Secrets of the Dog-Root

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An interview with Bob Dobbs, summer of 1995 at Gerry Fialka's home in Venice, California.

BD: Now let's relate this to music as a concept. Can there be music? Can there be a new present-day composer? Are there some ideas that you thoughtof, maybe even later, about the concept of the Big Note? There was thisinterview once that was done in Canada, where he interviewed himself. Haveyou ever seen that footage? He was a journalist interviewing himself, andthe first question is something like, "Frank, what do you really want to know?" And he turns and goes, "What time is it?"

NL: "When's this over?"

BD: And it's a great multi-level thing, because it's like "Oh, that's a question I can't answer -- let's get out of here -- what time is it? can weget out of here?" It's multi-level, but it's also the total musical, percussive question -- what time are we playing in?

NL: For him that was the question of his life: what Time is it?

BD: I have an obscure interview on a little record in a magazine where hesaid "I'm just decorating time" -- but it was a real time thing. So we bring that up [during the interview], and he refers back to it: "Rate is time". And then he quotes me: "What time is it?", he refers back to when we had brought that up. "But then you see how that relates to health -- think of disease. Because if you're comfortable and you're satisfying your different rate needs, you'll probably will be a more energetic, healthy person -- or dog..." I'm thinking of energy, not in [a sense of] a prissy, puritan, New Age kind of health, but to have the energy that he had, as a dog energy, that allowed him to burn up all

the coffee and cigarettes. It did him in, maybe, in the end, but he was able to overcome that just with the power of his energy, and eat crap food all the time. Which is what you used to talk about. I'd be amazed -- how'd this guy live like this?

NL: His stomach was a mess, too.

BD: But he still went on for twenty years.

NL: He was a stoic, too -- you have to understand that about him. He was in horrible pain a lot, but you'd never see him wince.

BD: That's where he was a yogi, or very strong person. So Frank says [in the interview], "I don't know if you're going to be more energetic" -- Iguess in terms of being healthy, see, there's where he qualifies it -- good foods don't necessarily make you more energetic, because [diet] is another form of repression. But people talk a lot about stress, and see, he really believed that stress was the hidden ground. [Quoting from the interview, Frank said] "That's big media thing -- stress is the difference between your calibrated rate and another rate at which you're forced to perform." I go, "One size fits all -- and that causes stress?" and then he says, "I don't think so...'One size fits all' means that the universe is the one size, it fits all." I projected a dictatorial meaning, of one size we all have to fit, but he meant another level. "Oh, I see," I say, "it's not imposed, it adapts to everything." Frank says, "'Impose' is the wrong word -- it exists" -- meaning the universe -- "and you can consider the universe an imposition, if you're truly arrogant." (General laughter) Which, in a funny way, he was! Which gets into Jarry and Joyce, and how they wanted to be God, and outdo God. Frank, somehow, was trying to do that.

NL: If he hadn't been so Catholic -- he never quite broke from a lot of Catholic, medieval kind of concepts. Whereas Jarry just steamrollered right over them, and Joyce as well.

BD: Actually, it's another topic, but we could get into where Frank failed to do what he attempted. But I'm glad it took a long time for him to fail, because

he produced a lot of good music.

NL: It was interesting in the meanwhile, yeah.

BD: So he says, "If you're truly arrogant, you can consider the universe an imposition" (more laughter) --

NL: That's a great quote.

BD: " -- or you can just deal with it the way it is."

NL: Which is what he did.

BD: Here: "It's a universe of rates. You have molecular rates, you have large-scale rates, you have the expansion of the universe rates. You have the rate of atomic decay. You have the rate of aging. You have all these rates, so it's a world of rates, and rates are time. So just so you really understand it, the rate is the difference between when it starts and when it ends. That's the rate, these are cycles -- now that brings us back to the Big Note." I was really glad he brought that up. "A note is a cycle -- a cycle is the way it goes up, the way it goes down, that's one cycle. You know, it's pretty consistent, the way I look at stuff, but I seldom do interviews with people where they ask me about any of these kind of things. They usually want to know, well, what about Tipper Gore." Now, Nigey, in light of the quote that I've read, what ideas do you get about Frank, from your knowledge now, in retrospect as over the last 20 years you've grown to understand his music more, and if you want to relate back to things he'd said to you at that time that might have related to the Big Note quote you have here?

NL: I hadn't listened to his music in 15 years when he died --

BD: These reviews [in "Being Frank"] are done from the point of view of now.

