

JAN REETZE

# TIMES & SOUNDS

Germany's Journey from Jazz and Pop  
to Krautrock and Beyond



Foreword by  
Hans-Joachim Roedelius

WALTMAN

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## WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?

When you happen to watch 40-year old TV commercials, they are not only something to smile about, but they will also give you a lot of background information about the time when they were originally shown. If you can read the signs, they will give you an idea about how people were thinking; you can see their wishes and their hopes, sometimes even their sorrows and problems. It's 40 years later now and you realize that in reality most things didn't happen the way they thought it would. In retrospect, we can see how and why.

What goes for TV commercials, goes similarly for music. Germany's daily life and culture mirrors itself in the music Germans listen to. When you read about it, you will learn a lot about Germany's cultural, political, and everyday background as well. These topics are interwoven; they are connected and influence each other. As music everywhere in the world, most German music came about not just "under the circumstances" Germans lived in, it came about *because* of the circumstances of certain times, and sometimes it had an influence *on* those circumstances.

You know the term "Krautrock". There is no clear definition, but it refers to German rock music from the late 1960s to the late 1970s. The title of FRUMPY's first album, *All Will Be Changed* (1970), clearly shows the atmosphere of departure this rising Krautrock scene had. Krautrockers, as one of today's several folktales about German rock music goes, followed their ideas in radical consequence. They defied all of the world and its brother, along with their audience and the A&R departments of their record companies (given they were signed), and did what the Lord or his chemical brothers planted into their heads. They were supposed to have done it this way because they were Germans, and Germans, as you know, always stand with one leg in the past and with one leg in the future, but you will never find them in the present.

But on their second album, FRUMPY already signaled a note of caution: "Take Care of Illusion". In reality, many bands had to walk several twists and turns before they finally found their niche, style and (if they were lucky) audience. Most of them failed or gave up. But to not exactly know one's path is not only something negative, it can also be seen as a chance. Bands fought with their record labels, they were in permanent financial trouble, ripped off by obscure managers. They had to solve technical problems. Band members had to deal with their families, friends, girlfriends, and boyfriends. They had to learn how to cope with sleepy radio hosts and the musical desert on German TV screens. They had to learn how to stand the often discouraging coverage done by the German music press. They had to deal with bizarre tour schedules, clueless concert promoters, agencies, and the employment office. There were also unruly and sometimes aggressive audiences, untrained to listen to new sounds and often unwilling to even pay entrance fees. (Several English and American bands touring Germany had to learn this the hard way, too.) Rock music in Germany was a product of permanent trial and error. To show this, this book will follow artists on their journey through decisions and learning processes.

This book rectifies several things that seem to be “common knowledge” especially in fan circles; it blows up some cherished illusions. It will give you some background about German music and some of its makers, many of which you’ve probably never heard of. You will hear about people like Siggi Loch, Peter Meisel, Manfred Weissleder, Mike Leckebusch. There are also names like Conny Plank, Dieter Dierks, Rolf-Ulrich Kaiser, along with some others whose names you’ve probably heard a thousand times, but not in the way they are portrayed here. You will hear about Bert Kaempfert or James Last, names you probably would never connect to German rock, but the connections exist. You will hear about the working conditions of professional musicians and the jobs they had to do to survive. You will have the chance to go behind the scenes of the studio and record industry. Last but not least, you will hear about the reception of German music in foreign countries and how it sometimes backfired for musicians, producers, and record labels.

This book is not a part of the current pile of “retro” books, and terms like “genius”, “legend”, or “icon”, et cetera, will rarely be used here. This is a journalistic book, not a scholarly one. It’s made for you to read, not for earning me a degree. It’s about the stuff I grew up with and the way we (young people in Germany) saw things at a given era. Krautrock is only a part of it, but an important one. My intention is to give you a clue about the circumstances under which different German music styles came into existence, how they influenced each other, and what became of them after their downfall.

