to describe his perceived difference between the completed work of art in a recording (object), and the ongoing process of redefining it (project). There are countless examples of Zappa employing this methodology throughout his career, and our intention was to explore, through teaching workshops and rehearsals, its artistic and pedagogical potential, alongside the other techniques discussed in this report.

On reflection, Frank Zappa unquestionably provides an excellent conduit for both music/drama staff and students to engage in cross-disciplinary activities. It was particularly interesting to observe the similarities that both art forms had in terms of

vocabulary and creative impulses, as the commonality made communicating with the group as a whole easier to manage. Discussions following both experiments verified our suspicions that a potential unit encouraging active participation of both student sets would be popular, and it was noted that this experimental group felt unfortunate that they would not be able undertake the official unit on a formal basis next year. Students were particularly enthused by the viability of creatively engaging on interdisciplinary ventures that enabled not only the realisation of existing scripts, but also the creation of original material within the confines of “Zappa’s parameters”. Depending on the interests and abilities of the cohort, this could include students’ composing music and/or devising narrative for a range of productions. Scripts could be based upon one of Zappa’s numerous characters (i.e. Billy the Mountain, Greggory Peckory, The Illinois Enema Bandit, The Mudd Shark, Punkies Whips, etc), specific aspects of his general ethos (i.e. his distrust of the media, his overt manipulation of the popular music audience, his involvement with politics, etc), or around a series of predefined compositions. Music could be loosely arranged by academic staff as per experiment, composed by students using Zappa’s compositional techniques (xenochronic, serial, conceptual continuity, harmonic climates, leitmotif, etc), or arranged and possibly notated by the students themselves. Creative commencement points could start with a predefined set of songs from Zappa’s portfolio, setting the environment for cohorts to compose stage productions around them. Conversely, students could commence with the script, and compose/arrange music based on the narrative. Factors such as this could be fine tuned depending of the time or credit drama/music modules are given. The latter, for example, could potentially work if the popular music unit has a greater credit rating than that of drama. We feel an area of particular interest is the intersection between the two art forms, the zone where members of Zappa’s band had to frequently operate as musicians and actors. The prospect of both cohorts engaging with each other’s disciplines is both an important academic pursuit, as well as providing a valid professional attribute. It was noted that actors would increase the opportunities of employment if they developed instrumental/vocals skills, and we feel music students in particular would benefit from an environment where they *have* to perform, as opposed to purely partaking in musicological paradigms. Although we did not have time to engage with the protocol fully, we believe the prospect of attempting to share creative processes could be particularly fruitful. Zappa’s incorporation of *Xenochronic* and *Conceptual Continuity*

are indicative examples of what we would like to explore further in future projects, the prospect of drama students attempting to horizontally (xenochronically) juxtaposition seemingly unrelated elements being a particularly challenging prospect. Although there is no evidence as of yet proving that Zappa himself consciously attempted this concept, the simultaneous appearance of ‘*Harry*’ and ‘*Harry as a boy*’ in *Thing Fish* proves that the concept is possible, if not on a subconscious level. The philosophy of *conceptual continuity* is an interesting challenge for both parties, encouraging them to consider the relation of the part to the whole not only in the recorded *object/project*, but as with Zappa, within the wider concept of a lifetimes work.

Our discovery of the *alternate Thing-Fish* recording (a demo which has come to light) confirmed our suspicions that Zappa experimented with a variety of different musical ideas over the same text before deciding which provided the most appropriate emotional environment. We therefore attempted to engage with this procedure during both rehearsals. During the first rehearsal we experimented with two incongruent musical backings for our *introduction*. Although at this stage the music students had only rehearsed the prescribed stand-alone pieces, we collectively and quickly decided upon some basic grooves to work over the narrative. As none of the students had heard the original recording, it was interesting to observe how the characters developed, with only the basic text and music to consider. It was decided that the obvious African- American dialect of the script would probably work best with music that was influenced by black culture, so we concluded that a James Brown type funk groove would be appropriate. Notably, *Thing Fish*’s character immediately delivered the text and movement with an almost *Rap* like quality – most certainly empowering the character with his own cultural influences, in much the same way that Zappa and Ike Willis had developed the original character. Subsequently, as we had hoped both music and drama students began to be influenced by one another, displaying a lucid awareness of each other’s *space* as the rehearsal progressed. This certainly placed another dimension to the original recording, which was entirely based on juxtapositioning music with narrative in the recording studio, with no interactive element. The experiment then proceeded to repeat the same narrative over a *Country and Western* groove. One again, this encouraged immediate improvisation from the actors, who indoctrinated a different perspective to their individual characters. *Thing Fish*’s character in particular gave the opening a distinctly “Wild West” feel –