NL: Yeah. I went back and listened to everything I could, when I was writing the book, so we'll put it into that context -- it's very much the present [August

1995]. Frank, to me, in retrospect, as I go back and look at his work, to my amazement, is so consistent and rigorously logical in that every piece he ever wrote, recorded, released, or otherwise intuited in any form that was ever publicly brought to light by him as part of his oeuvre, fits into a larger composition. It was so funny, because when I knew Frank, especially on that tour in '71, which was my first unprotected exposure, day after day, to him --

BD: And for a time, in August '72, for a month, when you were at the Zappa School -- that was the period of an intense four weeks of involvement, seeing him.

NL: But also on the tour, too, playing.

BD: There's two aspects.

NL: Right. The later one was listening, and the earlier one was actually performing.

BD: The private Frank -- what he likes to do, personally, with music, and then the public Frank. So you were saying, about the public point --

NL: Publicly and privately, it's sort of a macro-micro thing. It's staggering how, the more closely you look at his work, and the closer you get to [its sources], the more consistent it becomes. It's like some kind of mathematical model.

BD: That's just what I was going to say. But you were going to talk about when you were on tour in '71, and what you noticed then?

NL: Again -- if you want to look at it as a two-phase operation for me, of education, on the tour I sensed things intuitively. I had no concrete evidence of any of it, I just had a sense of certain things being true about Frank.

BD: And you describe it pretty well, your sensing. You knew what to remember when you wrote the book, because you remembered viscerally what you did notice. And you noticed there was something -- what? A

controlled conceptual consistent in him?

NL: Frank was messing with reality. What was so funny about that quote -- "if you're arrogant, you view the universe as an imposition" --

BD: That's almost Frank. He was partly that.

NL: It reminded me a little bit of Alfred Jarry, who did very much the same thing by becoming his character, Ubu, and living his life that way. And Jarry's character Dr. Faustroll, who was sort of a high-level Dr. Zurkon, said: "I live all dreams as one" -- and Frank, when I asked him on the tour once what he dreamed about when he slept, just said "I live in my dream". So I sensed that Frank was doing this, living and creating in simultaneous levels of 'reality'. I never took drugs, but being around Frank felt like what I imagined must have been like to take a really strong psychotropic drug.

BD: That's what you thought then.

NL: Yeah, and it was just a sense that I had of Frank controlling reality to the point where it was really exhilarating. Sometimes it was kind of strange, and I felt like I was all at sea, adrift in the cosmos.

BD: Did you feel like you were in the movie "Freaks"?

NL: Sometimes. I know what you mean -- he loved that movie.

BD: In other words, you'd sometimes look at Frank and say, "This guy is a pervert" -- there was a perverted image that would come out of the environment around him, and that was what you saw, as you stand back.

NL: Yeah, because if you mess with reality that much, there's nothing

really left to hang on to.

BD: Right -- he might just kill you right out of the blue.

NL: I never felt that he was capable of that, but I did feel sometimes that the energies were going from positive to negative, because it was just that intense.

BD: There's a story [in "Being Frank"] of something he did -- he yelled at someone for being late, and that's where you saw the negative karma.

NL: He was giving him hell, and it was just like, ugh, this is horrible.

BD: Yeah, it was a little extreme.

NL: I thought, "You don't have to go that far". And he felt a little funny about it, because when we got back to the motel room he was being really nice and solicitous, and he gave me a back rub and stuff. He could feel my discomfort -- he knew.

BD: When you say it was like being on a drug, do you mean you felt that he was on a drug?

NL: No, no, no -- I felt that the experience I had entered into, working with him on this tour, was like I was on drugs.

BD: And he had this alchemical energy to warp the whole environment. The 'drug' was Frank's body, 'dog' chemistry, physical and mental -- the dog chemistry swallowed you up in the vortex, and you'd be stuck in there.

NL: "Am I ever going to get out?!" That's what I was wondering sometimes. It was really a powerful feeling. Nothing I had ever experienced in my life up to that point --I was 17, what did I know? -- had been anything like that. I thought it was great -- if I'd been a little older, I might have been both more closed off to it, and more upset when it did happen, just for that reason.

