



The Malcolm Garrett Collection Playlist #3

Von Himmel Hoch > From Krautrock to Kosmische Musik

Compiled in 2012

Pulling together a comprehensive and credible Krautrock playlist with a running time much less than two hours is difficult, if not impossible, especially if hoping to include full-length tracks by a representative number of the crucial musicians of the era. This then, is by necessity a rather particular list.

I have decided to include what were the first pieces I listened to that were recorded by the most innovative of the bands somewhere between 1971 and 1972. As a consequence there are a number of pieces which are 'side one track one' on debut albums. The pieces are also mostly instrumental. With only one or two exceptions they are presented here in more or less the order I actually first heard them. Keeping the criteria this simple has saved me hours of agonising over potential selections from an otherwise vast amount of material.

The opener was intended to be *Von Himmel Hoch* (loosely translated 'from high heaven') from **Kraftwerk's** first album. It is largely a symbolic choice as Kraftwerk, more so than any other band, have come to represent the final solution in a quest for a new music led by German bands starting at the end of the 60s. With its droning electronics sounding like missiles falling and exploding randomly all around, it has been described as both an aural attack on the American tradition of blues-based rock, and a self-conscious reference to the bombing which took place throughout Europe in WWII. By default, if not actually by design, this had cleared the way for a comprehensive rebuilding of architecture and society. Here it clears the way for a musical form somewhere beyond 'rock', and serves as an apposite metaphor for the way in which Kraftwerk subsequently stripped away the conventions of the past to create a foundation for a distinctly German music. Sadly Kraftwerk appear not to have authorised this, nor any of their first three albums, to be played on Spotify so I've chosen the last track from side two of *Autobahn* to represent the time before they had fully evolved into their later robotic personae.

The first **Tangerine Dream** track which follows is a rare single that a schoolfriend had brought back from a trip to Germany. Memory says that it was probably the very first Krautrock track I had heard, but I was excited enough to want to hear more, and from here I actively sought out as much German music as I could.

I was intrigued by the titles that bands like Tangerine Dream chose for their long meandering pieces. *Ultima Thule* it transpires was a near-mythical island, supposedly somewhere in the far North Atlantic. It had been written about in Roman times as the furthest point that the expanding Empire might reach. This single was followed by an album in a similarly strident vein, *Alpha Centauri*, after which they would abandon their conventional instruments in favour of a purely electronic sound. Whilst *Ultima Thule* was the furthest earthly outpost known to early civilisation, *Alpha Centauri*

on the other hand is the closest star to our own Sun, and thus the first celestial body one might reach after leaving our solar system. Read into that what you will. "One small step for musickankind" perhaps? The album sleeve did include the note "dedicated to all people who feel obliged to space" after all. Subsequent albums, including what I consider to be their meisterwerk, 'Zeit', a double album with just four lengthy pieces of pre-synthesiser, arhythmic electronica, one per side, and represented here by 'Nebulous Dawn'. These were ambient long before the term had been coined, and are amongst the first 'kosmische' pieces.

The drummer on Tangerine Dream's debut album, *Electronic Meditation*, was the incredibly prolific **Klaus Schulze**, a co-founder of what has since become known as the 'Berlin School' of electronic music. He followed his brief period in Tangerine Dream by then joining guitarist Manuel Göttsching (perhaps best known to contemporary listeners for his 90s chill out opus *E2-E4*) to form **Ash Ra Tempel**, who are represented here with 'Amboss', which occupied the whole first side of their eponymously titled first album. Several German bands featured only two musicians (Cluster and Neu! for instance) but it never sounded as if anything was sonically 'missing' from their recorded works.

I feel compelled to include an epic twenty-nine minute piece from Klaus Schulze's own first album, *Irrlicht*. It is subtitled *Quadrophonische Symphonie für Orchester und E-Maschine*, and in what is a very early use of recorded samples, Klaus layers strands of orchestral sound, which he had written and recorded specifically for this purpose with the Colloquium Musica Orchestra of Berlin, into a dense soundscape of other-worldly electronics.

The first time I heard this music it was (very) poorly taped off the John Peel show, by placing a cheap microphone hooked up to portable cassette player in front of an even cheaper transistor radio. Always a stickler for playing songs in their entirety, even the legendary Mr Peel was unable to play the whole piece, and featured only the first section with its treated orchestral passages. Nevertheless, I was immediately stunned by this sound and my devotion to Klaus Schulze's music has never waned. He has since made well over 50 albums, including collaborations with a number of singers and performers playing conventional instruments, and has made numerous live recordings and film soundtracks. His relatively recent *Dark Side of the Moog* series with ambient electronic pioneer Pete Namlook is itself up to *Volume XI*. For me, however, none of Klaus' recordings has quite matched the alien sounds of this dramatic first venture into the kosmos, although another strong contender was his follow up, another double album with just four lengthy pieces, called *Cyborg*.

