



# Krautrock!

## A Beginner's Guide to German Cosmic Music

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Though 1969 marked the demise of the American Age of Aquarius with the grisly Tate-LaBianca Murders and disastrous Altamont Free Concert, it was arguably year zero for a similar epoch of cultural upheaval in Germany. Over the two decades following World War II, Nazism's specter still haunted the now-divided country as former Third Reich officials weaseled their way into disturbingly powerful positions in the West German government. With yet another authoritarian crisis looming, German youth channeled their disgust through leftist counterculture and generated a sonic revolution like no other: krautrock.

British music journalists coined the term in the early 1970s as a moniker for the experimental, oftentimes psychedelic rock and electronica that emerged from Germany's avant-garde and quickly garnered cult audiences all across Europe. "Krautrock" oozes with the lingering xenophobia common within the cultures of former Allied countries, but it nevertheless came to define the loose patchwork of bands and genres that many Germans dubbed "kosmische musik."

Even if you've never heard the phrase before today, you've almost certainly encountered krautrock — perhaps you've caught a glimpse of "Spoon" by Can in the first moments of Tyler, the Creator's Flower Boy, or maybe you've heard Pavement's cover of "It's a Rainy Day, Sunshine Girl" by Faust. Even if you haven't, I hope you can at least see what I'm getting at: krautrock's legacy transcends genre boundaries; listeners of all tastes can find something to love about it.

Consider this your state-of-the-art krautrock starter kit. Find your musical style of choice and welcome yourself into the world of Germany's cosmic sound-carriers.

### Hip-hop

Despite krautrock's nebulous definition, its drummers frequently share a certain beat style — "motorik" — that fuses jazz percussion's improvisational qualities with simpler time signatures. This makes krautrock complementary to rapping and in turn, ideal for sampling.

Cologne's oft-sampled Can is the perfect gateway band for hip-hop heads. Start with 1972's *Ege Bamyasi*. Besides Tyler, the album has been sampled by genre staples including Dr. Dre, Kanye West, Earl Sweatshirt, and Jaden Smith. *Tago Mago* (1971) and *Future Days* (1973) aren't as popular, but they're just as good. The rhythm section of bassist Holger Czukay and drummer Jaki Liebeze spearhead weirdly danceable jams abundant throughout each album, while guitarist Michael Karoli and keyboardist Irmin Schmidt unfurl kaleidoscopic licks reminiscent of contemporary psychedelia-tinged projects like Tyler's *Igor* or Young Thug's *Jeffery*.

Despite krautrock's nebulous definition, its drummers feature frequent appearances on Madlib's Rock Konducta Pt. 1. Faust's urgent vocals and musique-concrète indulgence are a more difficult listen overall, but the motorik-heavy sound of Faust IV and So Far (1972) should satisfy listeners pleased with Can. Unlike Can, however, Faust also approaches pop — their use of acoustic guitars and pianos on ballad-like songs create the perfect foil to more chaotic, drawn-out tracks.

## Alt Rock and Psychedelia

For all their proto-hip hop grooves, Can and Faust were also class psychedelic acts who built off the blueprint of "I Am the Walrus" by the Beatles. Tame Impala's mainstream breakthrough has triggered a wave of 60s nostalgia, and Gen Z abounds with Deadheads and Velvet Underground fanatics alike. If you fall into that camp, Can's early work — Delay 1968 and Monster Movie (1969) — might enthrall you just as much as their 70s masterpieces.

Krautrock's answers to the jam band — Ash Ra Tempel, the Cosmic Jokers, and Guru Guru — are also required listening for any psychedelia enthusiast. Ash Ra Tempel's self-titled debut (1971) combines rock and electronica, creating sprawling soundscapes whose mellowness can appeal to fans of both the classics (the Dead, Phish, Flaming Lips) and the current (Beach House, King Krule, MGMT). This consistent spaciness also shapes Schwingungen (ART; 1972), The Cosmic Jokers (Cosmic Jokers; 1972), and UFO (Guru Guru; 1970).

