

## 12 | Popol Vuh

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Discussing one of Krautrock's most remarkable and spiritual acts, Frank Fiedler, long-time creative partner of Popol Vuh mastermind Florian Fricke, states:

Popol Vuh wasn't a band in the traditional sense and only rarely gave concerts. Popol Vuh was actually more of a studio project by Florian. Even if different people joined the project for a while, some a little longer, the impetus for the music always came from Florian.<sup>1</sup>

Florian Fricke, who like many Krautrockers came from an affluent background, was the sole creative force behind the musical project he named Popol Vuh. While he gratefully accepted the moniker of *kosmische Musik* being applied to his mostly instrumental compositions, Fricke from very early on regarded his music as fundamentally different from the drug-induced space sounds that many of his contemporaries favoured. Rolf-Ulrich Kaiser, founder of labels Ohr Records and its subsidiary Pilz, was a key figure in the Krautrock scene which he also helped to define as the author of countercultural books such as *Das Buch der Neuen Pop-Musik* (1969). In *Rock-Zeit* (1972) he wrote on Popol Vuh:

The wind, the thunder, strong, weak sound that gives way to new births, transformed sound. The human soul has an inkling of the 'cosmic', of light, darkness, limitlessness, death, resurrection. The knowledge of the soul is a gateway to heaven, a departure into the cosmos. A music that is able to express these inner things, the free flight out of the connection to time into something eternal: that could be '*kosmische Musik*'. We would call this music dreamlike, ecstatic or blissful.<sup>2</sup>

Fricke developed a far more spiritual approach to music than most of his *kosmische Musik* colleagues due to his intensive studies of the five world religions as well as spiritual cults, which had led him on his quest for meaning from the Marxist world view he cultivated in the late 1960s to

<sup>1</sup> C Dallach, *Future Sounds: Wie ein paar Krautrocker die Welt revolutionierten* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2021), p. 219.

<sup>2</sup> R-U Kaiser, *Rock-Zeit: Stars, Geschäft und Geschichte der neuen Pop-Musik* (Düsseldorf: Econ, 1972), p. 308.

a highly religious understanding of spirituality, with music as its highest form of expression.

In *Krautrocksamler*, Julian Cope mentions as many as four albums by Popol Vuh in his list of ‘the 50 indispensable Krautrock records’: *Affenstunde* (*The Hour of the Ape*, 1970), *In den Gärten Pharaos* (*In the Pharaoh’s Gardens*, 1972), *Einsjäger und Siebenjäger* (*Onehunter and Sevenhunter*,<sup>3</sup> 1975), as well as *Hosianna Mantra* (1972) – though surprisingly he omits the soundtrack to Werner Herzog’s film *Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes* (1975).

### A Spiritual Journey with the Moog

While debut album *Affenstunde* is a pure Moog album, Popol Vuh’s second offering, *In den Gärten Pharaos*, begins to digress from sole use of the technically complex synthesiser. While being perfectly able to produce what might be regarded as ‘cosmic sounds’, synthesisers sounded too artificial and were therefore counter-productive in creating a spiritual atmosphere. Fricke began to understand that his vision of a transcendental, celestial sound could only be achieved with analogue instruments. He therefore made greater use of them on his albums following *Affenstunde*. In addition to the records listed by Cope, *Seligpreisung* (*Beatitude*, 1973) and the soundtrack to *Aguirre* should also be considered to constitute what might be called Popol Vuh’s classic phase.

The band name derives from the holy book of the Quiché-Maya, the *Popol Vuh*, which also contains the Mayan creation myth, studied by Fricke in detail in the 1960s. His first album’s title, *Affenstunde*, was taken from a chapter of the *Popol Vuh* that deals with the creation of mankind. This chapter describes how the ‘Creator, Heart-From-Heaven’, attempts to bring man into being as a perfect creature but in the end is only able to create a monkey-like animal. One day, Fricke commented, all the men who have evolved from this ape would mature into true human beings who would bear no resemblance to it anymore.<sup>4</sup>

Through the *Popol Vuh*, Fricke was introduced to other writings from different cultures that helped him on his quest for the very essence of

<sup>3</sup> The names are taken from a German translation of Popol Vuh, the originals being Hun Hunaphu (Einsjäger) and Vucub Hunaphu (Siebenjäger), Hun and Vucub meaning ‘one’ and ‘seven’, respectively, whereas ‘hunter’ is a possible translation (among others) of ‘Hunaphu’.

