Wesleyan University

Ambient Music

by

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The Ambient Belief System

an Introduction

I wanted to make a kind of music that existed on the cusp between melody and texture, and whose musical logic was elusive enough to reward attention, but not so strict as to demand it. (Brian Eno, from the liner notes to *Neroli*, 1993)

Brian Eno and many other composers work in a style that fans call “dark ambient music.” As a commercial category, it enjoyed widespread recognition only in the last few years, but it dates back to 1972 and Eno’s and Robert Fripp’s *No Pussyfooting*, the first self-described ambient album. Contemporaneous with Eno’s experiments with “sonic wallpaper” (his term for ambient music), the industrial culture movement in England was underway, experimenting with noise, shock, and auto-destructive art, and British progressive rock and psychedelia were breaking down the traditional rock band format and moving beyond the three-minute pop song format. What ties these three movements together is that they all came out of the British art schools of the late 1960’s and early 1970s; that they were intellectual and highly planned; and that the artists involved worked in isolation – from each other and their fans.

Dark ambient music, which I will simply call “ambient” or “ambient music” hereafter, thus has a rich twenty five-year history of theory and philosophy, a reflection of the varied visual, sonic and written art of the art schools. Not all of ambient’s developments originated in Britain, however. In
Germany, the U.S. and Canada, the source of key experimental rock groups, the genre known as “space music” developed in tandem with ambient. In New York City, minimalist composers were integrating concepts from Indian raga, experimental intonation systems, and electronic synthesis into long meditative performances.

As the compositional form of ambient music continues to evolve, there have been changes in the way fans discuss the music. Debates over what works are ambient have led many fans to conceive of the genre as a way of listening to music, rather than an established canon of compositions. In describing this, some fans mention listening rituals, altered states of consciousness, and firmly held theories about the power of the music to communicate visual imagery. In addition to studying ambient music as a compositional form, I will also present it as a belief system, and my term “ambient belief system” refers to the rituals, beliefs, and sacred history that surround ambient music.

First, I attempt to make some sense of the musical origins of ambient music, which are broader than what I described above. Chapter 1 defines six “trajectories,” which start from a cluster of musicians working in a subcultural music scene and trace their paths and ideas as they are transformed into a component of the ambient belief system. Here I also trace the history of music recording, looking critically at issues such as Walter Benjamin’s concept of musical “aura,” the debate over sampling and musical theft in other musical forms; this sets the stage for ambient composers’ justification for their compositional techniques. Chapter 2 profiles six major composers, selected
primarily because of the significant amount of information on them in print. The mystique surrounding their work and personal lives mirrors their compositions and creative techniques, and to understand their appeal to fans I have suggested how each represents a certain “archetype.” In chapter 3 I look at the fan base of ambient music, including a basic ethnography and the results of surveys conducted on the Internet. A detailed profile of one ambient listener is also included.

A tantalizing mystique surrounds the possibility that ambient music induces altered states of consciousness, particularly those thought of as “waking dreams.” Chapter 4 explores the rituals that listeners engage to attain these experiences as well as ambient music’s affinity with fantasy and science fiction literature and role playing games. As nothing exists in print on the structure of ambient music or the studio techniques that are used to create it, in chapter 5 I propose why it is so difficult to analyze and offer six sample analyses of important pieces. Much of the production is hush-hush, so I can work only with my anecdotes and my own knowledge of the recording studio. Chapter 6 is a case study of my own music, which I believe parallels some of the compositional structures of better known ambient composers.

This thesis is the most recent work in a lineage of subcultural studies of postmodern popular music genres, although, as I will demonstrate, ambient music relates differently to the mainstream than other better-studied subcultures do. The main studies referenced for the construction of this work are Sarah Thornton’s Club Cultures, a look into the British underground club
scenes of the 1980’s; Simon Frith and Howard Horne’s Art Into Pop, which gives an excellent history of the British art school scene and the emergence of punk rock from these roots; and David Toop’s Ocean of Sound: Aether Talk, Ambient Sound and Imaginary Worlds, conceived as an aural history of the twentieth century and which includes a number of interviews with ambient, dub, and jazz musicians.¹ A major inspiration for my composer profiles were the excellent examples of cross-cultural micromusics and the studies of bimusicality in Mark Slobin’s Subcultural Sounds: Micromusics of the West.

One way in which this work differs from the works listed above – and the main problem in organizing this thesis – is that the ambient music scene is not dead yet. In fact, it probably has not even peaked! Thornton’s work is an invaluable study of the trendy club scene of London and how localized movements such as acid house come – and go. The retrospective Art Into Pop looks at the already passé British punk rock movement, and many of the composers profiled in Ocean of Sound are no longer alive but live on in print and CD re-issues. At the point of publication of this thesis, almost all the artists are still composing ambient music, and they continue to work (as do their fans) in an anarchistic and non-deterministic environment. It is still possible to see the incongruities of the ambient music belief system. For example, there is the tricky relationship between the purported non-commercialism of the artists and

¹ Two other popular music monographs consulted as sources in subcultural studies were Robert Walser’s Running With the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music and
the fact that they make their living by selling CD’s; there is also the discrepancy between the living naturalistic experiences that happen in bedrooms around the world and the mass-produced disc of binary information that is created in an artificially inseminated recording studio. I imagine that as ambient music fades into memory these discrepancies will be erased. This thesis, in part, delights in the chance to witness the unpredictable evolution of a living musical form.

**Personal history with ambient**

As this thesis is in part a personal reflection on the aspects of life that have inspired me to compose and listen to ambient music, it is appropriate to describe something of my background in it. My initial musical impulses were fired by my parents’ passionate interest in Scott Joplin ragtime and Bartok string quartets. We went to many ragtime and new music concerts, and at age nine I remember writing my first piano composition – a crude piano representation of a hummingbird sound. The ambient sounds of nature interested me intensely from an early age, and living close to a large national forest and the expansive Pacific Ocean provided an vast array of natural sounds.

I first heard composed ambient music in the late 1980’s, on the college radio station KCSB. They broadcast several space music shows and also the syndicated “Music From the Hearts of Space,” featuring space music, new age,

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Martin Stokes’ *The Arabesk Debate: Music and Musicians in Modern Turkey*, which are about heavy metal and Turkish pop music, respectively.
and the ambient music of Brian Eno and David Sylvian. By the time I was a student at the University of California at Santa Barbara in 1990, I had heard a great deal of music in this vein and was interested in composing music based on “natural” structures. A chance roommate assignment in my sophomore year paired me up with my good friend Alex Donahue, who introduced me to the music of Jon Hassell, Steve Roach, and others. Together, we spent large portions of our college budgets on new ambient music CD’s and devoted all our free time to listening in a dark room, on headphones. We found out about interesting CD’s from two sources: tracing the musical lineages of ambient composers to see if they had collaborated on some rare recording with other interesting artists, creating complete collections of several artists’ work; or through the miraculous Internet, an oasis for obscure taste cultures such as the ambient music subculture. A simple query on the ambient newsgroup about peoples’ “favorite ambient albums that sound like Brian Eno” could generate dozens of eager responses.

After much listening and two years of music composition lessons at U.C.S.B., I gained access to the electronic music labs and began working on several tape pieces. In one, I simulated various atmospheric phenomena, creating artificial representations of rain, thunder, hail, and the like. Other pieces, composed with the computer program “cmusic,” explored manipulations of the timbres of sampled trumpet and ambient sounds. I structured most of the pieces on existing models of Jon Hassell and Robert Fripp but used different timbres to construct the pieces. The culmination of my west coast involvement
in the ambient music scene was as a performer in an industrial band with ambient leanings. We performed on KCSB radio shows on several occasions and produced the soundtracks to two underground films. Our sound sources were mostly amplified gamelan instruments and electric guitar feedback, though we used distorted vocalization, too. These radio shows broadcast late at night and once ran past dawn, attracting a surprising number of listeners, most in altered states (either music-induced or drug-induced, we don’t know which). Their phone messages, quite incoherent in content, became excellent sound material for the radio show. The producer of the show, Jason Brown, has run an ambient program at KCSB for six years, and I am indebted to him for the insight he has provided in interviews, personal conversations, and musical collaboration.

Since 1996, I have worked as an ambient DJ for the local radio station, WESU Middletown. I have also been hard at work in the electronic music studio at Wesleyan University, composing a number of pieces with samples of commercial recordings. The summer of 1996 in California was productive, as I discovered the music of dozens of obscure ambient groups, many of whom I am writing about in this thesis. I also made many recordings of ambient sounds, both “natural” (insects and frogs) and “industrial” (hums from factories, road construction noises) that will be incorporated into my next phase of compositions. I also began codifying the notions of the musical interest I find in ambient spaces, and I began intellectualizing about the unique nature of ambient music in terms of listenership and the listening “technique.” My
interest in writing this thesis is largely in refining my personal beliefs about the ability of ambient music to communicate through the subconscious; I also have a keen interest in how people perceive music and in how “nonmusical” sounds can become “musical.”

Acknowledgments

First I would like to thank Mark Slobin, my advisor, who has made this thesis happen in more ways than I can possibly recount. The intellectual questions he posed, the philosophy, popular music, and sociology texts which he introduced, and his tact in steering me away from dead-end issues were my inspiration to pursue ambient music to the end. I also thank three other Wesleyan professors who have given considerable help: Gage Averill, Peter Hoyt, and Ron Kuivila. Professor Hoyt coached me on romantic theory and tuned me in to the Memoirs of Berlioz, and Professor Kuivila’s course on recording raised some difficult questions of copyright, theft, authenticity, and aura.

I am indebted to my mother, Caroline Bates, for the extensive editing and questioning she did of my first complete draft. Without her insightful critique and help on writing style, the ideas I had would have never gotten across. She was also always there to hear about some new “discovery” I had made (even when my discovery was really old hat). My father, too, offered
some excellent suggestions, particularly concerning theft (which concerned him greatly from a legal standpoint).

