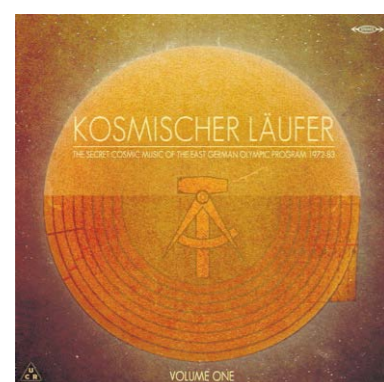


music

Teutonic training

Forty years ago, long before the fall of the Berlin Wall ushered in what certain commentators would call “the end of history” (more on that later), a fan of spaced-out cosmic music in East Germany got an unusual chance to make his communist part of the world a better, or at least fitter, place. His idea, bandied about in the early 1970s with colleagues at a sound studio in Dresden, was to make music to help train athletes for the East German Olympic team. “The music would be hypnotic,” he said. “It would bring focus.”

So intriguing was his idea that he was whisked away in a mysterious car and interrogated at an athletics camp outside Berlin, where state officials charged with making East German Olympians more imposing on the world stage were eager to hear about any new prospects to increase efficiency and effectiveness in sport. Would metronomic music, with the right rate of rhythm and a capacity to send training athletes into trance states, help in the cause? Maybe, maybe not.



Kosmischer Läufer Volume 1: The Secret Cosmic Music of the East German Olympic Program 1972-83
Martin Zeichnete, composer
Unknown Capability Recordings
Dh44

run”, with a brief opening passage for warm-up, an extended middle fit for a healthy jog, and a short tail at the end paced to wind it all down.

The ambient opening track, *Zeit Zum Laufen (Time to Run)*, introduces a sense of celestial weightlessness before *Sandtrommel (Sand Drum)* brings in a metronomic beat. And what a beat – shaking from side to side while pushing forcefully forward, it sounds somehow sympathetic to the hesitance that besets the beginning of a run – the sense that a lot of energy is about to be expended. And to what end?

It’s here that the exhilarating “motorik” sound of Germany at the time takes hold, with drums that fall into perfect sync with all the funky com-

ponents of other stuff put to work overhead. Guitar played in galloping fashion, bass that is insistent on keeping its concentration, lots and lots of synthesiser – such are the elements employed on *Kosmischer Läufer* to make people run.

The fourth track, *Tonband Laufspur (Tape Running Track)*, interestingly introduces a breakbeat that eases up the mind-erasing glide of everything that came before. It still moves at a swift pace, but the steadiness of it makes you think. Then comes a burst of guitar that drops into a chugging drone, much like the sound of stated English kosmische aficionados, Stereolab. The guitar is crisp and clear, round and expansive and many-splendoured in the way it was recorded. It brings the energy level up again.

But wait – wasn’t this recorded in 1972? How come other records from the period sound so distant and dry by comparison? And wait, now that we’re taking pause to think – is it really possible that a story so grand could have gone unknown and unchronicled for more than 40 years?

The answer, for better or worse, is probably not. Prior to the *Kosmischer Läufer* release, it seems, mentions of the ostensible creator, Martin “Z” Zeichnete, in the omnipotent archive of everything online, amount to precisely zero. There’s no mention of the programme or anything else like it, either. In answer to an email sending early word of praise and asking whether the *Kosmischer Läufer* music is really of the vintage that it claims, Drew

McFadyen, of the label Unknown Capability Recordings, wrote: “Glad you’re enjoying the music. You are free to think this release is real, fake, art, or nonsense, but it certainly isn’t a hoax.”

We’ve been down this road before, and recently. In just the past two years, the realm of electronic music has greeted the invented memories of Jürgen Müller, an alleged marine biologist-turned-hobbyist ambient-music composer, and Ursula Bognner, a departed German woman said to have made a private stash of great electronic recordings for herself in the 1960s. Neither proved to be verifiably real, but the sounds credited to them garnered much in the way of attention.

this week’s essential reading

{ ‘When Hollywood Held Hands With Hitler’ by Alexander C Kafka, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*

} ‘Evidence shows that Adolf Hitler and his Nazi Party exercised considerable influence over Hollywood, including what films went unmade and what scenes were cut’



An athlete from the former German Democratic Republic competes in the Olympic Games in 1972. Record label executives claim a new album containing electronic music was made specifically for East German athletes to train and excel at The Games held that year in Munich, Germany. AP Photo

isation of western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.”)

Such an idea is easy to disregard as overly sweeping or hubristic in its sense of scale, but what if, in the simplest terms, some sort of “end of history” in music is nigh? With the future contracting out in front and the past so fully mined that fictional history now has to stand in for the real thing, is a sense of fated stasis upon us? Does envisioning such a state represent newfound freedom from hyperawareness of the past, or is it more a failure of imagination?

Many questions spring to mind, but one answer relating to *Kosmischer Läufer* is the same either

way: it remains a great soundtrack with which to run. In that, it actually does slot in with real historical artefacts. One, just six years old, is *45:33* by LCD Soundsystem, which crafted a masterful extended-track electronic disco suite that plays around with the notion of messing with a runner’s head. (“Shame on you,” it cooly whispers near the start, just when the jogger’s sense of accomplishment begins to balloon.) Questions relating to its genuine investment in running were answered by its having been commissioned, presumably to sell shoes, by Nike.

Before that, from a slightly different vantage, came Kraftwerk’s famous fixation on bicycling. It

was put to song in the early 1980s in *Tour de France*, complete with heavy breathing by a biker seeming to exert himself as the song rolls along, and group member Ralf Hutter has been said to have, earlier in his career, cycled up to 200km a day. “Cycling,” he told an interviewer in 2009, “is like music. It is always forward.”

Was he correct? Is music, then, like cycling? Does it always move forward – progress, mutate, transform – or does it sometimes pull up and spin its wheels?

Andy Battaglia is a New York-based writer whose work appears in The Wall Street Journal, The Wire, Spin and more.

playlist

Albums that became favourites with runners, cyclists and gym enthusiasts



LCD Soundsystem

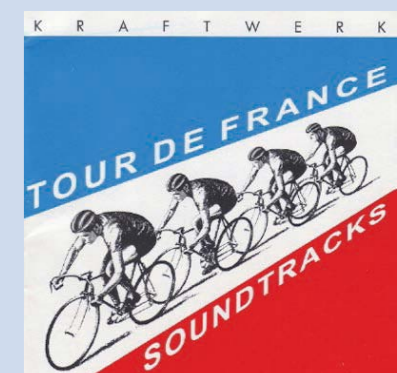
45:33

This classic jogging jam works in any context, in motion or sitting still, but there’s no overstating how helpful it can be when a run starts to drag. Get lost in the beat, forget that you are spent, and find the finish line in due course.

Kraftwerk

Tour de France Soundtracks

The robot heroes in Kraftwerk revisited and reworked their classic single *Tour de France* into extended form for a 2003 album made in mind of the French bicycle race’s 100th anniversary. Circular grooves and pumping action abounds.



Olivia Newton-John

Physical

In 1981, the previously squeaky clean *Grease* star’s smash-hit single *Physical* sported a video that made it a classic of the exercise-music arts – even if the kind of exercise maintained in a gym is not where its emphasis lies.

Various artists

The Sounds of the Office

The opposite of exercise, a day in an office can be numbing but aurally rewarding too, as exhibited on this endearingly strange record from 1964. Sample song titles tell it all: *Letter Opening, Manual Typewriter, Postage Meter and Envelope Sealer*.