somehow altering the text to adhere with this paradigm. Encouraged by this success, we implemented a similar technique during the “Harry and Rhonda” section, initially deciding to continue the Western theme by incorporating a four bar looped segment from *Montana*, in effect an example of *leitmotiv* as the piece is included in its entirety earlier. During rehearsal two (with different actors) the musicians intuitively used modulation as a means of increasing dramatic tension as the piece progressed. These modulations were delivered by key band members cueing the others when to change, and it was noted that this concept could be taken a stage further by employing something similar to Zappa’s incorporation of *hand signals* to depict feels, moods, textures, grooves etc. Zappa incorporated this technique to simulate the *cut and paste* contrasts of his live recordings, and we believe a similar methodology could be employed with actors. Once again this will form the basis of a future research project to examine its potential.

On a purely musicological level, it was interesting to note how music students undertook the challenge of performing part of Zappa’s notoriously difficult compositional portfolio. Although the pieces were chosen for their playability, the entire cohort conceded that they had underestimated the musical challenges, of paradigms that were subliminally complex. The contrapuntal nature of do-wop vocal lines was a factor that attracted Zappa to this music in the 1950’s, and although the end results sound effortless, it requires supreme vocal confidence to accurately deliver the individual strands of the harmony. Although music students did not attempt to copy the harmonies precisely, the process of composing similar tensions and releases was unquestionably a challenge for all concerned. Indeed it was noted that much could be learned from examining even the “easy” compositions of Frank Zappa, as they frequently had unexpected harmonic and textural perspectives. When discussing the pastiche nature of “Crusin’ with Ruben and the Jet’s” he regarded the album as a “mutated version of Stravinsky’s neo classical period” (Slaven 1996). Compositions performed by students such as “Who Needs the Peace Corps” and “What’s The Ugliest Part of Your Body” “mutate” the harmonic and formulaic aspects of their respective conventions. In the case of the former, the highly unusual tritone resolution during the verse was only noticed after transcribing the harmonic progression.

For drama students, the project opened up extraordinary avenues. Too often in theatre studies the tradition of written text is reified. In Zappa’s work we found “texts” that are more than just printed page texts. Looking at music and lyrical text

together opened up challenging and rewarding areas of consideration. The themes that the students had studied in the more orthodox textual works of Sam Shepard, David Mamet, Tony Kushner, August Wilson, Amiri Baraka and so on, were reinforced and challenged in Zappa's oeuvre. The critique of American domestic and international legislation and policy was uncovered in "Who Needs the Peace Corps" and "The Idiot Bastard Son"; the assault on the mythology of the American Dream was found in "Montana"; while "Elvis Has Just Left The Building" was assessed as a sustained assault on American iconographic and hagiographic processes just as "Love of my Life" was seen as an assault on clichéd values of idealised "love". Theatre students often use music but usually as a kind of wallpaper to their stage work. The Zappa project demonstrated how music can be used at a whole other level: the music was live and interactive, responding and provoking, facilitating and cajoling. Performance direction and, ultimately, meaning had to be liaised and negotiated through the medium and processes of interdisciplinary performance: this made the project a phenomenal lesson for all involved.

In conclusion, we feel our experiment was a resounding success. Returning to the aims of the project at the outset, we feel:

- *Enable staff and students from different disciplines to work together: This succeeded.*
- *Assist the assimilation and awareness of sister disciplines in order to discover commonality, and to learn from each other: This succeeded.*
- *Present a challenge for teaching staff who have extensive teaching experience in their own discipline but are new to academic investigation of colleague's expertise: This succeeded.*

In addition, the project has clear signs of longevity with staff continuing their investigations and students carrying on with their dialogue and interactions on Zappa and other interdisciplinary experiments. Regarding our final aim:

- *Begin the experimental and radical extension of the curriculum, with a view to develop other interdisciplinary modules and, ultimately, degree programmes*

This succeeded inasmuch as this is now very much on the agenda and a focus of planning discussions.

Over all, the Palatine money was invaluable as it facilitated the strategic planning and execution of the workshops and preparatory workshops in what was an immensely rewarding and successful project.