In Santa Barbara, I wish to thank my U.C.S.B. teachers Scott Marcus and Joann Kuchera-Morin. Professor Marcus, with his courses in Arab music and tuning systems, opened my ears to non-equal tempered musics. Professor Kuchera-Morin was my primary composition mentor, and with the courses in electronic music began my interest in the timbre of sounds. From her I also learned all the basics of the recording studio, the physics of acoustics, and most importantly how to organize sounds into a coherent piece of music. Additionally, thanks go to Jonathan Kessler and Beth Moscov for their help in lucid dreaming (studying and practicing).

The summer of 1996 in Santa Barbara was when I began formulating theories about ambient music and the potential of the music to invoke images of landscapes; it was also when I pondered the attributes of fans which distinguish them from pop music fans. Many of these ideas were worked out in conversations with Alex Donahue and Jason Brown, both whose ideas appear later in this thesis in interview format, but who deserve credit for much more. Additionally, I acknowledge the Internet community, whose never-ceasing posts provide bountiful food for thought, and who made the ethnographic survey possible.

Finally, I wish to thank Jim Farrington in the music library of Wesleyan, who located a number of essential ambient recordings and helped with my initial search for articles and books, and the whole staff of the interlibrary loan
department, who endured one hundred and thirty article requests without flinching. Last but not least are the charming employees of Klekolo's World Coffee, who provided me with the hundreds of Aztec Breakfast Blends that stimulated my creative flow.
Part 1

trajectories and composers

Ambient music is the product of such a striking collision of music genres and ideologies that no one mode of analysis is sufficient. These two chapters provide two modes of analysis. The first is the trajectory, tracking the evolution of genres, artists, and fans. The second is the archetype, distinguishing the most important affinities that unite composers and listeners. Though I mention a large number of musicians who might not be familiar to the reader, I hope that the writing alone is able to convey a sense of the different backgrounds of composers and listeners. Appendix b is a selective discography, both of ambient music and of major recordings in several of the trajectories, and it is intended to be used in conjunction with a reading of chapters 1 and 2. In the second part of appendix c, the bibliography, are additional readings on select artists, which offer the reader more detail on the compositional practices and ideologies than was feasible to reprint here.
Chapter 1

trajectories

To describe the complex musical background of even one ambient artist would be impossible. David Toop’s *Oceans of Sound* connects developments in ambient music with the changing soundscape of the noisy twentieth century that has seen hundreds of musical genres come and go. Walking through a shopping mall, one hears different soundtracks in each store, along with the sounds of thousands of man-made machines, and in honor of the cacophony that fills our day-to-day lives, ambient composers create soundtracks to imaginary worlds.

To make some sense of the sources of ambient music, I will profile six “trajectories,” that originate in an established music scene or a cluster of related musicians and travel through musical spaces to arrive at the site of ambient composing and compositions. They show not only the musical origins of key ambient albums, but also the progress of musical sensibilities and affinities experienced by composers and fans alike. The trajectories all start in countercultural scenes, and though not in all cases, the pre-ambient works are “programmatic” (they have a subtext, either of political ideology or narrative
mythology) while the ambient derivatives are like the romantic notion of “absolute music.”

The trajectories I propose in this chapter are by no means an exhaustive set of influences, musical or philosophical, but guide the reader toward recognizing key concepts of the ambient belief system: first, that ambient is more than a set of musical compositions or musical roots; second, that it has innumerable contradictions built into its philosophy and musical structures; and third, that it reflects the fragmentation of society into “bedroom cultures,” with the values of the music representing the recent interiorization of America and Europe.

The first and most important trajectory comes from British industrial culture in the early to mid-1970’s. Groups such as Throbbing Gristle, Non, SPK, and Z’ev, and performance artist Mark Pauline experimented with noise, timbre, shock, occult imagery, and altered states of consciousness while espousing attitudes on work and isolationism that form the core of current ambient philosophy. These artists grew up in the British art school scene of the 1960’s and 1970’s, where they were exposed to the writings and art of 1950’s “danger musicians,” 1930’s futurists, and 1910’s surrealists. Many of the current artists on the labels distributed by World Serpent (Charrm, Staalplaat, Soleilmoon, ...)

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This distinction is described by Lydia Goehr in a passage which references Weber and Dahlhaus: “Composers found another resolution [to the dilemma of individual genius versus spiritual enlightenment] when they began to describe their music either as absolute or as programmatic. Their descriptions rested heavily on the romantic terms that had given instrumental music its autonomy... In both, meaning was achieved through the unique qualities of instrumental sound, though whether the music embodied ‘transcendent’ content of...
Grey Area of Mute, Cold Meat Industries) are these industrialists, working in the similar milieus of industrial and ambient music, while many others are the generation of artists who grew up listening to industrial music.

The second trajectory describes two individuals who essentially created “ambient music,” at least as a label for their work. Brian Eno and Robert Fripp released *No Pussyfooting* in 1972 and collaborated on several other works with their tape loop compositions. Eno went on to gain fame as a record producer (for U2 and David Bowie) and for his seminal ambient works *Ambient 1-4, Apollo*, and *Music for Films*, which texturally inspired most of the subsequent ambient music. Fripp adapted the ambient music work he created with Eno into a one-man show by keeping the same old Revox tape units but performing live with his electric guitar. Eno and Fripp are important not just for their albums but as cultural icons and as writers able to articulate the philosophy of ambient music.

New York minimalism is the focus of the third trajectory. Jon Hassell and Harold Budd were students of Terry Riley and La Monte Young, and amidst this scene we see a clear example of ethnic music appropriation in ambient music. All were students of Pandit Pran Nath, the famous North Indian singer, and, following these studies, Hassell experimented with innovative compositional structures based on *raga*, African drumming, and Malaysian music. I will show that only certain attributes of these musics are of interest to

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a spiritual, religious, or even a political sort was believed to make all the difference.” (Goehr 1992: 212)
ambient composers; particularly, how modality and pitch are conceived of in ambient compositions.

Many of the fans I have interviewed first heard ambient music on the syndicated radio show, “Music From the Hearts of Space,” the starting ground for the fourth trajectory. Though much of the set list was what is now termed “space music” or “space rock,” the idea of exploring artificial landscapes was present in all the works from the beginning. Two space musicians, Vangelis and Tangerine Dream, through their immensely popular stadium shows, reached out to many musicians, particularly in Southern California, where a number of musicians created a space ambient scene.

Many rock groups from the late 1960's on experimented with different ways of interacting with their audience, and the result was the breakdown of the rock band and a new set of sensibilities about timbre and instrumentation. Less of a scene than a general “way of thinking,” the fifth trajectory looks at bands in three countries that inspired a new set of instrumental hierarchies, moving away from traditional melodic or rhythmic patterns. Some of these groups produced ambient albums, too, though their main impact was to change the way people heard music.

The final trajectory, and the most contentious among fans with different musical preferences, is the club music scene, where the deconstruction of techno and acid house became the soundtrack of the chill-out room (an exclusive listening space for ambient music). Some artists, such as Richard James, have crossed the lines between trip-hop and ambient and work
comfortably as producers and DJ's in both genres. Some of the first techno musicians were also among the first industrial musicians, complicating the web of connections even more.

After the six trajectories I give a brief analysis of ambient in relation to the seminal articles of Walter Benjamin (“The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”) and Theodor Adorno (“On the Fetish Character of Music and the Regression of Listening”). Sarah Thornton offers an alternative view of “authenticity and the recording,” and following this appraisal are examples of how the issue has become muddled with the evolution of recording studio and artist relationships, the change of the DJ’s role, and characteristics of ambient music listening and consuming. The last two issues, which I only briefly touch upon, are the packaging of ambient CD’s (which come wrapped in modern art) and the possibility of considering many of ambient music’s unique features in Deluzian, rather than post-Weberian, terms.

1st Trajectory -- Industrial Culture

“Industrial Culture” spawned probably the most significant trajectory in the formation of ambient. The oxymoronic label perfectly captures the mixture of feelings for and against increased industrialization in England, reflecting the anxiety many youth felt about the perceived efforts of the government to promote longer work days, change the focus of schools from a liberal education
to vocational training, and alienate people from each other. These misgivings were infused with the philosophical treatises of Nietzsche, Baudrillard, Sartre, and others. Contrary to much of the pop press coverage of the industrial “movement,” it was not simply about making music with power tools and distorted amplification; rather, it was a highly intellectual, planned, and wide-ranging movement that embodied performance media of many forms, provocative videos, body art and literature. Though warehouses were a popular venue for performances, art schools, concert halls, and commercial television were also used as spaces for industrial art. This section will focus on the lives of several prominent industrial artists, several of whom went on to be founders of the ambient music scene, and show which philosophical tenets of the industrial movement were transferred to the ambient movement, and which were not.

As early as 1969, the group Coum Transmissions were performing their sonic experiments in British art schools. Along with Rhythm and Noise, another art school group, they represented the initial forays into noise exploration. By 1976, Throbbing Gristle had emerged as the band-structured incarnation of Coum Transmissions, and the performances had expanded from the guitar noise and percussion experiments of the early 1970’s into a highly provocative performance art group that would routinely cause physical harm to the musicians – and the audience. It was probably through these performances that the underground scenes of bondage, body scarification, body piercing, and other practices that today are part of the “modern primitive” way of life were
exposed to the world. Although the bands didn’t invent any of these forms of shock treatment, their extensive research in forensic pathology, the occult traditions of cultures past, tomes of mental illnesses, and the psychology of such disparate figures as Charles Manson and Adolph Hitler, and their treatment of such subjects in performance art gave fuel to the modern primitives and the skinheads.

Such images and performance manners were not completely new to industrial music; in fact, much of the imagery and performance mannerisms resemble events during the futurist art movement (1910-1930) and the beat generation and the danger music scenes of the 1950’s. The reason for the resurgence of ideas in the early 1970’s is fairly clear: The 1970’s industrialists were taking classes with the 1950’s beat artists, who in turn had been inspired by futurist manifestos such as those of Luigi Russolo, or the canonized works of Lèger and other French surrealists. A common subtext of industrial music is the dehumanization of mankind as people begin to emulate the machines and factories they create, as depicted in 1928 with the vivid images of the popular cult film *Ballet Mècanique.* It is likely that such films were shown in art school classes. Industrial artist references to cut-up art and non-intentionality can surely be traced back at least that far.

