



writingambientmusic

Not since the futurists has a musical movement inspired the writing of so many manifestos. Ever since Brian Eno sat down to explicate the aesthetics of "discrete music,"¹ every attempt to discuss ambience has begun with an elaborate discussion of its history. In addition to this historiographical urge, many manifesto writers have also felt the necessity to place that history in terms of the music's metaphysics - its transcendent value. Today, in the mad dash to answer the question, "What is ambient music?" - typically asked of record companies and magazines trying to nail down the latest craze among *young people* - manifesto-making has become a boom industry.

It used to be that the British had a corner market on this sort of marketing hybrid. Who can forget the punk polemics of Malcolm McClaren or the excess-rhetoric of Paul Morley? Certainly the careers of the Sex Pistols and Frankie Goes to Hollywood owed their success largely to the musicological marketing of McClaren and Morley, respectively. The rise (and rise) and ambient music, has presented us Americans with an opportunity to catch up in the manifesto department.

Central to this exercise is the felt need to contextualize ambient music within the musical avant-garde and, more specifically, the developments of electronic music. Whether the writer begins with Brian Eno's polemics from the 1970s or extends back to John Cage's *4'33"*, a score for silence first performed in 1952, no ambient explicator seems to be able to resist the desire to historicize the movement. Whether the manifesto is Kim Cascone's program for a new age of metaphysics or Terre Thaemlitz' declaration of a materialist music, the intention persists to establish the singularity of an ambient genre.

Perhaps the need to polemicize in writing stems from a desire to explain the manifesto-impulse. Or rather, to give a grounding and a context to a form of music which so often makes claims of transcending context. If the musical genre is indeed this transcendental trip to higher states of consciousness (typically anticipated in idealist, immaterial terms), over and above culturally-determined experience, then there would be no need for a manifesto. General intelligibility of the music would render the need for writing obsolete. And yet what ambient compilation hasn't included some sort of new age sermon? Just pick up the compilations on Moonshine, Silent, Astralwerks, Beyond Records, etc. While individual artists may not release as specific statements as those written by Youth for the Art of Noise *Ambient Collection*,² many artists include credit lists that, by evoking the name of his or her precursors, compose a sort of history for themselves. Mixmaster Morris' catalog of references in the liner notes for the first album from *Irresistible Force* is just one example of this.³

Similarly, the lexicon of icons that grace many album covers with spacemen, dolphins, cyber-hippy graphics, appropriated Eastern symbols, these images form another type of manifesto writing. Which brings us to the music. Just as specific images have been canonized as summarily "ambient" so too an entire

catalog of sounds have been collected and authorized as officially ambient in significance. All of these examples serve as a sort of language system to express and to define the form of music called ambient.

However, isn't it contradictory that something transcendental be reduced to language at all? This is the great contradiction within ambient music - a contradiction that poses many possibilities for pleasure. In the same breath that ambient music is stylistically described as ethereal and mystical, its experience is radically sensual. The most obvious example of this truth was put on display at the "ambient-in" held in the Spring of 1994 in San Francisco featuring Space Time Continuum, Velocette, Irresistible Force and Pete Namlook. In the same moment that sight and sound beckoned participants to give up their material states for a "higher state of mind," the most electric element in the event was the pressure of a hundred bodies strewn around the floor like a giant libidinal slumber party. We might do well to remember what Brian Eno has said about ambient music being the people who experience sound. After all, it is the channeling of sound-waves through the physical corpus that forms the experience of music.

This subject brings us to those projects by artists that explore the physiology of sound frequencies. While not traditionally categorized as ambient artists (perhaps because of the materialism of their work), artists such as Etant Donnes, The Hafler Trio and V2 group in Netherlands, have conducted a number of remarkable sound sculptures using amplified frequencies generated internally and externally by physical objects such as the human body. The Hafler Trio's own attempts to extend their range into more danceable forms (the *H3öH* and *Designer Time* collaborations with Hilmer Örn Hilmerson and Reptilicus, respectively) and discrete forms (the Cosmic Trigger album) may bring them closer to the boundaries of a rigidly defined ambient music.⁴ We might also look into the work of Pete Namlook where musical ambience is composed from processed voices in conversation (his collaboration with Charles Uzzell-Edwards, *A New Consciousness*).⁵ Nevertheless, it is not our purpose to assert a correct aesthetic for all ambient musicians. Rigid musical academicism is the one element of Theodor Adorno's legacy we wish not to inherit.

Our concern, as always, is a matter of use for pleasure. That is, extreme, excessive pleasure directed against structures of oppression and exploitation. The pathway is always already that of transformation. We believe - through the experience of activist practice, and through tempering an activist theory - transformation begins in the context of our relations. Thus, for Ultra-red, ambient music is that context, that starting place. It is both the amplification of our situation and, via transmission, its transformation.

Perhaps this is the impulse that lies behind writing ambient music. While we may find comfort and even liberal bliss in a transcendent musicology - we are reminded of the Lutheran piety of Bach and the Catholic ecstasy of Verdi - writing is the material context of music's intelligibility: not what the music lacks, but what the rhetoric of music's transcendence denies us. The more we write, the more we amplify the more we frustrate our metaphysical urge. Perhaps it is an urge whose suspension is long overdue.

First written for the second issue of *Contact* (May 13, 1994), this essay also appeared in the program for the two-day ambient music event, *Before and After Ambient* at The Kitchen in New York city, November of 1994. Special thanks to Ben Neil for inviting our participation in that historic event.

¹ Brian Eno, *Discreet Music* (London: Editions EG, 1975).

² NY: PolyGram Records, 1990.

³ Irresistible Force, *Flying High* (London: Rising High Records, 1992).

⁴ *H3öH* (London: Ash International, 1994); *Designer Time* (Portland, OR: Staalplaat, 1994); Cosmic Trigger, *Polar Regions* (SF: Silent, 1993).

⁵ Frankfurt, Germany: FAX +40-69/450464, 1994.

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