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Amon Düül II were a musical splinter group from the Munich political art commune known simply as Amon Düül, who confusingly also made a number of albums under that name. Amon Düül II were a much more guitar-based group. With leanings towards the use of electronics and other less conventional instrumentation, they are often unfairly compared to British Prog bands of the time. *Archangels Thunderbird* is taken from their second album, *Yeti*. Diverting slightly from my selection rationale, I have included this track instead of *Restless Skylight-Transistor-Child* from their follow up *Tanz der Lemminge* album, which was actually the first piece by them that I heard. I realised that this might be one 20 minute track too many for this particular collection.

Often cited as the most musically innovative of all the Krautrock bands, **CAN** are held in the highest regard by a great number of contemporary musicians. The song, *Father Cannot Yell* is track one side one from their debut album, *Monster Movie*, and as legend has it was the very first thing they played together as a group. Gathering in their 'Inner Space' studio, they improvised as they went, to see how they all got along musically, the singer Malcolm Mooney making the words up on the spot. The story goes that they immediately went for a second run through and put this down on to tape there and then. This has since transpired to be a fabricated myth, but it's a good story nonetheless.

Mooney left after recording this album and several other pieces (which can be heard on other albums) and was replaced by a Japanese singer, Damo Suzuki. Members of CAN met Damo whilst he was busking on the streets of Cologne, and immediately invited him to perform with them that very night. All of CAN's work was improvised and recorded 'live' in their studio.

Hallo Gallo by **NEU!** is again track one side one from a debut album, an album which I bought after playing this track in the listening booth in Rare Records in Manchester in 1972. Even thirty five years later it still sounds unlike any other music I have heard. You would hardly suspect from listening to the three great albums by NEU! that guitarist Michael Rother and drummer Klaus Dinger found working together mutually antagonistic. After a couple of years apart, following the almost aborted recordings for *NEU! 2*, they somehow managed enough studio time together to record *NEU! '75*, arguably their finest work and often cited as one of the blueprints for punk, before going their separate ways for good. Michael Rother subsequently made numerous solo albums, and Klaus Dinger formed La Düsseldorf with his brother Thomas.

The next track, *Miss Fortune*, is taken from the debut album by **Faust**. This was released as a clear vinyl disc in a transparent vinyl sleeve, but with as dense a collage of sound as you'll hear

anywhere. Faust were outsiders even by Krautrock standards. Coming from rural Wümme in northern Germany rather than emerging from the creative hotbeds in Berlin, Düsseldorf, Munich or Cologne, they forged their own path with particularly Avant Garde recordings, but achieved fame and notoriety in the UK when Virgin released, to great commercial success, an album of short experimental pieces, called *The Faust Tapes*, for the amazingly low price of 48p, the price of a single at the time.

Cluster were initially known as *Kluster*, and made three albums under that name until founder member Conrad Schnitzler left, to briefly join Tangerine Dream, and then record solo. To this day has continued to release an enormous number of albums, sometimes up to seven or eight a year. Sadly there's no space to feature him anywhere in this collection. The other two band members Dieter Moebius and Hans-Joachim Roedelius made several albums together, went on to play as Harmonia with Michael Rother from Neu!, and then later worked with Brian Eno, indelibly influencing his recordings with David Bowie on *Low* and *Heroes*. This is also a good point at which to mention ubiquitous producer Conny Plank, whose audio presence is felt here as he had a hand in shaping so many Kosmische albums as composer, musician and producer, and was another influence on Brian and David.

This is Krautrock, then, just as it was turning Kosmisch and becoming steadily more electronic. This became my lasting preference, but there is not enough space here to give you so much as the briefest of introductions to that world. Maybe one day, in the future...

So, no **Harmonia**, no **La Düsseldorf**, no **Popol Vuh** (who reputedly owned the first Moog synthesiser in Germany, which was later sold to Klaus Schulze), no **Deuter**, and no **Cosmic Jokers**. No CAN with Damo Suzuki, who together made their most enduring albums. Nothing from what is considered 'classic' Tangerine Dream with their synths and sequencers. Not even any archetypal Kraftwerk, since they implicitly disown their first three albums, and silently draw a veil over the album they made when initially known as **Organisation**.

I've also avoided spoiling the audio experience with any of the more 'conventional' bands, with their more traditional rock sound, such as **Nektar**, **Guru Guru**, **Birth Control**, **Xhol Caravan**, **Annexus Quam**, **Grobschnitt**, **Floh de Cologne**, or even the influential **Agitation Free**. As I said at the beginning this is a *particular* selection. But you've got to start somewhere.

This playlist was first posted on Matt Cooper-Wright's 'Internet Music Programme' in 2012.