

Pep Llopis: Poiemusia La Nau Dels Argonautes

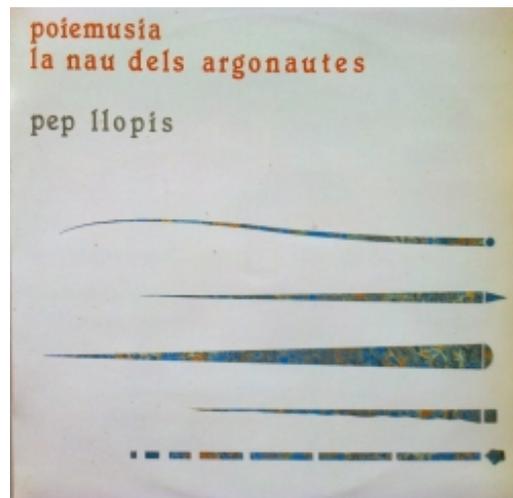
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Massive is the word for Pep Llopis's *Poiemusia La Nau Dels Argonautes*, a record made in Spain in 1987 that splits the difference between new age and minimalism but just barely missed the Cafe del Mar culture of Ibiza. Inspired by Llopis's trips around the Mediterranean, tracing those of Jason's Argonauts, it paints the sea that was once the center of the known world in appropriately grand gestures. Here, the Mediterranean isn't just a place where people relax but a place of frightening nobility, where Greeks and Romans once flourished and white temples sparkle on seaside cliffs to this day.

Llopis came from prog, having played in the band Cotó en Pèl from the Catalan-speaking town of Valencia. Like any progger worth their salt, Llopis likes big sounds and big chord changes. Even the piano chords on the quiet "Nits de Cristall" drop with the weight and significance of meteors falling to earth. Chances are you won't understand the Catalan poetry that floats over the music—written by local bard Salvador Jáfer, who swaps lines with actress Montse Anfruns. Luckily, Llopis more than makes his point with musical gestures to which it seems almost an insult to apply level-headed criticism and not veer off into the language of magic and dragons.



The moment when I knew I was listening to something special was about five minutes into opening track "Muntanyes de Granit." Llopis has already established the fundamental elements of the sound, we've heard both poets, and the music has reached a plateau. Most composers would add another element to amp up the tension, but Llopis has a better idea. He lets the poetry disappear for a while, and then—holy fucking shit—it reappears slathered in vocoder, casting jagged chords against the undulating marimba and synth lines and splashing the canvas with vivid color. The vocoder never appears again, but it's better that way. A second appearance would be anticlimactic. If you want to hear it again, you'll have to start the record all over.

Poiemusia is full of moments like this, like on the closing title track, where he lets a loop play itself out and then snaps it back to square one with frightening force. Llopis's debt to Philip Glass and Steve Reich is obvious, but he's less interested in how bits of music square off with each other than how a musical cue—a particularly devastating chord change, or the introduction of a new instrument at the perfect time—can pack as much of a wallop as the best poetry. There are so many moments on this thing where, once you've trained yourself to anticipate them, you can slam your fist down in unison.

That's not to say *Poiemusia* is lacking in subtlety. In fact, it's some of the more buried moments that pack the most power, like when flutes scream at the margins of "Muntanyes de Granit" or when Llopis snowcaps a synth loop with stabs of real piano on "El Vell Rei De La Serp." "Serp" is the longest and messiest piece here, never quite flowing seamlessly from its snail-paced opening motif through its manic midsection and back. But it's the best microcosm of what Llopis does here: ambient mood music, frantic surrealist wheel-spinning, ominous elemental dread, star-gazing rapture.

The piece, which here spans 47 minutes (long enough to be formidable but short enough to be listenable in a pinch), was originally conceived as a performance at Spain's Poiemusia festival, hence the name. Copies of Llopis's original recording sold for well into the hundreds before RVNG Int'l, one of the best experimental labels on the planet, decided to reissue it. It's tempting to chalk up the interest in this album to the newfound audience the Balearic music pioneered in Ibiza's seaside clubs has garnered in recent years, as well as the reevaluation of new

age that's slowly but surely taken place since Light in the Attic released its epochal *I Am the Center* collection in 2013.

But *Poimusia* doesn't really fit into either of these narratives. Though Llopis would spend most of the rest of his career making music that's unmistakably new age, *Poimusia* was presented as high art rather than chill-out fodder for hippies and tourists. And while the Ibiza aesthetic was largely defined by outsiders reveling in the Mediterranean as a paradise, Llopis lives there and loves it. This isn't a tourist log but a snapshot of a place by someone who knows well its history and its geography but still can't help but get a little weak-kneed at the splendor of its sights.

- Label:
Freedom to Spend
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