

Introduction

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Arguably, Krautrock is a primarily British phenomenon. Contrary to common assumptions, the term is by no means a British creation but has been circulating within the German music scene since 1969 at the latest.¹ However, the expression lost its original (self-)ironic quality when it eventually surfaced in the English music press in the early 1970s. British hacks adapted ‘Krautrock’ as their label of choice for the experimental rock music that emanated from Germany from the late 1960s to the mid-1970s. Music journalists and audiences largely preferred to perceive the outlandish, peculiar-sounding music – which often vehemently rejected the conventions of anglophone pop and rock music – through the ubiquitous Nazi stereotypes and Teutonic clichés peddled in British popular culture.

Leading music critic Nick Kent, to give a telling example, mirrored prevailing British Germanophobia when characterising German bands like Kraftwerk and Neu! in 1974 as ‘stout-hearted Krauts who have set out – facial muscles characteristically tensed-up as they lurch manically over their various keyboard instruments’; in his perception, Germans are overly-cerebral ‘experimental quacks’ who make ‘mind-numbingly boring’ music comprised of ‘nihilistic electronic landscapes they were droning their way through interminably’.² But as in the case of ‘Made in Germany’ – originally a designation of origin that was intended to deter British consumers from buying German products – the derogatory expression turned into a hallmark of quality as the reception of German experimental music soon reversed from defamation to adoration.³

Germany and Krautrock: An Uneasy Relationship

Krautrock is likewise a very British phenomenon in that the reverence, if not worship, of bands like Can, Kraftwerk, Faust, Neu!, and many more featured in this volume never took place in Germany. ‘The Germans never

¹ A Simmeth, *Krautrock Transnational: Die Neuerfindung der Popmusik in der BRD, 1968–1978* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2016), p. 54.

² N Kent, Can: Ve Give Ze Orders Here, *New Musical Express* (16 February 1974).

³ See my case study on Kraftwerk: U Schütte, From Defamation to Adoration. The Reception of Kraftwerk in the British Music Press, 1974–1981, *Angermion* 13 (2020), pp. 1–23.

do appreciate what's on their own doorstep', Mark E. Smith, late lead singer of Mancunian post-punk outfit The Fall, remarked in conversation with Irmin Schmidt of Can. As many of the Krautrock players featuring in Christoph Dallach's 2021 interview collection *Future Sounds: Wie ein paar Krautrockler die Popwelt revolutionierten* (*How a Few Krautrockers Revolutionized the Pop World*) attest, the German musicians were often taken aback at the rapturous welcome they received upon first playing in Britain.

The reverse of such appreciation is the lack of interest (and indeed: lack of pride) Germans continue to take in homegrown bands that revolutionised the idiom of global pop music. Indeed, it is only international fame that saved many lesser-known Krautrock bands from disappearing out of the public eye in Germany. At the root of this perplexing situation is the inferiority complex that haunts German culture: the experience of utter disgrace felt by young Germans growing up in the aftermath of Nazism and the Holocaust. German culture was perceived as indelibly tainted while the tradition of the vibrant popular culture of the Weimar period was cut short by fascism. What would be referred to as the '68er generation' hence largely turned to Elvis, Bob Dylan, The Beatles, and The Rolling Stones in protest against the staunchly conservative values of their parents' generation. The very notion of pop music being a liberating force, as well as a cultural expression offering opportunities for subcultural identity formation, became synonymous with Anglo-American models.

In the road movie *Im Lauf der Zeit* (*Kings of the Road*, 1976) by director Wim Wenders, one of the characters remarks upon hearing a certain pop song: 'Die Amis haben unser Unterbewußtsein kolonisiert' (The Yanks have colonised our subconscious). Only a minority of young post-war Germans opposed the ready acceptance of this cultural invasion. Among them was Ralf Hütter from Kraftwerk, who explained: 'We woke up in the late '60s and realized that Germany had become an American colony There was no German culture, no German music, nothing. It was like living in a vacuum.'⁴

What was later designated as Krautrock originated in a defensive reaction against the dominance of Anglo-American artists. German experimental music was an attempt to newly define what pop music should be and how it could sound. For this reason, it would be rewarding to critically examine Krautrock from the perspective of post-colonial studies. Often

⁴ Quoted in T Barr, *Kraftwerk: From Düsseldorf to the Future (with Love)* (London: Ebury, 1998), p. 74.

