

18 | Krautrock and German Free Jazz, Kraut Fusion, and Detroit Techno

MARCUS BARNES

Under the umbrella of the Krautrock movement, young German bands looked outside the nation's borders for inspiration. They incorporated a wide range of musical influences into their studio experimentations, which cultivated a remarkable diversity and eclecticism within the genre. This desire to uncover hitherto unheard sounds, as it were, resulted in the emergence of many innovative musical styles. Furthermore, the experimental spirit of the Krautrock era led both rock and jazz musicians to merge the two styles, resulting in homegrown free jazz and kraut fusion movements.

This injection of black music into Krautrock left a noticeable imprint on Krautrock and resulted in one particularly impactful line of development, namely the emergence of the automated machine funk of Kraftwerk. The band's electronic sound eventually fed back into black communities in the United States, triggering the conception of electro and Detroit techno. This chapter explores the legacy of Krautrock through the aforementioned genres, and the intersection of German experimentation with black American musicians and communities. It hence tells a paradigmatic story of the mutual interchangeability of musical forms that travel transnationally between nations, cultures, social groups, undergoing processes of adaptation and hybridisations that in turn spark the development of new musical genres.

Krautrock: The 4×4 Beat and Funk's Seedlings

As Krautrock transcended Germany's borders, its widespread transnational reception influenced the conception and development of new genres to varying degrees. Krautrock's fusion of electronic equipment with more traditional acoustic instruments broke new ground in the way that bands performed and recorded. The audacious experimentation by early Krautrock bands began to evolve, with key elements distilled into new variations encompassing folk, politically charged lyrics, unorthodox arrangement, minimalism, the integration of electronic synthesisers, and much more.

Of particular significance is the impactful cultural influence exerted by Krautrock on the conception of styles of electronic dance music developed by African American communities in the early-to-mid-1980s. This particularly concerns house and techno music. House emerged in the Chicago area in the post-disco era, named after the city's Warehouse nightclub – a popular nightclub among Chicago's black gay community – where DJ Frankie Knuckles was musical director. Later, the Warehouse closed and the venue was renamed Music Box. Ron Hardy became the nightclub's resident DJ, continuing the progressive music policy established by Frankie Knuckles. Among the key producers of the era were Larry Heard, Chip E, Farley 'Jackmaster' Funk, Steve 'Silk' Hurley, and Phuture. The group Phuture included DJ Pierre, who pioneered the 'acid' sound, using Roland's TR-303 synthesiser to create the distinct squelchy effect that defines acid house.¹

Techno, meanwhile, had its origins in post-industrial Detroit and, parallel to house music, was also developed by young black artists. Juan Atkins and his high-school friends Kevin Saunderson and Derrick May (known as the Belleville Three) experimented with electronic synthesisers. Atkins had already had local and international success with his Cybotron project, which preceded his solo project as Model 500. Under this alias, he shifted from electro into what he defined as 'techno', or 'technology music', setting up the Metroplex label to self-release his music. A key venue for Atkins and his cohorts to showcase their music was the Detroit Music Institute.²

It is specifically this channel of transnational migration of music that will be explored here. How did the influence of German bands from the Krautrock era permeate into Detroit and connect with black communities? As hinted, a line can be traced right back to the early years of Krautrock, with free jazz among a number of – often overlooked – influences that lie at the genre's foundations. Free jazz, a radical subsection within the United States' jazz movement, emerged in the late 1950s as a form of music conceived and developed by African Americans. Musicians like Ornette Coleman and Cecil Taylor, an improvisation virtuoso who pioneered a radical piano playing technique, were at its forefront. Similarly, Coleman's progressive (and controversial at the time) saxophone playing

¹ H Rietveld, *This Is Our House: House Music, Cultural Spaces and Technologies* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), p. 17.

² D Sicko, *Techno Rebels: The Renegades of Electro Funk* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010), p. 62.

inspired the free jazz movement. Of particular note was his open-ended approach to melody and harmony.³

Members of several prominent Krautrock bands had experience of playing and performing free jazz prior to forming their respective groups. Jaki Liebezeit and Michael Karoli of Can both came from a free jazz background.⁴ Drummer Klaus Dinger of duo Neu! performed free jazz. His *motorik* drumbeat proved an essential component of the automated nature of the music that came out of Düsseldorf.⁵ Mani Neumeier was also a free jazz drummer before he joined Guru Guru.

