

An interview with Joachim 'Jochen' Irmeler from

# FAUST

PT: Let's start right at the beginning. Where do you originally come from?

J: I come from the south of Germany, from the Bodensee. At the end of the Sixties I went to Hamburg because I wanted to get as far as possible away from my home. At the time Faust was formed I was working in an advertising agency, which is where I met Zappi, who became Faust's drummer. I have always been involved with music: as a child I played recorder, zither, and the guitar. Somebody in Hamburg enquired if I played any instrument. I had already built my first small organ, since I always had a liking for electronics. So when that guy heard that I had an organ - which unfortunately I had left at my parent's house when I moved to Hamburg - he put me into a car straightaway and we drove all the way down to the south in one night, just to get this little organ. And that was the beginning of this first band, which consisted of myself, Zappi and another drummer, Arnulf Meifert, who also participated in the making of 'Faust 1 (clear)'. The group was called 'Campyloblatus Zitelli', which is the name of a Swabian flying saurian. At least that's what I always thought it meant (laughs). This was the beginning of one half of Faust. And then there was this other band, who played more song-orientated music, whereas we were pretty much into anarchic free-form stuff and more interested in sounds and 'abnormal' things. We didn't want to play any beat-music, which wasn't always easy, since we had a bass-player whose biggest idols were 'The Rattles'.

PT: Ouch!

J: Exactly. This sometimes led to internal conflict, but the guy was very talented and at 36 years by far the oldest member, since we were all around 20. He came from Hamburg's red light district, a really tough guy. It was quite a strange combination of personalities who were working on this project. I can remember that at one point we had three drummers, two or three guitarists, bass, organ and some other instruments, all in all more than 10 people. And then there was the other part of what was to become the Faust-sextet, who were 'normal' musicians, who did real songs with a clear and set structure.

PT: How did the two halves come to meet?

J: At one point, Zappi got to know the girlfriend of one of the others quite well, and so it happened that the two groups met. And our group found it interesting to get some structure into the chaos that we produced. The two groups took an immediate liking to each other, although

each found what the other was doing very strange. We decided to do something together. But what? Faust was never a 'political' group. As individuals, we were political, but not as a group. The most interesting thing about Faust was that we were six totally different individuals. From that resulted the idea: Let's move somewhere together where everyone can live out his preferences, yet has to stand his ground against the other five. Which sometimes led to real fights. But it was and is a concept I can recommend.

PT: So each brought a different element to the band?

J: We said, "We have to do something radically different: let's create this band out of nothing", so that we could draw on all the creativity there was in us and not go the usual way of channeling the ideas and playing your way up in the clubs. We'd rather not have done any music at all than to do that.

PT: How did you come to meet Uwe Nettelbeck?

J: Luckily, we hung out with the Hamburger Film-Co-operative, a scene of young, avantgarde film producers who did short Super-8 films, where for example a man walked through Hamburg with a drinking glass in front of his eye. And there we finally found somebody who knew someone. Nobody from the record industry, but a journalist, Uwe Nettelbeck. So we told him our story, and he was interested, since he was frustrated by his job as a journalist. We liked him instantly and he liked our idea and concept. He started thinking about where we could go to.

PT: Was it Uwe who took you to Polydor Records?

J: I have always been a hi-fi-freak and so I knew which were the best pressing plants and who owned them. One was in Japan and the other belonged to the Deutsche Grammophon in Hannover. At that time we didn't even know where Japan was, so we thought "Let's try Hannover". We thought, hmmm, Deutsche Grammophon and Polydor, they are rich, they can give us money. So we choose Polydor (laughs).

PT: This all sounds a bit like a fairy-tale...

J: Yes, it does. I wasn't present at the negotiations, but when Uwe came back a fortnight later, he said "They want a demo". Which we didn't want to do. "How shall we do a demo if we do not know what kind of music we want to make?". So we played dumb: If they want a demo, they'll get one. What we did was to go out and make a recording of a demonstration (laughs). On our way there, we passed a giant pile-driver, the biggest we had ever seen. And we

thought: "Hey, that makes an interesting noise, we'll record this when we return from the demo". And that's what we did.

PT: So the "demo" you presented to Polydor was exactly that! No music?

J: There was some music on it. To record that, we went into Studio Hamburg, which was just like paradise for us, just as we had always imagined it to be. A big high room, where orchestra recordings were made. Together with the music that we produced there, the demo-tape was so cranky and obscure that Polydor just couldn't say no(laugh).

PT: So you were awarded a contract?

