

Faust Stretch Out Time: 1970-1975

By Andy Wilson

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The UK's Andy Wilson, keeper of the unofficial Faust site, is uniquely qualified to write this, a book which comes close to being a definitive history and assessment of the achievement of Faust, a band responsible for some of the most difficult and elusive of all music to have been played and released in the name of 'rock music'. As title indicates, the book concentrates on the 1970-1975 period and in terms of recorded material takes us right up to the Chris Cutler reissues and compilations. *Faust Stretch Out Time* is a very good analysis and history combined. It is filled with scholarship and detailed research. Wilson always states his case with conviction, and is very well informed. More so, I might add, than some writers and journalists who, it seems, are only able to understand Krautrock in terms of the recordings left behind; and even those are usually assessed simply by way of comparison with other Krautrock LPs.

Wilson has a wider vision than that. He knows about music other than Krautrock (eg free jazz, avant garde, noise, prog rock), enabling him to place the music alongside significant traditions and achievements of modernism. Further references to contemporary fine art, cinema, political events, music journalism, and other cultural matters of import are to be found on every other page. He can express good lines of argument in this knowledgeable and cogent frame of reference. Most rock books completely lack this wider vision; how many bios of Pink Floyd do you own which open with a quote by Brion Gysin and end with one by Guy Debord?

The book opens with a dazzling chapter. It contains very strong assertions and original theories about what made 'krautrock' distinctive. 'Germany Calling' outlines a brief history of musical influences on this 1970s musical genre, trailing the usual line of influences from American and English rock, an interest in record production methods, but also citing the background of classical avant-garde music, and even the visual arts. What made krautrock? According to Wilson, the answer is WWII. Post-war German youth wanted to disassociate from their parents' past completely, and with it came doubts about national identity and established culture. 'The generation gap had real resonance,' he is stating by p 13. 'Plenty of questions about the previous generation's allegiances remained unasked and unanswered.' From there it's just a stepping stone to ditching national culture, Vietnam, leftist politics and May 1968; a breeding ground for angry young men whose need to create something completely new borders on the pathological. From this, we can glimpse an insight to the wild ideas that lurked behind the wild eyes of Peron, Irmiler, Diermaier, Meifert, Sosna and Wüsthoff. This powerful chapter really gave me a new way of understanding Krautrock, more so than Julian Cope's lame theory that it all derived from Americans posted at German airbases and The Monks. Chapter one could have set the scene for a devastating book; unfortunately, Andy Wilson doesn't follow through on these ideas completely. They fail to resonate through the rest of the book as much as they could.

Chapter two is already lapsing into a more traditional rock history. We're introduced to the story of Polydor records, the creation of the Wümme studios, the producer Uwe Nettelbeck, and the engineer Kurt Graupner. Even so, Wilson makes it come alive, and comes close to a definitive recounting of this part of the tale; he describes Wümme as poised to become the biggest libertarian playground rock musicians have ever enjoyed (and not just a house of freedom in music, but also a site of

rampant drug taking and much sexual promiscuity). Recording methods by The Soft Machine, The Beatles and Teo Macero are briefly cited as antecedents for their strange production style; other notable musicians to have recorded at Wümme are namechecked. One failure of this chapter is that Graupner, given credit here on p 25 as the inventor of their unique sound-creating machines, tends to fade away hereafter and doesn't have as

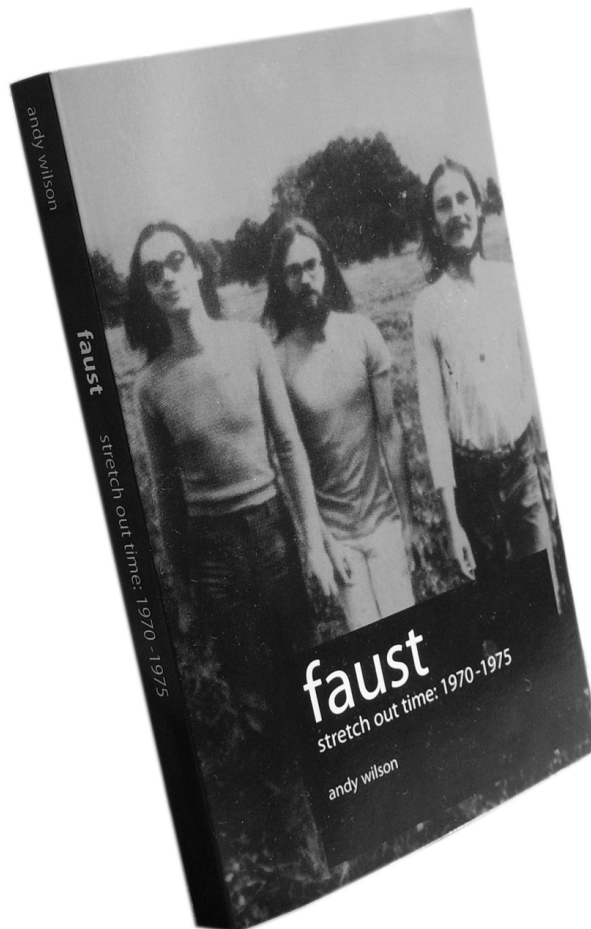
strong a presence in the following chapters. Yet to me his strong and capable production techniques (he was a modest, hardworking straight among lots of untogether, lazy and arrogant hippies) were one of the Faust keystones; the records wouldn't have existed without him.