BD: You were just at the right age to be young enough to flow with it and take it --

NL: This is a bit of a digression, but I read a book a number of years ago

about primitive societies and adolescent initiations. One of the things that was done with both young boys and young girls in tribes in New Guinea, I think it was, was that they were cut off at the same age I was, 17, from all of their peers and their family, and taken away by shamans. The boys were given hallucinogenic drugs and had visions and somehow found their place in society by relating the internal to the external. The girls, on the other hand, weren't given drugs, but they were sexually initiated.

BD: By the women?

NL: No, by the men, by these older guys.

BD: You mean they lost their virginity? They'd rape them?

NL: They wouldn't rape them, but ritually -- Anyway, I kind of felt that, even though I wasn't a virgin, and even though I didn't take drugs, I went through something very similar with Frank -- it was a mystical initiation.

BD: When did you read that book?

NL: Three or four years ago, probably.

BD: Did it remind you --

NL: It reminded me a little of Frank, it kind of jogged some dim memories.

BD: In other words, you hadn't thought of that up until you read the book, and you didn't relate that process to your experience.

NL: When I was writing the book it all came back to me. I thought, "Aha!" It's sort of like it was a subtext.

BD: In other words, when you read the book a few years ago, you thought of Frank.

NL: Yeah, dimly.

BD: And then when you wrote ["Being Frank"], you said, "Oh, that book is telling me what I went through." We said, hours ago, that Frank was the cool high school teacher. Well, it's even more tribal -- he was a shaman. It's almost like, when you listen to Steve Vai and the younger guys -- not the Don Prestons, or that age group -- they always talk about Frank glowingly -- "it was a great experience, he was a great musician" -- like the kids who've been shamanized, you know? Now would you say that Frank consciously did that?

NL: I don't know how conscious it was.

BD: I think he was trying to do it to the universe, and you got the microversion.

NL: A fractal variation.

BD: "I Was a Frank Abductee!" (general laughter)

NL: I did one interview recently, and it came out that I was a sexual fugitive harbored in Frank's basement, and I thought that was great.

BD: They said that, or was it you?

NL: Well, it was partly a quote of mine, but it came out a little twisted, as those things often are.

BD: They put that in there?

NL: It was the lead (laughs).

BD: I don't want to emphasize that -- I think it was a very privileged, special experience, that you got hijacked. You had a drug without the drug -- did you ever want to take drugs after that?

NL: No.

BD: And you never did before.

NL: No.

BD: But it seemed as if everybody in the '60s was going to have to deal with drugs somehow, and you got it through Frank. The "chemical monstrosity" -- when you think of the metaphor, you could even think that he knew he was trying to provide a counter-Leary, another form of drug. In the Life magazine article in '68 ["The Oracle Has It All Psyched Out"], he says, "We produce a chemical monstrosity like household ammonia", or something, and he did that chemical thing. That's alchemy.

NL: Well, because Frank, don't forget, when he was blowing things up, was making his own chemicals. Alchemy was a very real thing for him; it wasn't some kind of abstract concept.

BD: He didn't just follow the little catalogue, or the manual -- he was taking risks.

NL: Always. Actually, the last time I ever heard him play any guitar stuff was recordings of the '88 tour, and he was still doing it -- he was still blowing things up. But we've gotten kind of far afield --

BD: You were saying that you saw something consistent [in Frank's work over the years]. Now what was that consistency?

NL: Frank was very detail-oriented, of course. Every little thing that came under his nose was grist for the mill, and it ended up in his work, some way or other, partly digested, some of it, and some of it just got spewed out.

BD: If it fit -- if it resonated.

NL: One size fits all.

BD: One size fits all -- hmm -- if you look at it like that -- . You see, I asked him that in this interview --

NL: He had a different spin on it for the interview.

BD: I said that I thought he'd said in Rolling Stone that he was misquoted. I said "You take an event and impose a pattern on it" -- but he said, "No, I never impose a pattern on it". That might have been semantics, because he is imposing a pattern on it. Look at "Civilization: Phaze III", the way he takes from "Lumpy Gravy". In "Lumpy Gravy", the first one, he just takes these random quotes and makes them fit his point about the Big Note.

NL: And then in "Civilization: Phaze III" he's extrapolated, or intrapolated, more dialogue to give it a story line, almost, or a philosophical bent, anyway.

BD: So you were impressed with "Civilization: Phaze III"?

NL: Yeah, and no. It's too bad it was his last work. For me, his work really ended with the Ensemble Modern's rendition of "G Spot Tornado" [on "The Yellow Shark"]. That's the way I like to think of him going out. It's not that I don't like ["CPIII"], it's just that I find it kind of tough going, because the music is a lot less graspable than a lot of his stuff. I know what he's trying to do, but it's kind of labored, to me. The dialogue is interesting -- but there's an awful lot of it.

