

8.1. Freak encounters in the *free* press: sharing spaces in 1960s Los Angeles

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Abstract

On 23 July 1966, the Great Underground Arts Masked Ball & Orgy attracted one of the largest assemblies of countercultural radicals Los Angeles had ever seen. Extravagantly costumed attendees—“Freaks,” to use their self-imposed nomenclature—watched action paintings bathed in psychedelic light, provided corporeal canvases for marker-wielding tattoo artists, and danced with abandon to a performance by Frank Zappa’s Mothers of Invention. One month earlier, a tribute concert put on by a group calling themselves the Los Angeles Hippodrome provided a comparatively conservative experience: a performance of Arnold Schoenberg’s complete piano works, a slideshow of his expressionist paintings, and a recorded lecture. Despite these contrasts, the promotional materials for both events were virtually indistinguishable in approach and aesthetics. In both cases, the event organizers co-opted the pages of the Los Angeles Free Press—a seminal American underground newspaper—for their own promotional goals, printing ads and public manifestos that incorporated a distinctive DIY collage aesthetic reminiscent of John Heartfield’s photomontages. These two groups co-occupied more than just the pages of the Free Press. Their meetings in virtual space mirrored their interactions in apartment buildings, coffee shops, street protests, and performance venues like Aerospace Hall, where both of the above events were scheduled to take place. This paper will argue that the unique landscape of mid-century Los Angeles, situated as it was at the epicenter of the popular mainstream, engendered an interconnectivity of social networks in which competing movements of cultural resistance enjoyed a mutually-beneficial cross-pollination of strategies and ideas.

Keywords: counterculture, Los Angeles, underground press, Frank Zappa.

Introduction

On a Friday in June 1966, just around the corner from CBS Television city, a small audience assembled for an evening billed as an “Homage to Arnold Schoenberg.”² The event was hosted by the Los Angeles Hippodrome, a small consortium of avant-garde musicians and performance artists led by Michael Agnello and Joseph Byrd, a pair of experimentalist composers who were very loosely affiliated with the music department at UCLA. The concert—which included a slideshow and recorded lecture in addition to musical performances—consisted exclusively of works by the famed Viennese composer. Given the typically conservative programming that characterized most mid-century art-music concerts in Los Angeles, an all-Schoenberg event might have seemed somewhat out of the ordinary. A subsequent review in the *Los Angeles Free Press*, however, describes the evening’s refined poise and restrained Romantic emotion, an atmosphere familiar to anyone that has attended a typical performance of Western art music. “The earliest work on the program,” the reviewer writes,

was the Four Songs, written in 1899, at a time when the composer was still very much under the spell of the Wagnerians.

Accompanied by [Leonard] Stein, Spanish soprano Brenda Ferencz became a sensitive fraulein as she performed works written by an almost gushingly sentimental Schoenberg.

In “Erwartung” (Expectation) she was lyric and sentimental then beseeching as she sung “Give me Thy Golden Comb.”

The third song, “Exaltation,” found her crying out in triumph, and in the finale, “Waldsonne” (Forest Sun), Miss Ferencz, splendidly attired in a blue gown, ranged the spectrum of female emotion as she was by turns seductive and appealing, then angry, and finally warm and forgiving. (Moss, 1966)

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² For a more thorough discussion of the topics discussed here, see “Grasp the Weapon of Culture! Radical Avant-Gardes and the *Los Angeles Free Press*” (Mount, 2015).

Less than a month later, on 23 July 1966, a very different event took place. The Great Underground Arts Masked Ball and Orgy—or GUAMBO, as the event came to be acronymized—attracted one of the largest assemblies of countercultural radicals that the city of Los Angeles had ever seen. A recap of the evening, taken from the same newspaper, describes the frenzy:

Films were shown including Teague's footage of the Canter bust and Gary Taylor with his beautiful *Pleasure Faire* film. A combo played ... there were light shows ... Del Close did the Mad Doctor ... That crazy leopard girl danced and a conga drummer ad-libbed ... Somebody did action paintings ... and others did whatever they felt. Hundreds of people listened quietly to a sitar and tabla.

Upstairs again. The crowd is larger. The Sound Machine completes their set and a group called The Factory moves in. More people start to dance and the costumes are getting groovier and noisier. Vito and his acolytes are here.