without any musical training, young people tried to create an emancipatory, anti-nationalist art form that opposed the anglophone cultural imperialism – Krautrock offered an opportunity to create a new, uncontaminated national identity from a minority position, but also would be a transnational music, readily open to foreign cultural influences beyond the anglosphere. It was to be an innovative form of music that aimed at no less than ‘denazification’: rebuilding German culture and morally and politically cleansing the musicians themselves, as leftist pop music critic Frank A. Schneider remarked.⁵

This political-aesthetic programme was largely successful, although it became increasingly superfluous as German society and politics were liberalised under the chancellorship of social democrat Willy Brandt during the 1970s. Krautrock eventually disappeared and was succeeded towards the early 1980s by the *Neue Deutsche Welle* (German New Wave) movement, which was largely inspired by the British post-punk movement. New wave and post-punk were hence paying back their artistic dues; Krautrock returned, in adapted and hybridised form, to Germany. The chain of transnational exchanges and mutual feedback mechanisms – which could also be observed in the trans-Atlantic transformation of electronic Krautrock music (by Kraftwerk and other bands) into styles such as electro, house, and techno – had been set in motion.

A Krautrock Renaissance

In Germany, Krautrock bands were all but forgotten during the late 1980s and 1990s. It was only the renewed interest in Britain that initiated a sustained revival. A key role in this resurgence was played by the musician Julian Cope, formerly singer of the Liverpool band *The Teardrop Explodes*. His idiosyncratic *Guide to the Great Kosmische Music*, as his 1995 primer *Krautrocksampler* was subtitled, caused an astonishing Krautrock renaissance, reportedly leading to many British record shops selling out of the albums enthusiastically praised by Cope. His book also inspired the emergence of the *Kosmische Club* in July 1996, founded and run by Leon Muraglia, which quickly developed into one of the best-known clubs in London.

⁵ F Schneider, *Deutschpop halt's Maul! Für eine Ästhetik der Verkrampfung* (Mainz: Ventil, 2015), pp. 18–21.

The advent of the Internet unquestionably proved key in the rediscovery of Krautrock: the archive was flung wide open, as it were, making music widely available that previously often only existed as a rumour or as highly expensive, sought-after collectors' items. First mostly through illegal file-sharing blogs, later via commercial streaming services, even the deeper reaches of the Krautrock corpus became accessible. But the Internet boost was not just about the music: fan websites mushroomed while many musicians established an Internet presence, enabling direct contact and distribution opportunities. This in turn increased demand for reissues, to which new German labels such as the Bureau B and Grönland Records responded from the early 2000s, making almost all the important releases on the classic Krautrock labels available again.

From the 2010s onwards, public interest in Krautrock became palpable in Britain: in 2009 BBC Four screened the TV documentary *Krautrock: The Rebirth of Germany*, and in 2012 BBC Radio 6 Music followed suit with the programme *The Man Machine: Kraftwerk, Krautrock and the German Electronic Revolution*. The first Krautrock book in English appeared in 2009: *Krautrock: Cosmic Rock and Its Legacy*, a richly illustrated coffee-table book edited by Nikos Kotsopoulos. It was followed by David Buckley's band biography *Kraftwerk Publikation* in 2012 and, two years later, by *Future Days: Krautrock and the Building of Modern Germany* by the music critic David Stubbs, which provided a truly comprehensive and competent account of the genre. Yet another standard work on a major band was published in 2018, the voluminous *All Gates Open: The Story of CAN*. It contains a comprehensive biography penned by Rob Young and a collage of interviews conducted by Can's keyboarder Irmin Schmidt with some twenty-five musicians and artists on the reception and legacy of the band.

The beginnings of academic interest in Krautrock hark back to a special issue of the journal *Popular Music and Society* in 2009, which has five articles by American researchers.⁶ As John Littlejohn reminds us in his introduction, Krautrock is 'the single most important strand of modern popular music to originate outside the United States or England. . . . For such an important music, there exists surprisingly little research.'⁷ The journal issue, which included articles on bands such as Faust, Neu!, and Kraftwerk, could of course only scratch the surface but it was an important first step. Two years later, *Kraftwerk: Music Nonstop*, edited by Sean Albiez

⁶ *Popular Music and Society* 32:5 (2009).

⁷ J Littlejohn, Introduction, *Popular Music and Society* 32:5 (2009), pp. 577–8 (577).

and David Pattie, laid a solid foundation for research into this, the most influential band to emerge from the Krautrock context.⁸ Its eleven chapters cover a variety of themes and topics and demonstrate the richness of the research questions raised by Kraftwerk's oeuvre.

