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# EAT THAT QUESTION

## Frank Zappa in His Own Words

A Film by  
**Thorsten Schütte**

**90 min | Opens 6/24/16 (NY/LA)**

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## **CREDITS**

A film by  
**Thorsten Schütte**

**Producer**  
Estelle Fialon

**Co-producer**  
Jochen Laube

**Editor**  
Willibald Wonneberger

**Executive Producer**  
Thorsten Schütte, Gail Zappa, Ahmet Zappa

**Associate Producers**  
Yaël Fogiel, Laetitia Gonzalez, Nico Hofmann, Joachim Kosack, Markus Brunnemann

**Line Producers**  
Claire Babany, Michael Jungfleisch

**Archive Producer**  
Elizabeth Klinck

**Sound Mixing**  
Armelle Mahé, Marc Fragstein

**Color Grading**  
Eric Salleron

**Produced by**  
LES FILMS DU POISSON &  
UFA FICTION

**Co-produced by** ARTE France, SWR

**With the support of**  
CNC, MFG, Procirep Angoa &  
SVT

**In association with**  
THE ZAPPA FAMILY TRUST

## **FROM THE ZAPPA FAMILY**

THE ZAPPA FAMILY is thrilled that EAT THAT QUESTION—FRANK ZAPPA IN HIS OWN WORDS is finally out in the world. Our mother GAIL ZAPPA collaborated with THORSTEN SCHÜTTE and ESTELLE FIALON for many years on this project and had great respect for both of them. The film that Thorsten has made provides a new way for old and new Frank Zappa fans to discover more about FZ—in his own words. Gail would be so pleased to see the film in theaters. Enjoy!

—**AHMET ZAPPA**

This film captures so much of the full throttle genius of our dad. He was a misfit who was ahead of his time and who stayed the creative course against all odds. I'm so grateful that this movie may reach even one person who commits (or recommits) to their inherent gifts regardless of the opposing messages the world can spew.

—**MOON ZAPPA**

I'm so happy that there is an opportunity for people to experience my father, Frank Zappa, as not only a musician, but as a man. His words and his heart are so relevant and needed now and always.

—**DIVA ZAPPA**

## LOGLINE

EAT THAT QUESTION—FRANK ZAPPA IN HIS OWN WORDS is an intimate encounter with the iconoclastic composer and musician. Rare archival footage reveals a provocative 20th century musical genius whose worldview reverberates into the present day and beyond.

## PRODUCTION NOTES

During his thirty years of notoriety Frank Zappa became one of the most intensely independent artists the world has ever seen. Zappa would release 62 albums during his lifetime, signing with a range of companies, but as he mordantly observes in *Eat That Question*, “Record companies have a way of making sure your expenses always exceed your profits.” He was also wounded, early in his career, when several tracks on the third *MOTHERS OF INVENTION* album *WE’RE ONLY IN IT FOR THE MONEY* (1968) were edited—without his permission—in a crude, misguided attempt at censorship that scarred the recording. For Zappa, artistic and business control of his catalogue became an imperative.

Little wonder then, after his death, that Zappa’s family continued his tradition of a deeply abiding distrust of outsiders. For over a year they ignored request after request from Thorsten Schütte for a face-to-face meeting.

But Schütte, an accomplished and in-demand documentary-maker in his home country of Germany, was determined. The filmmaker had been both delighted by Frank Zappa’s music and intrigued by his brazenly honest media encounters for so long. Whenever he visited a television station or production house on his travels, he would ask them, “What have you got on Zappa?” The internationally-scattered gems of footage he discovered had made him even more determined to persist.

The project took eight long years to come together. “I first approached Gail Zappa in 2008,” remembers Schütte. “I think there must be many people knocking at this family’s doors. Why should you let everybody in? Especially as there is such a large following of fans. So I was writing and writing, saying I have found something, I want to show you something. I have an idea. Please, let’s meet. And let’s talk.

“And of course,” Schütte says, “the first response was always like, send it over! Then I would make a phone call. No, no—I insist, I need to show you those things personally, I want to meet you. Eventually I went through their lawyers’ office, just to give my request a bit more emphasis. Finally I got a response. They said come over. We can talk”, Schütte recalls. “After a year and a half, finally we had the opportunity to meet in person. That was very important. Our first encounter lasted for four or five hours, looking at the material we had found. Gail was very

warm, of course full of memories, and... I stayed a couple of days. They invited me to the house.”

