

## AMBIENT MUSIC

The concept of music designed specifically as a background feature in the environment was pioneered by Muzak Inc. in the fifties, and has since come to be known generically by the term Muzak. The connotations that this term carries are those particularly associated with the kind of material that Muzak Inc. produces—familiar tunes arranged and orchestrated in a lightweight and derivative manner. Understandably, this has led most discerning listeners (and most composers) to dismiss entirely the concept of environmental music as an idea worthy of attention.

Over the past three years, I have become interested in the use of music as ambience, and have come to believe that it is possible to produce material that can be used thus without being in any way compromised. To create a distinction between my own experiments in this area and the products of the various purveyors of canned music, I have begun using the term Ambient Music.

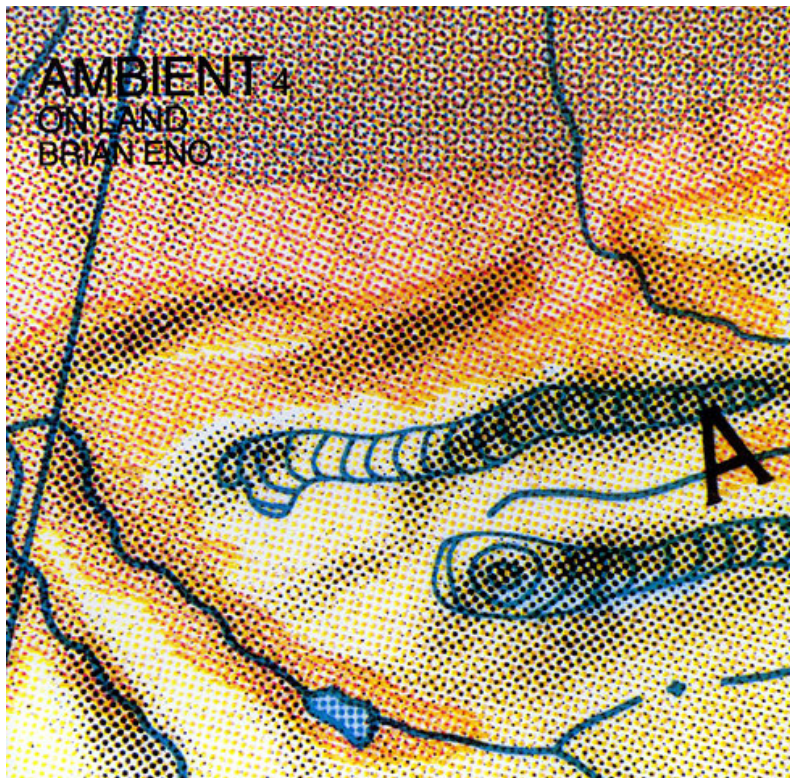
An ambience is defined as an atmosphere, or a surrounding influence: a tint. My intention is to produce original pieces ostensibly (but not exclusively) for particular times and situations with a view to building up a small but versatile catalogue of environmental music suited to a wide variety of moods and atmospheres.

Whereas the extant canned music companies proceed from the basis of regularizing environments by blanketing their acoustic and atmospheric idiosyncracies, Ambient Music is intended to enhance these. Whereas conventional background music is produced by stripping away all sense of doubt and uncertainty (and thus all genuine interest) from the music, Ambient Music retains these qualities. And whereas their intention is to 'brighten' the environment by adding stimulus to it (thus supposedly alleviating the tedium of routine tasks and leveling out the natural ups and downs of the body rhythms) Ambient Music is intended to induce calm and a space to think.

Ambient Music must be able to accommodate many levels of listening attention without enforcing one in particular; it must be as ignorable as it is interesting.

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September 1978



“realistically” to evoke spaces that were recognizable. From “Another Green World” onwards I became interested in exaggerating and inventing rather than replicating spaces, experimenting in particular with various techniques of time distortion. This record represents one culmination of that development and in it the landscape has ceased to be a backdrop for something else to happen in front of; instead, everything that happens is a part of the landscape. There is no longer a sharp distinction between foreground and background.

