Kraftwerk’s Florian Schneider: The pioneer of electronica (1947-2020)

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The co-founder of the prominent German band Kraftwerk, Florian Schneider, has died aged 73. He and his collaborators were influential enough to have been dubbed “the Beatles of electronic dance music.” Their provocative presentation of themselves as a human machine owed much to German modernist and avant-garde art movements, but brought with it baggage that proved in the end to be a serious constraint.

Schneider was born in 1947 on the Swiss border, then part of the French occupation zone of West Germany, son of the important modernist architect Paul Schneider-Esleben. After spending the war as a Luftwaffe pilot, Schneider-Esleben designed the first German building with a steel frame structure. He is best known for redesigning Cologne Bonn airport.

Schneider-Esleben designed the Rolandschule (1957-1961) in consultation with Zero Group artists. Founder Josef Piene had called Zero “a zone of silence of pure possibilities for a new beginning.” Also at Rolandschule was the action artist Joseph Beuys, whose political prognostications led him to reject socialism and class criteria in favour of a theory supposedly beyond “capitalism and communism.”

This cultural background of a disoriented avant-garde in the aftermath of the Nazi horror, World War II and the division of Germany helped shape and distort the music of Schneider and his peers.

Schneider and his closest collaborator Ralf Hütter studied at the Remscheid Academy of Arts and Dusseldorf’s Robert Schumann Hochschule through a period of intense radicalisation. In 1967-1968, Schneider played flute in the group Pissoff, before joining Hütter in the improvisation quintet Organisation in 1969.

The rebellion against conservatism in universities and elsewhere, opposition to rearmament, and a determination to deal with the crimes and heritage of Nazism—suppressed since the end of the war—linked the student revolt closely to an emerging offensive by the working class. But the students were cut off from that movement by the ideological framework of the Frankfurt School and the New Left.

Instead of capitalist exploitation, the ideologists of the New Left focused their social commentary and analysis on alienation, interpreted psychologically or existentially. After 1968, the student movement disintegrated, with many of its representatives reconnecting later to form the party that would ultimately provide loyal support for German imperialism, the Greens.

This shaped the formation of Kraftwerk’s musical conceptions, as well as informing what became known as “krautrock” more generally. Schneider emphasised this sense of alienation in 1975, saying “Kraftwerk is not a band. It’s a concept—’Die Mensch-Maschine,’ the human machine. We are not the band. I am me; Ralf is Ralf. Kraftwerk is a vehicle for our ideas.”

In line with this technocratic response, Schneider and Hütter spoke of themselves as “workers,” as “sound chemists” (*Klangchemiker*) in the *Kraftwerk* (power plant). The band was also a conceptual art exercise.

“Krautrock” covers many styles and trends. It includes numerous musicians influenced by the political and aesthetic concerns of the period who were trying to forge a new popular culture outside of the constraints of American rock ‘n’ roll and the legacy of German conservatism and fascism alike.

The influences included psychedelic rock, free-form and improvised jazz, and avant-garde composition. American minimalism and Karlheinz Stockhausen’s serial composition were both influential.

Stockhausen taught many krautrock artists, and his *musique concrète* —using recorded sounds, including synthesised noises, as raw material—pointed towards Schneider’s electronica.

Attempting to grapple with what was new led them to reject the past. Hütter said, “We don’t want to end up playing Mozart and Beethoven at our local concert hall. The question is, ‘What does Germany sound like today?’ That’s where we started.”

The pair’s first band, Organisation, improvised mainly with organic instruments, although Schneider began modifying their sound electronically. The formation of Kraftwerk in 1970, initially as a duo augmented by other musicians, accelerated this development.

Schneider found the flute “too limiting,” so he introduced “a microphone, then loudspeakers, then an echo, then a synthesiser. Much later I threw the flute away—it was a sort of process.”

Their first two albums were instrumental, with tape and recording effects applied to conventional instruments. The third used drum machines, synthesisers—and a vocoder.

Schneider and Hütter opened their own studio in Dusseldorf, Kling Klang, where all production took place from their fifth album onwards. There they worked for 12 to 14 hours daily, designing and building many systems and instruments, including their own vocoder, the Robovox, as well as making music.

They began collaborating with sound engineer Conny Plank, at whose studio they made their fourth album, *Autobahn* (1974).

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Electronic percussionists Wolfgang Flür and Klaus Roder now completed the group.

