

Krautrock: The Obscure Genre That Changed the Sound of Rock

By Zane Van Dusen

In 1968, a new genre of music appeared in Germany. This music, which had elements of 1960's rock and experimental music, received the patronizing nickname 'Krautrock,' from the British press.¹ Due to the relatively small size of this musical movement and the somewhat offensive moniker, Krautrock was all but forgotten in the 1980s and 1990s. Music critics and historians placed the bands from this movement (like *Faust*, *Neu!*, *Kraftwerk*, *Tangerine Dream*) in broad genres like "progressive rock" and "psychedelic rock," and the "press would [not] give such bands more than a jokey note in the 'Where are they now' columns."²

Then, in 1995, Julian Cope released a book titled *Krautrocksampler*. The book outlined a history of the Krautrock genre, including reviews of important bands, albums and concerts, and concluded with a list of Cope's top 50 Krautrock albums. Cope's book received much praise and started a huge revival of interest within the underground music scene, in addition to introducing "the word 'Krautrock' in a positive, pouting glam rock way."³ Since the release of *Krautrocksampler*, Krautrock has become a buzzword in experimental, indie and electronic music publications, like *Wire*, *Pitchfork*, and *Electronic Musician*, and its wide ranging influence is often noted. Although Krautrock was a small and localized movement, this unique genre had a profound impact on modern music, and is just starting to get recognition for it.

History and Cultural Background

In the 1950s and 1960s, British and American rock music had taken the music world by storm. Germans, living in a post-WWII Germany, were surrounded by the rock'n'roll culture of their British and American occupiers. At the same time, Germany was also home to some of the most important experimental music of the time, namely the works of Karlheinz Stockhausen. While rock music may have filled the dance halls and airwaves, most West German artists "dismissed pop & rock'n'roll as kids' music – entertaining but ultimately disposable compared to real art."⁴ In effect, German did not have a rock scene, until 1968.

1968 was the year when student riots broke out in Italy, France and Germany. Students, inspired by the events of 'Prague Spring' and a hatred of authoritarian governments, "closed down universities, and forced governments to sit down and negotiate with the 'new generation.'"⁵ These protests brought a wave of young hippies to Germany, backed by a new kind of drug-induced free-form rock music played by bands like *Amon Duul I* and *Amon Duul II*. Both bands came out of a multimedia artist commune called *Amon Duul*, which would play improvisational concerts for days without being paid, in order to "bring their vision of hippie living to a worldwide audience...and [also] recorded hours of material during what is reportedly one mammoth recording session,"⁶ from which they produced two LPs and one double album.

Another event from 1968 that had a major effect on the German music scene was the collaboration between John Lennon and Yoko Ono. While Ono's influence on Lennon was, for the most part, frowned upon in the U.K. and U.S., West German artists thought that it was a huge step forward for rock music. In the West German art scene, Yoko Ono was well-known and considered to be a "fine and inspiring artist. And...by picking up John Lennon, she gave her high artistic approval to the Beatles' [rock] music."⁷ Now that rock had the potential to be high-art, musicians like Holger Czukay and Irmin Schmidt (both students of Stockhausen) decided to form their own rock groups. Czukay and Schmidt recruited Michael Karoli (one of Czukay's students who introduced them to the Beatles' "I am the Walrus"), and started the group *Can*, a group equally influenced by both Stockhausen's avant-garde pieces and the Beatles' psychedelia.⁸

Then, in 1970, a Dutch music journalist, by the name of Rolf-Ulrich Kaiser, started an independent record label called *Ohr*, with the hopes of bringing Krautrock to a larger audience. At the time, "such a label...was revolutionary. Today we are used to hundreds of small labels for all kinds of music, [but] in 1970...this was a revolutionary task."⁹ Kaiser's label was a success at first, and even provoked some of the major labels to create their own sub-labels specifically for German rock music. However, after about five years, *Ohr* shut down as a result of Kaiser's excessive LSD use.¹⁰ After the demise of *Ohr*, the major labels' interest in Krautrock quickly dissipated, and by 1976, most, if not all, of the labels were had dissolved. While Krautrock may have only lasted about 8 years, it managed to produce a variety of new musical styles, sounds and philosophies.