If you prefer faster, vocal-laden music, look no further than Stereolab. As an Anglo-French 90s band, Stereolab deviates from krautrock's traditional definition, but their sound resembles Can or the Jokers far more than it does Nirvana or my bloody valentine. The albums Emperor Tomato Ketchup (1996) and Dots and Loops (1997) are filled with riffs and progressions lifted straight from NEU! and Kraftwerk, yet somehow still manage to be two of the most original, idiosyncratic projects I've ever heard.

Fans of Mazzy Star and the Cocteau Twins will find kindred musical spirits in the ethereal voices of Lætitia Sadier and Mary Hansen, whose optimistically Marxist lyrics echo the progressive politics behind 60s krautrock and feel especially salient amidst a worldwide rightward shift.

## Electronic (House, EDM, Dance-Pop, Ambient)

Ravers and ragers, it's your time to shine. At the risk of seeming lazy, I'll start by encouraging you to read the previous two blurbs — most electronic genres probably have more in common with krautrock than any other genre I've included. I could easily write an excessively dense dissertation on how every band I've discussed connects to electronic music. Even so, I'd be remiss to overlook NEU!, Kraftwerk, Cluster, and Harmonia here.

NEU! (1972) and NEU! '75 (1975) overflow with upbeat instrumentals and peaceful field recordings, all propelled by Michael Rother's guitar. Rother's recent music continues to blend experimental guitars with electronic calmness, but NEU!'s oomph factor comes from drummer Klaus Dinger, who elevates Rother's Radiohead-esque tendencies to a motorik pace that anticipates Daft Punk.

It's unsurprising, then, that NEU! is stylistically parallel to Rother and Dinger's former group: Kraftwerk. NEU!'s resemblance to Daft Punk is understated; Kraftwerk's is glaringly obvious. Although their first three albums feature early krautrock's typical trippiness, the minimalist synths on 1974's Autobahn lay a foundation from which Björk, Aphex Twin, New Order, and LCD Soundsystem have since expanded. Autobahn, Trans Europa Express (1977), and Die Mensch-Maschine (1978) are embedded in the DNA of house and ambient — J. Worra channeled Wolfgang Flür's electronic drums in her exhilarating Dillo 51 set, and André 3000's New Blue Sun revitalizes Florian Schneider's ethereal flute playing for a new audience.

André is hardly alone — atmospheric interludes are becoming more and more commonplace in pop albums, with MGMT and the 1975 proudly citing Brian Eno as an influence. Whether you like them, or prefer stuff like Oneohtrix Point Never and James Ferraro, Cluster might be the perfect krautrock group for you. Cluster II (1972) and Zuckerzeit (1974) are wonderfully accessible electronic works, and the collaborative Cluster & Eno (1977) bridges the gap between krautrock obscurity and Gen Z's relative familiarity with Brian Eno. These vibes continue in the supergroup Harmonia, whose 1974 debut — Musik von Harmonia — arose from Cluster alumni Hans-Joachim Roedelius and Dieter Moebius joining forces with NEU!'s Michael Rother.

## Metal and Prog

A lot of young people like nu metal — the Deftones, System of a Down, Slipknot, and the like. I do not like nu metal. These people also often like prog — Pink Floyd, Yes, Rush, and such. I am ambivalent about prog.

I am not, however, ambivalent about Amon Düül II's seminal 1970 album Yeti, an absolute gem that's about as close as krautrock gets to being progressive. Yeti's lyrics are a hodgepodge of esoteric gobbledegook, but the musicianship it exhibits is almost on par with that of King Crimson or black midi. Along with Düül's 1972 project Wolf City, Yeti is a transcendent, heavy psychedelic journey that mixes the jazz influences of other krautrock bands with baroque opera and West African percussion. I cannot recommend these albums to prog and metalheads enough.

## Conclusion

So there you have it — your very own portal to an alien world of psychedelic blips and bleeps. Planet Krautrock has space for everyone, so why not set up camp for a night and see if you want to stay?

This article is dedicated to Chris Karrer — guitarist, violinist, vocalist, and saxophone player for Amon Düül II — who died on January 2nd, 2024.