This was the band's defining album. The 23-minute title track, also released as a 3½-minute single, attempted to capture the sensation of driving at high speed on the motorway. Flür said, "We used to drive a lot, we used to listen to the sound of driving, the wind, passing cars and lorries, the rain, every moment the sounds around you are changing, and the idea was to rebuild those sounds on the synth."

Its lightness and sense of detachment made it temptingly futuristic. Their first British television appearance was playing the song on the science show *Tomorrow's World*.

They continued refining their sound. *Trans-Europe Express* (1977) was inspired by David Bowie's *Station to Station* (1976), itself Bowie's first step towards embracing their own sounds. "V-2 Schneider" on *Heroes* (1977) was Bowie's tribute to Kraftwerk and its founder, whose efforts he described as "folk music of the factories."

Kraftwerk's conceptual presentation was defined by Günther Fröhling on the cover of *The Man-Machine* (1978), where the band appeared as identically dressed mannequins. Here was a mix of electronica and fashion. It was unsurprisingly arch, given that it was said to have been inspired by British artists Gilbert & George, who had exhibited in Dusseldorf in 1970. That influence can be read in the enigmatic pose Schneider would take in interviews.

It was all deliberate, ironic and humorous, but limited. The band hid behind mannequin effigies of themselves as a deadpan satirical statement of mechanical integration, with Schneider saying in 1978, "We love our machines, we have an erotic relationship with them."

Their 1975-1981 albums were the highest point of their achievements, each centring on some aspect of modern technological life: *Radio-Activity* (1975) on radio communication, *Trans-Europe Express* on travel, *The Man-Machine* on human-technology hybrids and *Computer World* (1981) on the rise of computers.

The latter spawned one of their few single hits, "The Model," a typically detached satire on fashion. By this time their influence was clear. Artists enthusiastically followed their technological lead, but mostly without embracing their detachment.

The electronic vistas Kraftwerk had opened up did not require the dehumanisation they played with. Some responded to the brutality of society with active rejection rather than Kraftwerk's aloofness. Joy Division's Ian Curtis was a fan, and Kraftwerk inspired the changed direction of New Order after his suicide.

Some sought to counter the alienation with something warmer than wry irony during the 1980s explosion of electronic music. Singer Dave Gahan was once described as the "attitude" of Kraftwerk-inspired Depeche Mode. Electronic dance instrumentation was coupled with more soulful singing. Often all these were combined, as on Heaven 17's "Temptation" "Let me go" and later collaboration with Tina Turner.

Politics was also more engaged—as with Heaven 17's "(We Don't Need This) Fascist Groove Thang," Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark's "Enola Gay" and Depeche Mode's "Everything Counts." The technological developments Kraftwerk championed were widely accepted, but generally with a different attitude to the relationship of man and machine, and the balance between them. Very few artists tried to emulate the alienation.

The electronic dance music they had inspired continues to expand. Afrika Bambaataa's breakthrough hip-hop hit "Planet Rock" (1982), in part a tribute to Kraftwerk, triggered a wave of new electro, and their influence is today pretty much universal. The NME wrote that without Kraftwerk "there would have been no New Order, acid house, Prodigy, electroclash, grime or Daft Punk." Their influence is too extensive for one article, and for the expertise of this author.

But as their influence spread, their own output slowed and became less intriguing.

This was something of an impasse of their own creation. Their last major single success, "Tour de France" (1983), applied the "Autobahn" approach to cycling, with chains, gears and the cyclist's breathing worked into the soundscape.

They appeared less in public, which was a factor in Flür and Bartos' quitting. But Schneider and Hütter continued working at Kling Klang. In the 1990s, they began playing live more regularly at dance festivals, taking a portable studio with them.

Hütter called Schneider "a sound fetishist," saying, "With electronic music there's no necessity ever to leave the studio."

Schneider, who did not enjoy live performance, left Kraftwerk in 2008. He continued working but released nothing. His last recording, a collaboration with Dan Lacksman of 1970s electronic disco group Telex, was "Stop Plastic Pollution" (2015) for environmental charity Parley for the Oceans. It coupled looped recordings of water drops with guitar chords trying to do "something other than Kraftwerk, not Kraftwerk-like," in Lacksman's words. It is as if Schneider had himself come up against the limitations of his earlier achievements.

Kraftwerk's contribution to sound, to how music is made, is enormous. Many bands have sought to confront the relationship between mankind and technology, but they have built on Kraftwerk's pioneering accomplishments while placing emphasis on the human interaction inherent within both society and music rather than either celebrating or accepting as a given the subordination of man to machine.

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