<sup>4</sup> P Bebergal, *Season of the Witch: How the Occult saved Rock and Roll* (New York: Random House, 2014), p. 189.

religion and spirituality, as he recalled in one of his earliest interviews.<sup>5</sup> In fact, the quest for a connection between the unconscious and spirituality, which he thought to have first found in the *Popol Vuh*, was to exclude every type of cultural imperialism. He did not, as a Westerner, intend to appropriate Indigenous culture and spirituality. Rather, he was looking for his own form of meditation that could relate to these cultural influences and at the same time be rooted in Fricke's own cultural environment. It is hence only consistent that the photograph inside the gatefold cover of *Affenstunde* shows a Bavarian alpine panorama, which stands in harsh contrast to the music played on the album, carefully augmented by Indian tablas and tympanums.

A former Marxist, Fricke also claimed that, strangely enough, he had come to religion partly through synthesisers and partly through the physical theory of oscillations. He believed in touching people emotionally with the help of electronic devices in order to set free their hidden energies in a way that political activism – at least from his own point of view – could not.<sup>6</sup> With this approach he tried to find personal inspiration in Western as well as eastern spirituality and its sacral traditions. At first, Fricke firmly believed in being able to document his own spiritual journey by using the Moog as a means of musical communication, to combine sound and spirituality through this very instrument – an instrument that he thought would enable him to find access to his own subconscious to finally unfold his full spiritual potential. This way Fricke would arrive at his utopia in a way that he did not consider possible with Marxism.<sup>7</sup>

Such assessment of the Moog was not unusual at the end of the 1960s. In fact, Herbert Deutsch, who alongside Robert Moog invented the synthesiser, saw it as the result of a long search for the expansion of consciousness; a cultural quest that had started with the use of LSD together with the mainstream success of mysticism that developed in the second half of the 1960s. There was only one more step to take, announced Deutsch, to reach the next level, although this could only be done with the help of technology.<sup>8</sup> At the beginning of the 1970s Fricke explained:

For us the Moog synthesizer is the ability to create sounds that we have never heard or have only suspected. You can make about seven billion different sounds, and

<sup>5</sup> D Mulder, Liner Notes, *Popol Vuh – The Essential Album Collection*, vol. 1 (2019), p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> A Simmeth, *Krautrock Transnational. Die Neuerfindung der Popmusik in der BRD, 1968–1978* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2016), p. 76.

<sup>7</sup> R Langhans, Musik ist für mich eine Form des Gebets, *Sounds*, 3 (1973), pp. 35–7 (36).

<sup>8</sup> Bebergal, *Season of the Witch*, p. 182.

each sound represents a different feeling you might have. The music that can be made with the Moog simply encompasses the possibilities of human sensation.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, the machine offered Fricke ways to ‘experience myself in all my possibilities’, and so he took to calling the sounds he got ‘mind-expanding music’.<sup>10</sup> For him, spirituality meant being one with earth. Fricke believed that, if we live in unison with Mother Earth, heaven would automatically open above us as well as inside us. But if we live in dissonance with Mother Earth, heaven will close upon us and inside us: ‘When heart and head have lost their way, it’s good to return to our roots at the base, surrendering our despair, aware of Earth’s despair, as our first step to reconciliation.’<sup>11</sup>

Fricke was only the second German to own a Moog synthesiser, the first one being the avant-garde composer Eberhard Schoener, who lived just 300 feet away from Fricke’s house in the small Bavarian town of Miesbach. Incidentally, Schoener had acquired his instrument from none other than John Lennon. In 1970, Fricke, then in his early twenties, was working as a film critic for the national paper *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and news magazine *Der Spiegel*, among others, when he heard about his neighbour’s miracle music machine. He was a major talent on the piano, having studied it at the conservatory in Munich, but soon realised classical music was not for him. After testing it at Schoener’s house, Fricke was fascinated by the surreal soundscapes and the endless possibilities the Moog had to offer. Thanks to his wife’s wealthy family,<sup>12</sup> he was able to buy one of the expensive instruments – he paid 60,000 deutsche marks for the Moog III, which was the equivalent of a small property at the time – after Schoener had used his contacts with Robert Moog himself.