Elaborate, sometimes nearly psychedelic masks. Bare feet painted with flowers. Colorful clothing (or nearly none at all – but no nudes; the nearest thing was a girl in a G-String and a plastic raincoat). Masks made of flowers glued to faces, glasses covered with butterflies, a hexagonal box collaged with contrasting images of humanism and Vietnam slaughter, faces painted half black and half white, tiaras of feathers, jewels shimmering in the dim light, sequined faces ... leather, foil, paper, leaves and thousands of beautiful and bizarre substances. The Factory finishes its set and The Mothers of Invention go on. This is one of the truly wild scenes of the evening. Frank Zappa in his suit of flowers. His sidemen are garbed similarly and, behind them are five other musicians augmenting the group. Five short haired American Federation of Musician types in black suits, white shirts and black ties. Just sitting there, reading charts, blowing with the Mothers the Mother sound. And the Mother's Auxiliary dancing, dancing, dancing.

Carl, of "Hungry Freaks, Daddy" fame, is one of the featured dancers now. He is wearing what looks like zebra-skinned long johns with a pop art All-American Superman bib. Two nice ladies are dancing with him, alternating with some of Vito's group ... and from the dance floor comes a man in a mummy suit to join in. (Hopkins, 1966)

These two reviews, taken from the same newspaper, paint a pair of remarkably different scenes: in the one case a typically conservative performance of European art music, in the other a countercultural Bacchanalia of the highest order. Given this incongruity, one might assume that the individuals comprising the Los Angeles Hippodrome and the Freak movement—to use the self-imposed nomenclature—came from mutually isolated communities. In reality, however, these two events are better understood as outwardly different expressions of a larger socio-cultural complex—a situation that was very much a product of its geographical setting. By the time these individuals began to make their voices heard, the city of Los Angeles was well on its way to becoming what the social theorist Michael Dear has since described as a "polycentric, polycultural, polyglot metropolis" (2000, p. 3).³ Continuously large population growth and a maelstrom of wildly fluctuating industrial, political, and economic influences have, not unexpectedly, fueled numerous conflicts but have also engendered complex and cooperative social networks on a variety of scales.

The community surrounding the Los Angeles Hippodrome and the Freak counterculture was both crowded and socially variegated. It would have been hardly uncommon to find avant-garde composers and freak rockers living in the same apartment buildings, occupying tables in the same coffee shops, and chanting in the same street protests.⁴ In the case of GUAMBO and the "Homage," both events were scheduled to take place at the same venue: Aerospace Hall in the Fairfax neighborhood of Central Los Angeles.⁵ This sharing of physical space may be seen reflected in a sharing of conceptual space when one considers how both events were touted as multimedia experiences, more closely aligned with happenings than with traditional concerts. The remainder of this paper will explore a third type of co-inhabitation: a sharing of virtual space in the underground press.

Sharing virtual space in the *Free* Press

³ Dear goes on to provide a brief encapsulation of the contributing historical processes later in the book (101-111).

⁴ For further discussion of the social context, the reader is directed to McBride, 2003

⁵ "Aerospace Hall" was the common name used to refer to the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics Hall at 7660 Beverly Blvd. in Los Angeles. Although the event organizers had booked the venue for GUAMBO, issues with overcrowding and insurance coverage led to event's last minute relocation to the Danish Center at 607 South Western Ave.

Both of these events, GUAMBO and the “Homage to Schoenberg,” were sponsored and promoted by the *Los Angeles Free Press*, one of the first and most widely influential of the mid-century American alternative newspapers. The first mention of the Los Angeles Hippodrome’s “Homage to Schoenberg” (Figure 1) appeared in an issue from 17 June. Surrounded by scattered text in a variety of typefaces, a collage of photographs dominates the full-page ad. A tiling of three-quarter view portraits of the composer⁶ in varying degrees of overexposure forms a canvas for several other photographs—one of a pianist and one of a cello case and keyboard⁷—which have been cut out and superimposed on top. A second advertisement in the same aesthetic vein appeared in the following issue (Figure 2), although here multiple photographic focal points are spread out across the page.

This was not the first time the group had incorporated this visual style. Their “Concert Happening” event had been promoted in a similar manner several months earlier. Here again, a collage of photo clippings (Figure 3)—in this case of a man and woman conversing, a “NO LEFT TURN” sign, a man in a military beret reading a pamphlet on Vietnamese⁸—draws the eye from one snippet of irregularly sized text to the next. The cut-out letters forming the main header are reminiscent of a ransom note.