And it went from there. *Eat That Question—Frank Zappa in His Own Words* became a French/German production when producer Estelle Fialon (Les Films du Poisson) and Jochen Laube (UFA Fiction) came aboard.

“Estelle and her team, as well as our German co-producer Jochen and his staff, were the perfect partners for this production,” said Schütte, “not only because they had the skill and stamina to finance such a complex endeavor, but also the patience, and confidence in me until we eventually pulled it off. It was a long walk,” he said, “and knowing they were by my side gave me the space, means and freedom to make this project a success story.” The documentary was further co-produced by ARTE France and SWR in association with the Zappa Family Trust. Schütte was delighted when Sony Pictures Classics made *Eat That Question* their first big 2016 Sundance Film Festival signing, acquiring worldwide rights (outside of Germany and France). Their belief was swiftly repaid when *Eat That Question* won the Foundation Award, the April 2016 Asbury Park Music in Film Festival’s top prize.

## **SYNOPSIS**

Born in 1940, FRANK ZAPPA—self-taught composer, musician, bandleader, producer and independent thinker—first transcribed his avant-garde, Varèse-influenced compositions onto paper at fourteen. He only began to write lyrics in his early twenties. Nevertheless, upon the ‘66 release of his debut album, *FREAK OUT!* (with *THE MOTHERS OF INVENTION*), he swiftly became the most quotable voice of dissent in popular music.

A subtle, skillful montage constructed solely from historic footage, *EAT THAT QUESTION—FRANK ZAPPA IN HIS OWN WORDS* is an energetic celebration of this outspoken maestro. Zappa died far too early, in 1993, of cancer. How important then, that such unforgettable Zappa interviews and performances across three decades have been painstakingly gathered by director THORSTEN SCHÜTTE from the obscure vaults of TV stations around the world to create this unique 90 minute feature documentary.

Following Zappa from clean-shaven, besuited youth, to fearless chief freak, to his relentlessly productive final days before his death at 52, *Eat That Question—Frank Zappa in His Own Words* seats us right up front from the start; close enough to Zappa to read the flickering emotions in his eyes.

The film's main focus is on Zappa's uninhibited and entertaining media dealings. His interviewers here range from amused tonight show king Steve Allen, joining him on an improvised piece for two bicycles, prerecorded noise and orchestra in 1963, to fascinated amateur Chuck Ash—a Pennsylvania State Trooper in full uniform who interviewed him twice on camera through the 80s. However Zappa also regularly encountered others who mocked and underestimated him. Undaunted, he relished the opportunity to capture, reset and use the media—in his own words, “the slime ooziin’ out of your TV set”—to his own devices. While chatting courteously about a tour or album, he knew better than any of his contemporaries how to set off unexpected fuses. His caustic comments about state and religion, the music industry and youth culture leave behind an evocative musical and socio-political commentary on his time.

Zappa's touring, conducting and arranging complex bands to play his music very much enriches *Eat That Question's* feast of bold and entertaining face-offs with the media. We are reminded he also made movies, including his best-known, *200 MOTELS* (1971), and we are taken behind the scenes here. Despite this workload he also managed to release an average of two original albums a year for three decades; many of them instant classics. On these Zappa played hard and fast with musical genres, splicing and dicing R&B, jazz, spoken word, musique concrète, pop, rock, electronica and avant-garde classical. A good scattering of these works enliven the film.

Watching Zappa bending and picking strings simultaneously, we are reminded the black-haired, Sicilian-blooded six-footer was also a brilliant guitarist. Zappa was clearly a fearsome band leader too. He only hired and expected the best. However the lion-tamer in him was fortunately tempered by his infectious appetite for the absurd. As he conducts strange mannerisms and noises from his giggling ensembles in these largely previously unseen live performances, he's a sheer delight to watch on stage.

