



Episode 1, 2012: Frank Zappa Collage

Edward Lewis: My name is Edward Lewis. I'm a thrift store addict. I found this collage in a thrift store that I really think may be made by the famous musician Frank Zappa. I only paid five dollars but I really believe that it may be worth a whole lot more. Was this collage really made by Frank Zappa?

Gwen: In his three decade career, Frank Zappa never had a number one hit, and only flirted with the mainstream. Zappa's music was genre-busting: eclectic and experimental. He was a social critic in his music and his actions: satirizing the counterculture, confronting congress over music censorship and championing political and artistic freedoms around the world. But I've never heard that he made visual art.

Edward: This is what I was telling you about.

Gwen: Now why do you think it's a Frank Zappa piece? There's "FZ" over here.

Edward: It's signed "FZ", which I, I didn't think a whole lot about, but, uh, a friend of mine actually called me up and said you need to look at this website, there's a picture similar to yours and it's a Frank Zappa collage. And so I went to that website, and there was one very similar and it was attributed to Frank Zappa.

Gwen: Well, I'll see, attributed is the key.

Edward: Yes.

Gwen: That's right. Now tell me where you found it.

Edward: I found it in a thrift store in South Carolina. But the tag on the back shows it was framed in California.

Gwen: Let's see, Denney's Paint Shop. And what's the name of this town? Santa Paula, California?

Edward: Santa Paula, California.

Gwen: Now, I would want to take this out of the frame at some point. Is that okay with you?

Edward: Sure.

Gwen: I'll be very careful.

Edward: Just don't tear it up.

Gwen: Well, I'll see what I can find out.

Ed: That's why I contacted you.

Gwen: This says "drum shop". Interesting piece of work. Some things are cut, some things are torn. It's, uh, ink and watercolor. The cymbals are paper, as is this man's jacket. The plaid is painted on. And then up here we have what looks like it's either a bell for a boxing

match or for a fire alarm. There's a real vitality here. It's dense, it's colorful. Zappa certainly was known to have a visual style in his album covers, but I can find almost nothing about him as a painter. Seems he once worked as a greeting card designer, made claymation shorts, and even built a film set. But these references to visual art are fleeting in a career overwhelmingly devoted to music and musical experimentation with his band, the Mothers of Invention- and his later solo projects. Edward mentioned that there's a fan site that has other artwork reportedly by Frank Zappa. Let me see what I can find there.

Most of these look nothing like our collage. Here's the piece that Edward thinks resembles his. And it clearly has a lot of similarity with our piece. It has the same thick and thin pen and ink line, but there's no signature, not even "FZ". And, frankly, although some of this looks promising, almost nothing here is verified. Some of the statements about provenance show how unreliable this can be. This artwork was given to a lady I became friends with when I lived in Beverly Hills. She personally knew Frank Zappa. With Edward's piece found in a thrift store, I don't even have that tenuous connection. I need to find a way to link this collage to Frank Zappa.

Gwen: Denney's Paint Shop, that might give us an important clue. I presume that's when this was originally put into a frame. It's a long shot, but maybe they'll have records of who framed this. I can't find the paint store online, but Santa Paula is in Southern California, where Zappa had moved with his family as a teen.

My office is seeing if they can get records of when the store closed, and run down any of the people on the art web site. In the meantime, I'm meeting pop culture historian Michael Walker in the legendary Los Angeles neighborhood of Laurel Canyon, where Frank Zappa lived in the 1960's.

I'm trying to find out if this particular pen and ink...

Michael: Oh my gosh, look at that.

Gwen: Isn't this fabulous?

Michael: Yeah.

Gwen: If this was done by Frank Zappa.

Gwen: Have you ever heard about his doing work as a visual artist?

Michael: No. I did not know he did anything like this.

Gwen: But Michael does tell me that Zappa was a drummer in his high school days, and definitely part of a visual arts scene in Laurel Canyon.

Michael: Laurel Canyon was just a polyglot with all sorts of artists, real or imagined. Right, so...But Frank Zappa and Gail Zappa, his wife, and their daughter, Moon Unit, and this entourage that lived at the cabin with them... it was almost like a salon, like in Paris, except that he was running it.

Gwen: But Michael explains that Zappa stood apart from many of the other musicians and artists surrounding him.

[Music Playing]: "Come on people now, Let's get together try and love one another right now."

Michael: That was when folk rock was just huge. That was when the Mamas and the Papas

and The Byrds and Buffalo Springfield, he was surrounded, he lived amidst all of these people. But he was not doing what they were doing.

Gwen: Zappa was a fan of radical modern composers, especially Edgard Varese who experimented with electronic music.

Michael: He was doing avant garde, almost symphonic compositions.

Gwen: Lyrically, Zappa was also willing to poke fun at the earnest folk scene and the drug use of the day.

Michael: He was sort of, um, doing a reality check for the counter culture. He did not have an abiding love for hippies. He thought, perhaps, it was sometimes hypocritical. This is a song called the Plastic People, and it's a great song because it's, um, a parody both of Frank Zappa's own generation and also, sort of a, Middle- class American generation.

[Music Playing]

Michael: That's basically him busting his own people, which is a brave thing to do at that time. But he was more of a commentator and an iconoclast.

Gwen: Zappa was a political dissident too. In the mid 1980's, he appeared before congress to protest music censorship. In all his research into Zappa's artistic experimentation, Michael never came across Frank the collage maker, but he believes that Frank's concept of music was uniquely visual.

Michael: Well, he also talked about his music in a three dimensional way. When he played the guitar, he would refer to them as song sculptures and so he was making a physical thing in the air and he loved the idea of moving masses of air around in big concert halls with big speakers. It fascinated him.

