



AS ELECTRONIC MUSIC
PIONEERS, THEY
UPENDED OUR NOTION
OF ROCK & ROLL.

BY ROB BOWMAN

MUSICAL INFLUENCE

KRAFT



The classic lineup:
Wolfgang Flür,
Florian Schneider,
Ralf Hütter, and
Karl Bartos (from
left), 1981

WERK

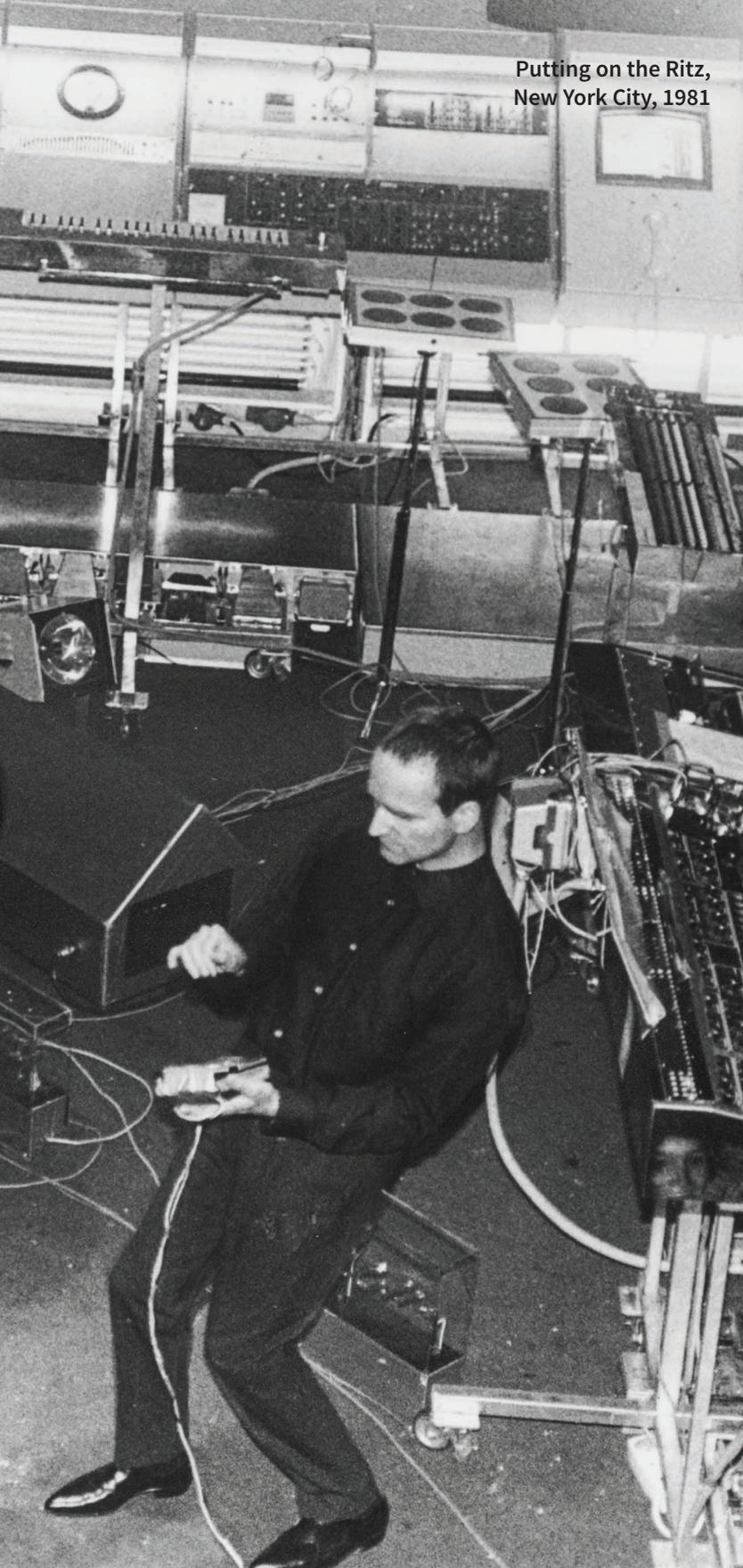


Kraftwerk, alongside the Beatles, are one of the two most influential bands in the history of postwar popular music. That is a big claim to make, but the facts back it up. In the mid-seventies, Kraftwerk singlehandedly introduced the idea of purely electronic music into the pop landscape. In the process, they completely upended the paradigm of gifted guitar gods, strutting lead singers, and the trifecta of sex, drugs, and excess that had defined rock music since its inception. The band also completely ripped apart commonplace notions of authenticity grounded in the concepts of emotional and personal expression.

Without Kraftwerk, it is impossible to imagine synth pop and many other subgenres of postpunk music. Their

influence on artists such as Gary Numan, Joy Division, New Order, Depeche Mode, Soft Cell, the Human League, and David Bowie is paramount – as was their influence on the ambient soundscapes that Brian Eno, Jon Hassell, Yellow Magic Orchestra, and other artists experimented with in the second half of the decade. As if that were not enough, Kraftwerk paved the way for virtually every type of dance and club music that followed the original flowering of disco. Electrofunk, techno, and house (as well as all the subsequent sub- and micro-genres that followed, from drum and bass to trap to New Orleans bounce) are all directly traceable to the work of Ralf Hütter, Florian Schneider, Wolfgang Flür, and Karl Bartos. Kraftwerk's sonic fingerprint can also be found in the punishing grooves of industrial bands like Throbbing Gristle and Ministry, as

Putting on the Ritz,
New York City, 1981



well as in many of the techniques and sounds commonly used in late-period progressive rock. Both Joy Division and Bowie routinely played Kraftwerk tapes for their audiences before they came onstage, and Bowie's 1977 song "V2-Schneider" was a tribute to Kraftwerk cofounder Schneider. The collective influence of the four "sound chemists" from Düsseldorf, Germany, is staggering.