As can be seen, the German free jazz scene – which orbited around key proponents such as saxophonist Peter Brötzmann, trumpet player Manfred Schoof, and pianist Alexander von Schlippenbach – constituted an important pool of musical innovators feeding the subsequent Krautrock scene. Drums were an intrinsic component of Krautrock, following on from their rise to prominence in free jazz. Drumming came to the fore thanks to free jazz, where the instrument was given more credence, beyond a mere timekeeping component, as it had been up until the conception of free jazz. In German free jazz and Krautrock, drums have equal standing with the rest of the instruments in the ensemble.

But German free jazz, being an imitation, or adoption, of a style originated by black Americans, was not the only source of influence for Krautrock. Black music was also enmeshed in the shift into kraut fusion, led by bands like Embryo, Xhol Caravan, and Kraan. Each of these groups incorporated a distinctly black influence into their music. Embryo are considered pioneers of kraut fusion, an offshoot that fused other styles of music onto the Krautrock framework, most commonly jazz and funk. Their album *Steig aus (Get off)*, (1973) featured American jazz pianist Mal Waldron on electric piano. Embryo explored musical styles from outside their home nation, paying visits to Africa and India to get first-hand experience of music from those countries.⁶

Xhol Caravan featured three Americans among its line-up,⁷ including African American Gilbert ‘Skip’ van Wyck on drums. The group initially played covers of artists like Otis Redding and James Brown – as heard on their *Soul Caravan – Live* LP from 1969 – before they moved in a more psychedelic direction and incorporated jazz into their rock-inspired

³ I Anderson, *This Is Our Music: Free Jazz, the Sixties, and American Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), p. 59.

⁴ U Adelt, *Krautrock: German Music in the Seventies* (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 2016), p. 61.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 101. ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 78. ⁷ *Ibid.*

compositions. This demonstrates how black music merged with German influences, with the aid of players with African American heritage, and the key musical touchpoints for these pioneering bands. Simultaneously, these bands rejected standardised Anglo-American structures, which had come to dominate the musical landscape in the 1960s, when they first began performing.⁸ In doing so, they sketched out an entirely new rock template, which allowed for freeform expression and the hybridisation of styles, evident throughout their work.

As well as jazz, Ulm-based band Kraan also began to imbue their compositions with elements of funk. This can be heard on their LP *Wintrup* (1972), where songs such as 'Mind Quake' and 'Backs' feature funk-influenced basslines. James Brown and his peers developed funk in the United States during the mid to late 1960s. By the 1970s, it had been popularised and reached European shores, with hits like Brown's 'Sex Machine (Get On Up)' (1970) charting in Britain and Germany.

Kraftwerk, too, took inspiration from James Brown's funk rhythms.⁹ In keeping with the ethos of Krautrock, the Düsseldorf group experimented with a variety of outside influences, including Tamla/Motown, and Detroit rock bands MC5 and The Stooges. Most pertinent to their connection to Detroit, though, is the underlying notion of funk. The black music styles that were present in the roots of Krautrock feed into the conception of techno in the mid-1980s, through the music of Kraftwerk. As one of the key acts name-checked by the foremost architects of Detroit techno, Kraftwerk are the bridge between Krautrock and the city's innovative form of electronic music.

The Socio-economic Background to the Evolution of Home Technology

The emergence of new, pioneering forms of black music based more on technology than conventional musicianship, is closely linked to the socio-economic background of 1980s Detroit. The city was amid huge social and economic upheaval as its automotive industry was in a state of collapse. An economic depression across the city, especially for its black population, created a need for escapism. Detroit's automotive industry, which gave it its nickname 'Motor City', started to decline in the 1950s. Thousands of

⁸ U Schütte, *Pop Music as the Soundtrack of German Post-War History* in U Schütte (ed.), *German Pop Music. A Companion* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), pp. 1–24 (13).

