

When legends come to town...



Frank Zappa, the legendary American musician, composer, story teller, writer and activist will be honoured this Friday with a special night at The Stables, Mullingar, when The Muffin Men (pictured) perform with long-time Zappa band member Jimmy Carl Black (far left).

For thirty years until his death in 1993, Frank Zappa was America's most controversial and also one of its most revered musicians. His music ranged from rock and jazz to the most complex classical styles. His close-to-the-knuckle lyrics took an unflinching look at religion, sex and politics. Zappa was funny and fiercely intelligent, inflammatory and sometimes infuriating, but never dull.

The Muffin Men, who play The Stables this Friday, May 30th, are dedicated to keeping Zappa's legacy alive, so much so that several of Zappa's bandmates have joined them on tour over the years. For their Irish tour, they will be joined by original Zappa band member Jimmy Carl Black.

Their shows combine music from all periods of his career, mixing boogie with classical, jazz with doo-wop. Their virtuosity has led ex-Zappa guitarist Mike Keneally to describe them as "the best Zappa band in operation". But not only do The Muffin Men play Frank Zappa Music, a little Captain Beefheart and stuff is thrown in, all played with precision, wit and conviction.

Originally formed in 1990 to play a one-off show to celebrate the 50th birthday of their favourite composer, the Muffin Men have gone on to play more than 400 shows in 10 countries. They have recorded 10 CDs and had 4 original members of the Mothers of Invention/Zappa bands in their line-up. Their line-up and flavour have changed somewhat over the years - just as Zappa himself evolved his bands and repertoire, allowing the music to grow.

As already mentioned, Jimmy Carl Black, original drummer and vocalist with The Mothers Of Invention is the special guest for these dates. Jimmy not only appeared on more than 15 of the original Zappa/Mothers albums, he also starred in the movie 200 Motels with Ringo Starr and Keith Moon, played drums with Captain Beefheart and His Magic Band and recorded countless albums around the States and Europe. Jimmy had been performing with The Muffin Men on and off since 1993 - "The Muffins are the best band I've ever played with, they take the music and turn it into something else, something new!" he told Rolling Stone magazine.

Founder member and Muffinz leader Roddie Gilliard is a tutor at the world-famous Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts (LIPA), founded by Sir Paul McCartney. The other band members also work within LIPA and other university colleges, some write for the theatre. The brass and horn players are often called upon by various other Liverpool-based bands to supply lines to their albums and performances, and most recently they could be seen on the road, on Jools Hollands Later TV show and in the studio with Liverpool band, The Coral. Once the Irish Muffin Men tour is over, The Coral European tour will see them occupied until the end of the year. At the moment, the five-piece band feature Roddie Gilliard on guitar, brass and vocals; Carl Bowry on guitar, bass and vocal; Martin Smith on lead guitar; Andy Friz on trumpet, horn and dancing; Tilo Pirnbaum on flute, saxes and vocal and Jimmy on drums and vocals.

This year, The Muffin Men are to collaborate with members of Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra to perform "When Worlds Collide" - a project that fuses rock band and classical musicians together to perform Zappa compositions. Conductor Clarke Rundell admits that "most rock/classical collaborations only work on a cosmetic level, but these people manage to play together in a way that seems so natural"

Although The Muffin Men were formed some years before the term "tribute band" was invented, they are unfortunately often placed in that category. Granted, the band do play tribute to Frank Zappa, his music and his heritage, but take it further - adding their own edge to the whole. Don't expect a 'look-a-like-sound-a-like' affair - expect fine musicians playing fine music. Most cover bands, whether they're playing the music of The Doors or Pink Floyd or whoever, attempt to copy their originals as exactly as possible - dressing like them, sounding like them, playing their music as you might hear it on record. By contrast, The Muffin Men have always attempted to perform Zappa's music in their own way, playing in their own style and clowning around as their personalities dictate. In this way they're keeping the music alive, extending it and interpreting it rather than emulating the ways in which it's been played in the past. From complex rock to jazz styling, boogie blues to avant-garde, chamber music to silly doo-wop, the band take on anything - always with eyebrows raised - just how Frank would have wanted it.

Jimmy Carl Black was born in 1938 as James Inkanish Jr. in El Paso Texas. Of Indian stock, he first met fellow outsider Frank Zappa in 1964 when the latter was recommended to him as one of the hottest guitar players around. Jimmy wanted him for his group The Soul Giants, so they auditioned him and hired him. One month later, Frank took over as leader of the rockin' combo and the band was called "The Mothers". They started building up a reputation around California and were famously signed to MGM Records when producer Tom Wilson heard the band playing "Trouble Coming Every Day". When they got to the studio to start "Freak Out", Tom Wilson, who thought he had signed a blues band, was completely shocked, when they recorded the first song, a charming ditty entitled "Who Are The Brain Police". Immediately he was on the phone to MGM saying that they had not signed a blues band, but some kind of weird band. He certainly was right about that. The band made dozens of albums - each better than the last - in the sixties and but they sadly split in the 1970s. Over the years Jimmy has jammed with Jimmy Hendrix, Janis Joplin, B.B. King, The Grateful Dead, The Jefferson Airplane, Cream, The Doors, Joe Cocker, Arthur Brown, Chicago, Blood, Sweat and Tears, Albert King, Otis Rush, John Mayhal, The Turtles, John Lee Hooker, Chuck Berry, The Howlin' Wolf, Capt. Beefheart, Ringo Starr, Ten Years After, The Moody Blues, etc. - all legends.

After the Zappa split, he formed his own band Geronimo Black with Bunk Gardner and some very fine musicians. The album bombed and Jimmy soon found himself back in Texas making donuts for a living. Not cut out for a nine to five, he was soon back playing drums with Captain Beefheart and then his own bands: The Valley Lobos, Big Sonny and The Lobos, The Farrell & Black Band, Jimmy Carl Black and The Mannish Boys and a reformed Mothers of Invention (sometimes called The Grandmothers). He even hooked up with fellow sixties legend Arthur Brown (The Crazy World of) and they started a painting company called "The Gentlemen of Color". Now running his own record label and touring almost non-stop, Jimmy somehow finds the time to engage in sculpting as well as fine-tuning his hatred for the current Bush administration in the States!

Support this Friday night comes from a "just back from the States" Jimmy Broder who will be performing tracks from his soon-to-be-released-and-as-yet-untitled-album with Peter Doran. Doors open at 9:00pm.