Sadly, Schoener and Fricke never co-operated musically. ‘Since no user’s manual came with the instrument,’ Jan Reetze writes in *Times & Sounds*, ‘Schoener as well as Robby Wedel tried to explain to Fricke how this thing worked. This was not an easy job; Fricke’s understanding of technology was limited.’<sup>13</sup> After Fricke and his wife had relocated to a ‘picturesque former parsonage at Peterskirchen near Wasserburg’<sup>14</sup> to enjoy the communal living typical at the time with fellow Popol Vuh musician Holger Trülzsch, his girlfriend, and a changing cast of artists, filmmakers, and musicians,

<sup>9</sup> Kaiser, *Rock-Zeit*, pp. 300–1. <sup>10</sup> Simmeth, *Krautrock Transnational*, p. 273.

<sup>11</sup> Mulder, Liner Notes, p. 2. <sup>12</sup> Dallach, *Future Sounds*, p. 218.

<sup>13</sup> J Reetze, *Time & Sounds: Germany’s Journey from Jazz and Pop to Krautrock and Beyond* (Bremen: Halvmall, 2020), p. 307.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

Fricke was approached by Gerhard Augustin of Liberty Records (which later became part of United Artists). The label manager was looking for a German artist able to record an album of electronic music based on the Moog. The 'Moog-based act' Augustin was looking for was intended to be a German version of Wendy Carlos (born Walter Carlos), who had been very successful with her otherworldly interpretations of compositions by Johann Sebastian Bach on the album *Switched-On Bach* (1968).

Fricke, along with his now wife, Trülzsch, and Frank Fiedler on 'Synthesizer-Mixdown' recorded *Affenstunde* at the Bavaria Studios in Munich. The back of the record sleeve later very fittingly would show 'Fricke in a sleeveless sheepskin top, attending to his Moog like a radio ham, as percussionist Holger Trülzsch sits swaddled in Afghan coating astride his drumskins, while Bettina Fricke, Florian's wife, who coproduced the album and designed the cover, attends to her tabla'.<sup>15</sup> However, when Augustin played the final mix to the record company executives, they first opted not to release the album, claiming it was 'terrible'.<sup>16</sup> It took a lot of convincing on Augustin's side to change their minds, although the company immediately decided not to release a second Popol Vuh album.<sup>17</sup>

'The idea of *Affenstunde*', recalls Trülzsch, 'was to imagine a marketplace where people meet, talk, and make music.'<sup>18</sup> Mutual friends in the music scene made sure that copies of the record found their way into the hands of John Lennon and Bob Dylan and – according to Trülzsch – the superstars were amazed.<sup>19</sup> The photographer Jim Avignon was said to have played the album in his studio continuously for six months.<sup>20</sup> Still, despite the pioneering spirit of this album and the positive reviews it received (the most important German music magazine of the time, *Sounds*, calling it 'the best and most satisfying LP with German pop music yet'<sup>21</sup>), it only sold around 3,000 copies at the time. Reetze partly blames this poor performance on what he conceives as being the sound of an artist still on the 'search for something', the compositions sounding unfinished and somehow erratic.<sup>22</sup> In spite of Reetze's concerns about an artist well aware of his spirituality but still unsure how to transform it into music, Cope calls Fricke a musician,

<sup>15</sup> D Stubbs : *Future Days. Krautrock and the Building of Modern Germany* (London: Faber, 2014), p. 359.

