

The Düsseldorf duo Neu!, comprised of guitarist Michael Rother and drummer Klaus Dinger, are, particularly for many anglophones, emblematic of Krautrock. Their first three albums, released between 1972 and 1975, did not see them achieve the sort of international success enjoyed by Can, Kraftwerk, and Tangerine Dream. There were several factors for this lack of success: commercial failure, the duo's inability to sustain a working relationship, and a failed romance (Klaus Dinger and his estranged girlfriend) at the heart of their lyrical narrative. As with so much of West German music of the time, their success was posthumous.

Neu! cemented their own individual freeway of departure from the dominant orthodoxies of Anglo-American blues-based rock, which held such sway with West German youth in the 1960s and the 1970s. It was a lonely freeway back then, but it has since proved immensely influential on post-punk and subsequent experimental bands such as Joy Division, Sonic Youth, and Stereolab. A host of twenty-first century bands, including Britain's Toy and Now, were also fired by the velocity of Neu!'s trademark *motorik* beat, the deceptive simplicity of which had profound implications for the future shape and direction of rock music.

Rubble Music: Neu! and the German Past

As with their experimental contemporaries across West Germany, Neu! were not immune to the profound political upheavals that took place as they came of age in the late 1960s. On the one hand, it was hard for Rother and Dinger to feel patriotic pride: Dinger declared himself 'not a big fan of Germany'.¹ On the other hand, an inescapable sense of cultural pride –

¹ C Bohn, Unedited Klaus Dinger, *Wire* (March 2020), www.thewire.co.uk/in-writing/interviews/p=14780.

obligation even – impelled them to make a political point through the nature of their music-making, according to Rother:

You cannot separate the music from all of the political events, the student uprisings, the changes happening in film, art. We were all exposed to this virus of change and what you came up with depended on your own creative potential. Everyone might have the wish to do that but some just cannot.²

In both name and approach, Neu! strove for originality, or at least an escape from Anglo-American rock norms. However, as Lloyd Isaac Vayo observes, Neu! came into existence in a West Germany in which the debris of the past was still a feature of the 1970s urban environment, a reminder of unresolved issues: ‘The material reproduction of the state lags well into the 1970s and beyond, with lots remaining clogged with the detritus of the bombs dropped so long ago, the rubble of shattered buildings merely pushed aside rather than removed.’³

Neu! falls short of the pristineness and serenity of Kraftwerk’s new electronic architecture. There is a sense of a lack of resolution, an emotional undertow, a future that has not yet arrived, and a country still in the grips of a patriarchal past, against which Dinger rages. The inner sleeve of *Neu!* ‘75 features an image of Dinger with a black-and-white photo of his grandfather and great uncle from World War I. They remain, for Dinger, a presence in the ‘new’ Germany of the Federal Republic. The notion of *motorik* in relation to Neu! is also helpful. Much as Kraftwerk were not a purely futurist concept, but also concerned with re-connecting with the tenets of the Bauhaus movement cut abruptly short by the Nazis in 1933, so *motorik* connects Neu! with the music of composer Paul Hindemith, for whom the term was previously used, and whose music was condemned as ‘degenerate’ by the Nazis.

In the context of Neu!, Vayo speaks of the ‘record-as-mirror’.⁴ The duo found it curiously difficult to recreate their records live, their subtle simplicity being too much for guest musicians such as Guru Guru’s Uli Trepte and Eberhard Kranemann to grasp and carry out. They only played a handful of concerts in their lifetime, and as such were never able to manifest themselves effectively as a live spectacle. And so their records are all we have, their mirror surfaces inviting reflection by the listener on past,

² Quoted in D Stubbs, *Future Days: Krautrock and the Building of Modern Germany* (London: Faber, 2014), p. 248.

³ LI Vayo, What’s Old is NEU! Benjamin Meets Rother and Dinger, *Popular Music & Society* 32:5 (2009), pp. 617–34 (617).

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 626.

present, and future, their forms offering the prospect of a new mode of rock practice drawn from West German origins, sources, and ingenuity.