⁹ D Sicko, *Techno Rebels: The Renegades of Electronic Funk* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010), p. 10.

employees were laid off, and the city suffered from rising crime rates, a low tax base, and what has been termed 'white flight', as many of the city's white occupants either fled to the suburbs or left the city altogether.¹⁰ The result was a ghettoisation of parts of Detroit.¹¹

Black unemployment in the United States has consistently been twice as high as that of its white population, going as far back as the 1960s, reaching a peak of 19.5 per cent for black people and 8.4 per cent for white people in 1983. In 2013, it was still 13.4 and 6.7 per cent, respectively.¹² Detroit's 'depression' of the 1970s and 1980s led to mass unemployment and a decaying city, where abandoned buildings and high crime rates became the norm. The dire economic circumstances in which many people lived was the catalyst behind a need for escapism. Creativity, imagination, and looking to the future for hope and optimism became important factors in the drive to develop new cultural expressions based on music and dancing.

Detroit techno emerged as a counter to the city's post-industrial collapse. The impact of the collapse of the city's automotive industry led to action in various tiers of Detroit's administration to portray it in a more positive light. Similarly, Detroit techno gave the city cause to celebrate, through events like the Detroit Electronic Music Festival (now known as Movement Detroit).¹³

Disco had its reign in the United States during the mid-1970s but a nationwide commercial backlash against the music, using the slogan 'Disco Sucks', led to its downfall. However, the popularity of the music primed the listening public for the arrival of electronic dance music, with its structured 4 × 4 beats, hypnotic arrangements, and pioneering electro-disco artists such as Giorgio Moroder and Cerrone. Both producers fused influences from soul and disco with synthesisers to cultivate a fresh new sound that arrived a few years after Kraftwerk were laying the groundwork for their own purely electronic sound from the mid-1970s onwards.

In Detroit, the post-disco era heralded a highly fertile and eclectic period, where DJs such as Ken Collier blended a range of sounds from Eurodisco and Italo disco to new wave, industrial, synth pop, and more. A melting pot of sounds was absorbed into the consciousness of the city's

¹⁰ S Albiez, Post-soul Futurama: African American Cultural Politics and Early Detroit Techno, *European Journal of American Culture* 24:2 (2005), pp. 131–52 (134).

¹¹ Cf. M Binelli, *The Last Days of Detroit: Motor Cars, Motown and the Collapse of an Industrial Giant* (New York: Random House, 2013).

¹² D Desilver, Black Unemployment Rate Is Consistently Twice That of Whites, Pew Research (21 August 2013), www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/08/21/through-good-times-and-bad-black-unemployment-is-consistently-double-that-of-whites/.

¹³ H Rietveld & A Kolioulis, Detroit: Techno City, in B Lashua, S Wagg, K Spracklen & M Yavuz (eds.), *Sounds and the City* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), p. 5.

party communities at parties like Gables, run by Todd Johnson. These parties were mostly attended by middle-class high-school kids who coveted European fashion and music – a rejection of ‘ghetto’ styles.¹⁴

Globally, advances in technology were rapidly revolutionising the way that society operated, with post-war science-fiction fantasies gradually becoming reality. Neil Armstrong stepping foot on the moon on 20 July 1969 was a historic moment that united the world. Microchips offered a glimpse into the next phase of technological evolution: smaller gadgets and devices, portability, and the potential for humans to be augmented. Technology not only offered hope and safety, but it also presented the possibility of a democratised society, where equal opportunities could become a reality.

In the area of music production, the synthesiser became emblematic of the potential offered by new technology. Though hugely expensive at first, affluent German bands such as Popol Vuh and Tangerine Dream used them to create their otherworldly *kosmische Musik*. Ralf Hütter and Florian Schneider from Kraftwerk adopted the new technology most eagerly, evolving from their Krautrock roots into a conceptual art project. Though Kraftwerk took a critical stance in reflecting the new technological age by envisioning how machines would shape the future, their firm hope – not least in view of the nation’s Nazi past – was that technology would help to build a better, equal society.

