

Review

***Krautrock*. By Marshall Gu. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024. 168 pp. ISBN: 978-8-7651-0329-6.**

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Music fans rejoice when a favourite album finds a place in Bloomsbury's 33 1/3 series, as these short volumes guarantee a heightened interest in the album. *Krautrock*, Marshall Gu's entry in the relatively new 33 1/3 series *Genre*, will perform a similar function for this experimental music of 1960s and 1970s West Germany. This volume serves as a fine introduction to krautrock, and it will even deliver a few new insights for those more familiar with the topic.

The Introduction provides a musical and cultural background for the phenomenon which became known as krautrock. Gu notes that this genre represents an attempt to create a music free of the Anglo-American rock that dominated West Germany at the time. As he further observes, the paths that these artists took led them in vastly different directions, resulting in a stunningly diverse body of music that falls under the umbrella of krautrock. Gu also delves into postwar German history, which is necessary background for anyone desiring a true grasp on krautrock. He does not, however, focus at any length on how krautrock artists were rebelling against their parents' music as well as international influences. Unfortunately, this section is a weak point in this volume; Gu's information is occasionally unclear, and some of his assertions are simply unconvincing. The author does better when discussing the British and American influences of early krautrock, e.g. the Beatles and the Velvet Underground, and when marking the similarities and differences between krautrock and prog rock. And, of course, he confronts the lamentable name of this genre, whose root is an anti-German insult.

The rest of this volume mainly focuses on the history and recordings of various krautrock artists. Gu compiles a solid selection featuring a dozen groups, from major artists such as NEU! and Faust to less familiar bands like Agitation Free and Embryo. The book's first chapter, 'Future Days: Can', is also its longest, with later chapters a half or even a third its length. Can merits that extra space, given the band's superior and diverse output as well as its influence on later artists. The author provides information about each of the core musicians and examines their greatest albums. He also looks at seminal musical influences, such as Terry Riley and, of course, Karlheinz Stockhausen, as he literally taught some members of the band. Gu does not overlook American funk artists such as Sly Stone and James Brown, whose effect on Can and other krautrock artists remains underestimated decades later. He also points out how Can included non-German members through much of its existence, most famously their early vocalists Malcolm Mooney and Damo Suzuki. The following chapters are consistently strong, often with delightful insights such as how the infamously anti-authoritarian group Faust 'were positioned to their label as what could be the German version of the Beatles even though they didn't have a song in them, much less a hit' (p. 37).

Two chapters, however, stand out above the rest. Chapter 9, 'Made in Germany: Amon Düül II', looks at this band's roots in communal living, from which it explores the importance of communes in krautrock generally. Gu examines their break from the original Amon Düül group, and the differences between those two bands. He also shows how Amon Düül II's musical process differed from other krautrock artists such as Can and NEU! This chapter is also the one which most compelled this reviewer to go back and give the albums another listen. Nonetheless, the book's best chapter might be Chapter 12, 'We are the Robots: Kraftwerk'. As Gu notes, 'Kraftwerk are a paradox: they are the most internationally renowned krautrock group, but they are also not known at all for their krautrock albums' (p. 131). The author does indeed focus on the early albums, which more comfortably fit under the umbrella of krautrock. In its brief space this chapter gives a well-deserved reconsideration of the first three albums – *Kraftwerk*, *Kraftwerk 2* and *Ralf und Florian* – which the band disowned later. At the end, Gu briefly touches upon their later works, stating that *Trans Europa Express*, *Die Mensch-Maschine*, and *Computerwelt* 'are their best albums, but they are also not really krautrock, and would be better saved for discussion in a 33 1/3 book on synth-pop' (p. 139). This reviewer agrees with this statement and hopes such a volume is forthcoming.

Closing out this book is a list of 'Ten Essential Tracks'. Absolutely no one will agree with this list, nor are they obliged to. However, it does provide at least some idea of the wide scope of krautrock. Although the 'Ten Essential Tracks' list is a feature common to all the *Genre* entries, a list of 'Ten Essential LPs' would probably have been more appropriate, since krautrock focuses at least as much on albums as individual tracks.

Marshall Gu's *Krautrock* breaks little new ground, but it will serve as a very good overview for people who want an introduction to this exciting music. Despite some weaknesses, its sheer readability will win over converts to this music. Indeed, it may function as a preferable entry point for readers who only later may reach for meatier recent texts such as Uwe Schütte's *Cambridge Companion to Krautrock* (2022) and Christoph Dallach's *Neu Klang: The Definitive History of Krautrock* (2024). Overall, this is a welcome volume and a fine entry into 33 1/3's young *Genre* series.

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References

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