Rock and Krautrock

Michael Rother and Klaus Dinger had enjoyed a liberation through imported rock music. In the 1960s, Dinger joined a group called The No, clearly influenced by the British art school rock of groups like The Who. Michael Rother, meanwhile, had been influenced by the surging dynamism of Little Richard and later fell in love with a Danish cover of pre-Beatles British group The Shadows' instrumental hit 'Apache'.

There was no Krautrock manifesto: the movement was too heterogenous to be reduced to a common denominator. While Neu!'s *motorik* beat is considered by some to be Krautrock's rhythmical signature, it is but one aspect of the new music produced in the late 1960s and early 1970s. While there is no distinctive Krautrock style, the groups assembled – albeit reluctantly – under its banner share some common properties, which make the term useful. These properties include: an understanding of twentieth-century avant-garde visual art that was often lacking in their Anglo-American contemporaries; an embrace of electronics as vital tools in the construction of any new music; a tendency towards instrumental music, reflecting the cultural 'implicitness' of the genre, which represented more of a 'formal' protest than one of content; and a rejection of the 'strong vocalist', the big, declarative character up front and centre stage.

Krautrock vocals, from Kraftwerk to Faust to Neu! themselves tend to be deliberately 'weak', deadpan, and understated. Krautrock also departs from orthodoxies such as the verse–chorus structure as well as the hierarchical format of the traditional rock group, with the rhythm section subordinate to the lead guitar. Arising as it did from the commune ethos, Krautrock regards all musical elements as equal, counterbalancing and complementing one another; and in Düsseldorf, Neu! would abide by most, if not all of these characteristics.

Kraftwerk and Neu!

Much as there was a rivalry of sorts between the flamboyant Liverpool and the more terse, severe Manchester in the post-punk years in Britain, so there was a contrast in character between the rival cities of Cologne and

Düsseldorf in the 1970s, with Can bearing some of the character of Cologne's anarchic sprawl, while Kraftwerk reflected the industrious, elegant efficiency of Düsseldorf. Rother and Dinger were briefly members of Kraftwerk during a short period in 1971 when Ralf Hütter temporarily left the band to focus on his architectural studies. It was the first time the pair met, and was a fortuitous meeting at that.

The 'Kraftwerk' that consisted of Rother, Dinger, and Florian Schneider represent a very different iteration of the group. This early era is one that the modern-day Kraftwerk seem almost anxious to suppress: their messy, organic, pre-*Autobahn* phase, none of which features in their live shows or has been reissued by them on CD. They have the sense of propulsion, of unremitting forward momentum one associates with Kraftwerk, but the most dominant feature is the flute of Florian Schneider, with which Kraftwerk would dispense entirely after *Autobahn*.

Rother and Dinger soon left Kraftwerk and do not appear on any of their recordings. There was a telling tension between Dinger, and Schneider and the returning Hütter. Dinger was very assertive of his working-class origins and was resentful of their more privileged family background. He also resented their reliance on electronic instruments. Dinger was horrified that such machines would displace skilled, artisanal manual labourers on the drumkit like himself, with Kraftwerk-like factory owners switching to automated techniques to put flesh-and-blood workers on the breadline. This disagreement marked the distinction between the two Düsseldorf groups.

As Rother said, 'I think an important element of the Neu! music – that along with the beauty there is a portion of dirt. And that's something that separates Neu! music from Kraftwerk, in my own understanding. There is a contradiction in our sound.'⁵ It was here, then, that Neu! and Kraftwerk parted company. The sheer rhythmic regularity of Neu!'s sound and the layers of treated guitar make it seem 'electronic' in nature, but it is a new form of rock music, in which guitars and drums feature most prominently, and strong emotions, from melancholy to outright rage, are frequently evoked through Dinger in particular. Although Kraftwerk's music is subtly soulful – Ralf Hütter once explained that 'the "soul" of the machines has always been a part of our music'⁶ – they would come to deal wholly in electronics, their emotional register serene, reflecting a symbiotic relationship between man and machine.