Comparing these images to the promotional materials leading up to GUAMBO, one cannot help but notice the aesthetic similarities. Although line drawings are the predominant type of graphic in the initial announcement for the event, an advertisement in the July 15 issue of the *Free Press* incorporates photographic elements as well. The masked revelers of the first ad are here seen spilling out of the windows of a 1938 Dodge sedan (Figure 4). The car itself is superimposed on top of an unidentified person’s face, acting as a mask with eyes peering out just above the bumper. Wavy text flows out of the collage and although the composition is both busier and more freely arranged, the visual connection to the “Homage” and “Happening” ads is clear. Several smaller advertisements for GUAMBO (Figure 5), appearing above the paper’s classified section, incorporate the same quirky frenetic collage style. The success of this model—pairing psychedelic multimedia concert dances with busy collage-style advertisements in the *Free Press*—was later used to promote a pair of post-GUAMBO concerts: the so-called “Freak Outs,” which also featured the Mothers of Invention (see Figure 6).⁹

Aesthetic precedents

This kind of visual art was not without precedent, particularly in a publication like the *Free Press*. By 1966 the photo-collage—or “photomontage” as it is sometimes labeled—had already had a rich and varied history. The Berlin Dadaists of the 1920s and 1930s are generally credited with being the first to assemble cut-up photographs in a collage-style composition. See, for example, Hannah Höch’s *Cut with the Kitchen Knife through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch in Germany* (1920). Raoul Hausmann, whose photomontage *Tatlin at Home* (1920) remains an important representative of this era and style, described the impetus in a 1931 lecture:

The first photomonteurs, the Dadaists, started from the point of view, to them incontestable, that war-time painting, post-futurist expressionism, had failed because of its non-objectivity and its absence of convictions; and that not only painting, but all the arts and their techniques needed a fundamental revolutionary change, in order to remain in touch with the life of their epoch. The members of the Club Dada were naturally not interested in elaborating new aesthetic rules But the idea of photomontage was as revolutionary as its content, its form as subversive as the application of the photograph and printed texts which, together, are transformed into a static film. (Hausmann in Kaes, Jay, & Dimenberg, 1994, p. 651)

⁶ The original photograph may be viewed in the digital archives of the Arnold Schönberg Center (Florence, 1946).

⁷ The pianist appears to be Leonard Stein, one of Schoenberg’s pupils and the featured performer for this event. The keyboard, along with the cello case standing next to the chair, appear to be personal items belonging to Schoenberg while he was working in his Brentwood studio. The keyboard, chair, and cello case are all visible in photographs of Schoenberg’s studio from this period. (See Fish, 1948, and 1952)

⁸ The pamphlet is entitled Vietnamese; language familiarization manual. Prepared by Educational Services for the Dept. of Defense.

⁹ Additional ads appeared on p. 6 of the 12 August 1966 issue and on p. 12 of the 9 September 1966 issue.

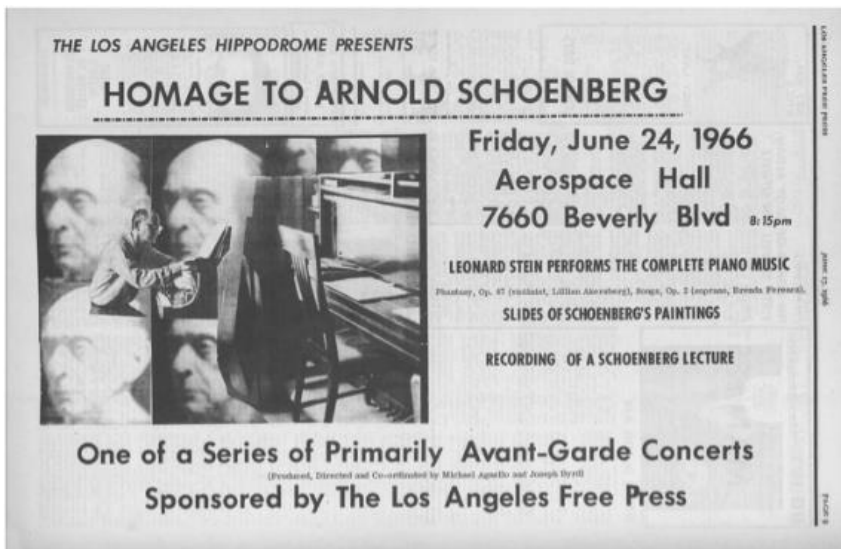


Figure 1 – “Homage to Arnold Schoenberg” advertisement, *Los Angeles Free Press* 3.24 (17 June 1966): 9 (image courtesy of the LAFreePress.com)