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3 The name “industrial” was not an accidental label for this genre. In keeping with the philosophy of Lèger, the performance artist Monte Cazzazza coined the term “Industrial Music for Industrial People” in 1976, suggesting a group of people who had become aware of their interaction with the industrialized world. (Juno and Vale 1983)
The importance of the art school education on the industrialists has received little attention from the music press, even in such sophisticated monographs as the *Industrial Culture Handbook*. But if the anecdotes Simon Frith describes in his *Art Into Pop* about the classes of Gustav Metzger (one class on electric bass disassembly during performance; others on auto-destructive art) are any indication of what these artists were exposed to, it seems to be a natural progression from classroom to performance space. The image of industrial musicians is different from that of pop musicians because of the emphasis on philosophical and intellectual art, and there is evidence of this in the large amount of space the *Industrial Culture Handbook* devotes to the libraries of artists, and their interpretations of major philosophical tomes. Several of the artists on the Sub Rosa label released a two-CD tribute album to the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, citing his concept of *rhizomes* (from his book *Mille Plateaux*) as the premise of the recording studio concept of the remix.⁴

Genesis P-Orridge, a constant member of Throbbing Gristle and later one of the founders of the acid house and other dance music scenes, is an excellent example of the industrial philosopher. Although his bibliography is filled with heavy writings of many European anthropologists, fascist scholars, and others...

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⁴ Deleuze’s work *Mille Plateaux* devotes considerable space to the development of the rhizome and the desiring machine. For a brief description, I cite the popular Deleuze primer of Achim Szepanski. “Their movements [streams of desires] - linking, coupling, are defined through forces that repeatedly construct new networks. The rhizome is such a labyrinth, a rich ensemble of relations; diversity, connection and heterogeneity, breaks and unexpected links. They show the vision of a life that opens the ways of production of subjectivity to art, and allows...”
social darwinists, and existentialists, his specialty is the occult, and he reserves
his highest praise for the writings of Alistair Crowley, from whom he gained
inspiration for his work with conspiracy theories and personal spiritual life. In
an interview in the *Industrial Culture Handbook*,

Interviewer: You place extremely high value on work – don’t you work all the time?
Genesis: Yes. But then you get somebody like Crowley – who wrote all those
bloody books! And he goes mountaineering, and has lots of sex; he does paintings, he
travels, he does magazines, he gets books published as well as writing them, he
organizes magickal societies, he has political in-fighting going on, he’s drugging it –
how the hell did he do it all? (Juno and Vale 1983: 15)

In the same interview, Genesis shows pure contempt for the music press, who
use the word “industrial” merely to mean noisy music, in ignorance of the
original basis of the movement. In describing Throbbing Gristle’s departure
from the performances of the parent group Coum Transmissions, Genesis says

Now we’re going to try and do that [performance art] with a sort of philosophical,
mystical magick, so non-dogmatic and non-authoritative – people who’ve been brought
up to despise anything that smacks of “religion” – maybe we can remind them that
there are useful structures; that spiritual values aren’t necessarily to be despised or
ridiculed. (ibid., 16)

Another mistake the music industry makes is to assume that industrial music is
merely another pop-like tradition. All the interviewees in this excellent book
say that except for rare collaborative performances, all the artists lived and
worked in complete isolation from other people and particularly from the music
world. It was not a “fun social activity” in the manner of a garage band, and

the horizon of resistance to light up.” (Achim Szepanski, quoted from his Gilles Deleuze

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there were no post-concert parties, press functions, or hordes of adoring fans. A great deal of personal risk was involved in the performances and the way of life, to some degree from the drug use that occasionally accompanied performances (though most of the artists I am highlighting despised addicts and junkies). But there were far greater risks in the way industrial musicians acquired instruments (theft of metal parts from factories); in the dangers to themselves and the audience as they performed with flame-throwers, dart guns, and vile liquid substances; and in the potential for arrest for the production of videos containing material of an offensive nature. For unknown reasons, Genesis is in exile in America, unable to return to Britain.

To summarize the original philosophical motives for the “industrial movement,” Genesis writes:

All of us were working before it became “industrial,’ and discovered each other and recognized that kindred spirit, that driving force, and that's what made us all, if you like, “industrial culture.” It’s just that we wanted to have some kind of alliance, because we felt like we were all a kind of outlaw – but we all had some basic motivation and drive in common... it didn’t even matter whether we thought each other was good – that had nothing to do with it... What was interesting was the people involved.... and that we’d arrived at the same alienated, cynical point, and somehow found a way, a method to rationalize it and integrate it back. (ibid., 16)

An American musician, Z'ev, made considerable contributions to industrial and ambient philosophies. In the late 1970's, he gained worldwide renown for his fifteen-minute-long performances of intense drumming, that were often amplified to the threshold of pain. His interview in the Industrial Culture Handbook succintly describes many of the main beliefs of the industrial
movement, particularly concerning the noise-producing sound sources, risk, and the links between industrial music and “primitive” cultures.

I've always been very committed to low-tech as opposed to high-tech! In Europe, a lot of bands are starting to use metals in percussion, to get a richness and variety of texture and timbre that one would normally go to a synthesizer for. Whereas in America there’s still this concept in people’s heads that a $5000 synthesizer is going to make them a better musician. (ibid., 109)

Z’ev performs under many stage names and stage personae, though there is a common link between all his performances:

The real crux of it all is – it's all coming from this basis of poetry. Various levels of poetry and various levels of language. Poetry encompasses all these levels, in terms of the occult situation, in terms of the cabalistic situation, in terms of the more ritual aspect of Zev, in terms of the language-and-sound aspect of Uns, and in terms of Magneet Bond – more celestial, and Element L – more elemental, having to do with tape processes. (ibid., 111)

In talking about the difference between his performances and those of mainstream rock 'n’ roll,

A general rock 'n’ roll performance is a social structure that is thrust upon people, where the music is only a part, a soundtrack for an experience that the people know everything about in advance..., whereas the Z’ev performance, at the sound level, deals with an evocative, experimental mode in the listener – the person listens and it gives him food for thought – ideally. There’s a tremendous amount of calligraphic language in the instruments themselves. If you closed your ears and just watched it, there is a language almost like puppeteers’ – whole sagas and dramas get played out... (ibid.)

Z’ev states that he has studied ethnomusicology, particularly African and Haitian drumming traditions, though his meaning of the study is more in context with acquiring new motives for his performance than with the anthropological study of a people.
In the summer of ’80 I was working with a Haitian man, and learned quite a bit from him toward understanding the Caribbean systems of voodoo drumming. I’ve used it subliminally, but I haven’t really dealt with it that much overtly because it’s difficult to do, to keep the concentration. Because if you call an energy down, you have to be able to deal with it. And if you’re doing shows night after night, for example, you have to be very centered, otherwise the energy will not leave. And so I’d walk off stage and I would not be me anymore. (ibid., 113)

Other points that come up in the interviews include his interest in the soundtracks of movies (particularly horror films), where he points out the importance of the sounds in invoking reactions in the viewer. Z’ev, in addition to continuing his intense drumming performances, composed the soundtracks to many cult films, consisting of many layers of recorded conversations and abstract spoken word sound sources.

To give a fuller sense of the sort of scene in which these artists were working, I will describe some of the other industrial performance art traditions that surfaced in the late 1970’s. Mark Pauline was seminal to the scene, because his performances with complex destructive robots – widely televised in California – had ambient soundtracks (made by the group Factrix), and dealt directly with the psychological terror of automation and the progress of the industrial era. Through the years his prodigious technological abilities resulted in robots with a complex range of possible motions, and more lethal weapons (such as real-life rocket launchers and flame throwers), creating a riskier spectacle. He also experimented with imbedding these robots in dead animals, or parts of animals, so that it appeared to the audience as though a robotized
rabbit was breathing a fifteen foot plume of fire. All the performances were one-time-only affairs, as the robots’ sole mission was to destroy one another, and each was put in some sort of “predicament” guaranteeing their destruction at the whim of another robot. All the robots were dead by the end of the performance. Pauline was using the welding torch to illuminate his vision of modern industrial era mankind – the robots were a metaphor for people hellbent on self-destruction.

Other industrial groups included SPK (an acronym for the Socialist Patients Kollektiv), an Australian (later British) band that created some infamous videos and shocked audiences with revolting performances. However, they preached a doctrine of non-violence and defended the portrayal of strange medical images in their films as a documentary exploration of common phenomena to which people have unnatural resistances.

Boyd Rice was the man behind the Non performances, that created a great deal of noise from a small amount of equipment. Apart from the hall speakers and P.A. system, Rice could carry all the equipment he needed in a small bucket. He was not interested in having the audience see him, so he would walk onstage to create the sound sculptures and then leave the premises until he felt the performance was over. As a recording artist, he did many experiments with modified LP’s, producing ones with loop grooves and others

5 The Socialist Patients Kollektiv was a West German group of mental patients who mobilized into a terrorist unit, only to blow themselves up while manufacturing bombs.
6 Performances comprised of bizarre sex acts such as scatology, and ritual laceration and body mutilations.
with two to four holes in the center (so the consumer could get four recordings out of the same disc).

Mark Pauline, Boyd Rice, and the members of SPK echoed much of the same ideology as Z’ev and Genesis P-Orridge: They believed they were creating sonic poetry with their performances; they shunned press and popular acceptance and were much more interested in creating sounds and spaces they liked to be in; they had a strong work ethic and lived their art; and they were well read in philosophy and literature and adept at describing exactly what they did and why they did it. Risk was one of the main features of their performances (all have been quite seriously injured). Each artist had certain “specialties” of knowledge, ranging from the troop training tactics of the SS and psychological treatises on Hitler to forensic pathology, mental “illnesses,” or beat poetry, which may seem unrelated to their art but that were central to the mindset of their creative work.

In the early 1980’s there was no longer a venue for the types of music and visual arts described above. Changes in popular music scene also helped along industrial music’s decline. Although industrial was not a “popular music” per se (it sold very few records and supported only a handful of artists), the musicians were aware of other underground scenes and responded to the emerging punk scenes in England and California. Punk was, to the industrial artists, a coyly marketed rock ‘n’ roll, fiercely determined to be commercial and aboveground in every sense. The image of punk was more important than the music itself – the fashionability of stage performances, the look of the records,
and the look of the audience was the performance. Skinhead culture was also developing, and if it began as a statement about the conditions of life inherited by intelligent British youth, it evolved quickly into a violent (and fashionable) group. Many of the industrial artists I profile were “skinheads” in the early sense, but fell out of fashion as they dedicated their life to their art, not their image, and shunned the violence that punk music inspired.