*Eat That Question* also explores Zappa's activism through his highly rational testimony in defense of both artist and record-buyer freedom of speech at Tipper Gore and the Washington Wives' PARENTS MUSIC RESOURCE CENTRE (PMRC) hearings. The PMRC sought content warning labels on rock records. Indicative of their lack of expertise, Zappa's GRAMMY AWARD-WINNING album *JAZZ FROM HELL* (1986) managed to attract their "Parental Advisory" sticker—despite being entirely instrumental.

In his later albums, Zappa sampled perfect notes from real instruments then fed them to the Synclavier he had installed in his “Utility Muffin Research Kitchen” (UMRK) home studio. This polyphonic digital sampling system freed him from the drama and cost of hired ensembles—much as he had clearly thrived on them earlier.

Towards the end of the film, extraordinary footage reveals the overcome Zappa's “hero's welcome” to Czechoslovakia in 1990. Looking deeply moved, the composer exits a plane to a cheering mob. Back home in America, he's mostly famous as that guy in the poster sitting on a

toilet seat. Or for four letter words. Yet in Europe he's a revered dissident artist, welcomed by CZECH PRESIDENT VÁCLAV HAVEL.

As Zappa's health wavers, his belief in free speech and the ideal of democracy never do.

In the space of an hour a half, Schütte's use of this illuminating material, once consigned to oblivion, creates a lasting portrait of one of the most original minds of the 20th century.

Today, Zappa's music and ideas remain vital, cutting across a generation of new fans. And his goal of freeing the listener from conformity still resonates.

## DIRECTOR'S NOTE

For years I've been snuffling out Zappa truffles in television archives, finding an amazing treasure trove of interviews, TV appearances and concert recordings. *Eat That Question—Frank Zappa in His Own Words* celebrates the man and his extraordinary musical and political legacy through the prism of this archival footage.

When Zappa died from cancer in 1993, at the age of 52, the world lost one of its most creative and provocative artists. As a rock musician and composer, Zappa was an iconic figure in the musical history of the twentieth century. But so little is known about the motives and beliefs of this barometer of his times. He was notorious for sharp-tongued lyrics—like "Plastic people, you gotta go," and "Jesus thinks you're a jerk"—and was routinely boycotted and censored by radio stations and the music industry at large. His compositional form of expression combined with an intransigent point of view provoked and polarized audiences. He played an essential part in the shaping of modern musical history through his steadfast refusal to play by established rules.

Beyond the enfant terrible we think we know, a sensitive and levelheaded individual emerges, an independent thinker who pushed the boundaries of music, art and morality—but who was at the same time inherently conservative and family-focused. Perceived as an outspoken critic of American culture and society, Zappa held core American values. Although he mocked prudish moral conventions, he was surprisingly anti-hippie and anti-drug use. His comments on the music industry, religion and the role of the state resonate strongly today. His body of work virtually epitomizes the freedom of speech.

My film consciously avoids the usual trappings of talking-head interviews with contemporaries or experts who insist they knew him. Loaded instead with lengthy interviews and a multitude of live performances, it is an exploration of the phenomenon of Frank Zappa, while still taking into account the bad old days of rock 'n' roll. The film provides the necessary time to get into the modes of Zappa's expression and into the patterns of his language, to grasp the complexity of his character, and to feel with the man behind the media persona.

I hope that this fresh look at the composer Frank Zappa will not just be relevant to his early listeners. More and more young music consumers are discovering Zappa for themselves. Zappa's body of work stands as a counter-statement to streamlined and commercialized pop music, in a time lacking controversial, outspoken and polarizing iconoclasts. The life and art of Frank Zappa connects to universal questions that so many can relate to. How can an artist stay true to his art and ideas? How does one handle rejection and the limitations of a creative output? And what is the ultimate price to pay for the freedom of expression?

It fills me great joy that the film was an official selection for Sundance 2016 and has begun its international journey. On December 21, 2015, Zappa would have celebrated his 75th birthday. I find it promising that he still can be heard.—**Thorsten Schütte**



## Q&A with PRODUCER ESTELLE FIALON

*What are your feelings about the documentary now that it's finished?*

I'm very proud of the film and always moved when we reach the end. I know I've produced a good film when my emotions remain vivid, no matter how many times I've seen the film! I'm happy because I feel the film has won its bet: with a very simple concept (Zappa in his own words) and one tilt angle (Zappa and the media), the film manages to reach much further and deeper into who Zappa was. It shows that to speak about a person you don't need to tell all his biography, to interview all his friends and family, you just need to look at him and listen to him and if you do that long and thoroughly enough you can catch somethings very deep and intimate, something you would never have caught in another way. This is why the film is so great and touching to me.