The Sound of Krautrock

Krautrock is broadly defined as a form of rock music that appeared in Germany in the late 1960s in response Germany's post-war industrial rebirth, and the U.S. and U.K rock scene. Due to this broad definition, there is a wide variety of music that can be classified as Krautrock. Most of this music can be broken down into four unique sub-genres: Psych-folk, space-rock, hyper-minimalist grooves and avant-garde rock.

Psych-Folk – Amon Düül I, Amon Düül II & Ash Ra Tempel

Krautrock started within the *Amon Düül* commune, where Krautrock (or 'Kosmische Music' as they called it) was not just a style of music, it was a way of life. *Amon Düül* started as a 10-12 artist commune dedicated to creating political art for the sake of art and politics, not for profit. The commune as a whole, even the non-musicians, would spread their philosophy through concerts, in which they played improvised music for hours on end, without rehearsal or payment. In 1968, four of the more musically inclined members split from the group to form *Amon Düül II*, a more polished improvisational rock band.

In 1969, *Amon Düül I* released 'Psychedelic Underground' and *Amon Düül II* released 'Phallus Dei.' The former was the result of a 48-hour jam session (which apparently provided the material for their next two

albums) with various studio effects applied afterwards, and sounded somewhat like Sun Ra's work from the 1960's, but it seemed more chaotic.¹¹ On the other hand, 'Phallus Dei' was a much more cohesive psychedelic-rock album. Their folk/hippy influence was still apparent, especially on songs like "Luzifers Ghilom," where the bongos are the lead instrument. However, since the group had weeded out those without any musical abilities, the band now had songs that actually had some semblance of structure.

However, the group really started to break new ground with the 20-minute title track that closes 'Phallus Dei.' The song starts with a three minute electro-acoustic sound collage that eventually builds into an intense rock-jam with operatic vocals. Minutes later the piece transforms into a freakish percussion breakdown, with seemingly random noises and yelling. The piece then goes into another intense rock-jam and fades out five minutes later. This recording set *Amon Düül II* apart from the other progressive rock bands of the time.

A couple years later, *Ash Ra Tempel* took the psych-folk sounds of *Amon Düül II* one step further, and combined it with the hard rock intensity of bands like *MC5* and the *Stooges*. However, while these groups' "obsession with the Outer-spacings of Sun Ra and the free-jazz inner visions of John Coltrane had been tamed beyond recognition by the American record industry, *Ash Ra Tempel* suffered no such disappointment."¹² Since *Ash Ra Tempel* was signed to the independent German label *Ohr*, they were free to explore new sonic territory, where they could capture raucous and intense nature of contemporary live rock performances. However, after their second album, the band started to work with Timothy Leary to radically change their sound into something much spacier.

Space-Rock – *Amon Düül II*, *Ash Ra Tempel*, *Cluster* & *Tangerine Dream*

Amon Düül II released the album "Yeti" in 1970, which ended with one of their best improvisations, "Sandoz in the Rain." The song was an "ambient wash of sound featuring delicately strummed phased acoustic guitars and a meandering flute... [this was] the birth of the entire space rock subgenre."¹³ Many other groups from the psych-folk scene, like *Ash Ra Tempel*, began to experiment with the space rock sound. However these groups were never able to detach themselves from their psych-folk roots.

Influenced by the spacey explorations of groups like *Amon Düül II*, guitarist Edgar Froese, drummer Klaus Schulze and keyboardist Conrad Schnitzler decided to form *Tangerine Dream*, the first pure space-rock band. Although the term 'space-rock' is used to describe *Tangerine Dream*'s, their music had little to do with rock. Instead, *Tangerine Dream*'s music "was minor-key and devoid of climax. It simply floated, disregarding the traditional song format."¹⁴ The group's propensity towards the new electronic instruments allowed them to further develop this new genre of music, which focused on creating psychedelic textures rather than melodies and rhythm. By 1974 the group had gone completely electronic, and released *Phaedra*,

one of their most popular albums, which was composed and performed entirely on synthesizers and sequencers.