Such hope mirrored the situation of socially and economically deprived African Americans in Detroit. Amid a depression, the cultural movement of Afro-Futurism, which harks back in its musical component to the pioneering ‘space jazz’ of Sun Ra and his Arkestra, provided the opportunity to envision a better future thanks to technology.¹⁵ Accordingly, science-fiction fantasies involving a future offering a clean slate, and a chance to rebuild the world anew, devoid of racial and social barriers, abounded, and served as a cultural interface to the ‘future music’ originating from Germany.

Hip-Hop and Electro: First Contact with The Robots

Hip-hop had been steadily developing since the early 1970s, with block parties, graffiti writing, and breakdancing flourishing in New York’s ghettos and, by the beginning of the 1980s, it was a fully formed

¹⁴ Sicko, *Techno Rebels*, p. 14.

¹⁵ For an overview of the heterogenous movement, compare Ytasha Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013).

culture.¹⁶ Preceding the development of techno, electro – a branch of hip-hop – encompassed the ‘future funk’ that emanated from the electronic music-producing machines operated by Kraftwerk, Tangerine Dream, and other German bands. Employing the TR-808 drum machine, manufactured by Japanese company Roland, electro (or electro-funk, as it was also known) utilised its science-fiction sounds and effects to cultivate futuristic sonics.

Hip-hop culture comprises ‘four pillars’: rapping/MCing, DJing, break-dancing, and graffiti. Each of the four pillars evolved prior to the development of electro. However, when the music emerged, breakdancers invented moves that complemented the music – the robot, which mimicked the mechanical movements associated with robots, and the electric boogaloo, which was a much smoother, flowing style of movement, and body popping/locking, where the dancer’s make stiff, purposeful movements, while other parts of the body remain still. The notion of rigid robotic funk connects back to Kraftwerk’s concept of artistic harmony between musicians and the electronic equipment they are using, or in other words: to musically merge humans and machines. According to Uwe Schütte, ‘Robots, as mechanical doppelgängers of the band, and the conceptual notion of the man-machine are of course closely linked. . . . Clearly, the notion of the robot is deeply futuristic, as it epitomizes the potential moment of evolution at which man and technology would merge.’¹⁷

The most widely acknowledged connection between Kraftwerk and the roots of electro comes via ‘Planet Rock’ (1982) by Afrika Bambaataa and Arthur Baker. Baker was hugely influential in the development of electro in the 1980s, channelling his knowledge and expertise into a myriad production and engineering endeavours. His key releases of the time include ‘I.O. U’ by Freeez (1983), ‘Play At Your Own Risk’ by Planet Patrol (1982) and, his most famous work, ‘Planet Rock’ with Afrika Bambaataa and the Soul Sonic Force.

The seminal release is a direct link to Kraftwerk, using the beats from their single ‘Nummern’ (Numbers, 1981) and the eerie synthesiser melody from ‘Trans Europa Express’ (1977). Bambaataa was DJing at block parties in the Bronx, presenting his audiences with an eclectic selection of music, which included funk, soul, and early hip-hop, alongside pioneering electronic music artists such as Gary Numan, Yellow Magic Orchestra, and

¹⁶ J Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (London: Picador, 2005), p. 280.

¹⁷ U Schütte, *Kraftwerk: Future Music from Germany* (London: Penguin, 2020), p. 187.

Kraftwerk. Highly influential New York radio DJ Frankie Crocker played Kraftwerk records on his WBLS show, which also helped popularise the group with his largely black listenership. Similarly, the radio show by Detroit's Electrifying Mojo also featured the German group on regular rotation.

Baker grew up in Boston, Massachusetts, becoming a DJ in the 1970s, and discovered Kraftwerk while digging for records.¹⁸ Both Baker and Bambaataa were enamoured with Kraftwerk's ability to combine funk and soul with futurism. They worked with multi-instrumentalist John Robie, who interpolated Kraftwerk's music so well that many people mistakenly thought Baker and Bambaataa had sampled the German group. At the time, sampling – copying parts of a song and repurposing them in your own productions – was still very much in its infancy, but soon after became a key component in hip-hop, and the wider electronic music industry. In any case, Kraftwerk made legal demands and received royalties.