Could it be that Krautrock, especially, was a backlash on modernism? Could it be that the chaotic way of developing and making music had its roots deeply in the era of German Romanticism? Could it be that the way Krautrock musicians were thinking was not far from the artists’ and “life movement” groups of the Weimar Republic – keywords being Worpswede, Hellerau, Monte Verità, et cetera? At least many Krautrock groups, as well as parts of the students’ movement, had a similar attitude of “all or nothing” to their predecessors in the 1920s. And it was a similar radicalism that led to phenomena like the “2 June Movement” or the “Baader Meinhof Group” in the 1970s. There are connections, sometimes unpleasant ones, and you will read about them.

Imagine a hot air balloon: You’ll get a wide view over the landscape, and from time to time you’ll fly down to have a closer look at interesting details. When you listen to music from Germany, this book might be a sort of “making of”. But, to plagiarize Stewart Brand: “If you’re reading this book just to reinforce your present opinions, you’ve hired the wrong consultant.”<sup>1</sup>

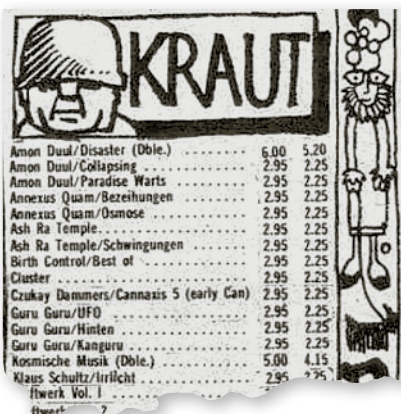
Here’s a list showing all of the German 45s (singles) that reached the U.S. *Billboard* charts between 1955 and 2015:<sup>2</sup>

YEAR	ARTIST	TITLE	POSITION
1955	Caterina Valente	The Breeze And I	#8
1962	Bert Kaempfert Orchestra	Wonderland by Night	#1
1975	Kraftwerk	Autobahn	#25
1975	Silver Convention	Fly Robin Fly	#1
1976	Silver Convention	Get Up and Boogie	#2
1978	Boney M	Rivers of Babylon	#30
1982	Peter Schilling	Major Tom (Coming Home)	#14
1983	Nena	99 Luftballons	#2
1984	Scorpions	Rock You Like a Hurricane	#25
1988	Milli Vanilli	Girl You Know It’s True	#2
1989	Milli Vanilli	Baby Don’t Forget My Number	#1
1989	Milli Vanilli	Girl I’m Gonna Miss You	#1
1989	Milli Vanilli	Blame It on the Rain	#1
1990	Snap	The Power	#2
1991	Scorpions	Winds of Change	#4
1992	Snap	Rhythm is a Dancer	#5
1993	Real McCoy	Another Night	#3
1995	La Bouche	Be My Lover	#6
1996	Mr. President	Coco Jamboo	#22
1999	Lou Bega	Mambo No. 5	#3
2015	Omi/Felix Jaehn	Cheerleader	#1

In a way, the list shows what “the world” tends to expect from Germany: discopop, Eurodance, also sometimes techno. A little bit of innovation is always expected (as the Audi slogan says: “Vorsprung durch Technik” – advancement through technology), and if it’s rock music that is taken note of in the U.S. or U.K., then it must be something very special. KRAFTWERK was one group special enough to be noticed. Or the stage act consists of martial noise and fire magic, produced by sweating, bare-chested young men – that’s the business model of RAMMSTEIN. Hard-rockers SCORPIONS are an exception to the rule: They are a German band, but nevertheless fit perfectly into the standards of a scene that is completely dominated by bands from Anglo-American territories.

Around 1970, some British music journalists glued the label “Krautrock” onto rock music from Germany. The V-2 had failed, and these crazy krauts dared to try it again, but this time with amplifiers and synthesizers? It couldn’t be true.