In the early 1980’s, the music industry picked up on the potential market for “industrial” music, possibly because of fragmentation among the fan base of heavy metal music. Groups like Metallica and Iron Maiden had consistently good concert returns, but the rising costs of producing the elaborate stage shows that formed the focal point of groups like Stryper, Def Lepard, and Poison were making two-musician units like Ministry and the less visually oriented Skinny Puppy and Front 242 a more profitable return. This new “industrial” music, though noisy, was not based on the philosophy of the original movement; it was Just Another Pop Music Genre distinguished by an album cover look, specific equipment on stage, and angrier lyrics. Also, with the steady increase of volume, anger, and noise in the genres of metal, speed metal, and the new “industrial” music, the initial shock value that allowed groups like Throbbing Gristle to get a “message” across was lost, and many of the early

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7 Simon Frith relates the fashion cult of punk to the fashion wars between the mods and the teds, two British style cults from the 1950’s and 1960’s. (Frith 1987)

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industrial artists moved into studying the potential of subliminal messages in music.8

Ex-Throbbing Gristle members Chris Carter and Cosey Fanni Tutti became involved with the discotheque as well, creating noise-based music that was danceable. The albums *Trance* (1982) and *Exotica* (1989) are two of their most famous, and were released during tours of the U.S. and Europe. In addition, the work of the post-industrial group Psychic TV and Genesis P-Orridge’s DJ’ing in America anticipated the Detroit techno, house, and acid house music scenes.9 Other artists who are now grouped as ambient composers began their musical careers working with these eclectic DJ’s, and include Stephen Stapleton (the composer of all the music of Nurse With Wound) and John Balance (of Psychic TV), who teamed up with Peter “Sleazey” Christopherson (of Throbbing Gristle) to form the group Coil. Nurse With Wound’s main venue has been the recording and the club, and Stapleton has released about thirty recordings. Coil produced most of their music as film soundtracks, from short cult films to full features, releasing albums of remixes of the film scores.10 An interesting community has developed among these

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8 The cult of Modern Primitivism, or the branch of industrial ideology that focused on body modification, piercing, S&M, and other things which had been previously associated with “primitive” as opposed to “developed” society, became pop as well, a considerable disappointment to the major players in the underground movement who were specifically trying not to be imitated or fashionable.

9 The same evolution that commercialized the industrial genre beset the club music scene, which started as a subversive, intellectual medium but was reduced to a sell-out.

10 Coil became widely known in the club music scene for a music video they created which began with the grotesque image of flies getting stuck in a vat of honey, and ended with
musicians, who had previously worked in isolation creating industrial music, but who now collaborate on remixes of each others ambient works. Now we find Nurse With Wound albums remixed by Current 93, Coil songs produced by Stapelton in collaboration with Psychic TV, and so on. The Sub Rosa compilation *Double Articulation* uses the Deleuzian concept of the rhizome to explain why all the songs are remixes (and the remixes were done by composers of other songs on the CD), and how this symbolizes an enactment of a lateral system of working (rather than a top-down hierarchy). Whether the compositions are tree-like or rhizomatic, it's become quite hard to determine the authorship of pieces or recognize the work of individual ambient composers with the interchange that now takes place.

At this point I will summarize some of the ways in which industrial musical metamorphosed into the work of many ambient composers. There is little difference between the sorts of sounds one hears on industrial or ambient music recordings. Both genres explore noise-based timbres and shy away from the prepackaged sounds of conventional keyboards and guitars. However, the powerful images of a rock star who was dying of the AIDS virus. This video is now part of the permanent collection of the Museum Of Modern Art in New York.

11 The *Oxford Dictionary of Music* defines “timbre” as “Tone-colour; that which distinguishes the quality of tone or voice of one instrument or singer from another.” (Kennedy 1985). This is inadequate for describing industrial sounds which aren’t produced by instruments, or that don’t have discernable pitches (tones). I define timbre as the “Spectral characteristic of a sound,” and conceive of it as the aural equivalent of a fingerprint. A fingerprint is a unique, complex combination of simple lines – a timbre is a unique, complex combination of simple sine waves.
shock component of industrial performances meant that there was a greater range of volume than in modern ambient pieces.

Theft was a practiced doctrine of industrial culture. Mark Pauline recounts memories of organized raids on IBM and other large multinational factories as part of the creative process of his works: The feeling was that the anti-factory works should somehow exist outside the conventional channels of capital flow, that the theft of scrap materials gave more credibility to the message. Z'ev mentioned in one interview:

The thievery has to do with – basically, Mercury on one level is the god of learning and communication, and on the other level is the god of thieves! The thievery is more of an occult situation, even though thievery is a political act on a certain level – it's shaped by certain socio-economic inequalities. You know, taking from those who have, who can afford it and don't give it... the thefts that I did, say in 1980, were done as rituals.... There's another level of working with the thievery, which has to do with the very big premium I put on risk in the production of works. So I feel that at the very basic beginning of the process, which means the accumulations of the material which are then going to get formed into instruments which are then going to get used in a performance – since the risk is such a big part in the performance aspect, I try to keep it consistent throughout the process! (ibid., 109-111)

Contrast this with pop genres where bands purchase the fad equipment promoted by mass-media advertising. I have not read specific accounts of ambient composers and material theft, but the principle of stepping beyond the normal channels of capital flow is very much an institutionalized practice in regards to the appropriation of restricted or commercial recordings. In chapter 5 I will discuss this theft further.

Two other principles of industrial music are risk and subversion. In the context of 1970’s performances, there were obvious risks to the musicians, who often practiced extreme realizations of the auto-destructive art preached by
Metzger. Most performances involved some sort of physical injury, accidental and deliberate, to performers and audience alike; those that didn't often suggested the possibility of such risk. Subversion came in the messages passed to the audience, particularly at moments immediately following some shock or trauma when the psyche is most susceptible to subliminal messages. There were many targets of subversion: Some industrial artists in San Francisco tried to create documentary films for elementary schools that included brief flashes of images that amounted to a rejection of the values the teachers were espousing, and some films did briefly circulate.

As industrial art was performative, many of the risks were physical; ambient music exists in the recording studio, so the only risks to the listener are psychological. Fans are aware that groups like Coil put subliminal messages in their songs. Ambient maintains the power to suggest in its application to film scoring. Coil's music is well suited as a soundtrack to horror films. If the reader doesn't believe in the suggestible power of the music, they should watch *Hellraiser II* with the sound turned off and compare the level of fright to the sensations when the volume is on high. Without the soundtrack the movie could easily be a comedy. By itself the soundtrack (that can be found in remixed form on the album *Unnatural History vol. II*) is stimulating enough to inspire odd and disturbing emotions.

Although I have briefly mentioned lack of intentionality, I want to stress that the composers of ambient and industrial music, as well as some avant-garde musical forms, strive to remove their egos from their works. Origins of this
idea are generally credited to John Cage, though they appear earlier in the philosophy of Dada. Cage also appropriated Zen philosophy, which advocates stripping away layers of ego in the practice of visual arts. It is likely a derivative of these influences that inspired Brian Eno to pursue process composition (as opposed to product composition) and self-generative art in his installations and albums. Industrialists describe similar beliefs; this is no surprise as they and Eno were all in art school at about the same time. I talk more in chapter 4 about two issues that arise from the egoless compositions: the lack of intense idolization and iconography of the composers, and the use of the CD as a useful commodity rather than as a recreational product or merely a marker of cultural capital.

When it comes to hard work and prolificacy, ambient composers are the equals of the industrialists. Coil, in just five years, released sixteen full-length and double-length albums, plus compilations and singles; Chris and Cosey put out twenty-three works, Psychic TV forty-six albums, and Current 93 at least fifty-nine recordings. All the artists in these groups have collaborated on many compilations and albums of other groups, and create in ambient and non-ambient contexts. A large school of composers who inhabit the twenty-three label collective distributed by World Serpent (particularly labels such as Soleilmoon, Staalplaat, and Touch), and who were influenced by the works of Throbbing Gristle and other early industrial artists, have produced similar quantities of ambient music. Compare this to the two- and three-album
contributions of thousands of briefly famous pop musicians, and one sees that there is a fundamentally different mindset at work.

**Trajectory 2 -- Brian Eno and Robert Fripp**

There is quite a lot in common between the process composition of Brian Eno and the industrial culture movement. Eno received a similar art education to the industrialists in his years of apprenticeship with Roy Ascott at Ipswich, and was exposed to minimalist music, the ideas of Russolo and Cage, and the music of the Velvet Underground while in art school. However, Eno took his intellectual study into the studio, not the performance space, and became a pioneer of many studio recording techniques.

Eno is a contradictory personality in the ambient music community. Though his music is apparently not about commercialism (the credo of the industrialists), he is a financially successful artist. He claims he is not a musician, but as a non-musician he composed some famous rock songs and began the entire musical movement of ambient (with the 1972 album *No Pussyfooting*). Despite his claim that he can’t play any musical instruments, he is one of the best known keyboard players in rock ‘n ‘ roll, from his acclaim with Brian Ferry and Roxy Music. Many magazines point out the lack of commercial success of his albums (none have gone gold), but when one compares six-digit sales of twenty albums to the success of a pop band with one platinum release, or to prolific ambient artists who never sell more than four thousand copies of
any one, he is one of the most commercially successful artists in any genre. Whether one considers his album sales or his fame as the producer of U2 and David Bowie (on two of the top ten selling albums of all time), his reputation was sufficient to win a commission from Microsoft to write a 3 3/4 second jingle for the Windows 95 computer operating system, for the grand sum of $400,000.