'Planet Rock' was a big hit when it was released in 1982 and remains an all-time hip-hop/electro classic, its influence reaching beyond New York's hip-hop scene to inspire artists around the world. The song was also the first hip-hop record to utilise Roland's TR-808 drum machine. In a 2012 interview Bambaataa stated:

To me, Kraftwerk always sounded European. *Trans-Europe Express* especially. But I understood the train and travel as a metaphor for transporting the sound through the whole universe, and so was their influence and power. . . . This is the music for the future and for space travels – along with the funk of what was happening with James Brown and Sly Stone and George Clinton.¹⁹

Cybotron: Architects of Techno Funk

Electro precedes techno by a few years. Its inception in the early 1980s would lead to the birth of techno, with the artist credited with coining the term 'techno', Juan Atkins, originally producing electro music himself. Born and raised in Detroit, Juan Atkins adopted the Cybotron moniker

¹⁸ J Toltz, *Dragged into the Dance: The Role of Kraftwerk in the Development of Electro-Funk*, in S Albiez & D Pattie (eds.), *Kraftwerk: Music Non-Stop* (London: Continuum, 2011), pp. 181–93 (188).

¹⁹ Afrika Bambaataa on Kraftwerk, *Electronic Beats* (13 November 2012), www.electronicbeats.net/afrika-bambaataa-about-kraftwerk/.

with his friend Richard Davis in 1981. The duo released several records that employed synthesisers creating music with similar tropes to the electro sound coming out of New York, but with their own darker twist.

In 1981, they released 'Alleys Of Your Mind' (1981) on their label Deep Space. This was followed by 'Cosmic Cars' (1982) and their biggest hit 'Clear' (1983), an all-time electro classic. 'Clear' features a rising and falling melody lifted straight from Kraftwerk's 'Spiegelsaal' (Hall of Mirrors). Again, like 'Planet Rock', Atkins played the riff himself, rather than sample it: 'I recreated it. I think that at the time, samples weren't even in existence.'²⁰ Atkins's philosophy had its grounding in futurism, with Alvin Toffler's books *Future Shock* (1984) and *The Third Wave* (1981) key influences in his outlook. Davis, also an outlier, created the terminology connected to their project: the name Cybotron for instance, a combination of the words cyborg and cyclotron.

Fellow Detroit pioneer, Jeff Mills, characterised the popularity of futurist thinking in the black community in Detroit thus:

All my friends were into futurism. Not Afro-futurism but in a technological way. We were interested in how we were going to live tomorrow. . . . People were much more open back then. Technology had a lot to do with that – for Black people, so long as it was funky . . . it wasn't just Kraftwerk, it was Visage, it was Gary Numan. . . . It was Kraftwerk's track 'Numbers' that sealed the deal, followed by 'Tour de France'.²¹

Mills is one of the exponents of techno who has pushed it furthest into the future. He aimed to express a sense of futurism in his music, realised in numerous conceptual productions and performances. Mills even composed a soundtrack to Fritz Lang's 1927 classic *Metropolis* in 2000, a film that also greatly inspired Kraftwerk, in the visual direction of the video for 'Trans Europa Express', for example, and the band's fascination with retro-futurism.²²

Automation and the Universal Appeal of Machine-Funk

The metronomic beat used by Krautrock bands set it apart from more traditional rock, which commonly used a backbeat. This rhythm was referred to as *motorik*.²³ Neu!'s drummer Klaus Dinger pioneered this

²⁰ V Brown, 'Techno's Godfather Speaks', Reverb (26 March 2021), <https://reverb.com/fr/news/interview-juan-atkins>.

²¹ Quoted in D Stubbs, *Future Days: Krautrock and the Building of Modern Germany* (London: Faber, 2014), p. 201.

²² Compare Schütte, *Kraftwerk*, p. 183. ²³ Adelt, *Krautrock*, p. 47.