Figure 2 – “Homage to Arnold Schoenberg” advertisement, *Los Angeles Free Press* 3.25 (24 June 1966): 9 (image courtesy of the LAFreePress.com).

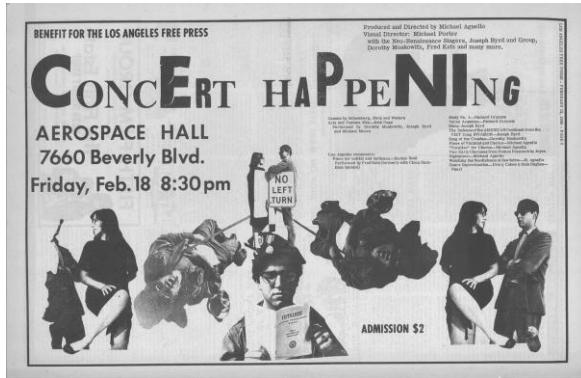


Figure 3 – “Concert Happening” advertisement *Los Angeles Free Press* 3.7 (18 February 1966): 5 (image courtesy of the LAFreePress.com).



Figure 4 – “GUAMBO” advertisement *Los Angeles Free Press* 3.28 (15 July 1966): 9 (image courtesy of the LAFreePress.com).



Figure 5 – “GUAMBO” advertisement *Los Angeles Free Press* 3.29 (22 July 1966): 15 (image courtesy of the LAFreePress.com).

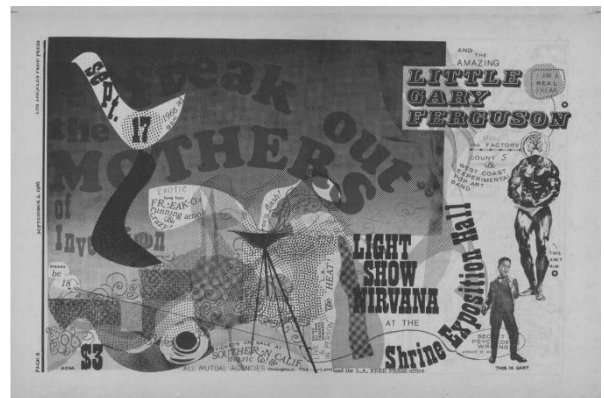


Figure 6 – “Freak Out” advertisement *Los Angeles Free Press* 3.35 (2 September 1966): 6 (image courtesy of the LAFreePress.com).

The artist most directly responsible for the type of collage discussed here was John Heartfield.¹⁰ Originally an active member of the Berlin Dada scene, the politics of Heartfield’s work quickly became focused less on criticizing perceptions and institutions of fine art and more on anti-Nazi propaganda and criticism of social policy (Evans & Gohl, 1986).¹¹ In the 1920s and 30s, Heartfield contributed over 200 photomontages to *AIZ* (*The Worker’s Pictorial Newspaper*)¹² a left-wing German magazine known for its use of amateur photography as a type of political weapon. Advances in camera and publishing technology made magazines like *AIZ* an ideal venue for disseminating ideas to a mass audience; photography made propaganda immediately accessible, even for an uneducated reader.

The *Los Angeles Free Press*, though temporally and geographically removed, may be seen as part of a lineage descending from magazines like *AIZ*. Art Kunkin, the newspaper’s founder had previously been employed as business manager for *The Militant*, the official platform publication of the American Socialist Worker’s Party. The politically charged nature of the *Free Press* was a direct outgrowth of Kunkin’s socialist background. But like many of the other underground papers that would follow, the *Free Press* had an equally influential cultural voice. Strong ties to the community meant that the intermingling of cultural and political elements in radical Los Angeles society would easily find its way into the paper. The advertisements discussed here are representative of this intersection.

¹⁰ Born Helmut Herzfeld 19 June 1891, died 26 April 1968.