BD: But you did say that "Civilization: Phaze III" has the plague theme. Does that relate to his technical musical structure? What is the musical point of Frank, other than everything happening at the same time?

NL: We've actually narrowed it down today, I think, to Good Frank/Bad Frank. The dog Frank, the dog energy, and the high-minded energy. And the pivotal character in all of this, of course, is Dr. Zurkon/Uncle Meat, who can either labor in bettering mankind, or [acts as] the destroying angel, blasting them to hell. And in Frank's music, that dichotomy is very, very apparent.

BD: He's acting out the collective schizophrenia --

NL: That's the 20th-century dilemma, and it's true, it comes to a head in

"Civilization: Phaze III".

BD: So rock gave him a medium to create this schizophrenia metaphor in relation to classical music.

NL: Beginning with high-minded, again, which was Varese, working quietly in his lab on Sullivan Street -- he was the "good" Dr. Zurkon -- and you get somebody like, on the other hand, Guitar Slim or Johnny "Guitar" Watson -- Frank viewed that distorted R&B guitar style as a stick of dynamite, literally, or a loaded charge.

BD: It was dynamite for him, he recognized it -- it blew him up, and then he wanted to say "This is an aesthetic -- this is a principle, a metaphor of alchemy". That's where he wasn't completely a musician -- he used music as a metaphor.

NL: It was abstract, in a strange sense. But that was the thing with Frank, you see -- he was always driven to make concrete that which was intrinsically abstract. Way back at the beginning of this interview, this conversation, I mentioned that I needed to run into Frank, and it was fortuitous that I did, because I had very abstract notions about what I wanted to do with music.

BD: And he concretized them.

NL: He was Mr. Concrete. And for him, that pull [between abstract and concrete] was always there, and you hear it in all his music, and that's another consistent element. But when I say the elements are consistent, it's almost frightening -- every interview that he ever did, every piece of music that he ever recorded, good, bad, or indifferent -- and they do run the gamut, all of those things -- at the core of them all, there's an atom of sameness, and it's almost like you're looking at the universe, macro and micro.

BD: Have we pinned down the atom -- the electron is Dr. Zurkon, and the proton is Varese, and the nucleus is him? What is the atom? I think it's [the question] whether the present-day composer can live or not. Isn't that what it is -- whether there is music? Kent Nagano -- I think it will be relevant to say

this -- says that Frank solves the musical problems of the 20th century, blah blah blah -- but he says that Frank disagrees, Frank says he's just an entertainer. Now there's the dialectic -- whether he's a serious composer or an entertainer.

NL: It's kind of getting on one side of the issue, which is that Frank

liked to entertain, but he just didn't want to admit it. He himself was a very serious person -- in fact, one of the things when I first met him at that Bizarre Records interview in 1970, he was being the stern, paternalistic kind of guy in the sense that he thought I was much, much too trivial. Because I've always tended to take things lightly. Frank had no way of knowing this, and when I was 15 I probably seemed relatively giddy, but I think very fast, and I tend to put things in humorous contexts. That may not be the way I feel, but he misunderstood -- he thought maybe I didn't take life seriously. He didn't realize how seriously I took it until later.

BD: When did he realize that? When's "later"?

NL: '75. It took him a while to begin to understand me, and in fact, in the song "Andy" he was trying to grapple with who I was.

BD: How do you know it's about you?

NL: Oh, I could run all the references down. It's a whole string of references.

BD: Like "Andy Devine" --

NL: Andy Devine was the actor with the squeaky voice, and the reason there's a reference to that in the song was, well, one, my name struck Frank as boyish, so there was the "Andy" part of it; but also, one of the things I had to do on the tour was when [one of the vocalists] would get laryngitis periodically, it was what Frank called the "Andy Devine School of Voice". That was almost like the code word, that I had to sing that night. So hearing that in the context of the song --

BD: So that's what it is --

NL: -- it makes perfect sense.