In using the term landscape I am thinking of places, times, climates and the moods that they evoke. And of expanded moments of memory too... One of the inspirations for this record was Fellini’s “Amarcord” (“I Remember”), a presumably unfaithful reconstruction of childhood moments. Watching that film, I imagined an aural counterpart to it, and that became one of the threads woven into the fabric of the music.

## LINER NOTES TO “ON LAND”

The idea of making music that in some way related to a sense of place - landscape, environment - had occurred to me many times over the years preceding “On Land”. Each time, however, I relegated it to a mental shelf because it hadn’t risen above being just another idea - a diagram rather than a living and breathing music. In retrospect, I now see the influence of this idea, and the many covert attempts to realise it, running through most of the work that I’ve released like an unacknowledged but central theme. This often happens; you imagine a territory rich in possibilities and try to think of how you might get to it, and then suddenly one day you look around and realise that you have been there for quite a long time.

My conscious exploration of this way of thinking about music probably began with “Another Green World” (1975). On that record I became aware of setting each place within its own particular landscape and allowing the mood of that landscape to determine the kinds of activity that could occur. Working from the realisation that my music was less and less connected with performability but was created in and of the studio, I took advantage of the fact that music produced in recording studios (rather than music reproduced by studios) has the option of creating its own psychoacoustic space. Most frequently this has been achieved by mechanical or electronic echoes and delays: short repeat echoes connoting rectilinear urban spaces, for example, and until recently, these possibilities have been used

What qualified a piece for inclusion on the record was that it took me somewhere, but this might be somewhere that I’d never been before, or somewhere I’d only imagined going to. Lantern Marsh, for example, is a place only a few miles from where I grew up in East Anglia, but my experience of it derives not from having visited it (although I almost certainly did) but from having subsequently seen it on a map and imagining where and what it might be. We feel affinities not only with the past, but also with the futures that didn’t materialize, and with the other variations of the present that we suspect run parallel to the one we have agreed to live in.

The choice of sonic elements in these places arose less from listening to music than from listening to the world in a musical way. When I was in Ghana, for instance, I took with me a stereo microphone and a cassette recorder, ostensibly to record indigenous music and speech patterns. What I sometimes found myself doing instead was sitting out on the patio in the evenings with the microphone placed to pick up the widest possible catchment of ambient sounds from all directions, and listening to the result on my headphones. The effect of this simple technological system was to cluster all the disparate sounds into one aural frame; they became music. *(continued on next page)*

Listening this way, I realised I had been moving towards a music that had this feeling; as the listener, I wanted to be situated inside a large field of loosely-knit sound, rather than placed before a tightly organised monolith (or stereo-lith, for that matter). I wanted to open out the aural field, to put much of the sound a considerable distance from the listener (even locating some of it “out of earshot”), and to allow the sounds to live their lives separately from one another, clustering occasionally but not “musically” bound together. This gave rise to an interesting technical difficulty. Because recording studio technology and practice developed in relation to performed music, the trend of that development has been towards greater proximity, tighter and more coherent meshing of sounds with one another. Shortly after I returned from Ghana, Robert Quine gave me a copy of Miles Davis’ “He Loved Him Madly”. Teo Macero’s revolutionary production on that piece seemed to me to have the “spacious” quality I was after, and like “Amarcord”, it too became a touchstone to which I returned frequently.

As I made these pieces, I began to take a different attitude towards both the materials and the procedures I was using. I found the synthesizer, for example, of limited usefulness because its sound tended towards a diagrammatic rather than an organic quality. My instrumentation shifted gradually through electro-mechanical and acoustic instruments towards non-instruments like pieces of chain and sticks and stones. Coupled with this transition was an increasing interest in found sound as a completely plastic and malleable material; I never felt any sense of obligation about realism. In this category I included not only recordings of rooks, frogs and insects, but also the complete body of my own earlier work. As a result, some earlier pieces I worked on became digested by later ones, which in turn became digested again. The technique is like composting: converting what would otherwise have been waste into nourishment.

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1982, revised February 1986