J: We had the contract, but no place to stay. This was solved when Petra, Uwe's wife, remembered her father's house on the heath, which was empty. So we moved there and practised living together, which, apart from a little friction here and there we managed quite well, given the fact that we hardly knew each other. In the meantime, we were looking for a house that was big enough for us all to live in and that could accommodate a studio and rehearsal room as well. And then we found this old school in Wümme, which lies southwest of Hamburg. The house, resembling a large 'I', had a part where we could inhabit, while we used the part that had accommodated the school as rehearsal room and studio. It was ideal. Then we started to think about how to build the studio, which wasn't easy, since none of us really knew how to do that. We only knew that it had to be sound-proof. In the end we managed to build it exactly as we wanted it to be. It was a great time, being able to research and record every sound. Often, late at night, when the others had collapsed into sleep, I'd make myself a big can of coffee and then go back. I always left the organ and the other machines running, so by the time I came back with the coffee, I often had to literally fight my way through a wall of sound, that the abandoned machines produced. There were about twenty big speakers and they were all vibrating, so that you could actually feel the sound. Wümme was the place where we could really experience and live our music.

PT: What kind of music did you decide you wanted to do?

J: We didn't want to do any beat- or rock-music, that was agreed upon. Compared to today's standards, the music-scene was relatively easy to survey. There were the Yardbirds, the Small Faces, Kinks, Stones, somewhere there also were the Beatles, although at that time they'd split up, thank God. Which was what I thought then, today I can listen to their music, but back then I wasn't a Beatles-fan. We liked Frank Zappa, and just today I've been listening to Vanilla Fudge again. I personally was more

into English music, I didn't like much American music, apart from Soul, which I always loved. But in 1970 we wanted to leave all these things behind us. I mean, now I can play tonic, dominant and subdominant in their correct order, but then I just couldn't, I was horrified by that. So I thought if I can avoid that, then I will be able to make 'music'. We always incorporated the sounds of everyday-life into our music. We were always interested in the question of where the borders between 'music', or 'notes' and 'sound' were and in exploring them.

PT: How far were you influenced by all the 'new composers', like Stockhausen?

J: I wouldn't say that we were intellectuals, definitely not. I had some chance encounters with the music of Stockhausen or Boulez and found it very confusing, but I was never a fan or a follower of theirs. Unlike Can, for example. At the time I listened more to Mahler and Grieg and their contemporaries from around the turn of the century. I liked symphonies. And I always think of Faust as a small symphonic sound-unit. All that we could fit into this unit, we squeezed into it. For example, we played 'Blue Danube' in those days. It may be hard to believe, but it's true. And to make sure that it sounded different from any version you might have in mind, everybody had to play the instrument that he least knew (laughs). We did everything: from jazz to imitating church-choirs. We dissected and examined everything, just like children at play. We also looked very closely at the combination of sounds. Every human being responds to certain sounds. There's a reason that a fire engine makes that sound, it was chosen deliberately. All these things carry meaning. We were in the lucky position to be able to spend two years examining that.

PT: Let's go on to your first LP, 'Faust 1' (clear). What interests me most apart from the music is the fact that there is the clear version but also a 'normal' black vinyl with white jacket version. Which came first?

J: 'Faust 1' had a complicated birth. At some point, Polydor became more and more inquisitive as to what we were doing out there in the country. So we finally said: ok, from now on we'll send you a tape every week. And they got tapes... I must say that I feel almost sorry from them today! At one time we even sent them a tape on which only the sound of passing trucks was audible. Eventually they became dissatisfied with the results, so we said, "It's about time we give them something more substantial, they're getting impatient". And so we started to record the first LP. Actually it's a concept album, in which we tried to disclose where we come from, to say: This is us. And so I thought: How could we better disclose this process than by making it transparent? So we decided to have a

transparent record. But it turned out that it wasn't as easy as we thought. Because back then, you had to have a label to keep the hole of the record in the centre. So we went to Hannover many times and experimented. We wanted to have a clear vinyl record, without a coloured label in the middle. After many experiments, we agreed upon a silvery label, since it looked most like the clear vinyl. And then there was the difficult process of putting no graphite into the vinyl... It was an incredibly time-consuming procedure, and on top of all this we also wanted a transparent cover, which nobody had done before. The record with the white jacket and the black vinyl that you mentioned, that was the second edition.

PT: Whose x-rayed fist is that on the cover?

J: One of the aforementioned young film producers, Andy Hertel, who was the only one who volunteered to be x-rayed (laughs). Therefore the honour is his.