<sup>16</sup> Dallach, *Future Sounds*, p. 220. <sup>17</sup> Ibid. <sup>18</sup> Reetze, *Time & Sounds*, p. 307.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 308. <sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> J Legath (ed.), *Sounds. Platten 66–77* (Frankfurt: Zweitausendeins, 1979), p. 183.

<sup>22</sup> It is interesting to note that Reetze points to two appearances of Popol Vuh on German TV in 1971, one of them on the famous show *Beat Club*. In both, Fricke has allegedly 'no coherent idea of what to do with his synthesizer' and is seen 'more or less cluelessly twisting the knobs of his Moog'. Reetze, *Time & Sounds*, p. 308.

who ‘was never so much ahead of time as out of time: that is, he appeared as an avant-gardist but was really a traditionalist-hearted visionary’.<sup>23</sup>

This might also be the reason why *Affenstunde* ended up being such a hermetic, strange album that is difficult to appreciate on an intellectual level. The friction caused by the avant-garde sound aesthetics stands at the centre of the listening experience, not least because at the same time it was marketed as ‘pop music’ by the record company. In between these two different labels – avant-garde and pop – was Florian Fricke’s longing to strive for what Mark Goodall characterises as ‘Heavy Consciousness’,<sup>24</sup> but what in his own words he delineates as ‘sacral’. As a result, Peter Bebergal sees Popol Vuh as outsiders even within a heterogeneous musical genre such as Krautrock, particularly because Fricke was primarily led by his religious vision.<sup>25</sup>

The cosmic sounds produced by the Moog would be paired with the tribal percussion played by Holger Trülzsch, which caused further friction within the sound structures Popol Vuh created. While the album’s A-side includes three fragments improvised on the Moog and referred to as ‘Dream Parts’ that make up a composition called ‘Ich mache einen Spiegel’ (I Am Making a Mirror), the B-side consists of the title track, running to nearly twenty minutes – the Moog sounds and Trülzsch’s tribal percussion being augmented with distant voices, real as well as synthetically produced, that attempt to take the lead amid a billowing mass of sound. Suddenly a ‘low tone begins, a hanging bouncing pulse behind it, the hell-tone dips and melodically forms into a Keltic mantra of some great beauty’<sup>26</sup> – only for it to disappear again quite suddenly and make way for atonal sonic experimentations and pulsating rhythms. In his essay that accompanied the re-release of the album in 2019, music critic Mike Barnes claims that this track consists of ‘a strange eerie tone and there was an undulating serpentine flow to the melodies pitched somewhere between signalling and singing, its rhythmic complexity enhanced by the use of sequence and echo and delay’.<sup>27</sup> Fricke was said to have used an electronic soprano part, then tried to eliminate the electronic element with the help of filter effects in order to make the music sound more human though electronically generated. In hindsight, these ideas made Trülzsch recognise

<sup>23</sup> J Cope, *Krautrock sampler: One Head’s Guide to the Great Kosmische Musik – 1968 Onwards* (Yatesbury: Head Heritage, 1996), p. 128.

<sup>24</sup> M Goodall, *Gathering of the Tribe: Music and Heavy Conscious Creation* (London: Headpress, 2012), p. 1.

<sup>25</sup> Bebergal, *Season of the Witch*, p. 189. <sup>26</sup> Cope, *Krautrock sampler*, p. 128.

<sup>27</sup> M Barnes, *The Song of Songs*, *Prog* 99 (2019), pp. 89–91 (90).

the enormous complexity of the project, not least because it took a lot of time simply to permanently filter the sound to achieve the result the musicians had in mind.<sup>28</sup>

## A New Path

*Affenstunde* represented a possible avenue to approach *kosmische Musik*, but strangely, Fricke himself was far from convinced. He understood something had to change and that the best way to achieve this would be to slowly move away from the dominance of the Moog. Popol Vuh's second album *In den Gärten Pharaos* – which quite fittingly appeared on Kaiser's Pilz label – only consists of two long pieces, each of them taking up one side of the original vinyl record. The title track recalls the electronic experiments on *Affenstunde*, but according to Trülzsch, the musical possibilities offered by the Moog to create the envisioned sacral sounds were exhausted at that point, not least because Fricke was none too tech-savvy and therefore had problems with electronic devices.<sup>29</sup>