⁵ Quoted in Stubbs, *Future Days*, p. 247.

⁶ Quoted in P Bussy, *Kraftwerk: Man, Machine and Music* (London: SAF, 2001), p. 99.



Illustration 9.1 Klaus Dinger and Michael Rother of Neu! © Anton Corbijn.

Rother and Dinger

The contrasting, yin and yang characters who made up Neu!, and their differing upbringings, were both the reason for their artistic success and their ultimate break-up. Theirs was an unusual set-up by the standards of Krautrock, which tended to deal in more ‘communal’ line-ups of at least three or more members, reflecting the role of communes in the origin of groups like Amon Düül II. Neu!’s duality later become more commonplace, in groups like Suicide (who formed in 1970 but did not release their debut album until 1977), DAF, The Pet Shop Boys, Soft Cell, and others.

Rother brought to the group a pacific, ambient element, born out of his fondness for water. ‘I always lived near water’, said Michael Rother. ‘In Pakistan at the seaside, Düsseldorf near the Rhine – I feel comfortable near water – it has an effect I can’t quite explain. It has to do with the passage of time, it also moves along like music itself – there are some parallels.’⁷ Having lived in Pakistan as a child, with his father employed by an airline

⁷ Compare B Whalley (dir.), *Krautrock: The Rebirth Of Germany* (BBC 2009).

that operated in that region, Rother absorbed at first hand the particular strain of oriental music that emanated from the region. 'I do remember being completely fascinated by the strange sounds of Pakistani music as a child – snake charmers, local musicians playing at the gates to get some money. This music that seemed to go on and on with no structure that I could make out – just an endless stream of melody and rhythm, like a river.'⁸ That fluidity is demonstrated on, for example, 'Weissensee' (White Lake) on Neu!'s self-titled debut album.

Dinger was always at loggerheads with his own father – a recurring theme in Krautrock and its rejection of rigid, patriarchal structures. His combative rage was lifelong, a 'permanent sense of opposition',⁹ but provided the impetus for Neu!, the forward pulsation, whereas Rother provided the scenery, the blues, the greens, and the oranges: the full colour palette. Dinger studied for three years as a carpenter – work in which he took an immense pride – as well as in architecture. Like Can's Jaki Liebezeit, he rejected machines out of a pride in his own mechanical exactitude as a player. As Dinger's widow Miki Yui said: 'He knows what is "straight" and what is "not straight". You hear it on what people call his Hammerbeat – he did three years of carpentry training and learnt to be very good with his handwork and in using his tools. All of these things came together in his playing.'¹⁰

Neu! and Düsseldorf

Thanks to the regeneration of the Rhineland, and its proximity to the provincial town of Bonn, declared capital of West Germany in 1949, Düsseldorf prospered in the post-war years industrially and commercially. However, it wasn't merely a manufacturing base. From architecture to fashion to its many art galleries and the patronage of Joseph Beuys, it also had a strong aesthetic sense. Commerce and style met in its extensive advertising industry, of which the Neu! logo was a product.

Klaus Dinger himself founded an 'advertising agency' while living in a commune in Düsseldorf in 1971, though it existed on paper only. This was the impetus for him to strike upon the band name 'Neu!' (New!). 'Neu!' at that time was the strongest word in advertising, everybody knew, and I think it still is, everybody knows, so I don't know why nobody else did that before.'¹¹

⁸ Ibid. ⁹ Stubbs, *Future Days*, p. 249. ¹⁰ Ibid. ¹¹ Bohn, Unedited Klaus Dinger.

The Neu! logo functions as a brilliantly acute piece of branding; the group were, after all, striving for absolute originality. It also satirises, however, the nakedly commercial imperative with which so much modern music making was bound up, an industry from which Rother and Dinger sought to set themselves apart. Although they welcomed any sales that came their way, their work was in no way dictated by pop ambition, but by artistic imperatives, the primary one being the rejection of the tried and tested, the formulaic, the dominant hegemony of Anglo-American rock and pop.