Virtually every aspect of pop music for the past twenty-five years has been dominated by sampling, robotic beats, numbing repetition, cold and austere electronically generated sounds, disembodied vocals, sequencing, minimalism, and electronic sound processing of every musical parameter. All of these techniques and technologies have their roots in the aesthetic of Kraftwerk as manifested on the handful of albums they re-

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leased from *Autobahn* (1974) to *Computer World* (1981). On these records Kraftwerk coupled their radical, vast, expansive, and otherworldly soundscapes with lyrics that addressed – and ironically celebrated – the alienation of a cybernetic world of mannequins (“Showroom Dummies”), the superficial world of consumerism (“The Model”), droids (“The Robots”), cyborgs (“The Man-Machine”), nuclear waste (“Radioactivity”), online dating (“Computer Love”), and modern, soulless travel (“Autobahn” and “Trans-Europe Express”). The combination produced a retro-futurist view of life that human beings are still struggling to come to terms with.

When Kraftwerk's most fully realized album, *Computer World*, was issued in 1981, less than 1 percent of Americans owned a personal computer. For most listeners, Kraftwerk were addressing a hard-to-imagine futuristic world. Yet that world would come to fruition only a few decades later. In many respects Kraftwerk embraced the anti-romanticism and lack of self-involvement that characterized the 1920s German New Objectivity movement, foregrounding discipline, precision, dispassion, and sobriety as they balanced both severity and grandeur in their mechanized soundscapes.

Their sartorial and iconographic aesthetic was equally unique. In 1973, inspired by the British collaborative art duo Gilbert & George, Schneider cut his hair short and began adopting a neatly groomed, highly formalized appearance and manner. The rest of the band followed suit, as would many synth pop bands in the following decade. The group borrowed from Russian Constructivism's austerity and industrial nature for its album cover designs.



The German Bauhaus movement's embrace of internationalism also played a key role in the band's development. A number of their compositions were recorded in English, German, French, Spanish, Italian, and Japanese. On some pieces, such as "Numbers," words from several different languages appear side by side in the song's lyrics.