PT: Let's talk the music a bit more in detail. What about the opening?

J: The idea was that we took an opening that everybody knew. So we sat down and practised for ages to be able to imitate the Stones and the Beatles (laughs). I think the first two pieces are 'Satisfaction' and 'All you need is love', and then - of course - there's Bach. An interesting anecdote in this context: In those days, Polydor's main source of income was James Last and his easy listening-records. The third track on side one of 'Faust 1', which goes like this (sings the melody), that was James Last. We thought about the order of the tracks very carefully, like "what's the mood when we combine this with that?". More often than not, what songs appeared on an LP and in what order was pure record-company-policy, they sometimes even put songs from previous albums on it as well, and things like that. Therefore a lot of thought went into the order of the tracks, a procedure we still do today.

PT: How was the reaction in England? It seems that John Peel immediately liked the record...

J: To be honest, we only became aware of how the record was doing when a Polydor executive came back from England and was talking about us and the reception in England in such a positive way that we knew he couldn't be completely wrong.

We knew that Polydor would have problems with what to do with this record and how to market it. Polydor had a good PR department, but they were fixed on promoting German hits and easy listening, and so they couldn't fathom how to promote this record. To my knowledge, the only thing that happened was one article in one of the larger glossy magazines

[the Stern]. The rest of the press ignored or disliked us.

PT: The second LP, 'Faust so far', appeared in 1972. I always found it amazing that Polydor let you do another record after the financial disaster that the first one must have been.

J: I have to say that I don't think the first LP sold that badly. About 20,000 copies, which wasn't bad for the standards of the time. Understandably, Polydor was very disappointed. But the first LP wasn't the flop everyone has thought it to be over the last 30 years, otherwise they wouldn't have let us make the second record.

PT: The second LP is quite a contrast to the first?

J: When we started recording the second LP, we decided that it should be a total contrast to the first one. Which it turned out to be. And to make it clear from the first look, we said "If the first one was transparent, this one will be totally black." And to this day I think that it's an underrated LP, there's some tracks on it that are absolutely wonderful.

PT: 'It's A Rainy Day, Sunshine Girl'?

J: We conceived that song to show the people what would happen if popular music followed the path it was pursuing. And of course it turned on us, 'Sunshine girl' became a hit with some people, so that on our concerts, the audience started to demand 'Sunshine girl'.

PT: And there's also an obscure single from that LP?

J: Yes, and it's got the whole LP on it, only played much faster and in a different key (laughs).

PT: Next in the chronology comes 'Outside The Dream Syndicate', your project with Tony Conrad. You're not playing on that record, are you?

J: No, I only did engineering on that. This project came about because every time we realised that we were stuck in a rut we thought that we'd like to open up the band again for new influences. We did many things, we even experimented with German lyrics, one or two years before they became acceptable in German rock music for the first time. At one point even Klaus Schulze came to see us, but it just didn't work out. We knew that with the studio in Wümme we had a real treasure on our hands, the 'means of production', as we put it in those politically agitated times, which we wanted to share with others. So amongst others, we also patronized a Hamburg-based band, which we knew from the early days. We even got them a record deal with

Metronome. The band was called 'Tomorrow's gift'. But the project of recording other Hamburg-based bands didn't spark off, and so we said, OK, most of them aren't doing any interesting music anyway, they still preferred playing beat and rock. Therefore we turned our gaze from Hamburg to the world to see if there was anything interesting happening. We invited other guests, one of them was Dieter Meier, who later went on to achieve international success with his project 'Yello', and an American band by the name of 'Moon', of which I've never heard anything again. Very spacey they were. Then there was also Tony Conrad and Anthony Moore and Peter Blegvad, with whom we later formed 'Slapp Happy'.

Initially, I also played on these sessions, but it soon became apparent that that didn't make any sense. So there just remained three instruments, which was an appropriate and new kind of minimalism. Faust has always had one maxim, which said that 'even one single band member can be Faust'. When we toured England, often I was the only person left on stage at the end of a show. I played myself into a kind of trance, then suddenly waking up and thinking "Where's everybody gone?" Well, now it can be admitted, they usually played much faster than me (laughs).

PT: In 1974 the 'Faust tapes' came out, an LP, which, as well as its predecessor came out on Virgin and was sold at a pretty low price.

J: And now you want to know why?

PT: I'd like to know if you had an agreement with Virgin or if they just saw it as cheap promotion for their new label which they launched on Fausts' back?