Fricke's new objective was further emulation of the human voice by technical means, only to realise he had failed this task while still in the middle of recording the title track. He therefore decided to embark on an altogether new direction with the second track on the album simply called 'Vuh', which makes up the whole of B-side: 'It is all too obvious that one of the great meditational holy works has been captured on tape',<sup>30</sup> Cope boldly states. In fact, Fricke opted for an unconventional method: he recorded 'Vuh' with a church organ located in a former monastery in the Upper Bavarian village of Baumburg. The piece is based on a single chord, which is only slightly varied throughout the composition and augmented with restrained percussion work.

As the picture of a Bavarian alpine landscape on the gatefold sleeve of *Affenstunde* already indicated, Fricke certainly saw himself committed to a German cultural tradition and therefore (in the press notes to *In den Gärten Pharaos*) refers to the influence German poetry, classical music, and philosophy have had on him and his music, while at the same time distancing himself from his country's recent fascist past. So it comes as no surprise that, on this album in particular, Fricke acts out the conflict between his German and his international influences by embracing the upcoming electronic music scene and German classical music he had

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. <sup>29</sup> Reetze, *Time & Sounds*, p. 309. <sup>30</sup> Cope, *Krautrocksamler*, p. 129.

studied at conservatory while at the same time opening up to the more organic, archaic sounds of African and Indian instruments.<sup>31</sup>

At that time, Fricke already saw Popol Vuh as ‘a group of people who make music, but are not a music group’,<sup>32</sup> a factor that, according to Reetze, increasingly led to tensions among the musicians:

In a certain way, this statement shows that Fricke saw himself not so much as the leader of a band but as an individual working with other musicians under a project name. He undoubtedly saw the project Popol Vuh as his own.<sup>33</sup>

Despite Fricke playing his Moog on Tangerine Dream’s *Zeit* (1972), the album that comes closest to attaining the vision of a *kosmische Musik* on record, he was determined to follow through with his own ideas on ‘Vuh’, and thus dispensed with the instrument he increasingly saw as an electronic shackle. Fricke sold it to another leading keyboard player in the Krautrock cosmos, Klaus Schulze. Fricke radically rejected the very notion of *kosmische Musik* and claimed that a ‘more beautiful and honest way’ would be to free your mind without the help of technology.

Over the years, music has increasingly become a form of prayer for me. With electronics you can first reach the depth, the unconscious, the timelessness of the human being more than with other natural sounds. I am aware of that, and it has fascinated me for a long time. These days, a more beautiful and honest way seems to me to purify and internalize oneself without technical aids and then to touch these spaces of darkness or light, the inner man, with simple, human music.<sup>34</sup>

For his next album *Hosianna Mantra*, Fricke makes use of acoustic instruments only and incorporates a true soprano with the Korean singer Djong Yun, rendering a very human element to his music. Years later, his widow Bettina von Waldthausen would explain Fricke’s repudiation of the Moog by claiming that electronic sounds were in clear opposition to the natural beat of the human heart.<sup>35</sup> What was new for Fricke here was that he increasingly broke away from abstract structures and opened to pop music to continue his spiritual journey. He described his newfound creative process as follows:

The path to creation is like walking on a small path. It begins without intention, purposeless, yet a goal arises. I say YES and approach the goal. I forget it again, but

<sup>31</sup> U Adelt, *Krautrock: German Music in the Seventies* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), p. 107.

<sup>32</sup> N Odorinsky, Popol Vuh: In den Gärten Pharaos, in J Legath (ed.), *Sounds*, p. 294.

<sup>33</sup> Reetze, *Times & Sounds*, p. 309.

<sup>34</sup> Langhans, *Musik ist für mich eine Form des Gebets*, p. 36.