Keyboardist and synthesist Ralf Hütter and flautist, violinist, and synthesist Florian Schneider first met at the Academy of Arts in Remscheid, near Düsseldorf, in the late 1960s. Sharing a mutual interest in improvisation and electronic sounds, Hütter and Schneider were both heavily influenced by German avant-garde composer Karlheinz Stockhausen. After recording an album of freely improvised music with a group called Organisation in 1969, Hütter and Schneider began working as a duo under the moniker Kraftwerk (which means "power station"). Between 1970 and 1973, they recorded three albums: *Kraftwerk 1*, *Kraftwerk 2*, and *Ralf & Florian*, using homemade oscillators, drum machines, and tape manipulation, along with traditional instruments such

as flute, violin, piano, and organ. While all three LPs are fascinating early examples of experimental, largely improvised sound constructions, Hütter refers to them as "archaeology," and the group maintains that its career officially started in 1974 with the more pop-oriented album *Autobahn*. The radio edit of the over twenty-minute-long title track became a surprise hit, rising to Number 25 in America while peaking at Number 11 in the U.K.

Autobahn mixed vocoded vocals, traditional instruments, taped sounds, the band's custom-built electronic drum kit, a Minimoog, an ARP Odyssey, and an EMS Synthi AKS. To facilitate touring the album, in early 1975, the group added a second percussionist, the classically trained Karl Bartos.

Subsequent releases, such as *Radio-Activity* (1975), *Trans-Europe Express* (1977), *The Man-Machine* (1978), and *Computer World* (1981), were each concept albums constructed from only electronically generated sounds. With each record, the group added ever more cutting-edge gear to its arsenal, including a Votrax speech synthesizer, an Orchestron keyboard, custom-built samplers,



Kraftwerk on
the party line,
Tokyo, 1981

and a Polymoog. By the 1981 tour for *Computer World*, Kraftwerk had turned their complete Kling Klang studio into road-friendly electronic modules that could be assembled onstage. Shows concluded with Hütter, Schneider, Flür, and Bartos exiting the stage, leaving robots to play the final song. What the band called “robot pop” garnered celebratory, ecstatic responses from audiences reveling in an imagined future.

Five years later, in 1986, Kraftwerk released another album, *Electric Café* (which spawned two Number One singles on the *Billboard* dance charts). They didn’t tour again until 1991, in support of that year’s *The Mix*, a collection of remixed, reimagined versions of many of their earlier recorded pieces. Flür did not play on *Computer World* or *Electric Café* and officially left the group in 1987. Bartos exited in 1990. It wasn’t until 2003 that Kraftwerk released their most recent album of original material, *Tour de France Soundtracks*. Schneider left the group in 2008.

Hütter has continued touring as Kraftwerk, presenting increasingly elaborate shows featuring himself and three new members standing behind laptops, their digitally

produced sounds synchronized with ever more fantastic 3D computer graphics. Wholly immersive experiences for the audience, Kraftwerk concerts manifested in the world of pop music Wagner’s concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk* (“total artwork”) – combining multiple art forms in one holistically integrated package.

Kraftwerk’s classic work has been sampled and/or reproduced literally hundreds of times by artists as diverse as Afrika Bambaataa, Cybotron, LCD Soundsystem, the Chemical Brothers, Orbital, R.E.M., Dr. Dre, Jay-Z, Depeche Mode, the KLF, Timbaland, New Order, Aphex Twin, Miley Cyrus, the Orb, and the Prodigy. Both Coldplay and Madonna have worked Kraftwerk melodies and grooves into their recordings. U2, Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark, and Siouxsie and the Banshees, among others, have covered their songs.

In the words of Martin Gore of Depeche Mode: “For anyone in our generation involved in electronic music, Kraftwerk were the godfathers.” Tonight, Kraftwerk take their rightful position in the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame as musical influencers.