As with Kraftwerk, Neu! had a complex relationship with time. Kraftwerk are considered 'futurists' but in their often kitsch-like imagery and neo-Bauhaus aesthetic, their love of Schubert, they are conscious of the German past, its ruptured heritage. Neu! in their branding are making a play for originality rather than novelty; they want nothing to do with the commercial pop industry, whose concept of the 'new' is merely a series of short-lived trends, soon to be dated. They sought, successfully as it turns out, a timelessness in their music.

This timelessness is evoked through the natural, physical flow of their sound, and through an ambient sense of the natural, eternal elements – water in particular. Neu! do not 'fetishise' the future, as do Kraftwerk, with (often playful) dehumanising evocations of mechanisation, automation, and the effortless conquest of nature. Yes, they are *motorik*, but this represents a necessary moment of intensification in the 1970s, a fast-forward motion that is bound up with their cultural circumstances in the early 1970s.

The Role of Conny Plank

Neu! were fortunate in that they were produced by Conny Plank. He was fully sympathetic to the broad, non-commercial aims of the genre while being *au fait* with, and having access to, the most advanced technological means to realise the musical visions of, among others, Kraftwerk, Can, and Cluster. Unlike some producers, including Joy Division's Martin Hannett or ZTT label founder Trevor Horn, Plank did not have a signature style that he imposed on the artists with whom he worked.

Rather, he functioned as an enabler, spending considerable time with the artists he worked with. Only when he had gained a good sense of the character and musical ambitions of the artists would work begin. Using all the technologies at his disposal, as well as his improvisational ingenuity

in the studio, he would assist Neu! in achieving their ideals with a stark clarity and impact that matched their striking logo.

Michael Rother recalled how struck he was by Plank's open mindedness. 'He was, in a way, crazy. He was open to everything. It couldn't be crazy enough.' And while he had advanced technical means, they were by no means the match of twenty-first century standards. He had at his disposal a tape machine to create delays and an echo chamber, but mostly he benefitted from his extraordinary sense of timing and memory, without the assistance of a computer.

They played 'Halogallo' to him, over a twelve-minute period on an eight-track, and he was able to offer notes from memory as to which elements worked and which did not. His ability to organise sound, his selflessness in not imposing his own pre-set ideas, and his exploratory spirit and clarity of vision that exceeded the technology of his day were all vital to the development of Neu!'s design and momentum.

Birth of a New Sound: *Neu!* (1972)

Neu!'s eponymous debut was recorded in December 1971 and released in 1972. While Kraftwerk took a few years to arrive at what is considered their trademark sound, Neu!'s sound came fully formed on 'Halogallo', track one of their first LP. The song proceeds at a steady, not breakneck speed, with a relentless disregard for the protocols of verse, chorus, and bridges. Dinger's 4/4 drumbeat (labelled 'Dingerbeat') is maintained without distraction, with Rother's guitars throwing up shapes and colours like scenery – streetlamps, fields, buildings – receding in a rear-view mirror, or creating a windscreen-wiper whiplash effect. The engine ticks over, the (instrumental) mood one of sustained excitement at what might lie beyond the horizon.

While Kraftwerk's 'Autobahn' is evidently a sonic simulation of an automobile journey, Neu!'s music is more open-ended, abstract. The images and narrative it conjures in the mind of the listener depend on one's individual perspective. Rother himself professed himself bemused at some of the impressions and feedback of fans and critics but did not deny their validity. As with 'Autobahn', however, there is a physical sense of landscape traversed, and here again is the West German landscape, an alternative topography to that of Route 66 rock 'n' roll Americana. Neu! travel hopefully, though 'arriving' will be another matter. There is a perpetual, existential sense of getting somewhere yet remaining in the

same place, implied in the velocity and repetition of the 'Dingerbeat', a yearning that remains tantalisingly unfulfilled.