But it was. Even in 1973 it was obviously not possible to imagine Germans without steel helmets, as this detail from a Virgin advertisement in the *Melody Maker* demonstrates:



If it wasn’t a steel helmet, then you can bet they would use a Gothic-styled font for the headline. When David Bowie entitled a track on his “*Heroes*” album “V-2 Schneider”, it was of course aimed at KRAFTWERK’s Florian Schneider, but the “V-2” makes it a very ambivalent dedication – probably the reason why Schneider never commented on it. Some journalists, as here in the *New Musical Express*, were very amused about the German accent, and, as you would expect, let Germans call the shots:



The British tabloids arrange similar nonsense in tiring conformity whenever a soccer game with England versus Germany takes place. It sounds a bit senile by now.

But in the 1960s and 1970s, some other countries also served with the big dipper, as this review of KRAFTWERK’s *Trans Europe Express* in Swedish tabloid *Expressen* might show: “First I didn’t know if I dared to laugh. A German pop group with this name: KRAFTWERK – is it a parody of the Fritz culture, or what ...? With excitement I put the record with songs like ‘Europe Endless’ and ‘Franz Schubert’ on the turntable and my laugh got stuck in my throat. Fascism is what it is, pure and simple. If there would be a work ban in West Germany it should be issued on KRAFTWERK. Throughout the sound is synthetic into metallic monotony. Triads and march rhythm with lyrics like ‘Europe Endless with elegance and decadence.’ ... Here it just becomes a rhythmic tramp of boots in the latest synthetic packaging.”<sup>3</sup>

If you think it would be hard to top this nonsense, then get ready for one that takes the all-time cake:<sup>4</sup>



If you ever need proof that British music press had a niche for brain-dead editors, this example should suffice.

But let's be fair: All these reviews didn't target the records, it was *Germany* they focussed on. Just think about when these critics and record industry guys were born. What did they hear from their parents and grandparents about Germany, what did they learn about it in school? Then add the fact that the first bands from Germany came off as really wacky, sometimes even arrogant. This was, of course, not much more than a way to deal with their own insecurities, but you can imagine the sort of vibes the critics received from this. For critics, Germany and these musicians were a heavy-loaded subject. And then, along with all of this, add the strange music! What did the critics do? They opened hate outlets and came out with a plethora of stereotypes they had heard of. The chief editors, usually the same age as their writers, maybe a bit older, supported this.

From the U.S. or the U.K. perspective, Germany was, and sometimes still is, an exotic place. WWII had still not been digested, and in many cases it was connected to personal or family experiences. Information about what was really going on in this mysterious country was hard to find. Sometimes facts were not even wanted – preconceptions were, and are, much easier to deal with. Most British or American music journalists, even the good-willed ones, had never been in Germany, usually did not speak the language, and didn't know much (if anything) about Germany's musical and cultural landscape. When journalists of this kind got into contact with the likes of CAN, AMON DÜÜL, AMON DÜÜL II, KRAFTWERK, FAUST or TANGERINE DREAM, they were either shocked or amused, but in any case, they had no idea how to deal with this stuff. Still today, when I read articles about Germany in the *New York Times* or the *New Yorker*, I have the feeling they are written about a country that is small and puzzling, with people with overbearing or pushy characteristics living, mentally as if still in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, yet simultaneously perceived as quite cute sometimes.

Krautrock is what is most well-known about German music (except classical music) in foreign countries. In reality, there was a much wider spectrum of German rock and pop music than this, and it goes further back than you may think. German Krautrock musicians often love to tell the story of how they had no tradition to connect with – there was nothing but Beethoven and horrible German schlagers, and so they were forced to develop something completely new. In fact, there *were* traditions, and as you will see, they made use of them. There were jazz influences, as well as traces of cabaret songs. There were British, American and homegrown folk roots. There was skiffle, there was merseybeat, there were connections between schlagers and rock, there were composers like Stockhausen

and Ligeti, there was “Sixty-Eight” (but nobody knew it then), and there was a sort of zeitgeist that simultaneously admired and bashed American culture.