J: No, the cheap price was our condition for signing to them in the first place! We were not exploited as some people have speculated. By the time we went looking for another label, the 'tapes' were almost completed. After we were through with Polydor it was clear to all of us that our new field of activity could only lie in England, because the English audience always seemed to appreciate 'modern' music in some form. England is more liberal and tolerant concerning new things, and that's true to this day. By pure chance, somebody told us about this 'sharing-system', which had record shops all over England and who also sold bootlegs. And these people now wanted to indulge in more legal adventures. That was Richard Branson and his crew. When we approached them, they didn't even have a logo or a name. But they appeared to be the right guys. Our condition for signing to Virgin was that we wanted the 'tapes' to enter the charts at once (laughs). To get into the charts, there's two methods: either you activate all your friends to write to a certain DJs and harass

them with demands for your favourite band, or you 'buy' friends by giving them something for next to nothing, which in this case was the 49p for the 'tapes'. That's how it happened.

PT: That's interesting. I have read a lot of stories about the 'tapes', but not this one.

J: I know there's lots of stories around, and it's starting to get on my nerves if journalists make something up instead of researching it properly. I can assure you that it was just the way I told you. I know this because the aspects of marketing the group have always fascinated me as well as the music.

PT: What about the upcoming book on Faust that is announced on the sleeve of 'Untitled'?

J: Well, that didn't materialise then, but it is still in the making. I didn't think that it would be so hard to get the story together. You have to look through so much material, it's incredible. I think that it would be better if different people wrote about different aspects of the band, because a single person just can't handle the amount of material. The only thing that's certain is that one day there will be a book.

PT: The story that I always liked most about Faust was the story of how you came to play that concert at the Birmingham town hall with this worker and his pneumatic hammer. Could you repeat that in your own words?

J: We were always interested in tools, since they also produce sounds. If you hold a drilling machine up to microphone, when you listen to its sound over headphones, you'll notice that there's more to it than just the drilling. And if you put reverb on it and make it much louder, then it suddenly gains a totally new dimension and value. As we were travelling into Birmingham, our tour-bus got caught up in a traffic-jam and next to our bus they were tearing up the road with these pneumatic drills. And we thought, "What a cool sound!" As we didn't have anything else to do, I said "Let's ask the guy what he's doing tonight". So we approached him, and he was completely taken aback. Anyway, after a long discussion, he agreed to come. We had asked him to come in his working clothes, but of course he came in his best suit and a bow-tie, since it was the City Hall, and you cannot go there in your working outfit (laughs). And that was the first time we had a pneumatic drill onstage.

PT: Did the man get paid his musician's fee?

J: If I remember it correctly, he didn't want any money, he said it was an honour to him, so we invited him for a drink.

PT: I read somewhere that you put real concrete onto the stage, is that true?

J: Yes. Because only concrete sounds like concrete (laughs).

PT: Let's move on to 'Faust 4'. The first song's title is 'Krautrock', which - as far as I know - hadn't been in existence before.

J: That's right. Nothing against Amon Düül, who I know had a title called 'Mama Düüls Sauerkrautkapelle' or something like that, but their song wasn't the starting point of this 'movement'. After we'd been living for some time in England, we became aware that the English still feared the 'krauts', since the war wasn't that long ago then. And it may be that when hearing our music some people might have thought that the next air raid on London was just around the corner (laughs). Anyway, being the Germans that Faust were, the English people sometimes called us 'krauts'.

PT: On this record, there suddenly appear normal song structures, especially on 'The sad skinhead', 'Jennifer' and 'It's a bit of a pain'. When I heard it the first time, I was quite surprised.

J: That record was number four. The records with even numbers are the song-oriented ones and 'Faust IV' is such a record, although we also took our liberties with the songs. 'Sad Skinhead' was extraordinary for its times. Today everybody knows that it's reggae, but then nobody knew it. This was clearly an influence that England brought about; there were other 'flavours' that influenced us, but basically, this record is a stock-taking of our English influences.

PT: And who had the idea for the cover-art, this empty sheet of music?

J: I think that was Gunter's idea. It's supposed to be a symbol for the music on this record, which, like 'classical', should be written down in little dots, but as our music wasn't classified as belonging to this Genre we thought it might be better to have an empty sheet of music on the cover. As an example of an absurdity.

PT: How about the cover of the 'tapes'? As far as I know, there's two versions of that.

J: Well, the record was made at a time when everybody was bent on expanding his or her consciousness to the extreme. So we were looking for a picture that would express this. And on this picture by Riley, there are waves, which, when you look at them for very long, give one person a very bad feeling and another a very good feeling, depending on who looks at it (laughs).