This momentum has already broken down by 'Sonderangebot' (Special Offer), with its rush of panning, its strange note of desolation – like a breakdown in the middle of nowhere. A high note pierces like the unforgiving sun. The weather of the album has taken a turn. As a result of this experience, 'Weissensee' proceeds at a much more thoughtful, slow pace, as if the landscape has run out and an uncertain seashore beckons, with Dinger's cymbals crashing like waves. These are not individual tracks but seem to follow on from one another, bleeding into each other in a narrative flow. There is a physical reflectiveness about Neu! thus far, a sense of the album as mirror-scape in which the listener is invited to contemplate themselves, to evaluate and reassess. 'Via the record-as-mirror, the listener aurally comprehends both their own literal individuality, as well as their emblematic status as German, therefore creating the individual as initial locus of and venue for action', according to Vayo.¹²

The album puts to water again with 'Im Glück' (Happiness), a grainy sample of a recording made while rowing with Dinger's girlfriend Anita Heedman. This is the beginning of a key thread in the Neu! saga: the recording is of Dinger with his then girlfriend, in a hazy, indistinct, brief moment of tranquillity. Rother's guitars lie like horizontal patterns on the slow, shifting water: distorted, shimmering. Following the violent, jack-hammer interlude of 'Negativland', which signals the past, in the form of a sample of applause of a Kraftwerk concert, and the future, in its prefiguration of the post-punk of Joy Division, romance resumes with 'Lieber Honig' (Dear Honey), in which Dinger serenades his girlfriend with the most affecting of vocals, as if so love-stricken and emotionally dependent he can barely muster the oxygen to sing. This is among the most effective deployments in the Krautrock canon of the 'weak' vocal, in which the individual is not all-dominant in vocal might, but just a small player subject to much larger forces.

Beginning Again: *Neu! 2* (1973)

Neu! 2 sees the duo follow a very similar arc to their debut, as if once again travelling hopefully. The Dingerbeat of the opening track 'Für immer' (Forever) varies only subtly from 'Halogallo': it is less dreamlike,

¹² Vayo, *What's Old Is Neu!*, p. 626.

sharper – aggressive almost – with a stormier ambience. ‘Für immer’ implies the length of the journey undertaken, perhaps by a ghost-rider, condemned to live out the same loop of forward propulsion. Again, with ‘Spitzenqualität’ (Top Quality), a companion to ‘Sonderangebot’ and another title that might have been taken from an advertising hoarding, the album decelerates, traffic whooshing past as you stand by your broken-down vehicle. Once again, the sanguine spirit of the opening track suffers a puncture. By the end, it’s as if Dinger is not so much drumming as hammering a dashboard in frustration.

‘Lila Engel’ (Lilac Angel) is a further paean to Dinger’s girlfriend, a fevered dervish of a track in which his vocals feel like a desperate incantation. The remainder of the album is the result of simply having run out of money, a series of proto-‘remixes’ of their ‘Neuschnee’ (Fresh Snow) single, sped up, slowed down, distorted, stretched out. Such plastic use of sonic matter would be commonplace thirty years on but in 1973 it was supposed that Neu! and producer Conny Plank had taken leave of their senses. ‘I remember at the time, the critics hated us for the second side and many fans in Germany thought we had gone completely crazy. The idea of treating recorded music in an unusual way simply wasn’t understood’, recalled Michael Rother.¹³

Later critics were more forgiving. Simon Reynolds described the remixes as ‘not as irritating as you’d expect, highly listenable, actually, and, sheer desperation aside, conceptually clever in a John-Cage-meets-turndablist style’.¹⁴ Julian Cope, meanwhile, in his *Krautrock sampler*, described the album overall as more ‘lush and fertile’ than the ‘short-grassed plains’ of its predecessor. As for the budgetary mishap that resulted in the B-side, he writes: ‘What’s an experiment for if there is never a failure? And this failure is undoubtedly one of the most successful ever.’¹⁵

Artistically, however, in the cold reality of 1973, Neu! were in a lonely place, having arrived somewhere too soon. Their lack of chemistry saw them drift temporarily apart, with Rother hooking up with Dieter Moebius and Hans-Joachim Roedelius to form the ‘supergroup’ Harmonia, whose eventual liaison with the likeminded Brian Eno sowed the seed of the future high regard in which Neu! and others of their West German generation would be held. But not yet.