Eno is credited with inventing ambient music, but the first album described as such was a collaboration with Robert Fripp, who provided the primary harmonic, melodic, rhythmic, and timbral material. On No Pussyfooting, Eno experimented with a tape loop process that is analyzed in detail in chapter 5. The input into the equation was Robert Fripp’s Gibson guitar sound, a sound familiar to fans of his renowned progressive rock act, King Crimson. Though Fripp didn’t bring production techniques or an art school background to the ambient music scene, he did bring the sensibility of a successful virtuoso art rocker, and from 1972 until the late 1980’s he worked with a highly stylized guitar sound he called “skysaw guitar.” In the same way that Jimi Hendrix’s guitar sound was the sound of psychedelia, or Kurt Cobain’s voice the sound of grunge and alternative rock angst, in the early 1970’s at least, Fripp’s guitar sound was the sound of ambient.

Though Fripp is one of the few early British ambient artists who was not connected to the art school system, he is an intellectual musician and a prolific writer for eclectic music magazines. His writings echo the sentiments of the ambient artists described in this thesis and are the best expression of the philosophy of ambient music composing.
Much can be written about both Fripp and Eno, and much has been in their biographies, magazine articles, interviews, and reviews. In chapter 2 I profile both artists in greater depth, and all chapters of the thesis reference to their ideas and compositions. In addition these profiles, the bibliography has a selected list of articles for readers who want more information on Eno and Fripp.

**3rd trajectory -- New York Minimalism**

Often when people ask about what ambient music sounds like, they wonder if the music of Philip Glass or Steve Reich is ambient. There is no conclusive answer: To some fans it is, and to some it isn’t. Both Glass and Reich, with their colleagues La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Frederic Rzewski, Pauline Oliveros, and Merideth Monk, are generally considered to be “minimalist” composers. However, when one analyzes the real meaning of Oliveros' concept of “deep listening,” it is fundamentally similiar to the ambient listening practices I discuss in chapter 4.

The sacred history of the ambient genre places the history of minimalism in response to the 12-tone and serial academic composition of the 1950's and 1960's, citing a marked transformation from music that went somewhere to music that was static. Some early works of anti-academic music were “Come Out” or “Piano Phase.” However, it is hard to think of Terry Riley’s and La Monte Young’s years of experimentation with intonation systems as a response
to anything other than the general meek acceptance of equal temperament. In Riley’s words, “We were both going in this direction – immersing yourself inside the tone, so that the tone becomes everything.” (Woodard 1997: 70)

Steve Reich, too, abandoned his original protest motivation when his music gained popularity on its own terms and moved to writing structured pieces such as “Different Trains” and “Desert Music,” that have since assumed an important place in the canon of western classical music.12

These two pieces have been cited as favorite “ambient works” by many fans on the Internet (the Internet fan base of ambient music is discussed in chapter 3). Drawing lines between the two genres is difficult by purely musical distinctions though pieces like these stand apart from ambient in that they require a large number of live performers. But a great deal of minimalist music is electronic, and Phillip Glass has admitted that many of his works could be performed quite well by a computer. Minimalist pieces often have an accompanying tape track that consists of sounds and synthesis techniques used every day in ambient music production. In analysis, the only real empirical difference between ambient and minimalism is in the space of representation: The performance venues of minimalist music are concert halls, while ambient is a studio-recorded genre. Minimalism, at least to some degree, is about acceptance as a high-art genre, which is not a concern of most ambient composers.

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12 It is ironic that minimalist compositions, with the pretenses of being anti-academic, are now introduced to composition students all over the U.S. as good studies for percussion writing
Once we get past the issue of differentiation, we can see how minimalism has contributed musics and ideas to the ambient belief system, including elements of Indian music. The history begins with La Monte Young, who was responsible for bringing the esteemed Pandit Pran Nath to New York. In the many years that Pran Nath lived in New York with Young and Riley, they and Jon Hassell studied his rich North Indian vocal tradition, and each composer applied the formal Indian music discipline to his own work. Young recently formed a blues band that performs three hour-long blues songs structured more like an Indian raga than a traditional delta blues number. Riley was interested in the intonation and the modes and created pastiches of raga on his RCA synthesizer. Describing his famous work, “in C,” Riley uses imagery similar to what we would expect from Eno.

It’s almost like fractals... if you take the same shape and repeat it many times and then you stick them together, they create a vibratory space. That was my big fascination – this vibratory body that happened with patterns interacting. It was kind of like what Escher was introducing in the visual arts or the OP artists were doing in the ‘60s. It was about creating a kinetic music. (Woodard 1997: 70)

Jon Hassell, too, adapted Indian raga and ornamentation on his jazz trumpet. It is through Hassell, Riley, and Young that ambient music “discovered” Indian music, and if we look at the influence of Indian music on the opus of ambient works it is apparent that only a few facets of Indian music were of interest. Hassell’s first ambient album, Vernal Equinox, has a sruti drone on almost every song, and he explores the timbre of the drone in later albums and rhythmic structures.

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(Music from the Fourth World Vol. I and II). His trumpet solos, which appear on many ambient albums, are loosely based on the pitches of several raga-s (particularly Darbari), but do not have the same structure or goal; their limited pitch range makes them sound like a alap (unmetered improvisation) with stunted growth. Tala (rhythmic meter) is not important to ambient music, which shuns beat, and the occasional instance of a tabla will be just as a timbre or an “ethnic touch.”

Another minimalist inspired composer, Harold Budd, has collaborated with Brian Eno on several well-known albums and released many of his own. A pianist, he took the sedate aesthetic of some of La Monte Young’s piano works and adapted it to a four-minute song format. His works are the shortest ambient compositions, eliciting some criticism for being repackaged new age pieces. Budd figured in the New York scene before the Indian influence, playing piano occasionally with Young (at that time a famous saxophonist) and Hassell (a trumpeter) in a free jazz group, though his later compositions show few jazz sensibilities and deal with modal regions like those Eno used on his first realization of Discrete Music.

4th trajectory -- space music

For many a youth growing up near college towns, the first exposure to ambient music came from the syndicated radio show “Music from the Hearts of Space.” Here one could tune in and “chill out” once a week: in Santa Barbara,
where I lived, it was broadcast at the ideal time of Sunday night, bringing a small refuge of inner calm to the start of another school or work week. Much of the music played is now thought of as “space music,” not “ambient,” though programs often included works of Brian Eno, Jon Hassell, David Sylvian, and many other ambient artists. What this show did was connect the electronic keyboard and synthesized sounds of Vangelis, Tangerine Dream, and Jean-Michel Jarre to the branch of ambient music by composers like Michael Stearns, Robert Rich, Steve Roach, Michael Shrieve, and Michael Brook.

The sonic landscapes of early space music\textsuperscript{13} were centered around a few popular but expensive synthesizers, most notably the RCA Mark II,\textsuperscript{14} the Bukla, and the Moog. The main synthesis engines in these units were amplitude and frequency modulation, which meant that banks of oscillators were daisy chained to create “complex” combinations of “simple” sine waves. In some instances the same operations could be applied to an external input, a primitive form of sampling and sound manipulation. More important than the technical specifics is how the composers used these units.

Vangelis is undoubtedly the most celebrated space musician, though his most famous song, “Chariots of Fire,” is much more neo-classical than spacey. In all his 1970’s and early 1980’s work he paired up electronic and acoustic sounds, treating them separately and differently. A pianist, he played piano

\textsuperscript{13} See the discography for a larger list of early space music. Three seminal albums are Vangelis’ \textit{Heaven and Hell}, Tangerine Dream’s \textit{Phaedra} and Tomita’s \textit{The Planets}.
\textsuperscript{14} The synthesizer also used to create Milton Babbit’s “Philomel,” Luciano Berio’s “Visage,” and Terry Riley’s “Shri Camel.”
“solos” on every album, though in many songs (c.f. Heaven and Hell, part 1) the piano was an accompaniment for electronic buzzes and whirs. He also performed many Greek percussion instruments and mixed in choral music with the electronics. Of his electronic effects, one of the most innovative and characteristic was the portamento sweep, where a large synthesized chord would smoothly glissando to a new pitch level. He used the same effect on his synthesized clarinet sounds to make it seem as though the “player” was lipping the reed.

Vangelis, despite his innovations in sound and his fame as a film scorer, used traditional classical forms for most of his pieces. In analysis, many are sonatas, rondos, or theme-and-variations. In contrasting his work with that of the other famous synthesizer and stadium concert giant, Tangerine Dream, we find that although many of the sounds and synthesis techniques are the same, Tangerine Dream didn’t adopt classical formal structures. They worked more with layers of drones and ostinatos, putting less effort into the creation of electronic “solo” instruments and melodic passages. Another fundamental difference is found in the background of the musicians. In Greece, Vangelis is known as the man who brought the first Greek rock ‘n’ roll band (Aphrodite’s Child) to his country in 1967. He has progressive rock roots, and through the years as one of the heaviest promoted artists of Polydor Europe, he delved into space music, new age, and music about nature. In recent albums, more of the
rock ‘n’ roll aesthetic has returned, though his new work is completely synthesized. Tangerine Dream began as a rock band but interacted with German experimental musicians and, as a group, went through personnel changes, different working ideologies, and radical altering of their sounds.

Both Vangelis and Tangerine Dream pioneered the art of lavish stadium concerts, complete with the most advanced keyboards and synths, experimental lighting systems, and video displays. At Tangerine Dream concerts in particular, many in the audience tripped on acid, or took other hallucinogens, and it’s not a large stretch to assert that these concerts were a prototypical “rave” scene. Raves were an urban music happening (originally in England), held in abandoned warehouses where top DJ’s would broadcast very loud music all night and into the morning, and it was at raves that the musical genre of acid house was created. In the 1980’s, there was a fairly widespread understanding of the “proper” sequence of drugs to take through the experience, and the music would change mood from heavy, fast rhythms to slower, spaced out grooves in response to the expected psychological needs of the ravers. The variance in affect of the musics held true in British clubs, where different rooms featured “industrial,” “acid house,” or “chill out” themes. I will talk more about the club-DJ influence on ambient later in this chapter.

A subculture of Californian musicians, who had all been a part of the stadium concert and proto-rave scene in the 1970’s and 1980’s, helped create

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15 His well known films include Blade Runner and 1492: Conquest of Paradise, and the TV series Antarctica and Cosmos.

