

Non-Standard English in Frank Zappa's "Zomby Woof"

"Zomby Woof" is a rock song written by Frank Zappa, and sung by Zappa, Ricky Lancelotti and a chorus, all Americans and native English speakers. It's from the 1973 album **OVER-NITE SENSATION**, currently Rykodisc RCD 10518. In the following transcription, non-standard language will be picked out in **bold type**, with comments on the flip-side page.

- 1 Three-hundred years ago,
- 2 I thought I might get some sleep;
- 3 I stretched myself out on a antique bed
- 4 And my spirit did a midnight creep –
- 5 You know I'll **never sleep no mo'**!

- 6 **It seem** to me that it just **ain't wise** –
- 7 Did you **evah** wake up in **de mornin'**
- 8 With a zomby¹ **woof** behind your eyes
- 9 (Just about as evil as you could be)?

- 10 I am **de** zomby **woof**!
- 11 I'm **dat** creature all **de** ladies keep **talkin'** about!
- 12 I am **de** zomby **woof**!
- 13 **Dey** all **seek fo'** shelter when I come **chargin'** out!

- 14 **Tellin'** you all **de** zombie **troof**,
- 15 Here **I'm is: de** zomby **woof**!
- 16 **Tellin'** you all **de** zombie **troof**,
- 17 Here **I'm is** ...

- 18 **Reety-awrighty, he de** zomby **woof**!²
- 19 **Reety-awrighty, he de** zomby **woof**!²
- 20 They said **aw-reety** 'n' **they was aw-righty** 'n' I was a zombie **fo'** you, little lady ...

- 21 I got a great big pointed fang,
- 22 Which is my zombie **toof**,
- 23 My right foot's **biggah** than my **otha** one is,
- 24 Like a **regulah** zombie hoof!
- 25 If I raid **yo' dormatorium**,
- 26 Don't try to remain aloof –
- 27 I might snatch you up **screamin'** through the window all naked
- 28 And do it to you up on the roof,
- 29 Don't mess **wit de** zomby **woof**, yeah!

- 30 I am about as evil as a bogey-man can be!
- 31 **Tellin'** you all **de** zombie **troof**,
- 32 Here **I'm is: de** zomby **woof**!
- 33 **Tellin'** you all **de** zombie **troof**,
- 34 Here **I'm is: de** zomby **woof**!

¹ The word *zombie* will be spelled "zomby" in the compound *zomby woof*, to keep Zappa's spelling from the title, but "zombie" elsewhere.

² Sung by the chorus.

Pronunciation

RHOTIC AND NON-RHOTIC: Lines 5, 7, 13, 20, 23, 24 and 25 have non-rhotic pronunciation of the words *more*, *ever*, *for*, *bigger/other*, *regular* and *your*. A linking /r/ appears in line 8, in the phrase *your eyes*, but there is **no rhotic pronunciation** anywhere in the song, which might be considered non-standard for American English.

FINAL -ING: All instances of the final *-ing* are pronounced as /ɪn/, not /ɪŋ/: lines 7, 11, 13, 14, 16, 27, 31 and 33; *morning*, *talking*, *charging*, *telling* and *screaming*. This could be considered standard or non-standard spoken American English.

INITIAL /ð/: Initial /ð/ appears in the words *the*, *that*, *than* and *they*. *the* becomes [d] in lines 10, 11, 12, 14-16, 18, 19, 29, 31-34, whereas the others vary: [dat] and [deɪ] in lines 11 and 13, but not in 6, 20 and 23. This shows that [d] is not the singer's (Lancelotti's) normal rendering of the /ð/ phoneme, but a case of **using a marked (non-standard) pronunciation for effect**. (It is not even fully implemented: there are [ð] pronunciations in lines 27 and 28.)

FINAL /θ/ AND THE WOOF: Much of the lyric is built around non-standard /f/ endings. This includes the “zomby woof”, and pronunciation of final /θ/ as [f]: *truth* (transcribed as “troof”) and *tooth* (“toof”) (8, 10, 12, 14-16, 18, 19, 22, 29 and 31-34). [wu:f] is a non-standard pronunciation of *wolf* borrowed from blues singer Howlin' Wolf (and his song “The Wolf Is at Your Door”) – all the non-standard language is a **simulation of African-American English**.³ (The final /θ/ in *with* on line 29 is pronounced [wɪt] by assimilation with the [dæ] immediately after it.)

ALL RIGHT: In lines 18-20, *all* is pronounced like *aw* in a couple of compounds (see also **REET** under the **Lexicon** heading below).

Lexicon

LOW-STATUS FORMS: *ain't*, used in line 6, is a low-status/non-standard form. Perhaps the whole *ain't wise* construction could be considered a low-status/non-standard way of saying that something is insane. *dormatorium* is a rendering of *dormitory* in the exaggerated “negro speak” of the infamous Amos & Andy radio show: not in use, but recognizable.

WOOF: *woof* is *wolf*, a standard lexical item.

REET: *reet* is a word taken from the entertainer Cab Calloway, used with *right* as a consonant pair. It means “right”. It appears in lines 18-20.

Grammar

The double negation in line 5 (*never sleep no mo'*); *It seem* for *It seems*, line 6; *seek for* for *seek*, line 13; the absence of copular verbs in lines 18/19; *I'm is* for *I am*, lines 15, 17, 32 and 34; *they was* for *they were*, line 20, *I got* for *I have* or *I've got*, line 21 – these are all non-standard constructions and further simulations of African-American English.

(Note

The lyrics printed on the record cover use many more non-standard spellings, also for words actually sung in their standard pronunciation.)

³ Zappa and Lancelotti were both chiefly Italian-Americans. Only the chorus had actual African-Americans (including Tina Turner).