Gwen: That's interesting, but I still don't have any proof that this collage was one of his artistic visions. The Santa Paula library has sent me copies of their business directories. They show Denney's Paint Store was only open from 1959 to 1963 at the address on our label. If Zappa painted this he did it before the age of 24. Someone who knew him back then for sure was his younger brother, Bob Zappa. I meet Bob and Calvin Schenkel, the artist who designed many of Zappa's most iconic album covers, at Calvin's Studio.

Have either one of you seen this?

Calvin Schenkel: I've never seen it.

Bob Zappa: I've never seen it either.

Gwen: Does it look at all familiar?

Calvin: Specifically?

Bob: No.

Calvin: No, I never saw it.

Gwen: But, Bob says his brother was making visual art in his teens and early- 20s

Bob: He even won a prize for a poster that he did on fire prevention when he was in the 9th

grade. And then when he was working for a card studio in Claremont, California, he was using silkscreen.

Calvin: I think he did a, he did a TV commercial for Luden's.

Bob: Luden's Cough Drops, yeah.

Gwen: Frank collaborated with animator Ed Seeman.

Bob: I don't remember exactly what it said but there was no, there were no people in it. It was just that visual of the lines and the sound of the record. The visual was dancing to music.

Calvin: Right

Gwen: But very much this notion of a sound and not just here's music and here's a painting but how do we see these screeching together.

Calvin: Earlier in LA, he did a lot of ads for the events, the concerts, using collage.

Gwen: Oh really?!

Calvin: Well, that's the thing about his music too. He worked in so many different directions and put it all together and just all kinds of different ways. Classical, jazz and rock on the same album and even in the same song.

Gwen: Calvin says the little art he does have that Frank made reflects this eclecticism.

Calvin: And, I have a copy here of a flyer that he did at the time.

Gwen: Uh, you see the same density and dynamism here. There's a lot going on.

Calvin: Yeah and his style, the cut of the letters, his, his style, you can see it in here: the little flourish on the S.

Gwen: Yes, there are real similarities, but was this done by the same hand? Our researchers at the History Detective's office have been tracking down leads from the website. None have panned out, but there is another lead, the one person who might be able to help settle this.

Gwen: I'm excited! Gail Zappa, Frank's wife, has agreed to meet me! I sent her a scan of the collage, and she asked to me at the Professional Drum Shop in Hollywood.

Gwen: Are you Gail?

Gail Zappa: Hi Gwen.

Gwen: Nice to meet you!

Gail: Nice to meet you.

Gwen: I'm very honored! I'm trying to find some material about an early visual piece that I think he might have done. Now, I sent you that scan, but here's the original. Let me show you.

Gail: Oh my goodness.

Gail: I didn't know I was going to get to see the actual piece.

Gwen: So, here it is. So, I'm trying to find out if "FZ" was Frank Zappa.

Gail: OK, that's a big question.

Gwen: Gail has not seen the collage before. But the art reminds her of how Frank would sometimes draw music, before writing or playing it.

Gail: This is really similar to a lot of the ways that Frank used to start off a composition. He would make a sketch of it in terms of densities and progression. Because for Frank, music was visual.

Gwen: Interesting.

Gail: Yeah. And that's how he saw music. Like, mobiles, you know, floating, things crossing each other. And you know what people don't realize is, he only ended up in Rock and Roll because there was no other label that he fit into.

Gwen: We also have this pretty conspicuous "FZ". Did you ever see him use his initials that way?

Gail: All the time!

Gwen: Oh, tell me.

Gail: The first time he went on the road, he had to go to the bank and get traveler's checks, because that's just it how it happened in those days – can you imagine? And he, they rejected them, because he could not sign his name the same way twice. And it got to be, starting out, Frank Zappa, and eventually ended up as this sort of "FZ" scribble. And that's consistent. I mean, we see that everywhere.

Gwen: Gail has another possible clue, and it's much more personal.

Gail: I wanted you to see this place, because Frank, you know, when we first met, we had very limited budget. And one of the few times that we actually went somewhere was to this place. This is particularly meaningful because of Frank's relationship with the owner, the original, the guy who started this place. Over here we have this fabulous picture, I believe that to be the owner, Bob Yeager. And this is a picture of him in that jacket.

Gwen: That is very striking! Then Gail points out one more thing that she thinks the owner's stepson can fill us in on.

Gail: Well, you know what, let's get Stan over and he can tell us.

Gwen: Now, Frank Zappa was a drummer when he was very young.

Edward: Oh, I see.

Gwen: He was also a visual artist when he was very young. That's something very few people know.

Edward: See, I didn't know that.

Gwen: I tell Edward that much of what I had heard was circumstantial, until Gail Zappa brought me to the Professional Drum Shop in Hollywood, where they've had something in storage for half a century.

Stan Keyawa: In the mid-60's or so, we had a huge rental situation, and this was one of our rental things that we had. It's a bell, which is not working too well now. But, that's the first thing I noticed was that up there.

Gwen: It certainly is the same kind of thing.
The loving recreation of the Professional Drum Shop leaves Gail with no doubt.

Gail: This is absolutely Frank Zappa.

Edward: That is amazing. That is amazing. Good 5 dollar investment I hope.

Gwen: I asked my colleague, Elyse Luray, how much she'd appraised this for. She said, "Oh, probably... 25,000.

Edward: 25,000. I made a good investment then.

Gwen: What I find even more exciting is the way that this opens up dimensions about Frank Zappa. You can hear this piece of art.

Edward: I always liked it, I appreciated it then, I really appreciate it now. I think I won't let it out of my sight.