SOUNDS GERMAN?

Popular Music in Postwar Germany at the Crossroads of the National and Transnational

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Musical undercurrent has long permeated German culture and intellectual life. For more than a century, theories and practices of folk, art, and classical music—variously understood both in their mutual interrelation and as entirely distinct—have anchored definitions of German national identity and the German cultural heritage.¹ More recently, musical styles such as jazz, rock and roll, and hip-hop have also played a key role in the emergence of new social movements and alternative sensibilities in Germany. Indeed, since the end of World War II, popular music practices in Germany have been alternatively decried as drivers of Americanization and hailed as catalysts of technological development that prompt new ways of producing and consuming music to emerge.²

This brief assessment of Germany's sonic landscape echoes much of the recent work on German music. Within the last few decades, the study of music in its various formations and figurations has yielded crucial insights into modern Germany both beyond and in concert with (pun intended) the prevalence of the textual and visual. Edited volumes such as Celia Applegate and Pamela Potter's *Music and German National Identity* (2002), Nora M. Alter and Lutz Koepnick's *Sound Matters* (2004), and Florence Feiereisen and Alexandra Merley Hill's *Germany in the Loud Twentieth Century* (2012) have explored and expanded our operative vocabularies and understandings of the impact of music on German national identity from the eighteenth century to the present.³ These works are also indicative of changes in the ways in which music and sound are addressed within German Studies. Applegate and Potter's work for instance centers on the "eclectic nature of the intersection of music with German identity, showing that this preoccupation is not exclusively a musical project but far more a complex of ideas and agendas originating from a wide range of players in German cultural and political life."⁴ Alter and Koepnick's intervention not only expands the musical focus

to include film and performance, but also complicates the picture of music's relationship to German national identity by investigating how competing conceptions of Germanness also shaped sound itself: "Sound mattered to the formation of modern German nationality, but ongoing debates about the contours of national identity also redefined the matter of sound itself."⁵ Building on this, Feiereisen and Hill's recent work asks "what does Germany *sound* like" and investigates music as but one instantiation of sound thereby accounting for different acoustic spaces and opening up the arena of German sound studies.⁶ The importance of music and sounds to German Studies has increasingly become commonplace not only between the covers of such works, but also in formats such as the Music and Sound Studies Network of the German Studies Association (formed in 2013) and in the classroom as evinced by numerous publications in *Die Unterrichtspraxis/Teaching German*.

Taking its cue from these seminal contributions, this special issue of *German Politics and Society* both narrows the view to focus on postwar German popular music and widens the frame to account for its national and transnational effects and contexts. For decades, Germany has been continually shaped and reshaped by the sounds of popular music—whether these are interpreted as uniquely tied to German history, culture, and territory (e.g., Schlager or Krautrock) or are theorized as antigens, ideological invaders from abroad. In postwar Germany, the concert hall, the grooves of the phonograph record, and the pages of the fan magazine emerged as popular music's *loci classici*—the first, and best, places one might go to find it. Engaging with popular music as subject matter in itself, writers and filmmakers increasingly turned their attention to popular musical movements, the communities that engage in them, and the political and cultural forces that such movements challenge and call forth. Beginning in the 1950s and taking root in the tumultuous 1960s, popular music became a source and site of critique, resistance, and subversion. The folk music popularized by the Beat generation in the U.S. and the British rock invasion formed and informed the soundtrack of the West German student movement's contestations of Germany's past and present and also spawned local iterations such as the rock group Ton, Steine, Scherben that "offers perhaps the most striking example of the interpenetration of popular music and popular politics."⁷ This increased prevalence of the popular also coincided with the rise of *Popliteratur* for instance in the work of Rolf Dieter Brinkmann and Hubert Fichte that contested the divide between high and low, thematized the experiences of the everyday, and gave a voice to new cultures and subcultures.

