

## Zappa Institute Of Technology

Teaching the tricks of the trade

By Chris Kathman

*Information is not knowledge.  
Knowledge is not wisdom.  
Wisdom is not truth.  
Truth is not beauty.  
Beauty is not love.  
Love is not music.  
Music is the best.*

- Frank Zappa

When I stopped by Van Nuys (California) High School recently to meet up with Marque Coy, I was surprised to find out that the Zappa Institute of Technology covers “whatever it takes to put on a live concert.” I’d assumed it only dealt with audio. Another mistaken assumption was that only high school kids make up the classes – to the contrary, they’re made up of people “from 14 to 40’s.”

Marque has been with the Zappa Institute “from its inception” seven years ago. Up until three years ago, when it moved to the high school, the program was run at Frank Zappa’s Joe’s Garage studio, twice a week for four hours in the evening. The Zappa

Foundation augments the institute’s budget, and older students pay a fee to the school system.

“We received a large state and federal grant, and with it we were able to purchase the equipment,” Marque adds. “I rebuilt the ceiling in the auditorium so we can do rigging – there are 11 points in there. The classroom was also rebuilt, with storage lockers for the instruments.”

Several leading manufacturers – Fender, Gibson, DW, Remo, Ampeg, Zildjian, Peavey, SWR and Sennheiser – lend their support as endorsers of the institute. Further support comes from Harman, which besides providing equipment, offers the opportunity to visit the JBL factory in Northridge to see how loudspeakers are made.

“I try to put the students hands-on as much as possible,” Marque notes, “because the more time you get your hands on, the more you learn.”

The first month of the class covers musical instruments. “You learn how to work with musicians, and then they come in and give clinics to the class,” he states.



Students waiting to learn about show biz from teacher Marque Coy, in his element at the Zappa Institute.



# First Person



Gear is part of the equation, with JBL mains and a Soundcraft console on hand, but every piece of the puzzle is covered, such as a "Frankenstein switch" for power.



Guitarists Steve Vai and Mike Campbell have visited, as have Steve Ferrone, Tom Petty's drummer, and Dizzy Reed, keyboardist for Guns 'n' Roses. The students also learn from top-of-the-line technicians, including Keith Emerson's keyboard tech, who brought in Emerson's whole keyboard rig and set it up.

## TO THE LIVE

A second month of classes is devoted to live sound – "I teach most of that myself," Marque says, on a system

packaged by Sound Image. He draws on his years of experience on the road with acts like The Band, Missing Persons, Sparks, Chris de Burgh, and of course, Frank Zappa. "Frank wanted a studio engineer who knew how to do monitors." Every show was recorded, and "feedback wasn't allowed, because it would ruin a take."

For years, Marque also worked as an assistant engineer in Elektra-Asylum's Annex studio. It was "the best learning experience I could have had. I worked with top-line producers and major acts. Every week I had a different band doing demos."

Students also take field trips to see how a real concert works, one time arriving to see the rigging call at 8 am for a Bob Dylan show at Pauley Pavilion. In fact, Dylan's production manager, Alan

Santos, actually wrote the course outline for the Zappa Institute.

Marque also describes going to see Nickelback, which has offered a student internship next summer, plus "30 tickets and passes to a show, and fed us – we got there at 9 am and left at 1 am. Linkin Park, another one from 8 am to 2 am."

Another time, Lisa Loeb came by to perform, courtesy of her relationship with Dweezil Zappa, with the students handling house and monitors. "I oversee them and say 'That's good, now move on to the next (input),'" Marque adds.

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Photo of Chester Thompson courtesy of Belmont University.

*"I have nothing but good things to say about my Westones."*  
— Chester Thompson

The third portion of the course covers lighting. High End sends a representative to teach for five days, and the company has also equipped the classroom with Studio Color moving lights. (In addition, the institute also owns a state-of-the-art Wholehog II lighting console.)

"We also bring in a rigger and he teaches for a couple days," Marque adds. "Robin Shaw from Upstaging teaches about trucks. We bring in bodyguards!" Ray Woodbury (production manager for the Pacific Amphitheatre and No Doubt) has come by to provide his insight, as well as Mike Hirsch from LA Stage Call, and both of them have used students on shows.

"We're shaving off a couple years of growth, he concludes. "The students get to know how to work with riggers, they learn to work with everything. If I've got a student I feel really good about, I'll plant them on a major tour. And none of them have come back in a box yet. I don't overstep their bounds."

### FAVORITE THING

Next, I caught up with Gail Zappa, Frank's widow and executive director of the Zappa Institute, and Ted Leamy of JBL, who serves as an associate director. Ted informed me that Frank was one of the first artists to own his own sound and lighting equipment.

I asked Gail if Frank enjoyed performing live, as I've worked for some bands that avoid touring like the plague. While she replies, "I know he didn't like traveling," she adds that, "Frank's favorite thing was to record on the road and take it home and mess with it.

"His favorite time to compose was when the band was live and the audience was right there with them and that for him was the drive, I think. There was an aspect to it that was very compelling, and that was if you have the right conditions and everything is working and you are so in the flow that you have to play that note."

She also shared the original motivation for the institute. "When you're living with a composer who is also a performer who is also a musician who is also a bandleader, you pick up a few things. What it takes to put a live

event together. There's a big difference between the guys on the stage performing and the guys on the stage making sure everything works.

"I thought the more sophisticated the artists, the more control they have, because of the types of technology available. The help you need also needs to be more sophisticated. I thought what was needed was to show the kids when they were young how things worked behind the scenes. I wanted to get people in the industry to actually teach the classes. That means the kids were either going to be their customers or their employees in the future, so nobody loses.

"What we focus on now is to reach the kids who want to be in music and hopefully they will discover acoustics or build something or get into management. So what we focus on is to teach everything that has to do with putting on a live show. The better you know what other people do, the better off you are.

"The academy program is basically integrated into the regular series of classes. It's an elective, it's the core curriculum. You're really in a sort of vocational training situation. It is a partnership between a given industry and LA Unified (school district).

"They tell you how it has to be written up, it is complicated how you submit your proposal. The school system has access to different types of monies. We got hooked up with one of their chief technology guys, he was very familiar with introducing alternative programs."

In closing, Gail confesses that, "In this case, I do have a secret agenda. It's that rock 'n' roll grew up in hockey venues and places like that, built for sports and not for music. Nobody has ever given anyone in rock and roll a nice place to work. How do you get someone to ever build a decent venue? Someone one asked me, 'If you wanted to have something with Frank's name on it, what would it be?' And I said, "A great f\*\*\*ing venue!" ■

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