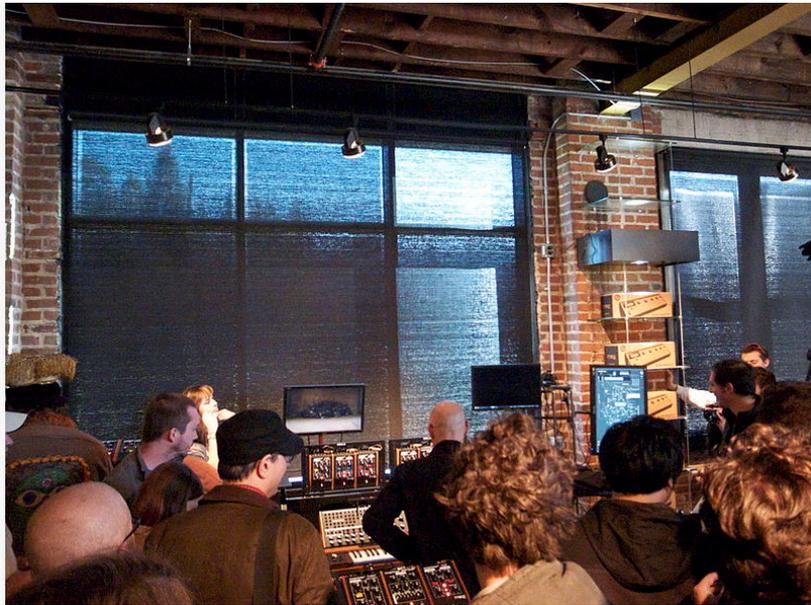


The case of a strange masterpiece!

Back in 1978 an album appeared by a respected pop musician that drew considerable flack from all sides of the musical world. It was not pop music or rock; it was not classical or experimental; it was not light music or jazz. Yet from then until now it remains one of the finest albums and forays into a sub-genre of music by any serious musician.



Brian Eno at the Moog factory in 2011. Photo by Gina Collecchia

“Ambient 1: Music for Airports” by the legendary **Brian Eno** must stand as one of his finest albums. It crosses the divide of serious art music, ambient, popular and experimental music in a way no other album other than Mike Oldfield’s *“Tubular Bells”* has done before or since.

Eno had been a member of Roxy Music during their glam rock days; he worked with Bowie in Berlin; he has been involved with many other artists and groups such as Coldplay and Laurie Andersen; and produced seven of U2’s albums. He also created the start up music for Microsoft’s Windows program, so we do all know his music! But as a solo artist he is a main player in ambient and generative music.

The style of the music is hard to describe. But if I were to try, it would be easier to describe the *influences* rather than the *music*. Eno is an eclectic and is obviously affected by what he hears around him. The work of the minimalists Glass and Reich are evident in a large degree; muzak, psychedelia, and ‘world’ all have a large bearing on this four track album.

The concept of ‘ambient’ stems from the muzak of lifts and department stores of the 1950s when Muzak Inc developed the idea of background music. Little did they know that sixty years later nearly all music would be treated as background to our increasingly busy lives and shortened listening spans. The idea of muzak was to take popular tunes and re-arrange them in a lightweight and derivative manner, to synthesise the tunes down to a banal level. This has led discerning musicians of all genres to dismiss it entirely as pulp and of no importance.

Eno, on the other hand, became fascinated by the idea of music as ambience back in 1975 and experimented with it until 1978 when this wonderful album was released. He went on to release three further albums entitled “Ambient”, to lesser success, using the same ideology of creating serious art music as ambient music.

The music drifts and takes the listener on a long calm journey to nowhere. This though is part of the concept of the music and by the end of the album you feel as if you have travelled a long, long way from where you began and are now on the threshold of something intangible: emptiness and eternity.

Calmness and dreamlike sound worlds that remain unaltered for the whole track take the listener on an emotionless yet emotional head trip, the likes of which must have appealed to the post hippy drug world and acted like a counter-culture to the counter-culture of the punk era. The main instruments are only the piano (played by the great Robert Wyatt), wordless female voices and electronic synthesizers. The tracks go by the un-emotional titles of 1/1, 2/1, 1/2 and 2/2, after their position on the original vinyl LP.

This album has always been near the front of my listening load and it always will be. There is something very British about it that, like the music, is extremely hard to define and pinpoint – just like Eno himself: enigmatic, likeable – loveable even – but infuriating at the same time.

No one knows how to categorise the album or its individual tracks. Just listen and enjoy the journey. This is pre-Ibiza chill-out by forty years and yet is part of the same culture, only better. As Eno writes in the liner notes to the CD: *“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”*

I do believe that this album works as one of the best examples of its sub-genre.