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Lifetime Achievement Award: Kraftwerk

A tribute to Germany's groundbreaking electronic/pop band

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For those listening to radio in the United States in 1975, it must have come as quite a shock. The country was still emerging from the era of granola and natural fibers, and music was still measured by its soul and authenticity. And along came this music that sounded as mechanized as a Ford assembly plant. It was vaguely rhythmic like a busy signal. It had a melody that never stepped out of order. For mainstream audiences, Teutonic pop was born that year in the form of Kraftwerk's "Autobahn," and music would never be the same.

Kraftwerk began devising their "robot pop" in Düsseldorf, Germany, in 1970. Kraftwerk founders Ralf Hütter and Florian Schneider met as classical music students at the Düsseldorf Conservatory, originally forming the group Organisation and releasing the album *Tone Float* in the UK in 1969. They disbanded the group and reformed as Kraftwerk (German for "power station"), inspired to craft music more influenced by psychedelic art rock than machinery. By 1973's *Ralf And Florian*, Kraftwerk were truly staring down the ghost in the machine. With their follow-up, 1974's *Autobahn*, Kraftwerk hit on a trancelike, pulsing

electronic rhythm that would set the stage for the nearly countless acts that followed, from rock (the Cars, Eurythmics) to new wave (Devo, Thomas Dolby, Joy Division), pop (Giorgio Moroder), electronic/dance (Moby), and even industrial (Throbbing Gristle).

Though he was being influenced by a number of outside forces at the time, David Bowie's late '70s period in Berlin found him adopting Kraftwerk's electronic overtones and droning rhythms for his albums *Low* and *Heroes*, highly influential works in their own right, and reportedly making a direct nod to Schneider with the song "V-2 Schneider," featured on *Heroes*.

In a January 2013 article in *The Telegraph*, music critic Neil McCormick posed the question: "Kraftwerk: the most influential group in pop music history?" McCormick referenced the literally hundreds of Kraftwerk samples used by artists ranging from Afrika Bambaataa to Madonna, Jay Z and Coldplay. But in an interview for the piece, Orchestral Manoeuvres In The Dark's Andy McCluskey pointed out that Kraftwerk endured the peril of true genius: a lack of appreciation in their own time.

"When [Kraftwerk] started there was a lot of fear of technology," said McCluskey. "People said, 'Look at these robot guys making music on computers; this is wrong.' Well, it turned out that they were absolutely right, not just about music, but in their whole vision of the future man/machine synthesis. And it's not been scary, we have all embraced it and got on with our lives."

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