BD: There was also a "thong" --

NL: That's the shoe. That's in the book. What he meant when he said "it was sublime, but the wrong kind" was, metaphorically, I was getting off on the wrong thing, confusing the symbol with the actuality -- having feelings about him that could really go nowhere. And, ironically, when he says "have I aligned with a blown mind" and "do you know what I'm really telling you, is it something that you can understand?", he was misunderstanding me as a person. I did understand, perfectly well. In my way I was as consistent as he was. But we were coming at it from two different places. That was the tragedy of our relationship, as far as I was concerned...But getting back to what we were talking about --

BD: The entertainer/seriousness thing. I saw Frank working out [the issue of] what's the role of music, what's the role of sound in this sound-obsessed society? That was a dilemma, that's the seriousness.

NL: All the work he did, he put 100% into all of it, macro and micro -- whether it was a little detail, or a big, operatic gesture. That comes through in all his work -- the more I listen to his stuff, the more I realize that. The integrity that it comes from is almost a schizophrenic stretch, from incredibly joky, throwaway kinds of stuff, like the band that I was with in '71, all the way through to the end, like "Civilization: Phaze III". Now how could one mind create all this? But there is a unifying principle in all of it.

BD: I think that he was a modernist and maybe even a post-modernist. He knew the divisions between high and low didn't work anymore, and there was something else --

NL: That's where he was ahead of the game, I think, too, because that was not a common concept at all.

BD: He was a genius on that level --

NL: Like all innovators, he wasn't thinking about it that way; it was just that, to him, it was either Varese or Guitar Slim, and he thought it was all good music, and he internalized that.

BD: He would say "I like it -- it's just an extension of me", but he had put a lot of concepts into it, to build up around the preference of taste. And there's a dialectic in him. I think he acknowledged it as just his taste because I think he thought other people should get the point too.

NL: Sure, judging by the way he played stuff for me, and tried to get me to listen to what he thought was 'good' music -- he was very elaborate about it. It was almost as if the unspoken message was, "This is good stuff", but it never passed his lips; he didn't say "Now you should listen to this because it's good", he said "This is some stuff that I like."

BD: This comes back to the seriousness issue. This is the male chauvinist -- he thought you were the giggly little teenager?

NL: That was at the beginning. This was more like when I was there in '72, playing stuff in the basement. His thought was, I think, that I needed to be steadier in the way that I approached things. Here he was, dealing with this vast body of stuff in a very serious, businesslike way. With me, I tended to be a lot more scattered.

BD: In other words, there was a personality and a temperamental difference. You were serious, but the way you came across to him, he thought you had the potential to be serious, that you should be serious, that it would be good if you were serious. And he didn't know that you were.

NL: I described this to somebody the other day, how in Robert Crumb's "Mr. Natural" comix, Mr. Natural is always lecturing Flakey Foont in different ways -- well, Frank kind of set himself that role with me. He was always sort of trying to show me the ultimate reality whether I understood it or not, and he figured that sooner or later I was sharp enough that I'd figure it out. That's

the significance of the drawing at the end of the book, "The Universe works whether or not we understand it" -- it's my tongue-in-cheek comment on his question "Do you know what I'm really telling you? Is it something that you can understand?". But I think he was right -- it's taken me, like, 25 years, but I think I really do understand his work as well as anybody can.

BD: I missed a word -- he wanted you to -- ?

NL: He wanted me to get a grip on the ultimate reality --

BD: And you think you did, as he understood it. You think you got his message.

NL: I got his message. Now, of course, there are hundreds of other universes out there that I didn't know existed, so it's kind of like you never really end that process. His music is about that, in a lot of ways...Do you know that famous line from R. Crumb, where he had a panel in one of his strips, showing his father -- who was crazy as a loon -- lecturing him: "Son, life is mostly hard work". It's hilarious, but it's so existential at the same time! That was Frank. Frank was medieval.

BD: Frank was a hard worker. He was the father.

NL: Right, exactly. The first thing Frank ever said to me at that meeting -- I had talked to him briefly on the phone to set up the meeting, and that was it -- the first thing he said, face to face -- he looked at me with that steady look, that sort of chilled your marrow if you weren't ready for it -- and he said, "My father always used to say to me, 'The road to hell is paved with good intentions'".

BD: Is that what he said?

NL: I'm sitting there going, "Oh, God...!"

BD: It's like a cult --

NL: This means something -- he was putting it in the context where he wanted it, I guess.

BD: Did he ever talk about his father? Once I read that he had fights with his father over Shakespeare, and [his father would] beat him up on the lawn if he brought the car home late -- did he ever tell you stories about his life with his father?

NL: I met his father. In your interview, where Frank is talking about

molecular rates -- it's his father talking.