While German schlagers had nearly no chance to be heard across the Channel or in the New World, Krautrock did. And while in the beginning, the term wasn't meant to be very friendly, after some time, something happened that nobody had predicted: Krautrock bands found an audience in the U.K. It was a small circle of listeners at first, but it grew. After a while, the Krautrock label turned into a sort of quality brand, first in the U.K., then in the U.S. and Japan, even making its way to Australia. Krautrock became a synonym for things to be found rarely in the mother countries of rock: strange sounds, sometimes endless ramblings and musical anarchy, ignoring the rules of the music industry, but also innovation of many kinds, radicalness, and intransigence. That was the point: The material coming from Germany had to be different from what Brits and Americans had in their own countries. The Anglo-American audiences – other than from their music press – had no prejudice, German musicians just had to learn some international rules.

To be presentable in the media, music needs distinctive personalities — great singers, extraordinary guitarists, people who are able to deliver crisp statements. But personalities of this kind didn't exist in Germany. Ralf Hütter of KRAFTWERK: “We're not too good at talking, that's why we make music”<sup>5</sup>, and he was not the only one thinking this way. That's why a lot of guessing started among British and American music journalists. They were not able to categorize the sounds they heard from Germany (except schlagers – they had to be ridiculous by nature), they didn't know how to explain them in their magazines or radio shows. There was no internet and no Wikipedia, so only little background information was available, and even large parts of the information that *was* available were based on guessing – sometimes by intention, sometimes simply because the journalists didn't understand the meaning of German phrases some musicians used in interviews. The music fans in the States and the U.K. hardly had a chance to verify the press coverage about Germany, German music, and German musicians.

It was no miracle that it didn't take very long for some “fake news” to develop. Misunderstandings and false conclusions began to circulate – around the music itself, as well as around its makers and their abilities and intentions. Once these conclusions made their way into the public, they stabilized themselves and were perceived more and more as the truth.

Up until present day, this still hasn't really changed. Not all the information you find in the English language is wrong, but oftentimes, important context is missing. Once put into context, many things suddenly look different.

This book will provide you with context. It will show you how the music scene in Germany was embedded into everyday life – a search for the traces, done by someone who was present when the bulk of it took place. Krautrock is neither an isolated event, nor something that fell from the sky. It has lots of backstory, history, a sort of tradition, and at times, has led to the creation of something new.

This book is about the biotope in which German music generally came into being. It delivers background information on the artistic, cultural, sociological, infrastructural, political, and economic circumstances that were formative for the German music scene (and beyond the music scene) between the 1950s and the late 1980s. This book explains why musicians found ways of expressing that were different from the ways commonly used in the U.S. or the U.K. In this way, it also acts as a story about Germany, its everyday life, and its walk through the ups and downs during some strongly varied decades. You will smell the atmosphere we had lived in. You will see that musicians sometimes overvalued occurrences because they participated in them.

The “plot lines” of this book are organized chronologically, but I found that sometimes, it's more effective to follow a topic instead of keeping a strict timeline. The real changes in culture, arts, and music have always been a process anyway; they happen independently from the beginning of years or decades.

However, this book's content ends around 1990. The media landscape changed drastically, new technologies changed the music production, its distribution, and of course the music itself, and the German Reunification occurred in 1989. To bring all this together would require the creation of a whole other book in itself.

One more important point to bring up: This book is about West Germany and West Berlin. I'm well aware of the fact that there was an active jazz and rock scene in the GDR (German Democratic Republic; East Germany) with many excellent musicians, but this scene was relatively isolated and, because of the often strict ruling of the socialist GDR government, these musicians could hardly connect to the trends going on in the western world. It's not that I didn't know

about East German bands, especially the ones prominent during the 1970s, but I think that their story should be told by somebody who lived in East Germany and can talk about the frame conditions they had to work under.

So then: Bon voyage!

Jan Reetze, April 2020