In the following decades, new musical formations such as punk, new wave, and techno similarly found literary and thereby increased popular cul-

tural footing in the works of Rainald Goetz, Thomas Meinecke, and Benjamin von Stuckrad-Barre not to mention in the pages of Germany's leading popular music magazine *Spex*. And yet, as Andrew Wright Hurley notes, since the 1980s this particular confluence of the popular began to tip in favor of the musical: "In 1980, [young Germans] spent 56 minutes per day reading books, whereas by 1995 it was only 24 minutes per day."⁸ Similarly, the challenges leveled by such musical and literary works—between "high" and "low," subversive and affirmative cultures—began to disappear as well. Popular music is no longer solely a site of confrontation and contestation, but "a vessel—and an often remarkably open one—for individuals, collectives, and institutions to fill with meaning," both musical and extra-musical.⁹ That is, popular music has not only become an arena through which to explore the shifting terrains of German history, culture, politics, and society. It is also the construction site of these discourses, continuously etching the grooves of these discourses into the sounds and practices of modern Germany. At the same time, however, the national implications of popular music cannot be thought apart from the transnational. George Lipsitz makes this clear in his exploration of various musical exchanges:

Popular music has a peculiar relationship to the poetics and the politics of place. Recorded music travels from place to place, transcending physical and temporal barriers. It alters our understanding of the local and the immediate, making it possible for us to experience close contact with cultures from far away. Yet precisely because music travels, it also augments our appreciation of place.¹⁰

Popular music, then, is situated at the intersection of the local and the global, the national and the transnational. Similar to Alter and Koepnick's dialectical understanding of sound and nation, a transnational view of German popular music forces us to reconsider how the transnational movement of music shapes the national and alternately how nationally rooted sounds and technologies reconfigure the transnational. For every influx of new music from abroad such as jazz, rock and roll, and hip-hop that was, in time, made German there were also a host of exports made in Germany that shaped the broader musical soundscape. A brief case in point serves to illustrate the complex patterns of the national and transnational at work in German popular music, namely techno.

The pioneering sounds and technical innovations of Kraftwerk, while firmly rooted within the historical and cultural context of West Germany of the 1970s, quickly exploded these parameters.¹¹ From the postindustrial regions of West Germany, Kraftwerk's new approach to music found its way to postindustrial Detroit and Chicago where it became the foundation of minimal techno and house, respectively, and spoke to a new generation

of Black musicians looking for something beyond the African-American sounds of blues, soul, and R&B.¹² In other words, as Kodwo Eshun formulates, “For Techno, Dusseldorf is the Mississippi Delta.”¹³ These new forms of techno influenced by the robotic sights and sounds of Kraftwerk would eventually find their way back to Germany. As its local popularity began to wane, many of these American techno musicians found new life in Dimitri Hegemann’s newly-formed techno club Tresor and on its eponymous record label, founded in 1991 and located near Potsdamer Platz in Berlin. What was once the site of the East-West divide was now, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, a space of reunification between the two Germanys as well as German and American techno as evinced by the 1993 compilation *Tresor II: Berlin-Detroit: A Techno Alliance*.¹⁴ More recently, Hegemann has expressed interest in opening a new club in a former Detroit factory in a way completing a musical exchange than began over three decades ago.¹⁵ The imbrication, movement, and exchange of popular music across national boundaries complicates and adds a particularly productive dimension to the study of national cultures, histories, and societies.

This special issue of the *German Politics and Society* brings together contributions from leading figures in the field of German Studies, popular music studies, and cultural studies at large. Accordingly, this volume understands the study of popular music quite broadly and seeks to expand on this by addressing German popular music’s transnational musical and cultural exchanges as well as its attendant medialities. Ranging across musical genres, time periods, and geographies, the seven contributing authors situate German popular music texts, genres, and practitioners with respect to the historical contexts with which they interacted. In her article, Sunka Simon explores the televised contests between Schlager and disco and the ways in which these contributed to and expanded notions of West German identity during the 1970s. Cyrus Shahan’s contribution similarly mines popular music’s emergent technologies in his investigation of post punk’s attempts to harness musical and technological repetition in order to critique and escape the malaise of 1980s West Germany. John Littlejohn and Seth Howes’ articles turn our focus to the other side of the Iron Curtain. Littlejohn sheds light on the cultures and politics of popular music in East Germany by examining the rise and continued influence of the rock band Die Puhdys. Howes details the DIY (do-it-yourself) media practices and aesthetics of two East German punk bands and the ways in which these participated in a German-German transnationalism that attests to new modes of popular music correspondence and collaboration between the two Germanys. Mirko Hall’s article continues with this transnational thread and

queries the potential and problematic fascist aesthetics of the British neofolk group Death in June and its reception in a reunified Germany. Maria Stehle examines two American pop musicians, Peaches and Rose McGowan, in her theorization of popfeminist practices and aesthetics that contest neoliberal gender dynamics and boundaries (both corporeal and national). Lastly, Richard Langston asks us to rethink both German Studies and Cultural Studies by exploring and reflecting on the practices of writing about popular music itself in the era of reunification and globalization.