<sup>35</sup> Bebergal, *Season of the Witch*, p. 19.



the goal starts to be more and more alive in me and I move steadily towards it, to receive it. It is me, who is moving. This is my collaboration, my devotion, which fills my person totally with an undivided attention. And I feel the power within, focused on the goal. This is the path to a small path.<sup>36</sup>

Fricke saw himself as a representative of an anti-capitalist, universalist, and anti-consumerist variant of Christianity, which he pays homage to on *Hosianna Mantra*. This title already gives an indication of Fricke's conception of a non-denominational form of Christianity by combining Christian and Hindu terminology. Music had become his very own form of prayer;<sup>37</sup> by cutting his ties to electronic music,<sup>38</sup> Fricke aimed to achieve immediate access to his own spirituality. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he did not claim to possess inner wisdom relating to Eastern religions. Rather, Fricke aimed to understand Eastern spiritual essence through his own Christian culture, as expressed through the album's title.<sup>39</sup>

## The Cinematographic View

Thanks to their rewarding co-operation with German director Werner Herzog, Popol Vuh succeeded not only in making their music known to a larger audience, but also, more importantly, in enhancing their spiritual vision through the association with Herzog's grandiose visual aesthetics. Fricke had met Herzog in 1967 and made a short appearance as a piano player in Herzog's debut *Lebenszeichen*, which was released in 1968. They stayed in contact, so Popol Vuh were approached to do the soundtrack of Herzog's Amazonian adventure film *Aguirre* in 1971, starring Klaus Kinski in the leading role. The soundtrack, however, would not be released until 1975.

Herzog's approach was to wait for the audio track to complement the visual experience, so that the full effect was only ignited by the intermedial connection of image and sound. The director once explained<sup>40</sup> that there is no such thing as 'background music' in any of his films as they constituted a synthesis of images and music. For a long time, Popol Vuh were responsible for soundtracking the films of the internationally acclaimed German director and one of the main protagonists of the New German Cinema

<sup>36</sup> Mulder, Liner Notes, p. 2. <sup>37</sup> Adelt, *Krautrock*, p. 108.

<sup>38</sup> Adelt points out somewhat sarcastically that the loosening of the electronic fetters did not imply modern recording technology, especially the use of microphones, in the recording studio. Adelt, *Krautrock*, p. 108.

<sup>39</sup> Langhans, Musik ist für mich eine Form des Gebets, p. 36. <sup>40</sup> Adelt, *Krautrock*, p. 113.

movement in the 1970s (which comprised such directors as Edgar Reitz, Wim Wenders, and Alexander Kluge). Fricke worked with Herzog on *Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes* (1972), *Herz aus Glas* (1976), *Nosferatu, Phantom der Nacht* (1979), and *Fitzcarraldo* (1982) as well as on two documentaries. Later, Herzog used some of Fricke's compositions for parts of his soundtracks. *Cobra Verde* (1987) was completely soundtracked again with Popol Vuh's music.

The director described his relationship with Fricke's music as follows:

Popol Vuh is a stroke of luck for me because there is always something hidden in the images themselves, which lies and slumbers deep in the darkness of our soul and is made visible through the music of Florian Fricke. That is, the images suddenly have a completely new and unique and strange quality. There is something puzzling about this music.<sup>41</sup>

It is particularly the fusion of sound and image in *Aguirre* that illustrates Fricke's own spiritual quest. In the film's opening scene, a long shot shows hundreds of people painfully descending a narrow mountain trail in the blurred Andes. The accompanying music is reminiscent of a religious chorale – a celestial, exhilarating aural setting, which at the same time carries a reminder of the actual agony dominating the scene. This effect is due to the way Fricke created the chorale: what we hear are not actual human voices but electronic emulations that range between the human voice and synthetic sounds. To achieve this effect, the musician used a 'choir organ', an instrument reminiscent of a Mellotron, in which pre-produced tape loops were played or called up via a keyboard, and thus conjured up sounds and choirs.<sup>42</sup> The camera moves closer to the people who seem to be in harmony with the music consisting of otherworldly sounds, taking on a godlike perspective of the mountain. Then, however, the camera descends from its bird's eye position to reveal a series of shocking close-ups, showing the immense suffering on the faces of the expeditioners and their porters. The soundscape can be seen as a harbinger of the catastrophes that will haunt the expedition as its leader Aguirre gradually descends into madness and drives his companions ever deeper into the Amazonian jungle and thus into the very heart of darkness.