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first the space music scene and later “ambient space music.” Steve Roach was one of the first, composing space music much in the idiom of Vangelis’ early electronic works, but later exploring world music (particularly Indian). He collaborated with a number of other artists, initially hiring them as studio musicians, but later producing albums with them or playing on their own space and ambient music recordings. One of the best examples is the recording Dali: The Endless Enigma, that is a compilation of the work of Roach, Robert Rich, Michael Shrieve (the best known “ambient” drummer), Michael Stearns, and Michael Brook. The work of all these artists comprises the bulk of the playlists of the Music from the Hearts of Space, still broadcast over the continent at late night hours.

Robert Rich is one of the central artists on the Music from the Hearts of Space compilation CD’s, and his world music influenced synthesizer and guitar washes are a frequent sound on the radio show, too. His personal ideology is constructed around the concept of glurp, and two passages help to illustrate his usage of this term:

For many years I have struggled with the schizms [sic] between symmetry and randomness, rationalism and mysticism, reductionism and wholism, shimmer and glurp. (from personal correspondence, June 1995)

As a child, I used to stay up late at night reading art books and Charles Addams cartoons. A neuronal [sic] connection occurred in my brain, merging my fantasies with

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16 This is a more specific category than “ambient” or “dark ambient,” referring to music which is created by former space music composers. The term is one of many coined by fans on the Internet, but is used frequently by people on the space music mailing lists. See chapter 2 for more on Internet fans.
Max Ernst’s melting “anti-Pope,” Dali’s Baked Beans and Nuclear Mysticism, the chirping of frogs outside in the creek, and the dripping of rain upon moss covered rocks. I could dream living worlds shrouded in clouds, mountains with faces, geometric truth coexisting with liquid biomorphic phantasms. Glurp is the noun that collects these associations. Dali was glurp, Gaudi was glurp. Fungus is glurp. Terry Gilliam, J.G. Ballard, Gahan Wilson, Robyn Hitchcock... all connected to the archetype of glurp. (from “The Meaning of Glurp,” 1990)

One feature that distinguishes the above-mentioned ambient and space-music musicians from all the other ambient artists, is that much of their initial sponsorship came not from fans but from the music industry, particularly the consumer electronics market. Roach was interviewed and profiled in just about every keyboard magazine. Shrieve is featured yearly in Modern Drummer and Electronic Drummer, and all the artists were used to help market new keyboards and electronic drum equipment. Concerts became something of an industry display of fancy new boxes, though Brook and Roach have shied away from that in their more recent performances, depending less on the industry for their bread and butter. Unlike the industrial-influenced artists or Eno and Fripp, for that matter, there is no appeal in broken or semi-functional equipment, or in low-fidelity sound-sources, which has prompted some Internet criticism as to their “true allegiance” to new age or space music.

Despite disagreements about the ambient nature of various composers, space music and ambient fans share a number of other affinities. One is with space exploration (as in NASA). The year 1979, when the Cosmos series aired on PBS, was one of the last great times in our nation’s popular history of space exploration (Vangelis composed much of the soundtrack). The Voyagers I and II were taking pictures like crazy, discovering new moons around the once-
mysterious outer planets of our solar system. A number of factors shifted the public consciousness away from space exploration, particularly the space shuttle Challenger explosion in 1985. This event showed the world that mortality was an issue in space exploration, and fear over possible repeat incidents canned any existing ideas for manned missions to Mars or beyond. In addition, the Republican administration of Ronald Reagan capitalized on the public fear of Russian retaliation with an increase in high-tech arms manufacture, which he deployed in situations like Grenada and Libya. His personal fantasy, we now know, was the construction of unmanned space weapons ("Star Wars,") which would shoot down enemy planes, missiles, and rockets – this is far from the public myth of the scientific interest in outer space that had fueled many of the space missions.

In chapter 5 I will talk more about one of the main affinities of space music, and ambient music, fans – science-fiction. Most of the space albums I suggest in the discography have cover art which is derivative of the same graphical art style that covers sci-fi books, and many (such as Albedo 0.39 by Vangelis) have an entire sci-fi subtext underneath the layers of synthesizers. Robert Rich and Michael Brook give praise to sci-fi literature as some of their main musical inspirations; in turn, several sci-fi journals give space music album reviews.

5th trajectory -- Breakdown of the rock band
Well I saw uh baby dancin’ in her x-ray gingham dress;
I knew she was under duress, I knew her under her dress
Just keep comin’ Jesus, you’re the best dressed...

“Captain Beefheart, “M’Human Gets Me Blues” (1968)

The late 1960’s and early 1970’s saw a number of experimental rock groups that in many ways broke down the structure and meaning of rock ‘n’ roll. The above example of lyrics shows Beefheart’s interest in the sound of the words more than in the story told or the meaning attributed to them. The way he lulled and emphasized the “esses” in each word, placing these syllables off the major beats of the music, sounds more like a timbral counterpoint to the guitars than a synchronized vocal. Also, on this song there is no hierarchy of musicians, and all the layers (guitar, bass, drums, saxophone, vocals) are playing complicated parts in different meters, with none of the accompaniment / melodic roles previously attributed to rock.17

A German group, Can, was flipping instrumental roles upside down at the same time. In this four-piece band, the bass and drums were clearly the most prominent instruments and the guitar and singer were backgrounded. Can also broke down the normal accompaniment / melodic roles with use of polyrhythms, non-rhythmic tape loops, and ambient sounds in the background of their songs. Their “lead singer,” Dano Suzuki, was something of a deliberate

17 The Magic Band was also unique at the time for their instrumentation, which included instruments like the Mellotron (a primitive sampling keyboard), bass saxophones, and marimbas. Many of the drum parts have no cymbals or hi-hat, or only cymbals and hi-hat, and even the electric guitar, a fairly standard instrument, was played in a very unconventional fashion by Rockette Morton (who clawed rapid successions of five-note dissonant chords with his right hand)
mockery as well, with a very non-virtuousic voice, singing lyrics in broken English. Bassist Holger Czukay, incidentally, went on to record two solo ambient albums and to collaborate with David Sylvian on the brilliant *Plight and Premonition* and *Flux + Mutability*. In England, the Velvet Underground was working toward the same aesthetic, with haunting rock numbers that broke down into long arhythmic and unconventional jams. Their music was a great inspiration for early punk rock and industrial music, which took skewed instrument roles as a given and developed from there. Brian Eno collaborated with Velvet Underground’s John Cale on a couple of albums, too.

Many underground and cult groups that emerged through the 1970’s and 1980’s, cited one or more of the three above groups as their main inspiration. The early recordings of Sonic Youth, one of the first Californian punk bands, demonstrate an amazing exploration of guitar feedback. In live shows they instigated feedback loops or slowly evolving distortions lasting for fifteen or more minutes, and the trance-like states they induced in the audience (and themselves) are much like the effect of ambient music recordings. Pere Ubu, originally a Beefheart-inspired punk band in the midwest, was like Sonic Youth in some ways, but by 1978 they produced theme albums on subjects such as babies learning to walk. *The Art of Walking*, in the way it uses recurrent motives and timbres and features the potential of vocal gibberish as a timbre, is very much an ambient-leaning album.

18 The best examples are *Confusion is Sex* (1983) and *Early Sonics: Sonic Death* (1982).
The Residents were a “commercial anti-group” who pioneered the art of synthesizer playing. As a commercial entity, they were known for their anonymity (no one still is sure exactly who the Residents are) and their stage costumes (tuxedos with large eyeball sculptures that covered their whole heads). Their Commercial Album, a record of forty one-minute pop songs and jingles, is ostensibly about making a pop commodity in a pop context but in a very non-pop way, as the effect of listening to forty different songs in the space of the time of a normal album makes each piece a unique timbral exploration. The songs are sparse, and if they have a lyric it is short and incomplete; in one minute it is hard to make a song about anything. Two to three sounds, no more, unfold in a given song they but the skill with which the Residents foreground and background these delicate sounds is unlike the synthesizer use in any other band I know. However, their best known work, and an album mentioned frequently on the Internet ambient list, is Eskimo, an attempt at re-creating a few Eskimo ceremonies and rituals (though they don’t know anything at all about the Inuit!) A synthesized “wind” track runs through the entire piece, and there are various arrangements of solo Eskimo chanting (beginning in a language the Residents concocted and gradually incorporating English words as the Eskimos are “corrupted” by developed nations), Eskimo choruses, and strange imprecise drumming. There are also many soft and subtle synthesizer parts. As the whole album exists in a singular mythical space (a San Franciscan’s impression of the arctic tundra), it is a major recording in the history of ambient music,
much like Jon Hassell’s *Aka Darbari Java*, Rapoon’s *Kirghiz Lite*, Nurse With Wound’s *Soliloquy for Lilith*, all portraits of a particular landscape.

These are just a few of the experimenters of the 1970’s and 1980’s who changed the way people listen to rock ’n’ roll, suggesting that the rock group could be, first and foremost, about timbral exploration (and landscape navigation). Other groups whose work also influenced ambient music concepts include Tuxedo Moon, Wire, Dome, the Birthday Party (in Australia), Einstürzende Neubauten (in Germany), and British progressive rock groups Pink Floyd, Soft Machine, and King Crimson. These groups were pioneers in sounds, structure, and mood, but as pioneers their music was novel, and unable to get past being the “first” music to use these concepts. Ambient music was able to take the new timbres and moods and use them without being novel, and do (one could say) “further research” on the subjects possible because of experimentation.

These groups I highlight were also under the constraint of being active performing musicians, which is not a time commitment for most ambient artists. Though they would experiment in the studio, too, the demands of fans meant they needed to be able to recreate, without lip-synching, the albums they produced. This aesthetic changed in the 1980’s when the groups changed from album-producing live bands to album-producing studio artists. To take the example of the group Wire, when they regrouped as Dome, their studio releases quite exceeded what they could perform live, made of extensive layers
of electronically treated and distorted sounds. The Dome albums, with long songs that are mostly noisy drone (with a background of indistinguishable lyrics), are ambient music in a rock band format. The Residents shied away from performances, too, as they felt they had a mission to create the most fascinating sounds for people to listen to. They also believed they had a closer connection to their audience if they made really good albums, stating that their fans weren’t buying just a recording but buying a “friend.” (Search and Destroy #3, 1981) From experimental rock groups we move to experimental DJ’s, who also began in a performative space but moved to the production of ambient recordings.