*Your thoughts on Zappa himself?*

I was never a Zappa fan before producing the film. Not that I didn't like the music, I just didn't know it, apart from the most famous songs like Bobby Brown, which I loved. But I had never seen Zappa live on a stage or even on TV, performing or talking. So to me it was a complete discovery when Thorsten showed me the first interviews and when I sat with Gail in the Zappa's living room one night and discovered ROXY: THE MOVIE that they had just completed, which was 90 minutes of Zappa and his musicians on stage. It completely blew me away. What struck me when I got to discover him better, of course, is his articulated and brilliant mind, but also how free he was. To me Zappa is really a free man, a free thinker, a free artist, who was ready to fight for this freedom and also pay the price for it.

*How did you find working with director Thorsten Schütte?*

He impressed me from beginning to end. Not only is he one of the most documented and fine experts on Zappa, but he is also a smart and uncompromising director, extremely precise and demanding in his choices, who would always push the limits further.

*Tell us about any battles you encountered as a producer helping pull Eat This Question together.*

I started working on the film in 2011 when Thorsten pitched the project at the Amsterdam International Film Festival's Forum. So this was a LONG road indeed... The most difficult part was to gain the family's trust. Along that road I got to know Gail Zappa and some of the children better and I think I came to understand how difficult it is to deal with the legacy of an artist; how difficult it can be to trust another artist to give his own interpretation. I understand the urge to protect... Another part of this long road was to dig out the material all over the world, but this was the fun part! Which was brilliantly handled by our Canadian researcher Elizabeth Klinck and by Thorsten himself.

***EAT THAT QUESTION***  
***FRANK ZAPPA IN HIS OWN WORDS***  
**Filmmaker Biographies**

**THORSTEN SCHÜTTE**  
**DIRECTOR**

German documentary filmmaker THORSTEN SCHÜTTE has worked for over 20 years as a writer, director and producer. He has produced and directed numerous TV films and series including *WORLD JAZZ* (1998); *TRIP TO BRAZIL* (2001); *THE CACTUS OF KNOWLEDGE* (2001); *I WAS THE KING OF PORN—THE ADVENTUROUS LIFE OF LASSE BRAUN* (2002) and *NAMIBIA GENERATION X* (2005), for broadcasters including ZDF, Arte, VPRO, Discovery, NBC and One Africa TV. His thought provoking and well-reviewed films have been widely shown at international festivals including Sundance, IDFA and Berlinale.

Parallel to his passion for music documentaries, Schütte dedicates a substantial part of his work to environmental and labor activism in Southern Africa through film. Some of his other documentaries, like *LAND MATTERS* (2008) and *DWAAL NET ROND / THE FORGOTTEN* (2015), deal with subjects like land ownership, affirmative action and farm workers' rights. As a founding member of the Stolen Moments—Namibian Music History Untold Research Group, Schütte and his team members have been exploring the Namibian music culture that was almost forgotten, suppressed under apartheid for several years now. He is currently running a digitalization campaign in cooperation with the Namibian Broadcasting Corporation and co-curating an international exhibition that is going to open in fall 2016.

Since 2002, in Germany, Thorsten has also coordinated documentary and fiction studies at the internationally renowned film school Filmakademie Baden-Württemberg.

**ESTELLE FIALON**  
**PRODUCER**

ESTELLE FIALON is Associate Producer at LES FILMS DU POISSON, an acclaimed French production company founded by Yaël Fogiel and Laetitia Gonzalez in 1994 which has won a string of international awards. Among the company's accolades are the FIPRESCI (International Federation of Film Critics) Prize and Best Director (Mathieu Amalric) at Cannes Film Festival for *ON TOUR* (2010); the Camera d'Or at Cannes for *JELLYFISH* (2007) by Shira Geffen and Etdgar Keret; and five César awards (French Oscars) between the films *SINCE OTAR LEFT*, directed by Julie Bertuccelli; and *VOYAGES* (Emmanuel Finkiel, 1999).