The overwhelming elemental force of nature that Herzog is trying to depict in his film is staged in an impressive way by merging long shots and the soundtrack. The naturalistic focus on the faces of suffering people,

<sup>41</sup> Simmeth, *Krautrock Transnational*, p. 77.

<sup>42</sup> G Augustin, *Der Pate des Krautrock* (Berlin: Bosworth, 2005), p. 236.

meanwhile, reveals an uncanny connection between man and nature that reaches its full effect only with the help of the soundtrack. Adelt points out that the circularity of the main chorale theme underscores the central character's lack of progress and is in turn supported by the camera moving in circles around Aguirre at the end of the film.<sup>43</sup> But the music not only reflects the disturbed psyche of the figure, but also the simultaneously sublime and oppressive soundtrack. As Herzog stated in an interview in the 1970s:

[The music] can reveal qualities and characteristics and rhythms in images, especially in the movie theatre, which would otherwise never come across. For example, when I filmed the jungle in *Aguirre*, then the jungle is first of all a landscape. Thanks to Popol Vuh's music, this landscape suddenly becomes something different. It becomes, so to speak, a quality of the soul, a human quality.<sup>44</sup>

David Stubbs even sees a deliberate contradiction between Fricke's music, which 'aspires cleanly heavenward',<sup>45</sup> and the fate of Herzog's hero, who embarks on a quite literal descent. This paradox will be repeated in their later co-operation on *Fitzcarraldo*, which features yet another anti-hero played by Klaus Kinski, once more fighting his fate accompanied by the spiritual sounds of Popol Vuh.

Many of the celestial sounds on Popol Vuh's recordings, especially on the soundtracks for Herzog, were accomplished with the 'choir organ', a custom-made instrument Fricke commissioned in the 1970s, based on the then popular Mellotron but able to produce sounds that came closer to Fricke's spiritual vision. It is not clear where exactly this instrument was made and where it ended up, although it can be heard on several other Krautrock albums such as *Tanz der Lemminge (Dance of the Lemmings)*, 1971) by Amon Düül II. In 2019, Frank Fiedler describes this extraordinary instrument:

Unfortunately, we never took a photo – today it would look crazy. It was 60 or 80 tape loops with a keyboard; two big plywood boxes with all of his machinery in it, and it was very noisy when it was running because of its electric motors. We had to use speakers so you could hear the music over the noise.<sup>46</sup>

Though *Aguirre*, their first collaboration, might at the same time be seen as the pinnacle of their work together, Herzog and Fricke collaborated on

<sup>43</sup> Adelt, *Krautrock*, p. 116. <sup>44</sup> Simmeth, *Krautrock Transnational*, p. 77.

<sup>45</sup> Stubbs, *Future Days*, p. 367.

<sup>46</sup> F Fiedler, Q&A: Florian Fricke's former collaborator Frank Fiedler talks to Uncut, *Uncut* 265 (2019), p. 41.

most of the films made with Klaus Kinski in the leading role, namely *Nosferatu*, *Fitzcarraldo*, and *Cobra Verde*. The soundtrack to *Nosferatu* was even released as a regular Popol Vuh album entitled *Brüder des Schattens – Söhne des Lichts* (*Brothers of Shadow – Sons of Light*, 1978).

But Herzog and Fricke fell out after their last collaboration, for reasons the director cited years later as follows: ‘He was always too much into drugs, which I never liked . . . Secondly, he drifted away into his idiotic, new-age-pseudo-philosophy babble, and I could not really communicate with him.’<sup>47</sup> These complaints, however, did not come only from Herzog. It can be argued that Popol Vuh’s reputation has long suffered from Fricke’s later musical attempts.