¹³ Stubbs, *Future Days*, p. 261. ¹⁴ S Reynolds, Neu!: Reissues, *Uncut* 5 (2001).

¹⁵ J Cope, *Krautrock sampler: One Head’s Guide to the Great Kosmische Music – 1968 Onwards* (Yatesbury: Head Heritage, 1996), p. 126.

Famous Last Words: *Neu!* '75

After the release of the sophomore album, and the subsequent hiatus, the Rother–Dinger partnership would resume in 1975 with *Neu!* '75. The two members recorded across separate sides, and Dinger brought on personnel who would join him for his breakaway group La Düsseldorf, who would break away from the orthodoxies of Krautrock itself.

Once again (on the A-side, Rother's side), the album sets forth in determined *motorik* vein, with 'Isi': bathed in evening sunlight, blues-less, an anthemic instrumental. Once again, the mood breaks down, the vehicle slows as the sun sets on 'Seeland' (Sea Land), as Neu! arrive at those lonely waters with only their own reflections for company. Finally, with the melancholy of 'Leb Wohl' (Farewell) and its spare, ambling piano, mortality seems at hand. The waters have all but ceased to lap, and the image that comes to mind is that of Arnold Böcklin's portrait *Die Toteninsel* (*The Island of Death*, 1880/86). Rother's vocals are weak emissions, like a dying man trying to muster breath for a last testimony. It's as if, over the course of twenty minutes, we have gone through the three ages of a life.

Dinger takes the reins on the B-side, eschewing drums for a guitar. 'E-Musik' is perhaps the most advanced version of *motorik* to date: chromium-plated, swerving with abandon along a freeway regardless of destination, topped and tailed by the winds of desolation. It is preceded, however, by 'Hero', which is, in effect, Dinger's breakout track. In the posture he assumes – declamatory, explicit, guitar brandished, self at the forefront – he has abandoned Krautrock protocols, in which sublimation, implicitness, green investment in the musical future, laboratory avant-garde exploration, and the subjugation of excessive individuality are all pushed to the fore.

But the fabric has to be torn. In his sneering, lowing, nihilistic tone he prefigures John Lydon on the Public Image Ltd track 'Theme'. 'Just another hero, riding through the night', Dinger cries out. The reason for this despair? 'Honey went to Norway, to Norway', he laments. His girlfriend Anita has left him, pulled away by the malign force of her family, Dinger suspects, her businessman father having deemed the unkempt, lower-class Dinger an unsuitable mate.

Nazism may have ended in 1945 but the oppressively masculine values of the fascist era continued to thrive in the Federal Republic. The tyrannies of commerce, the snide, reactionary values of the monopolist tabloid *Bild Zeitung*, the persecution of 'longhairs' by a society still dominated by a former Nazi party faithful have all conspired against Dinger, it appears,

robbing him of the love of his life. 'Fuck your business, fuck the press / Fuck the bourgeoisie!', Dinger screams. It is hard to blame him for breaking Krautrock's customary, meaningful silence on political matters, though having done so, there is no way back. Anita represents a romantic dream of what once was, flickering across these albums, tormenting Dinger in his own dreams: what was suppressed, what has been lost, perhaps for good, in Dinger's generation at least.

After Neu!, What Now?

Neu's first three albums are their essential trilogy. Neu! made a further, poorly received album, *Neu! 4*, made up of tentative but abandoned studio recordings, but the chemistry between the pair was not really there. Dinger did not approve of Rother's use of synthesisers in the sessions, while Rother was upset that Dinger went ahead and released the album without Rother's knowledge or consent in 1995, followed by the live album *Neu! '72 Live!* in 1996, again not having sought Rother's approval. This led to the final breakdown of relations between the two musicians.