In 2006, Fialon founded the documentary branch of Les Films du Poisson and has since led a number of noteworthy international co-productions. In 2013 she received nominations for the Academy Awards, the Producers Guild of America Awards and many others for Dror Moreh's celebrated documentary feature *THE GATEKEEPERS* (2012), winner of the Best Non-Fiction Film award from the National Society of Film Critics Awards among many other major wins. Fialon also produced Blaise Harrison's celebrated documentaries *SUMMER GROWING UP* (2011)—which premiered at the Directors' Fortnight in Cannes—and *HARMONY* (2013), presented in the official competition of the Locarno Film Festival. She is currently developing the new documentary feature by Dror Moreh, *CORRIDORS OF POWER*. Fialon is also the producer of *THE SETTLERS* (Shimon Dotan) which premiered at Sundance 2016.

## **JOCHEN LAUBE**

### **CO-PRODUCER**

JOCHEN LAUBE studied film production at the Filmakademie Baden-Württemberg. In 2006 he founded sommerhaus filmproduktionen which produced the German Film Awards-nominated debut feature by Christian Schwochow, *NOVEMBER CHILD* (aka *NOVEMBERKIND*, 2008), as well as the Grimme-Preis-awarded documentary *SONBOL* (2008). Laube then began managing the Ludwigsburg office for UFA in 2008, where he produced *THE DAY I WAS NOT BORN* (2010) by Florian Cossen, which won two awards at the Montreal Film Festival and two at the German Film Awards; as well as *DIE UNSCHTBARE* (2011) by Christian Schwochow, awarded a Lola at the German Film Awards 2012 and twice decorated at the Karlovy Vary International Festival. In 2013 Laube produced *STATIONS OF THE CROSS* by Dietrich Brüggemann, which was took the Silver Bear for best script at the 64th Berlinale. His theatrical fiction feature *WE ARE YOUNG, WE ARE STRONG* (Burhan Qurbani, 2014) screened at Tribeca and won a Lola at the German Film Awards. After seven years at UFA, Laube left to dedicate himself to producing through his own company sommerhaus filmproduktionen once again.

## **WILLIBALD WONNEBERGER**

### **EDITOR**

WILLIBALD WONNEBERGER was born in 1982 in Berlin, Germany. He graduated in editing studies from the prestigious Filmakademie Baden-Württemberg school in 2015. Among his previous works are *INTO MY DREAMLAND* (Mai Seng, 2015) and *Dwaal Net Rond—The Forgotten* (2015) by Thorsten Schütte. *Eat That Question—Frank Zappa in His Own Words* is the first international release Wonneberger has edited.

## MUSIC

« Trouble Every Day »

Frank Zappa

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« Nasal Retentive Calliope Music »

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« Sex in Today's World Improvisation »

Frank Zappa

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« Plastic People »

Frank Zappa

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« Improvised Concerto For Two Bicycles  
Pre-Recorded Tape And Musicians »

Frank Zappa

© 1963

« Mother People »

Frank Zappa

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« A Pound For A Brown On The Bus /  
Sleeping In A Jar »

Frank Zappa

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« Holiday in Berlin »

Frank Zappa

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« This Town is A Sealed Tuna Sandwich »

Frank Zappa

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« The Pleated Gazelle »  
Frank Zappa  
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« Magic Fingers »  
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« Tinseltown Rebellion »  
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« Pedro's Dowry »  
Frank Zappa  
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« When The Lie's So Big »  
Frank Zappa  
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« G-Spot Tornado »  
Frank Zappa  
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« Love Of My Life »  
Frank Zappa  
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« Advance Romance »  
Frank Zappa  
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« Sharleena »  
Frank Zappa  
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« G-Spot Tornado »  
Frank Zappa  
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« Dog Meat »  
Frank Zappa  
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« Ionisation »  
Composed by Edgard Varèse  
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Authorized By Universal Music Vision

« Let's Make The Water Turn Black »  
Frank Zappa  
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Authorized By Universal Music Vision

All Songs Written By Frank Zappa  
Except « Ionisation »  
Published By Munchkin Music Co  
Administered By Kobalt Music Publishing Ltd

