Ship Arriving Too Late to Save a Drowning Witch, Frank Zappa on Barking Pavement.

Like, OH MY GOD! Frank Zappa's got this like mighty SUPER bitchin' new album out and ya know, it's get a big hit single called "Valley Girl." You've probably heard it already — ya know, it's the song with his fourteen-year-old daughter Moon (oh right — MOON? Bug the name, I'm sure) taking a monologue in a super Encino airhead voice. Well, like, the song is Frank's first really big top forty radio hit, and like, it's getting airplay to the max. But, ya know, it's like a really big sellout with nothing happening musically — ya know, one of those cheap riffs with silly words that ol' Zap really loves to toss off. But no big deal. It's no worse than "Dancin' Fool," his last big hit.

Frank said once that he was meeting fourteen year old fans at his concerts that knew the words to Freak Out, an album that he recorded before they were born. Well, now he's got a new legion of kiddies at his doorstep; it's the same legion of kids that white at record stores when they learn that "the Zappa album with "Valley Girl" on it" is sold out. Never one to miss a buck, Frank released a twelve-inch single version (with an adorable father-and-daughter cover photo) that's selling like hotcakes. Gag me with a spoon.

The hardcore Zappa fans will be relieved to learn that the rest of the album fares somewhat better musically. Side one, the disappointing side, contains "No Not Now" (a ride-the-mechanical-ball/sex metaphor) and "I Come From Nowhere" (another isn't-middle-America-boring song). Although both tunes feature fine guitar playing, their rapid tempos and high-pitched vocals render them irritating.

Side two, the interesting side, consists of three tunes recorded live and overdubbed in the studio. "Drowning Witch" contains a classic Zappa guitar solo, the type he hasn't played since "Yo Mama" (from the Sheik Yerbouti album). Apparently Frank has recently decided to remind us that he is a guitarist — his three record set of solos, Shut Up an' Play Yer Guitar has just been released stateside. "Witch" flows seamlessly into "Envelopes," a high-energy raveup that sets up the climax of the performance, "Teen Age Prostitute." This mock mini-opera walks a fine line between satire and serious social commentary, at once berating the society that would allow such an institution and also extolling yet another American stereotype.

Ship Arriving Too Late to Save a Drowning Witch, with its combination of musically advanced and musically regressed ideas, shows Zappa straining to create a new audience and maintain the interest of his established (and somewhat annoyed) following. He should concentrate on just one group soon, before he gets worn thin. Maybe the youngsters would prefer Zappa's son, Ahmet, who is preparing to record a single with his band Fred Zeppelin. I'm sure, like, totally.

David Shaw