Read together, these distinct investigations of popular music collectively survey the sociopolitical impact of these musical formations on conceptions of the German state and national identity (both before and after reunification), German thinking about gender and sexuality, and transnational cultural production and consumption. By focusing on national and transnational issues and musics, this special issue aims to expand on the ways in which the sounds, technologies, media practices, and exchanges of popular music provide a unique glimpse into the political, historical, and cultural dynamics of postwar Germany. Equally important, however, these articles demonstrate that the study of Germany and the field of German studies are not hermetically sealed endeavors, but rather add to our understanding of the multifaceted interactions of popular music and society broadly speaking.

Finally, I would like to note that the articles in this special issue are themselves the product of collaborative transnational exchange. They were first presented at the biannual German Studies Workshop at the University of Texas at Austin in March 2016 co-organized by Sabine Hake and myself. In addition to the authors presented here, this workshop also brought together German musicologists Jens Papenburg, Martin Pfeleiderer, and Michael Ahlers; historian Michael Schmidt; and Germanists Bastian Heinsohn and Peter Rehberg whose comments and contributions, though not part of this volume, were central to our discussions and to this final product.

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Notes

1. See for example Celia Applegate and Pamela Potter's edited volume *Music and German National Identity* (Chicago, 2002).
2. Uta Poiger's seminal cultural history outlines for instance the contested terrain of popular music after 1945 on both sides of the wall. See *Jazz, Rock, and Rebels: Cold War Politics and American Culture in a Divided Germany* (Berkeley, 2000).
3. Nora M. Alter and Lutz Koepnick, ed. *Sound Matters: Essays on the Acoustics of German Culture* (New York, 2004); Florence Feiereisen and Alexandra Merley Hill, ed. *Germany in the Loud Twentieth Century: An Introduction* (New York, 2012).
4. Applegate and Potter, "Germans as the 'People of Music'" in *Music and German National Identity* (see note 1), 34.
5. Alter and Koepnick, Introduction to *Sound Matters* (see note 3), 19.
6. Feiereisen and Hill, "Tuning in to the Aural Ether: An Introduction to the Study of German Sounds," in *Germany in the Loud Twentieth Century* (see note 3), 12.
7. Timothy S. Brown, "Music as a Weapon? *Tön, Steine, Scherben* and the Politics of Rock in Cold War Berlin," *German Studies Review* 32, no. 1 (2009): 1-22, here 2.
8. Andrew Wright Hurley, *Into the Groove: Popular Music and Contemporary German Fiction* (New York, 1995), 10.
9. *Ibid.*, 11.
10. George Lipsitz, *Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Postmodernism and the Poetics of Place* (London, 1994), 2.
11. See for instance Alex Seago, "The 'Kraftwerk-Effekt': Transatlantic Circulation, Global Networks and Contemporary Pop Music," *Atlantic Studies* 1, no. 1 (2004): 85-106, here 90ff.
12. See Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*. (London, 1998), 3; Sean Albeiz, "Post-soul Futurama: African American Cultural Politics and Early Detroit Techno," *European Journal of American Culture* 24, no. 2 (2005): 131-152, here 143; Kirkland Fulk, "'Ohne Musik ist alles Leben ein Irrtum:' Alexander Kluge, Techo, and the Proletarian Counterpublic Sphere," *The Germanic Review* (forthcoming).
13. Eshun (see note 12), 100.
14. Dan Sicko, *Techno Rebels: The Renegades of Electronic Funk* (New York, 1999), 172-174.
15. See J.C. Reindl, "German techno club owner eyes abandoned Detroit factory," *Detroit Free Press*, 15 October 2014; available at <http://www.freep.com/story/money/business/michigan/2014/10/14/techno-club-owner-likes-detroit/17278385>, accessed 28 November 2016.