Dinger's unauthorised actions may have been an attempt to resurrect the Neu! brand following the demise of his follow-on project La Düsseldorf, as well as multiple other attempts to return to the limelight through collaboration with various partners. La Düsseldorf, his only post-Neu! project worth mentioning in this context, enjoyed some success in the early 1980s, as leftfield West German music, though still formally innovative, became more brutally explicit than its Krautrock forbears: *Einstürzende Neubauten* and *DAF* (Deutsch-Amerikanische Freundschaft) in particular.

A trio comprising Dinger, his brother Thomas, and Hans Lampe, La Düsseldorf made three albums: *La Düsseldorf* (1976), *Viva* (1978), and *Individuellos* (1980). These were impressive records, bearing the fruit of the seeds of proto-punk embedded in Neu! They were in the spirit of the times. They departed, however, from the protocols of Krautrock in key ways, especially in Dinger's desire to be up front and centre stage. Predictably, the money that came with (relative) fame and fortune brought its own disputes and, as so often was the way with Dinger, personal recriminations with his fellow band members. Following a further project, Japandorf, Dinger passed away in 2008 while recording his last album, released posthumously in 2013 under the name Klaus Dinger + Japandorf. Dinger was only sixty-one years old when he died.

Herbert Grönemeyer, one of the most successful German musicians in German-language album-oriented rock, re-released the *Neu!* trilogy in 2001

on his label Grönland. This led to a renaissance of the band in Germany and renewed interest internationally. Michael Rother, meanwhile, has navigated the quiet, rewarding seas of his own solo career. He has released a total of ten albums since his 1977 solo debut *Flammende Herzen* (*Flaming Hearts*). His solo works reflect the aqueous, ambient element of Neu!, while never lapsing into the clichés of New Age music.

Comprehensive box sets called *Solo* (2019) and *Solo II* (2020) on Grönland collect Rother's solo oeuvre of nine studio albums between 1977 and 2004. His 2020 album *Dreaming* marked a triumphant return to form. He still performs regularly, playing tracks from Neu! and his own work, supported by a band including Hans Lampe – is the closest possible replacement for the ultimately irreplaceable Dinger.

Legacy

Back in the 1970s, Neu! benefitted from the blessing of Brian Eno – who described the Dingerbeat as being as important as those of James Brown and Fela Kuti¹⁶ – and, by association, David Bowie. Bowie understood, not least from personal experience, that the momentum of Anglo-American rock was all washed up on the West Coast of the United States by 1975, and that decadent old dinosaurs like Led Zeppelin, The Who, and John Lennon were in every sense physically incapable of taking the music any further. It was time to look eastwards, to Europe; hence Bowie's relocation to Berlin. This led to a reconsideration of the value of West German experimental music among those who had not fully embraced it, and an understanding that its conceptual approach – as opposed to one based in mere technical aptitude, à la prog rock – lent it a kinship with the spirit of punk.

There was even the possibility, in 1977, that Bowie would recruit Michael Rother as his guitarist. As Rother himself explained on his website, he had been surprised to read Bowie's claim that Rother had declined to work with him. Rother had not; he had been told that Bowie no longer needed him. Rother suspected that wires had been deliberately crossed, possibly by someone at Bowie's record company anxious about the sluggish sales of his experimental 'Berlin trilogy'. As was his wont, Bowie feted the avant-garde – in this instance, Neu! and Kraftwerk – while prudently never travelling too far in that direction himself.

¹⁶ Quoted in Vayo, *What's Old Is Neu!*, p. 621.

Ian Curtis was keen to educate his bandmates in Joy Division by bringing in LPs in his collection for them to listen to and absorb: Neu!'s albums were among them. Their spirit can be heard in the skittering, linear, reflective surfaces of 'Isolation' on *Closer*, for one. "This was the first record where I thought, "I want to do this too! And I could do this!" Krautrock was like punk in that way', confessed Joy Division and New Order's Stephen Morris.¹⁷

For subsequent generations of musicians, Neu! would become emblematic of Krautrock cool – Sonic Youth in particular picked up on this from afar. Under their side moniker of Ciccone Youth, they cut 'Two Cool Rock Chicks Listening To Neu!' which featured on 1988's *The Whitey Album*, while Sonic Youth drummer Steve Shelley sat in as replacement for the late Klaus Dinger on the Michael Rother & Friends tour in 2010.