6th Trajectory -- Club Culture

One night on late night TV, I flipped onto a video of an androgynous person moving in slow-motion in a world that was moving uncontrollably fast. It would come across a crosswalk on the highway, but the car lights were moving at hundreds or thousands of miles an hour. On a dank alley way it observed a vine attempting to grow out of a crack on a dirty brick wall, but later in the video the vine died. The protagonist walked by a store window in this hectic city, where dozens of black and white televisions were broadcasting pictures and messages, messages which lasted only 1/24 of a second, subliminal messages about something, until suddenly one of the video screens rested on a message for a few seconds, “MONSTERS EXIST,” which caused a great deal of fear in the androgynous cyber-person. The credits rolled and I saw this strange video was by the techno/ambient group Orbital, part of a new MTV series, AMP, which features “ambient music” and videos. Is ambient music going the route of every other cultish music scene? (research notes, 12/28/96)

The music on MTV’s AMP is by and large not ambient. Artists like Tricky, Ultraworld, Massive Attack, and Orbital are some of the major players in

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19 See the discography for recommended albums by these artists.
trip-hop and acid-house music, though their most recent albums are less dance oriented, with weaker stated rhythms and more non-rhythmic content. However, the music industry has latched onto these artists as part of the new hip “ambient” music scene.

It’s not so easy to dismiss club music as something separate from ambient music. There are some notable cross-over artists and still others who work in both experimental, non-dance genres and as dance DJ’s. Also, some of the first techno DJ’s who shaped the Detroit house scene and most of the British club scenes – Chris Carter, Cosey Fanni Tutti, and Genesis P-Orridge (of Throbbing Gristle), and Richard B. Kirk (of Cabaret Voltaire) – began as experimental industrial musicians but adopted a club DJ mentality. Another connection between club music’s origins and ambient’s roots lies in the popularity of Krautrock acts, such as Kraftwerk, in the club venues later inhabited by techno DJ’s. Kraftwerk and Can (cited previously), with other Krautrock groups, gained international popularity in the early to mid-1970’s and shared a common fan base.

Considerable information exists on the Internet on hundreds of local DJ’s, including DJ’s who run chill-out rooms, techno, acid house, and trip hop DJ’s who have made forays into ambient grooves. As club cultures weren’t a part of my own musical background and there was already too much information on the artists I was familiar with, I profess ignorance to many of the developments in the club-inspired ambient music scenes. Sarah Thornton’s
book *Club Cultures* would be nicely sequeled by a similar work focusing on such artists and their fans.

From reading many posts on the ambient music Internet mailing list, I have ascertained that several artists are quite revered among fans with club backgrounds who also listen to ambient music. Such artists as the Future Sound of London (FSOL), the Higher Intelligence Agency, and all the artists on the FAX label (the offshoot projects of Pete Namlook) are mentioned frequently, and experts on them abound on the mailing list. Qualities that are attributed to them are their creative use of techno-based timbres in an ambient manner, but most of all their ability to transport the listener to virtual spaces (which FSOL calls “biospheres”) or conjure up abstract images of digital-age life (called “lifeforms”).

Many ambient list-posters shun techno- and acid house-inspired ambient music, and the factions of fans have gone through phases of suggesting a breakdown of ambient into sub-categories (much like the fragmentation of techno into jungle, trance, ambient, acid house, etc.). The titles of the sub-categories, such as “ambient house,” are generally chosen for the timbral allegiances of that canon of works, which is an interesting contrast to other nomenclature systems of modern music.\(^\text{20}\) Thus, ambient house would use the

\(^{20}\text{Categories of other underground genres seem to have varying motivations. The subdivision of the British ska scene in the 1980’s contrived the 2-tone category, named after a record label; psychorockabilly is a combination of the rockabilly instrumentation with a psychotic mentality, and straight-edge punk is defined by the substance-free pledge of the fans and musicians.}\)
same TC-808 drum machine (from which the ambient house group 808 State gets their name) as regular house, but use it in a different way.

One important cross-over artist is Richard James, the man behind AFX, Polygon Window and Aphex Twin, a prolific ambient and dance music artist with a distinct philosophy of music, who recently landed a major label deal (with Warner). James, like Brian Eno, used many unconventional recording and sound manipulation techniques to create subtle rhythms and ostinatos, and more detail on his mysterious compositional practices is in chapter 2. Aphex Twin has videos on MTV, too. As a club DJ in the 1980’s, he was popular for his videos, which would fill TV screens in the chill out rooms of prominent British clubs.²¹

If James is an example of a balance between the club DJ and the studio ambient artist, the chill-out rooms where his videos and music played were the club’s antidote to the overbearing heavy rhythms of techno and acid house. These rooms, which often had pre-recorded soundtracks, were where people coming down off drug trips, too exhausted to move anymore, went to chill out. James was one of the first club DJ’s who DJ’ed the chill-out room, though Autechre and other cross-over artists soon followed-suit. The chill-out room and the bedroom or listening room of the domestic ambient fan share a peculiar similarity. People don’t interact in these spaces, and they experience their own drug-induced voyages in a darkened setting designed with listening in mind.²²

²¹ See chapter 2 for a composer profile of Richard James.
Authenticity and the Recording

The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity. (Benjamin 1968: 220)

One might subsume the eliminated element in the term “aura” and go on to say: that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art... the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition. (ibid., 221)

Every fundamentally new, pioneering creation of demands will carry beyond its goal. Dadaism did so to the extent that it sacrificed the market values which are so characteristic of the film in favor of higher ambitions – though of course it was not conscious of such intentions. The Dadaists attached much less importance to the sales value of their work than to its uselessness for contemplative immersion. What they intended and achieved was a relentless destruction of the aura of their creations, which they branded as reproductions with the very means of production. (ibid., 237)

Walter Benjamin’s *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, if not the first work to seriously explore the changes in the modes of art perception after the advent of photography and sound films, is certainly the most often cited. However, many of the issues that Benjamin introduces, shrouding the larger category of “authenticity and art,” need a serious re-evaluation in the 1990’s. The playing field has expanded and the rules of the game have changed. Benjamin was not writing during a period when entire genres were conceived in the recording studio, and commercial recordings were the original musical performance. Also, it was not until the early 1980’s that digital technology began to dominate the industry.

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22 Sarah Thornton found, in her research of British club culture, that the chill-out room was often a “VIP” room, one to which only a few exclusive people had access, and this correlates well with the bedroom ambient listener’s exclusive listening space described in detail in chapter 4.
It is imperative to understand the fundamental differences between the LP and the CD, to appreciate not only the heightened concern of illegal sampling, but moreover to understand the added value of a compact disc of music. Arguments about digital versus analog notwithstanding, the CD is a virtually exact replica of the original master. By this, I mean that no degradation of sound, or loss of information occurred when the original master was transferred to the CD, and subsequent digital copies caused absolutely no loss in sound quality or increase in noise. With the LP, at best the disc is an approximation of the original, and even with the best turntables there is a perceivable difference in a copy made from the original master and one made from the LP. In the age of digital, consumers are buying products that are the equivalent of original masters, not the dubs they purchased before.

How do we conceive of the aura of a recorded product? Benjamin noted:

Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be. (Benjamin 1968: 220)

We know that the earliest art works originated in the service of a ritual – first the magical, then the religious kind. (ibid., 223)

This may be true if one is comparing, for example, a studio recording of a harpsichord work with the context of the piece in the court of Louis XIV, or a Real World overproduction of African drumming with the original performance experience. But how do we analyze a work, such as Oval’s 94Diskont composed

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23 There is the potential for a slight loss of quality if the digital mastering of the CD is
by an algorithm on a Macintosh computer, the digital output directly copied onto the CD one purchases? There is no original time and space of this recording except in the composer’s head. But there is a sense of ritual, and in chapter 4 I describe in detail the components of ambient listening rituals. The work, in its ability to affect the subconscious, takes on a magical aura of the sort that Benjamin couldn’t have imagined writing in 1938.

Benjamin wrote well before the role of the DJ changed from one who merely spinned dance records to one who creatively manipulated those recordings, and before the emergence of any genres featuring the creative art of DJ’ing (such as rap, hip-hop, and dub). One book that offers a post-Benjamin definition of “authenticity,” in the context of the recorded artifact, is *Club Cultures*. Thornton writes:

First... authenticity is dependent on the degree to which records are assimilated and legitimized by a subculture. Authentication is the ultimate end of enculturation. Second, the distance between a record’s production and its consumption is relevant to the cultural value bestowed upon it. When original performers are remote in time or place, as is the case with foreign imports and revived rarities, records can acquire prestige and authority. Third, the environment in which a record is produced contributes to its authenticity. Records are more likely to be perceived as the primary medium of musics whose main site of production is the studio. And finally, the ideological vagaries of music genres like their communication of bodily ‘soul’ or their revelation of technology play a main role in whether records come across as genuine. In other words, authenticity is ultimately an effect of the discourses which surround popular music. (Thornton 1996: 66)

Another writing, and one of the few canonized reception studies, is Theodor Adorno’s *On the Fetish-Character in Music and Regression of Listening*. Where Benjamin attempted to disallow the possibility of aura in a mechanically poorly done, but the increasing expertise of studio engineers has made that problem rare.
reproduced medium, Adorno attempts to illustrate how the increasing
fetishization and commodification of music has rendered a “musical experience”
impossible.

The consciousness of the mass of listeners is adequate to fetishized music. It listens
according to formula, and indeed debasement itself would not be possible if resistance
ensued, if the listeners still had the capacity to make demands beyond the limits of what
was supplied.... In music as elsewhere, the discrepancy between essence and
appearance has grown to a point where no appearance is any longer valid, without
mediation, as verification of the essence. (Adorno 1938: 285)

The counterpart to the fetishism of music is a regression of listening.... Not only do the
listening subjects lose, along with the freedom of choice and responsibility, the capacity
for conscious perception of music, but they stubbornly reject the possibility of such
perception. (ibid., 286)

Replacing the previous system, where (albeit only a few) people were able to
specifically listen to music, is one where large corporations, through
advertising, dictate the commodities people should purchase. Adorno’s work
borders on pure paranoia, with the author using ideas such as “subversion” and
“betrayal,” and drawing on the images of Aldous Huxley, to contend that “The
liquidation of the individual is the real signature of the new musical situation.”
(ibid., 276) Four quotes illustrate clearly Adorno’s concept of the relationship
between listeners and corporations:

The star principle has become totalitarian. The reactions of the listeners appear to have
no relation to the playing of the music. They have reference, rather, to the cumulative
success which, for its part, cannot be thought of unalienated by the past spontaneities of
listeners, but instead dates back to the command of publishers, sound film magnates
and rulers of radio. (ibid.)