While many space rock bands of time had a psychedelic sound, some bands, like *Cluster* took a different approach to the genre. *Cluster* resisted the psychedelic tendencies of their peers, in favor of tense drone-scapes, which they created using an “armory of FX pedals and guitar loops.”¹⁵ The music was dissonant, creepy, avant-garde and ahead of its time. *Cluster* sought to bring to the foreground the ambient sounds of our world, in an effort to explore the inner psyche of the individual in the technological age.¹⁶

Hyper-Minimalist Groove Music – *Can*, *Kraftwerk* & *Neu!*

Upon its creation, the hyper-minimalist rock sound quickly became the most popular version of Krautrock. This is probably due to the fact that this music spoke to the German youth, who, at the time, were critical of Germany’s post-war industrial rebirth.¹⁷ The music mirrored a culture in which young people “[raced] to the city limits against increasingly sophisticated police surveillance techniques in a bid for the relative freedom of the Autobahn.”¹⁸

The first of these hyper-minimalists was *Can*. *Can*, formed by two of Stockhausen’s students and a young music student who introduced these two to the *Beatles*’ more experimental recordings, embraced monotony and let it be their inspiration. According to their bassist, Holger Czukay, “restriction is the great mother of inventive performance.” Even *Can*’s recording process was restricted; Czukay would only put out a couple and microphones and would record to a 2-track tape. The group would then improvise for hours, and just like *Miles Davis*’s ‘On the Corner,’ Czukay edited together the best parts.¹⁹

Shortly after forming, the group recruited Malcolm Mooney, an African American vocalist. The addition of Mooney drastically changed *Can*’s sound; they continued to experiment with their *Velvet Underground*-esque minimal trance-rock, but now they started to add funk rhythms to music, while Mooney energetically ranted/sang on top of everything. *Can*’s unique, yet accessible, style earned them international recognition and respect.

While *Can* used funk rhythms to appeal to an international audience, a band called *Neu!* sought to create music specifically for a post-war German audience. Skeptical of the state’s push for technology, *Neu!* incorporated machine-like rhythms into their songs. *Neu!*’s drummer, Klaus Dinger, became famous for his “metronomic, pulsating rhythm that [instilled] a sublime sensation of restrained exhilaration,”²⁰ which received the name ‘motorik’ from music critics. While Dinger played his signature motorik drum beat, the guitarist, Michael Rother, played atmospheric guitar lines that created rich textures, which evoked images of blurry streaks of color seen through the window of a fast moving car. *Neu!*’s music was a celebration of

the freedom provided by the Autobahn, as well as, “a frantic effort to escape the strictures of civic training. It [had] no discernible goal except to get lost in speed.”²¹

Then, in 1974, *Kraftwerk* adopted *Neu!*'s motorik style, and released “Autobahn,” an album that made the inspirational highway a household name all over the world. The album's twenty-minute title track is pure motorik music; complete with engine roars, wiper sounds and car horns, as well as, synthesizers which created an even more lush atmosphere than *Neu!*'s guitar work. The other major difference between ‘Autobahn’ and *Neu!*'s work was *Kraftwerk*'s obsession with pop music, which somehow led to a 3-minute radio-edit of the song that reached the top 30 in both the US and UK.²² Because this music was, in fact, really great driving music, the hyper-minimalist bands were very popular in Germany and beyond.

Avant-Garde Rock – Faust

Faust was a mysterious band, led by Uwe Nettleback, whose mission was to create a completely unique German rock that did “not copy anything in the Anglo-Saxon rock scene.”²³ With this in mind, the band took over an old school house, and spent a year and a half recording and creating a new form of rock that was uniquely German. The result was their self-titled debut that mixed elements of rock, electronics, tape splicing, static noise, and music-concrete.

Faust's first album opens with “Why Don't You Eat Your Carrots?,” a 10-minute masterpiece, which broke all the rules of rock and brought the genre to a new level. The song makes no concessions to the UK/US rock audience and starts off with one minute of static noise and tape manipulations, as well as, short samples from “Satisfaction,” and “All You Need Is Love.” From there it breaks into Zappa-esque melodies played by of horns, guitars, drums, piano and high-pitched electronics, which then leads into a heavily edited and manipulated chorus. The song continues on this wild sonic journey for 7 more minutes. It is chaotic, but there is an overarching sense of structure, everything seems to fit together.

Faust's first release was not very well received in Germany, and it sold less than 1,000 copies. The album did moderately better in the UK, where it was pressed on transparent vinyl, placed in a transparent sleeve with a transparent cover.²⁴ The transparency gimmick mixed with the bizarre songs made the album a novelty item for many British people. However, an elite few, including producer John Peel, truly appreciated the album, which convinced *Faust*'s label to let them record a second album.