'machine-like' 4 × 4 beat. His work with the Düsseldorf band radically reinvented the rock template, discarding unnecessary flourishes and focusing on a more minimalistic approach to drum patterns. Automation, or industrial rhythm, is the language that binds Kraftwerk's music to Motor City and it has been at the core of a sonic dialogue that has been occurring since the group's early stages.

Both Detroit and Düsseldorf have histories that have been deeply impacted by their industrial nature. Automation, monotony, and the hypnotic power of repetition were core characteristics of Kraftwerk's compositions. Their synthesisers afforded them the ability to programme beats and repeat them perfectly for as long as they wanted, something that is virtually impossible for humans. This repetition was present in the industrial belt of Düsseldorf and Detroit's factories, where mechanised sounds were prevalent – robots and machines programmed to perform monotonous actions as part of the automated manufacturing process. As Hütter explained: 'It has always interested us to make industrial music. Assembly line music. Production processes, which are all around us in the industrial world.'²⁴ Within this rigid, robotic monotony was an innate, hypnotic 'funk'. This trance-inducing repetition forms the blueprint of modern dance music; disco, house, techno, drum 'n' bass, dubstep, trance, and many of their offshoots.

According to Hütter: 'The dynamism of the machines, the "soul" of the machines, has always been part of our music. Trance always belong to repetition, and everybody is looking for trance in life etc., in sex, in the emotional, in pleasure, in anything . . . Machines produce an absolutely perfect trance.'²⁵ Finding soul, groove, and funk in apparently soulless machines is one of Kraftwerk's great achievements.

What must also be considered when speaking about the connection between the United States' black communities and Kraftwerk is the way in which the German group's music transcended racial categorisation. It balanced American rhythms and European melody, as epitomised in Kraftwerk's conceptual notion of electronic pop music and the myriad influences that were fed into their machines and regurgitated as a more universal sonic language, liberated from the constraints of national identity. Robots are often depicted as genderless representations of the human form. Similarly, machines have no race or gender. By using them as

²⁴ W Andresen, *Computerliebe*, *Tip* 22 (1991), p. 202.

²⁵ Interview with Sylvain Gaire, quoted in Bussy, *Kraftwerk: Man, Machine and Music* (London: SAF, 1993), p. 101.

a channel for their broad spectrum of inspirations, Kraftwerk connected with multiple audiences; black people in Detroit, gay Latinos in New York, people who didn't fit the racially and sexually homogenised mainstream. This was a counter to the dominance of rock music of that era, which embodied a very definite sense of whiteness and masculinity. Not only did Kraftwerk's music transcend race and gender, but it also evoked a very global, transnational appeal, with the band including various languages on tracks such as 'Nummern' or 'Techno Pop'.²⁶

'Our music is good if blacks and whites can dance to it at the same time', Hütter once explained.²⁷ François Kevorkian, who also worked on their *Electric Cafe* LP (1986), observed the universal appeal of Kraftwerk's music first-hand while immersed in New York's vibrant underground club scene in the 1980s: 'What was really remarkable was that their music . . . had that ability to cross over between all the different scenes. Kraftwerk was, like, universal.'²⁸

Tim Barr commented on the 'extraordinarily funky bass line' on 'Kristallo' (1973), and that Kraftwerk had 'obviously been paying close attention to the bass parts played by Bootsy Collins on their favourite James Brown records'.²⁹ Former member Karl Bartos confirms this, explaining that, in the 1970s, 'we were all fans of American music: soul, the whole Tamla/Motown thing, and of course, James Brown'.³⁰ Atkins commented on his meeting with Schneider at British outdoor rave Tribal Gathering in 1997:

We met up behind the Detroit stage and chatted a bit and I was really surprised to learn that Kraftwerk were hugely influenced by James Brown. Of course, P-Funk was made up of at least half the JB's first line-up, so somehow Detroit techno was a very natural, even 'fated' progression.³¹

Interestingly, Kraftwerk hired a black engineer from Detroit to work on the final master of *Mensch-Maschine* (*Man-Machine*). Leonard Jackson had no idea Kraftwerk were white until he met them in Düsseldorf.³² Black artists sampling Kraftwerk add up to a considerable list, amongst them as Trouble

²⁶ Compare Toltz, *Dragged into the Dance*, p. 190. ²⁷ Bussy, *Kraftwerk*, p. 124.