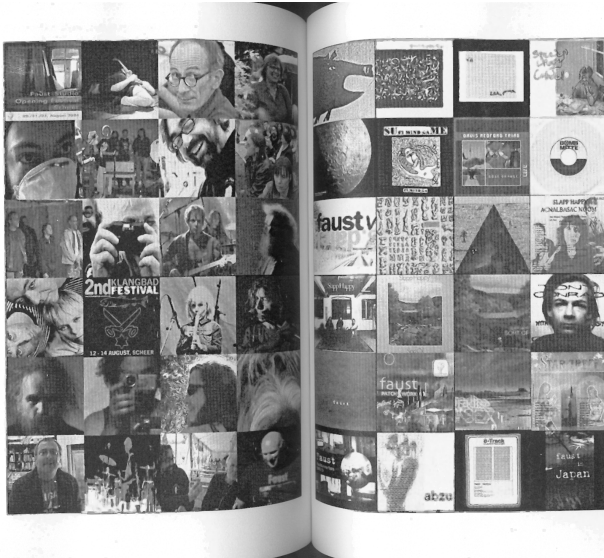
There follow a series of chapters detailing the stories behind the records, one chapter devoted to each LP. Here, Wilson gets a little pedantic for my tastes as his work increasingly becomes a conventional track-by-track breakdown. This approach is good early on in their career when there's a story to tell, but it gets a bit boring when he's just collating review-style info. That said, only a churl would fail to recognise that the chapters on *Faust Clear* and *So Far* really sing, and must be reckoned as near-definitive accounts of these difficult and complex LPs. The factual research detail is the best you're ever going to get; Wilson's assessments of the cultural worth of these two records will make your head spin. His assessments often begin with an understanding of the sleeve art; he spends five pages on the first LP cover alone, detailing the resonances and hidden meanings of the clear sleeve with its x-rayed fist. That same chapter, having neatly filleted the strands of its elaborate musical construction, concludes with insights linking the first LP to Hindu and Brahman religions, Voltaire and Vietnam, and the Baader-Meinhof

group. He sees *Faust Clear* as one of the most powerful and direct artistic statements on the themes of ambiguity and doubt to have been made. Hence, 'nobody knows if it really happened.'

The *So Far* LP chapter starts with an Adorno reference and brings in an understanding of Malevich to help us get a purchase on that all-black sleeve. Wilson is very good, in flashes, at assessing Faust's achievement in music and makes strong cases for why it's so significant. He sees them as succeeding in certain ways where the formal avant-garde has failed us. Faust have made numerous breaks with old traditions. They are primitives who managed to work technology in their favour. He is also hot on the detail of the members, their movements, their personalities, and their individual contributions to each track. This seems to have been achieved through a combination of research, detailed interviews, and simply *listening* to the records in great detail. By the end of this thorough research, you feel you will know much more clearly who is playing what on all the records, and you will be a step closer to truly knowing the band. I can't stress enough what an achievement that is. Faust's 'anonymity' has always been overplayed in previous assessments, especially by lazy music journalists who fell at the first hurdle and couldn't really be bothered to find out who or what lurked behind that list of strange-looking German names.

The chapter on Tony Conrad is extremely useful, mopping up all the loose ends from the recording session that produced *Outside the Dream Syndicate* and the subsequent (much later) release of stray tracks; the chapter takes us up to the 1995 concert in London, with many a troubling quote from the bass player and his dramatic use of the sledgehammer. The chapter on *Faust Tapes* contains much useful historical detail on the Virgin Records story behind this infamous 48p LP and the label's misguided bid for chart success. Ever since Chris Cutler first published the numerous track titles for this confusing and bewildering work of genius, I thought we couldn't possibly handle any more detail on *Faust Tapes*. I was wrong;





Wilson has found further ways of untangling the skeins of spaghetti and giving us meaningful handles on an LP which, for many, has long seemed to be an incoherent mess.

The book winds up with two curious chapters; perhaps they are more like appendices. In one of them, Wilson dissects the music and career of Frank Zappa, one of Faust's more obvious influences. (The drummer earned his nickname through having a Zappa LP under his arm at all times). This entertaining and discursive chapter brings in Miles Davis, Sun Ra, Adorno, Dumitrescu, and more; even so the author starts going in circles slightly, finding many new ways to state his single contention, which comes down to 'Zappa was a control freak'. The first appendix 'Fruit Flies like a Banana' is a curious Marxist-informed analysis of our Western commodity-fetish culture, and an attempt to slot in the music of Faust as some sort of antidote to capitalism. These are preceded by a brief assessment of Faust's live concerts 1971-1974; but these are simply cut-and-paste extracts from the published reviews of other writers, and constitute the weakest chapter in the book. The continuity of Wilson's thesis is severely disrupted by these excerpts, although there are some great writers (Karl Dallas, Ian MacDonald) represented.

Mention must also be made, in this heroic book, of the excellent supporting features. An index (the lack of a good index in a non-fiction book always troubles me). An exhaustive and accurate discography with catalogue numbers and dates (something which Paul Stump overlooked in his Tangerine Dream book for SAF). A bibliography, including a separate list of available (and trustworthy) online resources. These get three cheers from your present writer's archivist tendencies. But it's in the picture library department where Wilson has truly excelled himself: sharp b/w reproductions of all the sleeves, and lavish spreads of related LP/CD projects, concert tickets, concert fliers, adverts, promotional materials, two of the paintings from *So Far*, Virgin Records handouts, and best of all a repro of the famous article by Ian MacDonald which appeared in the NME 23 December 1972. All of these sources are likewise cited accurately.

This is a first-class and well-presented and readable book about a fascinating subject, and you will find it constantly stimulates your own ideas as well as providing rich seams of information.

ED PINSENT 18/09/2007