Finally, two important monographs, both appearing in 2016, demarcate the beginning of serious and sustained research into Krautrock: Alexander Simmeth's German doctoral thesis *Krautrock transnational* and Ulrich Adelt's study *Krautrock: German Music in the Seventies*. Simmeth investigated the immense influence exerted by the most important German bands. From the viewpoint of an historian, he analysed the transnational feedback processes in which Krautrock music became hybridised across national and cultural borders.⁹ Adelt surveyed the heterogeneous field of Krautrock and provided a reliable theoretical framework for future research. His careful analysis showed Krautrock to be a discursive formation that invokes notions of essential Germanness and universal New Age spirituality, blurs rigid distinctions between a specific socio-political context of protest and a much broader interrogation of identity and stretches across different forms of media.¹⁰

The electronic branch of Krautrock, and in particular Kraftwerk, remains at the forefront of public interest and academic investigation. The international two-day conference I organised in Birmingham in January 2015 drew a capacity audience and created considerable interest among the research community, fans and the media. The edited volume *Mensch-Maschinen-Musik* from 2018 comprised papers given at the conference as well as at a follow-on event in October 2015 in Düsseldorf during the first *Electri_City* Conference,¹¹ which accompanied *Electri_City*, the oral history of electronic music from Düsseldorf, edited by Rudi Esch. My Kraftwerk primer, entitled *Kraftwerk: Future Music from Germany*, appeared with Penguin in 2020 and an adapted German version will follow in 2024 to celebrate fifty years since the release of *Autobahn*.

Kraftwerk are also the cornerstone of a travelling exhibition on the development of electronic music, which was first shown in 2019 at the Philharmonie de Paris with further stops at the Design Museum in London 2020 and Düsseldorf in 2021/22. The first dedicated Kraftwerk exhibition took place in 2015 at the Röhsska museum in Gothenburg, while the

⁸ S Albiez & D Pattie, *Kraftwerk: Music Non-Stop* (London: Continuum, 2011).

⁹ Simmeth, *Krautrock Transnational*.

¹⁰ U Adelt, *Krautrock: German Music in the Seventies* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016).

¹¹ U Schütte, *Mensch-Maschinen-Musik: Das Gesamtkunstwerk Kraftwerk* (Düsseldorf: Leske, 2018).

Barbican in London was the site of the 2020 exhibition entitled *Tangerine Dream: Zeitraffer* (Time Lapse/Fast Motion), which explored the work of these pioneers of *kosmische Musik* through photographs and videos, original synthesisers, cassettes, and vinyl.

The relative lack of German interest in Krautrock must be measured and understood against this roughly sketched background. Only the serious international recognition of Kraftwerk, Can, Neu!, et al. as influential musical innovators brought home the significance of Krautrock as a home-grown cultural achievement. Yet there are hardly any German equivalents to the BBC documentaries or indeed the knowledgeable books by British music journalists.

The first German survey of German music from the 1968 era and beyond, *Krautrock: Underground, LSD und kosmische Kuriere*, by Henning Dedekind, appeared in 2008 with a small Austrian publisher; evidently no German publisher was interested. It is a similar story for Christoph Wagner's excellent *Der Klang der Revolte: Die magischen Jahre des westdeutschen Musik-Untergrunds* (*The Sound of the Revolt: The Magical Years of the West German Music Underground*) from 2013. This richly illustrated volume appeared with Schott, a publisher specialising in musical notation rather than books on pop music.

More recently, to conclude this overview, the US-based German journalist Jan Reetze published *Times & Sounds: Germany's Journey from Jazz and Pop to Krautrock and Beyond* in 2020, followed by a German version in 2022. This idiosyncratic book provides an extensive survey of the history of German popular music from the immediate post-war period to the present. In it, Krautrock takes centre stage, but all sorts of side lines are discussed and, once again, only a small publisher was interested.

Female Voices Uncovered

It took until summer 2021 before Christoph Dallach's aforementioned interview compilation *Future Sounds* became the first German Krautrock book proper to appear with a trade publisher, Berlin's Suhrkamp Verlag. Dallach interviewed both leading and unknown musicians from Germany and Britain, along with prominent journalists, key producers, and important record company managers, providing a rich and polyphonic oral history of the development of Krautrock and its cultural, historical, and socio-economic context. *Future Sounds* was positively received in the media and finally drove home the importance of Krautrock to a German

reading audience, but this is not its only merit: the book also gives overdue credit to the female musicians and other women whose important contributions were previously largely ignored in histories of Krautrock.