¹¹ See, for example, his *After Ten Years: Fathers and Sons* (1924).

¹² Arbeiter-Illustrierte-Zeitung, or, AIZ.

Their primary purpose is to advertise cultural events and they do so in the politically charged context of the *Free Press*.

There remains, however, a disconnection between photomontage in the *Free Press* and its European agit-prop precedents. In works like Heartfield's *Adolf The Superman: Swallows Gold and spits Junk* (Heartfield, 1932a) or *The meaning of the Hitler salute: little man asks for big gifts* (1932) (Heartfield, 1932b) the viewer is made keenly aware of an overt political message. The subjects of the individual photographs are usually identifiable and the artist's or editor's viewpoint is made obvious. In the *Los Angeles Free Press*, however, collage-style advertisements routinely use anonymous subjects and vague juxtapositions. Consider the long-haired youths in the 22 July GUAMBO advertisement (Figure 5) or the Janus-headed bodybuilder in 2 September advertisement for Zappa's second Freak Out concert (Figure 6). Unable to identify the photographic subjects with any degree of certainty, a viewer is likely to be left with only a vague sense of irreverence.

This lack of clarity should not, however, be seen as a watering down of the photomontage technique. Rather, it seems that the mid-1960s Los Angeles photomonteurs are operating on an abstracted level. Instead of using collage as a medium of communication, they are taking advantage of an identifiable visual aesthetic to project a carefully shaped ideological appearance. The medium, in the over-quoted words of Marshall McLuhan, is the message.¹³ And, like the *Free Press* itself, this appearance was both political and cultural. On the one hand, the continuation of a tradition starting with Heartfield's vehement anti-Nazi propaganda broadcasts an obvious anti-establishment dissidence. On the other hand, their use of the collage technique is a means of establishing cultural cachet. By 1966, the photomontage aesthetic had spread to the English-speaking world by way of such early pop-art works as Richard Hamilton's *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?* (1956) and Andy Warhol's *Marilyn Diptych* (1962). Closer to home the artist Will Connell had produced a book entitled *In Pictures: A Hollywood Satire* (1937) containing a series of satirical photomontages lampooning various aspects of the entertainment industry, which by the middle of the 20th century had come to dominate the Los Angeles landscape. This visual aesthetic imbued the advertisements discussed here with a favorably irreverent image and an in-the-loop association with cutting-edge art.

Conclusion

But perhaps the most striking similarity between the seemingly disparate musical communities represented by the Los Angeles Hippodrome on the one side and Frank Zappa on the other is that both groups seem to have co-opted the pages of the *Free Press* not only for advertising their musical performances but as a platform for disseminating their beliefs. For the page preceding the very first "Homage to Schoenberg" advertisement, each of the members of the Los Angeles Hippodrome submitted a manifesto (Figure 7). The composer Michael Agnello begins his with the statement:

Art is dead. Let us bury it along next to god; and in doing so, let us harken back to a more fundamental state of consciousness where the only worthy successor of art is culture and the only worthy successor of god is the creative spirit of man. (Agnello, 1966)

His colleague Joseph Byrd, a one-time assistant to John Cage and an experimental composer himself, prefaces his manifesto by proclaiming "the necessity of art is to oppose illusion: to bring all possible forces to bear on reality and the things implied by it." The manifesto itself is a cartoon of a dog-like creature brandishing a knife poised to cut off the head of a snake; below this is written, "GRASP THE WEAPON of culture!" (Byrd, 1966). A later issue of the *Free Press* featured two full pages of advertising space paid for by Frank Zappa. Following an advertisement for one of the two Freak Out concerts, the second page is left blank except for a small block of text broken into four paragraphs (Figure 8). The text is signed "Suzy Creamcheese," a fictional character who appears in several of Zappa's works as a personification of youthful naiveté in the world of cultural exploitation—and in this case serving as a pseudonym for Zappa himself. Zappa comes to his main point in the second paragraph:

¹³ The programming of the "Homage to Schoenberg" concert may be seen the same way. Although it might seem odd that a group of experimentalist avant-garde composers and performance artists would put on a fairly conservative performance of music that had become more or less part of the Western canon, the event makes sense when one sees it as a gesture of alignment with a figure whose historical reputation remained that of revolutionist.