PT: And then there's the cover with Goethe's 'Faust' on it.



J: Yes, that's on the re-release of the LP by Recommended Records. That was Chris Cutler's idea, to get a bit closer to the meaning of the name 'Faust'. And I don't think that anything can be said against that.

PT: 'Munich And Elsewhere' was scheduled to be the fifth Faust-LP.

J: Officially also called 'five and a half'. Again, a record that was ahead of its time concerning its use of the studio. Every instrument on every track was honed to perfection, similar to 'Ravvivando', which, as far as I'm concerned, is the quintessential Faust LP. But 'Munich' was never released, because Richard Branson, who was never a musically-minded man, he was more like a human abacus, told us straight to our faces that we were too expensive. And, I mean, the Manor was an expensive studio. Fun, but expensive. Branson agreed that our music was quite good, but he wanted us to "change it a bit". He offered us a large sum of money if we did a tour of America, but he also wanted us to play the music he wanted.

PT: Maybe he wanted you to become another Mike Oldfield.

J: Maybe, since that was exactly the time. I think it was clear to all of us that nobody should tell us what to do. If you try to create music out of your personality like Faust did and then some \*\*\*\* comes along who cannot even tell Bach from The Nice, that's no working basis. Under the circumstances I didn't want to participate any longer. We had a fight over this issue

and in the end, I left England. At first, the others went on tour with parts of Slapp Happy. Some time later, Zappi called and tried to persuade me to come back and re-join them for a tour. I agreed on the condition that it would be my last stand with Faust. So I went back to England, we did the tour, and that was it. When the rest of Faust (apart from Jean-Herve) returned to Germany, I said I'd like to quit making music for a while, since I felt my creative powers had dwindled to nothing; I had totally spent my energy.

PT: But after a while you returned?

J: A year after Faust's first break-up, I felt bored and asked the others if we couldn't make some music again. I had returned to the south of Germany, where I discovered an old cottage with my then-girlfriend. And I immediately thought, that this would be the ideal place for Faust to rehearse. And thus it came that in the spring of '75 we were back together again.

In the meantime I had got in contact with the Musicland studios in Munich. The idea was that we would do another album there, since in our contract with Virgin, it said that they had to cover the studio-costs for another album. But Branson was so offended - which now, after all these years, I can understand, as some of the things I said to him were not very nice - that he simply refused to pay for the album, so that all of a sudden we were left with 30,000 Deutschmarks to pay. But, luckily, we had very kind parents, so none of us had to go to jail (laughs). And that was the end of Faust for many years, everybody went his own way. Rudolf said that as we had

always called him 'the Italian', he would go to Italy to conquer the Stromboli. Jean took the bus to Crete where he wanted to start a family; so basically only Zappi and me were left. Around 1978 I moved back to Hamburg and resumed making music where we had left off. In the eighties we nearly released something, but then we found that musically there was so much going on in Germany at that time that we didn't think this old stuff was needed by anyone.

PT: A few questions concerning odds and ends: From what sessions are the 'Faust Party'-tracks released on the 'Seventy-one minutes of Faust'-CD?

J: They are session-recordings. Chris Cutler wanted to release something from us, he asked if he could have these old tapes, and we agreed. And I think that record offers a good overview over the diversity of Faust-

music.

PT: My favourite Faust-LP has always been 'You know Faust', especially the track 'Man from the Moon'. But most people I play this song to go "What's *that*?"

J: Well, it's folk music. The horns on that song are played by the local fire-brigade. It cost us a lot of liquor (laughs), because they weren't able to play until everyone of them had devoured at least one bottle of really strong liquor. That's true! Then they suddenly became really straight (imitates the horns, almost laughs himself to pieces). For things like this we always had a soft spot. On 'So Far', for example, Zappi made the local butcher's and the grocer's children sing in English, although they didn't understand one word! That was Zappi's favourite passtime, he's always had a foible for training children!

PT: Last question: What was the hardest thing about being Faust?

J: The hardest thing was not to lose our way. I mean, nothing is easier than to play rock'n'roll, or, as is now the case, some kind of minimalistic electronic music. I personally think that it's the hardest thing not to succumb to the 'Zeitgeist'. Very often people will say: But you're totally out of step with these times, etc. But I am a living product of the present, I am not a relic of days gone by, and if I remain open enough, then I don't have to fear anything. Thus I'll never end up like Status Quo (laughs)

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