BD: Really? Now that's some new information.

NL: Frank was his father, in a lot of ways.

BD: Really?

NL: Oh, yeah. They were one and the same.

BD: I saw it as a metaphor --

NL: Did you ever meet his dad, or see his dad?

BD: No.

NL: Poor fellow, he passed away in --

BD: About 1973, I think.

NL: Yeah, when Frank was on tour, as a matter of fact. I remember when he got back and found out he was really upset about it and didn't want to admit it to anybody.

BD: How did you meet his father? Where did that happen?

NL: In August of '72, when I was there. I guess he wasn't really that well, and he'd come to the house to do some business stuff. He was a really cheerful little guy -- he'd sit there and talk your ear off.

BD: So he was down in the basement?

NL: Yeah. I saw this old gent coming slowly through the door, and I said, "Are you Mr. Zappa Senior?", and he said very proudly, "Yes!" because he was really proud of the fact that he had this famous son. He used to pull stunts all the time, like he'd run ads to sell cars in the Valley News -- he'd put in there: "Frank Zappa's father has '55 Chevy for sale", or whatever.

BD: So you're saying that you talked to him, and he talked about metaphysics?

NL: He didn't talk about metaphysics, but he was Mr. Scientist. I could see right away -- the light bulb went off -- here is where Frank gets those theories from! His father was Mr. Theory, too -- everything fit into a system.

BD: And he demanded that Frank like Shakespeare, and Frank wouldn't --

NL: Frank said, "Go to hell!", and he's, like, bucking the system!

BD: But his father was like a cult -- "you gotta understand Shakespeare, you've gotta learn this stuff".

NL: I think so many of us are condemned to repeat our parents without

really understanding them, and Frank certainly fit that picture.

BD: And yet he at least saw some dilemma his father was in as a government conspiracy scientist, whether it was good or not.

NL: That must have been the dilemma for him, because he must have realized how much of his father's emotional and biological makeup was part of him.

BD: That's very interesting. That is the male spirit in Frank, that he put up as an anti-environment to everything else that was going around. I don't know if it's macho, but it's just male energy -- it really comes from him wrestling with his father presenting that to him.

NL: There's so many of his songs, where you get little snippets of that -- like, it wasn't from his better period, but the song "Tryin' to Grow a Chin": the conflict described in that is really Oedipal. And of course "My Guitar Wants to Kill Your Mama" -- on the surface it's parents in general he's referring to, but I always sensed a struggle to tear his girlfriend away from her father, the Electra/Agamemnon thing. That one was autobiographical; it described that abortive high school relationship so perfectly.

BD: It's funny how he took the Hitler thing in the opposite --

NL: He turned the mustache upside down. You have to be careful with that kind of symbolism, I think.

BD: Even before he became the conceptual Frank Zappa, it was interesting that he said, "I'm going to be a mock dictator in my band, and it's disciplined" -- a reverse Hitler, a software Hitler rather than a hardware Hitler. I always thought that was the meaning. Do you think he meant that by that?

NL: I don't think so, because I saw pictures of him in high school, and his mustache grew like that then too -- stringy, you know.

BD: He had it before he'd think about it that way. So is the atom in the universe -- and that's the Vatican -- the father-son relationship?

NL: Yeah. It's Catholic -- it's the Father and the Son.

BD: It's Catholic. So is that the conceptual continuity?

NL: It's the root of it, and from there it's very, very consistent. Frank was the sum of his experiences, but he was much more. Like any great artist, he took

those experiences and in the process of creating his own reality he made a really fascinating universe that anybody can get into if they want to give it a chance. It took me 25 years -- it might take somebody else five minutes.

BD: You mean, after he died, it took you 25 years to understand it and enjoy it?

NL: I always enjoyed it. But to really understand it in an intellectual sense.

BD: That's different from getting into it. You got into it --

NL: Oh yeah, I got into it in an emotional sense --

BD: But it took you 25 years to understand it.

NL: See, I'm getting older. I'm 41. When I knew Frank, he was almost 30, and the big age difference -- if I'd been older -- that's why I say I wish I'd been at least ten years older, because then I could have understood faster, and it would have saved me a lot of time. But I'm beginning to understand more and more, and probably by the time I die I'll be able to understand Frank perfectly, if I'm still thinking about him at that point.

BD: You'll understand the peculiarity of your relationship with him.

NL: I understand that now, whereas I didn't, before.