A freak is not a freak if all are freaks. "Freaking Out" should presuppose an active freedom, freedom meaning a liberation from the control of some other person or persons. (...) If we could channel the energy expended in "Freaking Out" physically into "Freaking Out" intellectually, we might possibly be able to create something concrete out of the ideological twilight of bizarre costumes and being seen being bizarre.

In both of these cases, the manifestos appear in close proximity to one of the collage-style advertisements already discussed.

With heavy-handed tone and heady proselytizing, these texts reveal a deep bond connecting the Los Angeles Hippodrome and Zappa's freaks: a shared ideological space defined by a broader social mission. Both of these groups shared a common crusade: alarmed and overwhelmed by the pervasiveness of the mass-entertainment industry in their home city, they rallied against commercial superficiality and celebrated intellectual artistic freedom. Although certain individuals did not always see eye to eye—and although certain groups occasionally sparred for visibility—the sharing of physical, conceptual, virtual, and ideological spaces discussed here reveals a revolutionary mindset that unified a complicated and tempestuous social network.

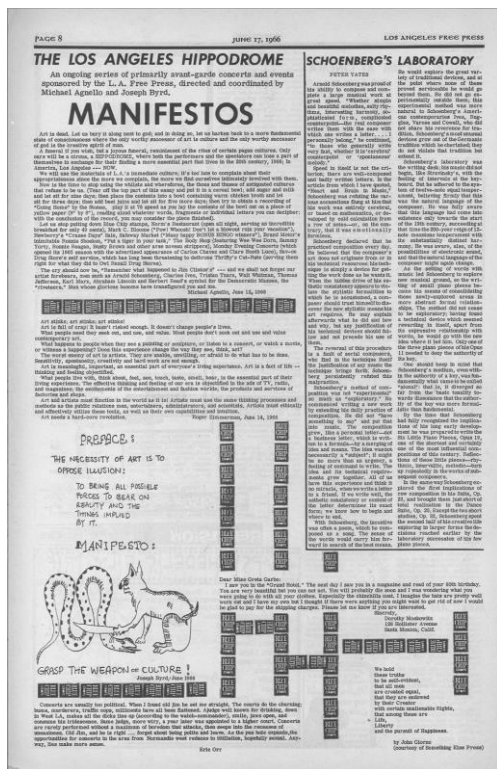


Figure 7 – Manifestos of the Los Angeles Hippodrome, *Los Angeles Free Press* 3.24 (17 June 1966): 8 (image courtesy of the LAFreePress.com).

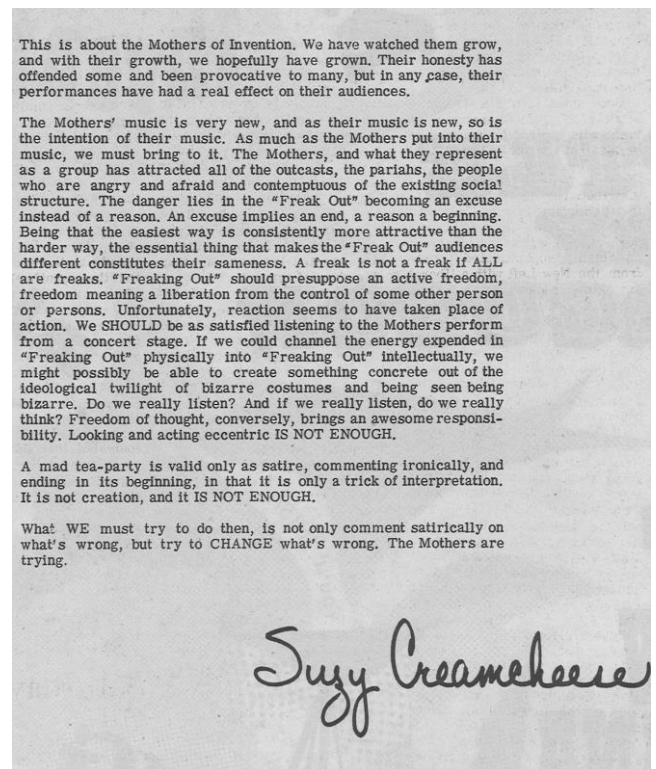


Figure 8 – Manifesto of Frank Zappa (alias "Suzy Creamcheese") *Los Angeles Free Press* 3.37, (September 16, 1966): 10 (image courtesy of the LAFreePress.com).

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