### The Later Years: Celestial Music and New Age

Nevertheless, Popol Vuh’s collaboration with Werner Herzog for his 1982 film *Fitzcarraldo*, now regarded a cinematic classic, marks a turning point in Fricke’s work because the experience saw him turn into a filmmaker himself. Fricke understood his films made with long-term creative partner turned cameraman Frank Fiedler as a continuation and an extension of his spiritual search. They created the films during their travels that took both men to different regions of the world, with Fricke eagerly enriching Fiedler’s images with his music as he had learned from his work with Herzog. This can be most impressively seen in the CD/DVD-Edition of *Kailash – Pilgrimage to the Throne of the Gods* (2015), released fourteen years after Fricke’s death and showing their journey to Tibet. Equally impressive was *Messa di Orfeo*, a multimedia performance premiered in the labyrinth of Molfetta/Italy in 1998, the music being issued on CD in 1999.

Fricke continued to record albums under the Popol Vuh moniker until his untimely death in 2001, albeit at considerable intervals and sometimes, as Herzog pointed out, dangerously close to the popular New Age movement in the 1980s and 1990s. According to Reetze, he had turned into an alcoholic, and following his divorce from Bettina von Waldthausen had begun the life of a recluse.<sup>48</sup> A large-scale reissue campaign of his work on CD, started in 2004 by SPV Recordings, brought Popol Vuh’s albums not only back into record stores but also into the public eye. A vinyl boxset

<sup>47</sup> J Wirth, Popol Vuh: The Essential Album Collection Volume 1, *Uncut 265* (2019), p. 38.

<sup>48</sup> Reetze, *Times & Sounds*, pp. 311–12.

released in 2019 called *The Essential Album Collection Vol. 1*, containing five albums from the early days, was not only enthusiastically received by music critics but also led to a series of feature stories on the band's history. A second box set with four LPs was released in November 2021 under the name *Vol. 2: Acoustic and Ambient Spheres*.

In his liner notes to *The Essential Album Collection Vol. 1*, Dolf Mulder praises Fricke's music as visionary, consisting of 'many styles and influences such as electronica, ambient, progressive rock and music of the eastern tradition. They were musical pre-cursors in many ways: ambient, trance, electronica, ethno-fusion, psychedelic-rock, raga-rock.'<sup>49</sup> His role within the Krautrock community – if one can speak of this at all – was always that of an outsider who wanted to go his own, spiritual way. Still, Popol Vuh is a musical project that – also in an intermedial context – can be seen as symptomatic of a certain strand of development in the 1970s and 1980s. Born out of the electronic pioneering spirit of Krautrock, Fricke soon sought new paths and broke away from what he saw as technological shackles.

The connection to Werner Herzog is by no means a coincidence, as the filmmakers of the 'New German Cinema' were looking for new forms of subjective expression. Although this was based on the ideals of the 1968 movement, it said goodbye to the idealisation of the collective that both Krautrock bands like Amon Düül and political rock groups like Ton Steine Scherben claimed for themselves. For Fricke, the path to the inwardness he envisaged led via his own, individually composed form of global spirituality. This connects him not only with Herzog, but also with authors such as Peter Handke or Hubert Fichte, as well as with that literary movement that is somewhat generalised under the term *Neue Innerlichkeit* (new inwardness). The music that emerged from this was quite hermetic in its approach but opened to the listener when he or she was ready to engage in the spiritual journey that Fricke envisaged.

It is therefore possible that Fricke's development towards New Age realms in the 1980s can be explained by disillusionment with the perception of his work, since New Age can generally be seen as a commercial decline of the spiritual. For although Popol Vuh's music sounds unique even in a Krautrock context, it never – even retrospectively – gained the recognition of a wider audience. And without the collaborations with Herzog, Fricke and his music would possibly only be a footnote in German rock history.

<sup>49</sup> Mulder, Liner Notes, p. 3.

## Essential Listening

Popol Vuh, *Affenstunde* (Liberty, 1970)

Popol Vuh, *In den Gärten Pharaos* (Pilz, 1972)

Popol Vuh, *Hosianna Mantra* (Pilz, 1973)

Popol Vuh, *Aguirre* (PDU, 1975)