In addition to allowing Renate Knaup-Krötenschwanz, lead singer of Amon Düül, to discuss her marginalisation in an all-male band, Dallach's book rediscovers the avant-garde music of female bands like Zweistein (consisting of the sisters Suzanne and Diana Doucet) or the unusual musician and instrument maker Limpe Fuchs. Furthermore, *Future Sounds* features female voices such as the graphic designer Gil Funccius, who conceived impressive album artwork for Embryo, Wallenstein, and Amon Düül, among others. Similarly, Dallach's book recognises Hildegard Schmidt, wife of Can keyboarder Irmin Schmidt, for the crucial role she played as manager of the music group.

Another important book published in 2021 is devoted to the rediscovery of a pioneering female music journalist: *Die Zukunft war gestern* (*The Future Was Yesterday*) collects many of the best features and reviews by Ingeborg Schober. She was not only one of the first music journalists in the Federal Republic but also one of the best to boot. Her pioneering, partly autobiographical book *Tanz der Lemminge* (*Dance of the Lemmings*, 1979) gave a vivid and detailed portrayal, not just of Amon Düül, but also the communal scene that proved so crucial to the development of Krautrock. As a woman working in the predominantly male world of music journalism, Schober long fought against prejudices and later became a role model for aspiring female journalists.

Always eager to discover exciting new music, Schober writes on many Anglo-American bands that proved ground-breaking, such as Talking Heads, The Human League, and Ultravox. It was her pronounced interest in experimental sounds, though, that meant that she not only discovered but also strongly advocated Krautrock acts like Can, Neu!, and Kraftwerk, despite widespread German prejudice against home-grown bands. It is therefore no exaggeration to state that Schober considerably helped shape the German Krautrock scene.¹²

The 'Sound of Revolt'

While the present volume aims to provide readers with an academically solid and focused overview of the major Krautrock bands, along with the key contexts and an examination of the legacy of the movement, there is an

¹² I Schober, *Die Zukunft war gestern: Essays, Gespräche und Reportagen* (Meine: Reiffer, 2021).

important proviso. As must be readily admitted, any such endeavour is bound to fail given the complexity of the Krautrock phenomenon. Krautrock simply cannot be defined effectively as the product of specific German political, economic, historic, and cultural specifics, since international outliers have existed since the term originated.

For example, in 1970, the multinational quartet Dom released their only major album, *Edge Of Time*, which shares several stylistic similarities with Krautrock but included members from Germany, Poland, and Hungary. In the following year, the Belgian band Brainticket released their debut *Cottonwoodhill*, inspired by Tangerine Dream, Amon Düül II, and Can, which again shared many of the musical characteristics of these bands' early work.¹³ Likewise, the music by the all-French band Magma, which sang in the constructed language of Kobaïan, is partly reminiscent of the composer Carl Orff and fits seamlessly into the sonic palette of German Krautrock bands.

A better way to consider and define the heterogenous artistic body of Krautrock is hence to posit that the common aesthetic quality uniting these bands and artists was the emphasis placed on experimentation with sound and song structures. Through these musical means, Krautrockers of all denominations constructed what can be described, with Josh Kun's notion of the 'audiotopia', as an alternative, utopian space. This aesthetic space constructed from experimental sounds did not necessarily mark an attempt to create a German-sounding pop music.

After all, much of Krautrock music was inclusive of non-German elements and influences and thus sought to create a hybridised version of Germanness that challenged essentialist and fixed notions of what it meant to be German. As such, it resonated strongly with musicians outside Germany, who also felt political dissatisfaction with their own culture and its pop music. Or as Kun puts it: 'Music can be of a nation, but it is never exclusively national; it always overflows, spills out, sneaks through, reaches an ear on the other side of the border line, on the other side of the sea.'¹⁴ And that is just what Krautrock did.

As a German phenomenon, however, it needs to be understood as the main but surely not only expression of what Christoph Wagner labelled the 'sound of revolt'.¹⁵ Though Krautrock proved to be the most important and influential musical expression that originated in the fertile period between 1967 and 1973 in Germany, it was by no means the only musical revolution

¹³ Thanks to Alex Harden for bringing these examples to my attention.

¹⁴ J Kun, *Audiotopia: Music, Race, and America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), p. 20.

¹⁵ C Wagner, *Der Klang der Revolte: Die magischen Jahre des westdeutschen Musik-Untergrunds* (Mainz: Schott, 2013), pp. 15–37.

at the time. In a spirit of optimism, young Germans radically broke with the affirmative *Schlager* music produced by the culture industry in the revolutionary atmosphere of a general politicisation of society.