²⁸ Quoted in M Rubin, 'The Heritage of Kraftwerk on Funk & Techno', *New York Times* (4 December 2009).

²⁹ T Barr, *Kraftwerk: From Düsseldorf to the Future (with Love)* (London: Ebury, 1998), p. 67.

³⁰ Sicko, *Techno Rebels*, p. 10.

³¹ Juan Atkins on Kraftwerk, *Electronic Beats* (10 November 2012), www.electronicbeats.net/juan-atkins-about-kraftwerk/.

³² Cf. B Brewster & F Broughton, *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life: The History of the Disc Jockey* (New York: Grove Press, 2000), p. 582.

Funk, Digital Underground, Cookie Crew, Doug Lazy, Kiss AMC, The Fearless Four, Eskimos and Egypt, and Borghesia.³³ The website whosampledwho.com provides more examples, including black music icons like Dr Dre, Timbaland, Sir Mix-a-Lot, Ultramagnetic MC's, Underground Resistance, the late Biz Markie, and others.

The Electrifying Mojo, P-Funk, and the Mothership Connection

The universal appeal of electronic music and its faceless presentation via the radio, meant listeners to influential hosts such as The Electrifying Mojo were often unaware of the racial identity of the musicians he supported. Johnson's reverence and eclectic curation is what Carl Craig describes as the mix of music at the root of techno: 'Techno is that attitude in the music that Mojo was playing that influenced me as a kid. Techno is that cross section – that mix of music that influenced what we know as Detroit techno.'³⁴ Johnson's ethos was to counter the dominance of commercial organisations.

From my perspective, radio was not going to be an instrument of divisiveness. I would go and bridge the gap that separated old from young, rich from poor, black from white, and informed from uninformed, as opposed to my joining the circle of radio celebs who pretty much dominated the airwaves and psyche of people.³⁵

Kraftwerk were among the many avant-garde artists Mojo showcased on his show. Like Frankie Crocker in New York and his peers at WMBX in Chicago, Johnson pioneered a multi-genre approach which tapped into the automated funk that emanated from Kraftwerk's music:

I remember when *Trans-Europe-Express* came out. I played it and they [the station executives] said, 'What the hell is he playing now?' It wasn't a beat that people understood, but I could hear it perfectly. I mean, here's a band who's obviously from the same planet that I'm from, right?³⁶

Kraftwerk's music had been relegated to 'production fodder' (i.e. background music) by station management at WGPR but it was salvaged by Johnson and played on his show. A video clip on YouTube demonstrates how well

³³ Bussy, *Kraftwerk*, p. 125.

³⁴ M Barnes, Label of the Month: Planet E Communications, Beatportal (16 August 2021), www.beatportal.com/features/label-of-the-month-planet-e-communications/.

³⁵ Sicko, *Techno Rebels*, p. 58. ³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

Kraftwerk's music connected with black audiences.³⁷ Broadcast on local TV station WGPR-TV (the television department of WGPR radio, where Johnson hosted his show) *The New Dance Show* clip features its audience split in two, with audience members parading down the middle – a format copied from the show *Soul Train* – dancing to Kraftwerk's 'Nummern'.

Juan Atkins remembers that the first time he heard Kraftwerk's track 'Die Roboter' ('The Robots') 'I just froze. This sounded like the future, and it was fascinating [...] there were other funky electronic bands around – Tangerine Dream and Gary Numan and all that – but none were as funky as Kraftwerk.'³⁸ Atkins was also influenced by the P-Funk of Parliament Funkadelic, another pivotal group from the seventies whose fantasy-based imagery, and visual presentation (stage and costume design), envisioned black people in space – developing their own brand of psychedelic Afro-Futurism.