BD: In your musical compositional knowledge, within the music jargon, say what the assets of Frank were.

NL: Theme and variations, on a very grand scale. What he's talking about there, with rates and almost like molecular disintegration, it's a very slow decay. It's like we were talking about, in those very long guitar solos. Once something becomes part of his musical oeuvre, or his vocabulary, whatever you want to call it, the decay rate is extremely slow. The first time it pops up in his work -- it might not have been the first time he thought of it -- you can trace that element all the way through, from wherever it starts to wherever it

ends.

BD: So the radioactive plague?

NL: Well, I wouldn't say radioactive plague, but half-life, definitely. And if you take, simultaneously, all these elements that are decaying at a very slow rate, although the slow rates vary a lot -- now we're starting to sound pretty metaphysical here -- the interplay of all of that slow decay, all at once, in this bewildering, staggering universe of concept -- that's Frank. It's the axis, the vertical and the horizontal.

BD: Are you familiar with "Finnegans Wake"?

NL: Yeah. Somewhat.

BD: I've said for years that Frank Zappa is "Finnegans Wake" set to music. Would you agree?

NL: Yeah. I would. Conceptually.

BD: Have you read Ben Watson's book?

NL: I've looked through it. I get the gist of it.

BD: He's talking about "Finnegans Wake". I don't know if he's accurate -- he's got the right book, but I don't know if he understands "Finnegans Wake" the way you're talking about it, and how it could be applied.

NL: Well, there are people who have been studying "Finnegans Wake" for years and years, and I would give them far more credit than myself for that. But it's the same thing that Frank liked about Pynchon, too --it's that real spatially-aware conception of time as having axes, vertical and horizontal, though you can't limit it that way.

BD: There's a quote from Frank, which I read in a little pop culture book about 1971, "I think music is way behind literature and the other arts, and I

want to have music catch up". I always remembered that, and I thought, OK, he's taking the accomplishments of "Finnegans Wake" and applying them to the musical world. If that quote is accurate, he was playing catch-up and he knew it, and he felt responsibility for catching up.

NL: I think he did.

BD: Did he ever say anything along those lines?

NL: Not in one specific statement, but in a lot of different statements, I would say.

BD: He felt that the musical establishment had gone back, had slowed down?

NL: He never pontificated. He would drop in little hints for me to pick up. In a sense, that's what this book is. It's my way of piecing together the total work. As I've grown to understand his work, that's how the book has come about, putting the pieces together. I could write a whole other one now that would be a lot more in-depth, because this one was just as I was groping toward the end of my conception of what was really going on with him.

BD: I would say that -- time's running out, isn't it, Gerry? -- I would say that you did succeed in putting the pieces together, and you made a big contribution to understanding Frank, so I think there's nothing more for me to ask. If there's anything that you have to say, you can say it and then I'll say my last bit.

NL: I've got a question for you. You've been asking me really great

questions, and I don't know if this is a really great question, but what would you say Frank's gift to you has been? As someone who's very familiar, and intimately knowledgeable, about his work?

BD: As I've said before -- I think it's in my book, as a quote from one of my radio shows -- we went to the Zappa concerts in Buffalo in 1988, and my co-host asked me, "Why did you go there?" and I said, "Even Bob Dobbs needs

acoustic stimulation sometimes." And I said, "Frank's the only one who gives me the acoustic release" -- which Frank often said: "People who are attracted to my music are in a tense situation, or in some situation where my music releases their stress". And the releasing goes back to this quote -- the melody and the dissonance, the building up of stress and releasing it. The explosion.

NL: The blowing things up.

BD: For me, Frank was the only musician who I bought -- I bought his stuff -- I listened to the whole range of music, but for me, Frank's music spoke to me the way you said -- I think it was you, I just read this quote today -- the emotional makeup of Frank's music is similar to my emotional makeup, and his tones and textures are satisfying to me. I don't want to say sexually -- but Clapton and them would play, but they never had the right timbre, they never had the right pitch. And so it was a totally pleasurable experience to hear Frankie. As a matter of fact, I can't sing, generally, and I can't play, but with Frank's music I can sing, I can play -- it's my music. It's me. So to me, Frank has always been me. "Being Frank". (General laughter)

NL: I think that's where we should end this.

BD: I just want to add this (more laughter).

NL: OK. Well, it was a good tag, anyway.

BD: Wasn't that a mindblower ending?

NL: That's great. Of course, it's not true, right?]