This radical change equally affected the area of jazz: free improvisation emerged with musicians such as Peter Brötzmann and Alexander von Schlippenbach, and jazz musicians such as Wolfgang Dauner branched out into electronic music; the unadventurous singer-songwriter scene, too, saw a paradigm shift with the advent of political *Liedermacher* (literally: song makers) like Franz Josef Degenhardt, while the folk scene turned psychedelic with Witthüser & Westrupp and others.¹⁶ Ton Steine Scherben, to provide one last example, stuck to Anglo-American models with their music but used highly political lyrics that openly agitated for revolutionary action.¹⁷

That is to say, in more sober academic language, the transition period from the late 1960s to the early 1970s was – to use the terminology of historian Reinhart Koselleck – a *Sattelzeit* (saddle time, or threshold time). Still, as Magma and other experimental French bands demonstrate, Krautrock was part of a continental radical transformation that was fundamentally but not exclusively German.

Air from Another Planet

When visiting Germany, British observers like the music critic Ian MacDonald were not just fascinated by Krautrock, they also noticed that audiences behaved noticeably differently. When joining concert-goers to listen to ‘cosmic groups’ in the winter of 1972, MacDonald stated that ‘the audience common denominator on the rock circuit is that fabulous monster: The Revolutionary Head’.¹⁸ To MacDonald, German music fans appeared far more sincere, politicised, and unruly than their British counterparts. Similarly, he noticed the unfamiliar features of the German music scene, such as a pronounced tendency for self-help, idealism, and initiative,

¹⁶ E Holler, The Folk and Liedermacher Scene in the Federal Republic in the 1970s and 1980s, in D Robb (ed.), *Protest Song in East and West Germany since the 1960s* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2013), pp. 133–68.

¹⁷ M Putnam, Music as a Weapon: Reactions and Responses to RAF Terrorism in the Music of Ton Steine Scherben and Their Successors in Post-9/11 Music, *Popular Music and Society* 32:5 (2009), pp. 595–606.

¹⁸ I MacDonald, Germany Calling, *New Musical Express* (9 December 1971).

resulting in economy-priced concerts, independent distribution, or self-prompted shows.

The ‘threshold time’ between the 1960s and 1970s was clearly shaped by the strong belief in utopia; the faith that, after the immense catastrophe of the Holocaust and out of the rubble of the bombed cities, a better, brighter future was (or at least seemed) attainable. The futuristic impetus of Krautrock originates from this very spirit of departure. But the sense of being at the cusp of a new age – and this is a crucial point – could be grasped when listening to the utterly new sounds created by synthesizers. In very much the same way, going to a concert now often meant to witness machines making music. No wonder, then, that futuristic metaphors and/or sales tags like *kosmische Musik* abounded, along with science-fiction-type album titles like *Cyborg* (Klaus Schulze) or *Alpha Centauri* (Tangerine Dream), and that was long before Kraftwerk released their defining album *Mensch-Maschine* (*Man-Machine*) in 1978 and began to replace musicians with robot mannequins.

Fast forward forty years to July 2018: when Ralf Hütter invited the German astronaut Alexander Gerst – who was orbiting earth on the International Space Station – to join Kraftwerk live from space for a performance of ‘Spacelab’ at their Stuttgart appearance, he used the words, ‘Lasst uns zusammen Zukunftsmusik machen!’ (Let’s play future music together).¹⁹ ‘Future music’, as a concept, is key here. For starters, well into the twenty-first century, the very innovation of Kraftwerk and other Krautrockers to shed all norms and conventions of rock music proved more than prophetic. Not only does electronic pop music constitute the (cultural industrial) norm today but, more importantly, the experimentation that characterised 1970s German music carries on in current bands like Radiohead, The Flaming Lips, or Camera.

At the same time, the notion of ‘future music’ refers us back to Richard Wagner. In 1861, Wagner expressed his view that it is not enough for music to be contemporary: it had to be ahead of itself and its time. The composer’s duty, according to Wagner, is to call up from the future those aesthetic forms that may already be present in the germ but have not yet been made audible.²⁰ This line of thinking, of course, betrays a very modernist aesthetic. Furthermore, Wagner understood his considerations of the future of

¹⁹ U Schütte, Update 2021: ‘Lasst uns zusammen Zukunftsmusik machen’, in U Schütte (ed.), *Mensch-Maschinen-Musik: Das Gesamtkunstwerk Kraftwerk* (Düsseldorf: Leske, 2021), pp. 358–65 (363–4).

²⁰ R Wagner, *Zukunftsmusik: Brief an einen französischen Freund als Vorwort zu einer Prosa-Uebersetzung seiner Operndichtungen* (Leipzig: Weber, 1861).