Here we can trace the family tree from Motown to James Brown, Kraftwerk, Parliament, and Detroit techno. Members of Parliament (Maceo Parker, Bootsy Collins) were part of James Brown's band The JB's. Parliament frontman George Clinton was a songwriter at Motown, which also influenced Kraftwerk. Mike Banks, of pioneering Detroit techno group Underground Resistance (with Jeff Mills and, later, Robert Hood), was a former studio musician who worked with Parliament. Like Kraftwerk, Underground Resistance adopted a similarly media-averse outlook, and eventually remixed the German group's track 'Expo2000'. Banks refers to Kraftwerk's key track 'Nummern' as 'the secret code of electronic funk': 'That track hit home in Detroit so hard. They had just created the perfect urban music because it was controlled chaos, and that's exactly what we live in.'³⁹

Another Detroit outfit that took great inspiration from Kraftwerk is Drexciya. A duo made up of James Stinson and Gerald Donald, who defied music marketing norms to adopt a totally anonymous identity. They never performed live and operated exclusively from Stinson's basement studio, shunning the limelight to focus purely on their music. Stinson and Donald created an entire world and mythology around their Drexciya concept; based around the idea that an underwater colony of aquatic humanoids evolved from the babies of pregnant slave women, thrown overboard

³⁷ Kraftwerk 'Numbers' at The New Dance Show, YouTube video (8 May 2020), www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZOcf9Uq6EjQ

³⁸ Juan Atkins on Kraftwerk.

³⁹ Quoted in M Rubin, The Heritage of Kraftwerk on Funk & Techno, *New York Times* (4 December 2009).

during the trek across the Middle Passage (the journey from Europe to the USA).⁴⁰

There are very clear nods to Kraftwerk in some of the track titles and terminology (such as the track title ‘Aquabahn’ clearly alluding to ‘Autobahn’) used in their material. Later, under one of the many aliases associated with the Drexciya project, Elektroids, they paid respects to their German inspirations with a note in their press release from their 1995 LP *Elektroworld*: ‘This album, titled elektro world, is a personal, tribute to those well known pioneers of the electro-disco-beat; Kraftwerk.’⁴¹ This homage to the German group not only demonstrates the influence of their robotic funk on black electronic music artists in Detroit but also shows how their conceptual approach had an influence on the generations that followed.

Short Conclusion: Universal Funk and Electronic Spirituality

The transnational flow of musically encoded ideas and concepts between Detroit and Europe hints at a deeper connection. The notion of universal funk pervades throughout Krautrock, the music that influenced it and the music it inspired. Beyond superficial physical identity such as gender, nationality, racial categorisation, and other such limiting signifiers of identity, music is a vehicle for the human experience. As we’ve seen, machines transcend fixed identity, the listener is presented with sounds that trigger universal responses, memories, thoughts, feelings, and reactions. Accordingly, Ralf Hütter himself hence described the connection between Detroit and Düsseldorf, Germany as ‘spiritual’:

There’s quite a techno connection, Kraftwerk to Detroit. [. . .] The industrial sound of Motor City and Kraftwerk on the autobahn, there’s a spiritual connection. Automatic rhythms, robotic work, robotic music – all kinds of fantasies are going on.⁴²

⁴⁰ Compare H Deisl, Mit dem Zug durch Europa, mit dem Tauchboot durch den Atlantik: Sound-Topografien bei Kraftwerk und Drexciya, in U Schütte (ed.), *Mensch-Maschinen-Musik: Das Gesamtkunstwerk Kraftwerk* (Düsseldorf: Leske, 2018), pp. 275–90.

⁴¹ Elektroids – Elektroworld, Discogs, www.discogs.com/de/release/1077176-Elektroids-Elektroworld.

⁴² G Dayal, Kraftwerk on Cycling, 3D, ‘Spiritual Connection’ to Detroit, *Rolling Stone* (26 August 2015), www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/kraftwerk-on-cycling-3d-spiritual-connection-to-detroit-56548/.

Recommended Reading

- S Albiez, Post-soul Futurama: African American Cultural Politics and Early Detroit Techno, *European Journal of American Culture* 24:2 (2005), pp. 131–52.
- I Anderson, *This Is Our Music: Free Jazz, the Sixties, and American Culture* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).
- D Sicko, *Techno Rebels: The Renegades of Electronic Funk* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010).
- Y Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013).