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Father's son knows best

Frank Zappa's music is brought to life for a new generation by his ardent offspring.

By Josef Woodard, Special to The Times
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VIRTUOSIC composer-bandleader-guitarist-prankster Frank Zappa met his premature demise, from prostate cancer, in 1993, at age 52. If anything, the subsequent years have made it clearer that Zappa's work belongs in a genre all its own. On planet Zappa, extreme musical sophistication, outrageous comic twists and a bad-boy perspective on progressive rock collide.

Such singularity comes into sharper focus when his complex — yet also nasty and fun — music is played live, and correctly. Angelenos are getting a chance to hear it this year, through projects directly linked to Zappa's history. In April, the Grande Mothers, featuring alumni Don Preston, Roy Estrada and Napoleon Murphy Brock from Zappa's band Mothers of Invention, played tightly machined versions of Zappa music at REDCAT.

And on Friday at the Wiltern, the band Zappa Plays Zappa returns from a successful tour of Europe and the East Coast, landing in the city where Zappa reared his family and launched his adventures. A labor of love and, well, plain labor, the band was assembled by son Dweezil Zappa, a nimble guitarist himself, and a passionate advocate for his father's work.

"My real goal is to let the music speak for itself, and give it a live platform," Dweezil says by phone from Detroit. "That's the thing that has been missing for so long."

A showbiz kid who has worked in television and made metal-flavored music under his own name, Dweezil, 36, is the second-born in the Zappa brood. He's sandwiched between older sister Moon Unit (the "oh my God" vocals on the fluke Zappa hit "Valley Girl") and younger siblings Ahmet and Diva.

From the start, Dweezil recognized the questions he'd face from die-hard Zappa fans. "Before we

played a single show," he says, "a lot of people were very skeptical that I would be able to pull it off in any way, shape or form. Now, having done 30 shows, people recognize that I have put the time in. It is possible to make this music sound as authentic as can be without Frank."

Response so far has been mostly flattering. After last week's concert at Manhattan's Beacon Theater, the New York Times ran the headline "Best Band He Never Heard in His Life." Reviewer Nate Chinen wrote that Dweezil "led a sharp assemblage of musicians in a program complete with harrowing intricacies, inscrutable grandiosities and several of his father's alumni as featured guests."

ZAPPA'S music is distinct from virtually any other, before or since, through its blend of theatricality, heavy doses of satire, rock 'n' roll audacity, and also for its fiendish difficulty, tinged as it is by jazz and classical ideas. With its spidery lines and cerebral arrangements, heavy lifting is required of its musicians.

In Zappa the Younger's case, preparation translated to some serious effort honing his skills. As he says, "to do it in the way that I knew it could be done, and should be done meant that I needed to spend several years on my own, in my own autodidactic bubble, and learn the music."

He described his learning curve as resulting in "a complete guitar makeover. I changed my whole physical picking technique, sort of akin to training yourself how to walk differently. It was a very challenging process, but that's just what this job required, for me."

He then sought out young musicians able to tackle the difficult songbook. He was aiming young, partly because he seeks to appeal to young audiences. "I also thought there would be a whole other style of enthusiasm from younger musicians," he notes. "Another purpose was that I wanted to make sure that I got to train the band the way I wanted to train the band, and not have it be all about people who formerly played with Frank."

On tour, the band does include former Zappa mates guitarist Steve Vai, drummer Terry Bozzio and, again, vocalist Brock.

Despite the family brand, Dweezil insists that his "goal is not to try to pretend to be Frank, or to step into Frank's shoes, which is the mistake a lot of people make. This is just about just playing the music and trying to do it as authentically as possible.

"There are plenty of people who think that it requires rearranging and putting their own stamp on it. I think that's a very bad approach to Frank's music, because he's a real composer."

Their nearly three-hour show covers a broad span of Zappa's career, but focuses on the early '70s, from such albums as "Overnight Sensation," "Apostrophe" and "One Size Fits All."

Will it be an ongoing project? "I would hope so," he says. "There's clearly a treasure trove of material there."

Zappa's discography is close to 70 albums, including posthumous releases.

The music, Dweezil says, "will hopefully be better and better understood by many more audiences, as opposed to the years that have gone by where he's just described as some sort of satirical iconoclast with 'hairpin turns in his music' and stuff like that."

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Zappa Plays Zappa

Where: Wiltern LG, 3790 Wiltern Blvd., L.A.

When: 7 p.m. Friday

Price: \$42.50 to \$52.50

Info: (213) 388-5005