This time around *Faust* worked with intent to appeal to a British audience, rather than a German audience. In 1972, they released *So Far*, which took a minimalist approach to rock, much like the *Velvet Underground*, however *Faust* took the idea to the extreme. The opening track, “It's a Rainy Day, Sunshine

Girl,” consists of a driving rhythm and a guitar thrashing on two chords over and over, while vocals, saxophone and synthesizers go in and out of the foreground. It was bizarre, but oddly catchy, much like the rest of the album. The album was slightly more successful, especially with the support of the band’s first UK tour, which featured the use of two road drills, slabs concrete, upright piano, and two pinball machines connected to synthesizers. However, *Faust* never was able to appeal to the German market.

Krautrock’s Influence

Although Krautrock is a relatively obscure genre, it had a profound effect on modern music. Krautrock has influenced everything from pop to rock to techno to electronic music. Krautrock showed the world that the rhythmic essence of rock was a groove “that fused the luscious warmth of flesh-and-blood funk with the cold precision of techno.”²⁵ It also introduced synthesizers and electronics to the popular music scene. Before Krautrock, electronic instruments were restricted to the experimental music scene. Bands like *Cluster*, *Tangerine Dream*, and *Kraftwerk* paved the way for electronica and techno by proving that one did not need any acoustic instruments to make music. *Cluster* even influenced the ambient works of Brian Eno, when they collaborated on their 1977 album “Cluster & Eno,” one year before the release ‘Ambient 1: Music for Airports.’

Nowadays, countless numbers of bands are still inspired by Krautrock. The influence can clearly be heard in the minimal rock of *Joy Division*’s ‘Unknown Pleasures,’ and *Tortoise*’s ‘Millions Now Living Will Never Die.’ Its pulsating rhythms and use of electronics influenced countless “New Wave” bands, as well as the free-form guitar chaos of “No-Wave.” In addition, its influence is felt in the post-rock scene, where bands like *Sonic Youth* and *Stereolab* create art-rock that avoids the clichés of progressive rock.

However, one of the most influential and important aspects of Krautrock was the politics of the movement. The musical freedom of Krautrock bands, provided by the independent German labels, like *Ohr*, inspired the creation of thousands of independent labels in the 1980s. Before Krautrock, music was controlled by elite few who ran the major labels; now, independent labels everyone access to wealth of different musical styles and sounds. Krautrock may have been small and obscure musical movement in Germany, but, over the years it has become something much bigger that has influenced many generations of rock and non-rock musicians.

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³ Ibid.

⁴ Cope, Julian. *Krautrock sampler*. Great Britain: Head Heritage, 1995. 6.

⁵ Reis, Raul. Rev. of *1968:the Year That Rocked the World*, by Mark Kurlansky. *Brazilian Journalism Research* 2005: 181.

⁶ Scaruffi, Piero. *The History of Rock Music, 1951-2000*. Lincoln, NE: IUniverse, 2003.

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- ⁷ Cope, Julian. Krautrock sampler. Great Britain: Head Heritage, 1995. 10.
- ⁸ Ibid. 11.
- ⁹ Göttsching, Manuel. Interview with Archie Patterson. EUROCK.
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- ²⁰ Shapiro, Peter. 31.
- ²¹ Kopf, Biba. Undercurrents: the Hidden Wiring of Modern Music. Ed. Rob Young. 146.
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Discography & Suggested Listening

Artist	Album
Amon Düül I	Psychedelic Underground
Amon Düül II	Phallus Dei
Amon Düül II	Yeti
Ash Ra Tempel	Schwingungen/Seven Up
Can	Monster Movie
Can	Tago Mago
Can	Ege Bamyasi
Hans-Joachim Roedelius (of Cluster)	Works (1968-2005)
Faust	Faust / So Far
Faust	The Faust Tapes
Guru Guru	Live
Harmonia	Musik De Harmonia
Kraftwerk	Autobahn
Neu!	Neu!
Neu!	Neu! 2
Neu!	Neu! '75
Tangerine Dream	Alpha Centauri
Tangerine Dream	Zeit
Various Artists	The Wire 20 (1982-2002)