

UWE SCHÜTTE (ED.) (2017). GERMAN POP MUSIC: A COMPANION.

Review by Ulrich Adelt

As Uwe Schütte rightfully remarks in his introduction to *German Pop Music: A Companion*, despite the increased interest by German academics in film and graphic novels, »the study of popular music continues to play a somewhat underrated and neglected role« (3f). Considering the diversity and influence of pop music produced in Germany since World War II, this is unfortunate, and Schütte's anthology is therefore a welcome addition to the relatively small number of books devoted to the academic study of German pop. Given the interest especially in the UK and the US, the book will be particularly useful due to it being written in English; Schütte, in fact, managed to bring together informed academics from both inside and outside of Germany to shed light on the issue of German national identity as reflected in pop music.

In the book, the complex issue of German identity appears in light of the Nazi past, the influx of Anglo-American culture, the division of the nation in 1961, and the unfinished reunification of 1989/1990. These touchstones are directly linked to specific musical formations, from the sentimental 1950s Schlager to the countercultural 1960s Krautrock and 1990s techno. The anthology's working definition of pop music as »tied to progressive, leftist, non-conformist, emancipative notions« (5) is a bit limited and explains why the existence of right-wing rock music is acknowledged but no chapter is devoted to it; the book also excludes some of the most successful German exports that do not specifically engage with German national identity, such as the hard rock band the Scorpions, the pop duo Modern Talking, or the soundtracks by German composers for Hollywood movies. Yet, the most glaring absence is that of East German music »due to the repressive cultural politics in the German Democratic Republic (GDR)« (5). Those

repressive cultural politics could have made for a fascinating study of popular music's limitations of liberatory potential; it might require another companion to adequately represent this complex heritage that involved not state-sanctioned music but also oppositional politics.

Uwe Schütte's introduction provides an overview of German pop music after 1945 and connects the different chapters of the book. This is helpful, since some of the chapters focus on theory while others mostly list specific band biographies. Schütte is clearly an expert on the topic and only makes one misstep when declaring that unlike the German Diskursrock of the 1990s, »there is no pronounced tradition of writing songs with intellectual lyrics in Anglo-American pop music« (22). This tradition clearly exists and includes such well-known figures as Bob Dylan, Patti Smith, and Frank Zappa. Aside from this faux pas, Schütte clearly shows how his book manages to cover the main movements in German-language popular music, namely, Schlager, protest songs, Krautrock, German punk and new wave, techno, hip-hop, industrial, and indie rock.

In the first chapter, Julio Mendívil discusses how Schlager, sentimental German-language popular songs, constructed a conservative and nationalist discourse that rejected foreign influences – even when they involved performers from non-German countries or transnational themes (such as Udo Jürgens' »Griechischer Wein« [»Greek Wine«]). Although Mendívil does not fully explore the genre's complex relationships to the Neue Deutsche Welle, German new wave from the 1980s, and to the Schlager revival of the 1990s, his chapter provides a good foundation against which many later forms of music position themselves. This begins with the German-language protest songs by singer/songwriter (»Liedermacher«) Franz-Josef Degenhardt and the pre-punk rock of Ton Steine Scherben discussed by David Robb in the following chapter. It also applies to Krautrock, electronic music and psychedelic rock from the late 1960s and early 1970s, which is the topic of John Littlejohn's chapter. Both protest songs and Krautrock are connected to the West German student counterculture and are responses to the Nazi past as well as what was perceived as Anglo-American imperialism. However, one important aspect of Ton Steine Scherben's music is left out of David Robb's chapter: their engagement with alternative sexuality and spirituality, due to singer Rio Reiser's coming out as gay and his interest in Protestant Christianity.

Uwe Schütte himself devotes an entire chapter to Kraftwerk, the seminal German band that significantly influenced hip-hop and techno. Having produced what might be called »the most iconic song in German popular music« (85) with 1974's »Autobahn«, Kraftwerk has rightfully achieved more

scholarly attention than any other German group. As Schütte points out, they employ ambiguity and retro-futurism in their expression of German identity, the latter being an attempt »to fuse utopian notions with nostalgic images to create an aesthetic tension that confronts the present with unredeemed past promises of a better future« (92). The following two chapters continue the discussion of German music into the 1980s by focusing on punk (by Cyrus Shahan) and the Neue Deutsche Welle (by Christian Jäger). Shahan points out that German punk is aesthetically linked to the European avant-garde; one is left to wonder what is specifically »German« about it, since that link applies to British punk as well. Jäger's account of the Neue Deutsche Welle (NDW) is more thorough and captures the »subversive affirmation« of songs by Fehlfarben and DAF. He groups the movement into two phases, NDW I and NDW II, the former being the innovative post-punk groups that revitalized German-language music in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the latter being the highly commodified neo-Schlager and rock bands from the mid-1980s.

Alexander Carpenter's chapter then turns to industrial music by analyzing the groups Einstürzende Neubauten and Rammstein, both of which have been very successful outside of Germany. Carpenter situates the engagement with a problematic German past of the Neubauten within modernism and that of Rammstein within postmodernism, a helpful distinction. Surprisingly, Carpenter claims that industrial music originated with the British band Throbbing Gristle and forgets to mention the Krautrock group Faust, who already employed sledgehammers and other tools on stage in the early 1970s. In the following chapter on techno, Alexei Monroe also largely ignores foundational figures, in his case the African American techno DJs from Detroit, and instead discusses many specific local scenes, not just Berlin where techno was closely linked to politics of reunification, but also Frankfurt, Cologne, and Munich. In her chapter on German rap, Marissa Kristina Munderloh discusses the influence of immigrant cultures on the genre. Having slowly moved into the 1990s, the book offers a chapter by Christoph Jürgensen and Antonius Weixler on so-called Diskursrock (»discourse rock«), mostly by the German-language »Hamburg School« bands Blumfeld and Tocotronic, who have blended high art and pop/rock music, but also, rather oddly placed, by Austrian band Ja, Panik. The book concludes with Heinrich Deisl's interview with Diedrich Diederichsen, a German pop theorist with significant influence in Germany but little recognition outside the country.

Overall, the anthology by Uwe Schütte offers an excellent introduction to major developments in German popular music from World War II to the present. Despite some omissions that could have easily been fixed, the book

speaks to both casual readers and scholars. If there is one major issue that would have needed attention, it is gender, since after reading the book one is left thinking that women did not play much of a role in shaping German pop and rock music (and one can quickly cite Nina Hagen, Nena, Marusha, Sabrina Setlur, and Helene Fischer to show that this is a false perception). Yet, as one of the first (almost) comprehensive anthologies to cover German pop music, Schütte's book accomplishes an amazing feat.

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