
**Reviewed by:** Wolf-Georg Zaddach, University of Music Weimar, Germany  
wolf-georg.zaddach@hfm-weimar.de

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*Sounds German: Popular Music in Postwar Germany at the Crossroads of the National and Transnational* is an anthology of eight contributions. These chapters present themselves as case studies and span the period from post-World War II until recent times, and close with a more general reflection on discourses around popular music. *Sounds German* is edited by Kirkland Alex Fulk, assistant professor at the Department of Germanic Studies at the University of Texas in Austin, where a preceding workshop on the topic was organized in 2016. At first glance, the title promises a sound-centred approach. It ‘is meant to be slightly ambiguous and even provocative’ (p. 2) and furthermore evokes, as Kirk explains in his introduction, questions such as: what does ‘sounds German’ essentially mean, and how can this actually be determined? However, sound as a medium is less in focus in *Sounds German*, but rather a part of the culturally and historically oriented discussions that follow.

In the introduction, Fulk proposes a perspective that revolves around ‘the constellations of popular music within and across national boundaries’ (pp. 1–2) as an answer to the problematic question of how ‘German sound’ could be characterized. By pointing out the specificity of popular music in its global and at the same time local manifestations, Fulk outlines a promising preview and a framework for the volume. He also refers to research that shows the complexity of glocal music scenes and genres within the complex history of Germany, and acknowledges recent developments of German-speaking popular music studies, which opened up to international popular music studies more intensively, with several English language publications in recent years. Fulk refers especially to Michael Ahlers’ and Christoph Jacke’s *Perspectives on German Popular Music* (2017), in which the editors emphasize the importance of transnational and cross-cultural interaction, not just in relation to
the history of popular music but also the associated academic discourse. Following up on this, Fulk points out that by studying popular music we not only understand the exchanges, transfers and transmissions of it, but we can also see that popular music itself is ‘particularly adept at capturing these flows’ (p. 4). To exemplify this approach, Fulk provides several examples—from West German Krautrock to the ‘German-American techno alliance’ (p. 7) around the Berlin-based Tresor club. In doing so, he aims at highlighting ‘the complex interactions, ambivalences, and contradictions of popular music’s flows that cut across a simple binary either/or (good/bad, pop/popular, subversive/affirmative, enlightenment/entertainment, national/transnational, and so forth) and the simplicity of what sounds, in fact, German’ (p. 8).

With this introduction, Fulk provides a broad cultural studies perspective that seems to be compatible with other—although not explicitly mentioned—concepts such as affect and practices, and with disciplines such as science and technology studies.

The chapters are arranged according to the proposed framework of national and transnational aspects of popular music, beginning with a chapter about Schlager and Disco music in West German television by Sunka Simon. By comparing the two genres, Simon can show not just how a national identity was negotiated during the 1970s, but also create a space within which to consider gender roles and heteronormativity. This is followed by a chapter about West German post-punk with a focus on new music technology and its usage by Cyrus Shahan. Here the author—who has worked intensely on West German punk and intellectuals such as Alexander Kluge and Peter Sloterdijk—discusses the examples of the bands Die tödliche Doris and S.Y.H.P.H., as well as producer Pyrolator (Kurt Dahlke), in order to show how these protagonists used technology to ‘escape the loop of West German identity and countercultural production by discovering holes in existent technology and projecting potential change through these holes’ (p. 40). While the text is insightful and relates to current research on sound objects in Germany,1 the title ‘The Birth of Autotune and the Loop of (West) German Identity’, however, is slightly misleading since the digital tool of pitch-correction did not play a role until the late 1990s. Hence, the author mentions ‘autotune’ only during the last paragraph and introduces it as ‘the vocoder’s technologically advanced present’ (p. 40). To argue that this currently unifying technology is contrary to the experimental intentions of the case studies seems a long stretch by the author. This argument does not seem entirely

convincing, particularly since the examples have already used pitch-standardizing MIDI technology, but above all because it underestimates the general standardization through digitization processes of the recording studio, which is not limited to pitch-correction (known as auto-tune).

The following chapter by John Littlejohn discusses one of the major East German rock bands, Puhdys. Littlejohn emphasizes the band’s role in the cultural exchange between East and West Germany (they were allowed to tour abroad). Seth Howes continues with a perspective on Socialist East Germany and analyses East German punk bands. Here, he describes the informal DIY production practices as well as their musical compositions. He demonstrates how the fans and musicians in East and West Germany communicated, even though the Stasi were especially keen on stopping such exchanges. In Chapter 5, Kai-Uwe Werbeck examines hip-hop in East and West Germany with a special focus on the phase after reunification. He discusses the negotiation of a new national identity and hip-hop’s transnational and transatlantic dimensions, in addition to ethnic and socio-economic positions. Mirko Hall debates right-wing populism with the example of British neo-folk band Death in June. In doing so, Hall shows how the transnational movement can create cohesion through ideology expressed in the band’s music, but also how Germany’s fascist past is negotiated in such movements. Maria Stehle sheds light on the contemporary negotiation of gender in popular music with the examples of Peaches and Rose McGowan. By demonstrating how these feminist aesthetics on the one hand contest neo-liberal structures, and on the other circulate widely within them, Stehle can acknowledge the glocal aspects of popular music by exploring different communities at the intersection of the national and transnational. The final chapter by Richard Langston offers an analysis of journalistic and academic discourses on popular music in Germany and the US with a focus on the 1980s and 1990s. Langston discusses the roles of cultural and German studies, music journalism and pop literature, and considers the flows between these from a transatlantic perspective.

This volume is one of a number of recent publications on popular music in Germany. In addition to the well-received anthology by Ahlers and Jacke (2017), German popular music studies in particular offer further publications that are only partially acknowledged in Sounds German (in part due to very recent publication dates). Melanie Schiller’s Soundtracking Germany: Popular Music and National Identity (2018), Bodo Mrozek’s Jugend, Pop, Kultur: Eine transnationale Geschichte (2019), the recent and exhaustive anthology Made in Germany: Studies in Popular Music (2020), edited by Oliver Seibt, Martin Ringsmut and David-Emil Wickström, as well as the German-language anthology One Nation under a Groove. ‘Nation’ as Kategorie populärer Musik (2020) edited by Ralf von Appen and Thorsten Hindrichs,
demonstrate a growing interest in, as well as an increase of research on, German popular music. The negotiation of the national and transnational especially seems to play an important role not only in documenting and analysing the history of popular music, but also contributing to contemporary and future debates in the case of Germany and other countries or regions as well. Indeed, Germany during the Cold War represents an interesting case, as the appropriation and further development of primarily Western popular music can be compared under different and opposing political systems, while the cultural-historical foundations were very similar. Whilst a stronger interweaving of and exchange with current discourses on popular music in Germany would have strengthened the arguments and findings of the chapters, *Sounds German* expands the perspective through its case studies and enriches the discourse with its background in German and cultural studies, in addition to providing a transatlantic perspective.

**References**


