

Wir fahr'n fahr'n fahr'n auf der Autobahn

Charles Day

One day in 1975 (I've been unable to track down the date), the BBC's science and technology TV show *Tomorrow's World* opened with the German band Kraftwerk playing the title track of their 1974 album, *Autobahn*. I was 12.

Even if I hadn't found the Kraftwerk clip on YouTube, I'd still remember much about the band's TV performance. It seems conventional at first. The two keyboardists, Ralf Hütter and Florian Schneider, play Minimoog synthesizers while twiddling knobs to adjust the sound. But then the camera pans to show Karl Bartos and Wolfgang Flür using what look like knitting needles to rhythmically tap metal disks the size of drink coasters.

Perhaps anticipating viewers' puzzlement, the show's presenter, Raymond Baxter, explains in a voiceover, "Last year they removed the last recognizable instrument, the violin, and built these synthetic drums. Each disk gives a different sound—rolls, congas, snares—just by completing the contact with the spring steel batons."

Besides synthesizers and electronic percussion, the band was notable for its demeanor. With their neatly groomed hair, conservative ties, and jackets, the band members looked more like middle managers than rock musicians. I was mesmerized!

Tomorrow's World made its debut on 7 July 1965 with the goal of introducing the British public to new technologies. The show's Wikipedia entry lists some of those technologies along with the year they appeared on the show. When Sony released the world's first commercial camcorder, the Betacam, in 1983, viewers of *Tomorrow's World* would have remembered seeing Baxter introduce the technology two years earlier.

Despite the impression that Kraftwerk made on me, I wasn't a devoted fan of *Tomorrow's World*. It was broadcast during the summer in the early evening when I preferred to play outside.

Another science show that could have influenced the young me but didn't was *Horizon*, which



served as the blueprint for the PBS show *Nova*. Timothy Boon of London's Science Museum pored through the BBC's archives to discover the story of *Horizon's* conception in the mid 1960s. His research, which appeared in 2015 in the *British Journal for the History of Science*, volume 48, page 87, revealed that it took four years of research and planning to devise an enduringly successful format: a documentary shot on location, based around interviews with scientists, and without an on-screen presenter.

What accounted for my lack of interest in science TV? It could have to do with what TV offered and what I chose to watch. Factual shows that weren't news or current affairs were relatively rare. Perhaps because I read so many books, I turned to TV for entertainment, not knowledge. The documentary series that transfixed me during my school years, *The World at War* (1973) and *All You Need Is Love: The Story of Popular Music* (1977), are, significantly, just two in number.

Without inspiration from TV, my interest in science grew anyway as I attended classes in biology, chemistry, and physics in secondary school. I didn't need a charismatic presenter or theatrical experiments to get me hooked. But I was lucky to have excellent teachers in my state school in North Wales. Without them, I might have devoured *Tomorrow's World* and *Horizon*.

On page 26 of this issue, historian of science Ingrid Ockert recounts the genesis of *3-2-1 Contact*, a children's science show that ran on PBS in 1980–88. My wife was an avid fan who can still sing the show's theme song. When I asked her what she liked about the show, she had a ready answer: "It taught me I could solve problems by asking questions. I could connect the dots myself. At school we pretty much just learned facts." 

**WHAT SCIENCE SHOWS DID
PHYSICS TODAY'S EDITORS WATCH
AS CHILDREN? HOW DID THE
SHOWS INFLUENCE THEM?**

**Click on
physicstoday.org/jan2021d
to read their reminiscences.**