It may well have been the scarcity of Neu! that added to the group's widespread appeal beyond Sonic Youth. Certainly, for those aficionados for whom the esoteric nature of Krautrock was an attraction, Neu! developed a mythical status. As Julian Cope put it in *Krautrocksampler*: '[T]he music and story of Neu! is a legend with a great canon of work attached to it.'¹⁸ For while contemporaries such as Can, Faust, Tangerine Dream, Cluster, and Kraftwerk either continued to perform or at least had their 1970s back catalogues available throughout the 1980s and 1990s, ongoing disputes ensured that Neu! had only circulated as vinyl rarities or on pirated cassettes up until the belated reissue of their first three albums in 2001.

In Neu!'s absence, Stereolab came to the fore, the relentless, 4/4 beat element of their music key to their overall Franco-German homage. This lent further grist to Klaus Dinger's sense of rage and injustice. Tim Gane of the group recalls Dinger being persuaded to come to one of their concerts to be assured they were not a mere rip-off, only for him to refuse to set foot in the hall once he got there.¹⁹ Therefore, and maybe not surprisingly, Stereolab is missing on *Brand Neu!*, a compilation released in 2009, a year after Dinger's death. The tribute album reflected the esteem in which Neu! were held, as well as their influence, featuring as it did contributions of self-written material by, among others, Primal Scream, Cornelius, LCD Soundsystem, and even Oasis, as well as Michael Rother himself.

All of this meant that there was a significant delay of at least a quarter of a century before the albums of Neu!, reflective as they were of the early 1970s post-war condition in West Germany, were more widely

¹⁷ Quoted in C Dallach, *Future Sounds: Wie ein paar 'Krautrockler' die Popwelt revolutionierten* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2021), p. 385.

¹⁸ Cope, *Krautrocksampler*, p. 126. ¹⁹ Compare Stubbs, *Future Days*, p. 271.

disseminated (and even then, not to a vast international audience). For while Neu!'s music aggressively, if sometimes implicitly, laid claim to a 'new' German identity, it must be admitted that if their mission, and that of Krautrock as a whole, was to remake German popular cultural identity and displace the old Anglo-American hegemony, the mission failed. Anglo-American music styles from rock to hip-hop continue to dominate the musical tastes of pop music listeners in Germany, and we can only talk about the emerging Krautrock renaissance in Germany happening some twenty years after anglophone audiences re-discovered the music.

The contrast between Krautrock's effect on the national mood and that of Britpop could not be starker. But then, 1990s Britpop was triumphalist, retrograde, and nostalgic in mood, as well as formally conservative. Krautrock was the very opposite of these things in every respect: no big chants to sing along to, silently haunted by past trauma and ruin, invested in future prospects, and musically difficult, which made it a tough sell to West Germans (like any other mainstream audience). This certainly applied to Neu!, whose innovations and departure from commercial musical norms inevitably cost them in terms of sales, not least domestically.

However, Neu! did help profoundly impact perceptions of West German identity as others in Europe and America saw it, working to break down ubiquitous stereotypes and aiding the healthy regeneration of the country's reputation internationally. At the same time, if not wholly at the behest of Neu! or Krautrock generally, post-war West Germany has undertaken civic acts of reparation and self-cleansing: it is not in the same place it was in 1968, and time alone has seen to that. Meanwhile, with each successive generation and the temporal distance West Germans put between themselves and World War II, the music of Neu! – its immaculate surfaces, rippling with underlying drama and emotion – remains, 'Für immer', forever, on offer as a paradigmatic product of West Germany.

Essential Listening

Neu!, *Neu!* (Brain, 1972)

Neu!, *Neu! 2* (Brain, 1973)

Neu!, *Neu! 75* (Brain, 1975)

La Düsseldorf, *La Düsseldorf* (Teldec, 1976)

Michael Rother, *Dreaming* (Grönland, 2020)