The concept of musical fetishism cannot be psychologically derived. That ‘values’ are
consumed and draw feelings to themselves, without their specific qualities being
reached by the consciousness of the consumer, is a later expression of their commodity
character. For all contemporary musical life is dominated by the commodity form; the
last pre-capitalist residues have been eliminated. Music, with all the attributes of the

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ethereal and sublime which are generously accorded it, serves in America today as an advertisement for commodities which one must acquire in order to be able to hear music. *(ibid., 278)*

The consumer is really worshipping the money that he himself has paid for the ticket to the Toscanini concert. *(ibid., 278)*

Regressive listening is tied to production by the machinery of distribution, and particularly by advertising. Regressive listening appears as soon as advertising turns into terror, as soon as nothing is left for the consciousness but to capitulate before the superior power of the advertised stuff and purchase spiritual peace by making the imposed goods literally its own thing. *(ibid., 287)*

There are several factors which make Adorno’s arguments difficult to accept, at least in relation to ambient music listening and consuming. First of all, ambient is a fan-promoted genre. This means that virtually no advertising monies are spent by the record companies. Second of all, ambient is an underground, possibly subcultural genre that has a small but dedicated fan base. It is decidedly unpopular (in a pop culture sense), and in my interview with Jason Brown in chapter 2 he brings up the ostracism he experienced as an ambient music fan. Third, ambient, which has been called by several artists and many fans “isolationist” music, is an entirely solitary activity. In the Internet survey I summarize in chapter 3, I found that with only two exceptions all the fans listened by themselves to this music, and many respondants mentioned that they didn’t know anyone else who liked this style of music. Fourth, ambient music, though it could be used otherwise, is generally the center of attention when fans listen, and fans often give hundreds of listenings to a song or album. An interview with one fan revealed that although pieces by David Sylvian invoked the same waking dream each time, he discovered many subtle
nuances after years of repeated listening. The intense study of the music, which isn’t done for academic reasons, is far from “regressive” listening.

These four points appear throughout the thesis in different contexts. However, there are even more refutations to the arguments of Benjamin and Adorno, which I will briefly summarize. The limitations I set on the scope of the thesis mean that I haven’t developed these ideas fully, but introduce them to stimulate other scholars to consider them.

The packaging of ambient music is a whole field of research in itself. Though liner notes on new albums tend to be sparse, sometimes not even indicating the name of the artists or the album, the presentation is very distinct. Each record label favors a genre of visual art; one notable example is the label Table of the Elements, which uses inks with metallic pigments for all their covers. They moved beyond the recognizable gold and silver pigments, and use less common metals such as zinc, chromium, titanium, tungsten, and tin. The covers are reminiscent of the paintings of Anselm Keifer. Many of Soleilmoon’s covers are designed by Robin Storey, whose art has roots in ancient Mayan calendars and Native American cave paintings. These examples, I hope, show that the packaging of ambient CD’s is sufficiently different from that of pop CD’s to warrant a serious analysis as modern art.

I mention briefly that several artists invoke the Deleuzian image of the rhizome to explain the studio phenomena of the remix. I think that other aspects of ambient music would benefit from a similar comparison, including
the relationship between audience and composer, the structure of the ambient community, and the notion of time in ambient music listening.
Chapter 2

ambient composer personalities

In chapter 1 the trajectory is used to demonstrate a mode of analysis that focuses on the intellectual and musical influences of several important cultural scenes. This chapter will go into more detail about six important ambient composers. I singled these artists out for a number of reasons. First, there was sufficient information in print, either in magazine articles or on the Internet, concerning the issues I wished to consider about the personalities of the composers. The second reason, and the one that frames the methodology of this mode of ambient analysis, was that I found the tendency among ambient fans to patronize a small number of similar composers (such as Californian space music artists, or Eno’s collaborations), and a unique idolization of them among fans on the Internet. My supposition is that we can learn something about this idolization by examining the image and ideas the composers convey, and I have chosen a Jungian sort of approach that defines six ambient “archetypes.”

The first composer archetype is Brian Eno, without a doubt the most interviewed ambient personality, who makes it clear that the exploration of new and interesting timbres is one of his fundamental musical aims. He
experiments with all forms of equipment, broken and working, and creates egoless, process-composed, and self-generating compositions. Many ambient fans on the Internet frequently discuss these characteristics, and some composers have gone as far as becoming Eno-clones. The fiddling with broken equipment and dislike of conventional keyboards, all attributed to Eno’s influence, define what I call the “Experimenter” archetype.

In similar fashion, I highlight five other artists and archetypes: Robert Fripp the Virtuoso, David Sylvian the Shaman, Jon Hassell the Fourth World Explorer, Robin Storey the Tormented Isolated Man, and Richard James the Lucid Dreamer. Because the space of ambient compositions and the experiential domain of ambient is tied up in contradictory mythologies, fantasies, and psychoacoustical experimentations, the sensationalist titles of these archetypes reflect their strong personalities they embody.

After comparing and contrasting all six, I suggest yet another approach to understanding ambient music, in the form of a long interview I conducted with the ambient radio DJ Jason Brown. Brown lives in Santa Barbara, California, where he has had a regular show for over six years. He is articulate about his influences, philosophy and methods of composing, and the ins and outs of the radio station studio. Because of flow considerations I include the interview in question and answer format with only a little analysis.
Musician Profile -- Brian Eno

_Musician magazine interviewer:_ “How do you intend for your new record [On Land] to be used?”

_Eno:_ “The way I use it, which isn’t necessarily the way anyone else has to use it, is I sit in the little soundproof room I have at home – a luxury to begin with – with the lights dim, and I listen and imagine I’m in the places that the music represents to me.”
(McKenna 1982: 66)

On the record jacket for Eno’s first solo ambient record, _Discrete Music_, he describes the composer removing himself enough from the process of making the music to become an audience (and a listener) to the work. The portrayed selflessness that permeates Eno’s discussion about his music dates back to when he was an art student of Roy Ascott at Ipswitch, long before his first musical composition. ¹ At school, he went through “a process of complete and relentless disorientation...of getting rid of these silly ideas about the nobility of the artist.” (Frith and Horne 1987: 116) Eno began his studies as a painting student, but switched his focus to the making of sound sculptures.

We know little about how Eno’s early listening history informed his subsequent musical interests, except that at Ipswitch he was first exposed to the minimalist music of La Monte Young and Terry Riley and befriended John Cale, one of Young’s pupils and the singer / songwriter for the Velvet Underground. Eno was drawn to the sound of the Underground, because “when you listen to the music your focus is shifting all the time because there’s no ranking [of

¹ Pete Townshend, the guitarist of the Who (famous for destroying musical equipment while performing on it), was also a student of Ascott’s. (Frith and Horne 1987: 116)
instruments into rhythmic/melodic roles], which doesn’t only reflect the internal structure of the music, but also the structure of your attention to it.” *(ibid., 117)*

Although Eno became famous largely for his work as the keyboard player of the band Roxy Music, between the years of 1971 and 1973 (just shortly after his first exposure to Cale and the minimalists), he didn’t really play the keyboards. He used the VCS-3 sampling keyboard, a notoriously unpredictable machine, to alter the sounds of the band, and only really played semi-broken reel-to-reel decks. He couldn’t read music and hadn’t played any other instrument; as he has said in dozens of interviews, he came to the realization that the recording studio was his instrument.

Eno’s recording studio is an interesting but relatively mysterious phenomenon in itself. Eno wouldn’t tell the music press (mainly *Musician* magazine, a hybrid trade magazine / pop art criticism journal) the specifics of his equipment, claiming that how he used it was more important. We do know that he had a penchant for broken or semi-operative machines, finding more use for a half-working cassette deck or transistor radio than a brand new sequencing synthesizer. The VCS 3 and Mellotron were two of his early favorite keyboards, and even as late as the 1990’s he claimed still to prefer the VCS 3 to a fancy computer.² Most importantly, Eno’s studio features unpredictability,

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² The VCS 3 was one of the only synthesizers that allowed an external audio source to be modified by the algorithms of the synthesizer; thus, a musician could plug tape recorders, guitars, or other VCS 3’s into this input and create sophisticated and unconventional signal processing. The unpredictability was with the LFO’s (Low Frequency Oscillators), which are
which most audio equipment manufacturers strive to eliminate! His studio also
has equipment that normally is designed to produce clear, pitch-oriented sound
but that in a dilapidated state add a random noise component.

In composing, “his object was to eliminate himself from his work, to
minimize his ‘degree of participation,’ to cleanse his art of the idea of the
individual artist.” (ibid.) For this reason, Eno thought of Muzak as a
wholeheartedly “useful” application of music, and a fascinating approach to his
own work:

I predict that the concept of ‘Muzak,’ once it shed its connotations of aural garbage,
might enjoy a new (and very fruitful) lease of life. Muzak, you see, has one great asset:
you don’t have to pay attention to it. This strikes me as a generous humility with which
to imbue a piece of music.” (ibid., 118)

Eno also claims that although his compositions are primarily motivated around
the exploration of timbre, which he credits to the electronic experimentation of
rock bands, his compositions are really the processes he constructs, into which
he feeds notes, timbres, and ideas. Recently, he described his album Neroli as
“self-generating music,” meaning that he created a computer-driven process

supposed to create a periodic oscillation to some facet of the sound, but were very unstable on
this keyboard. The effect might be that a sound intended to have a steadily pulsating attack
would have an irregular shimmering timbre – giving it the sense that it had more “life” (under
the premise that natural sounds featured seemingly chaotic systems, whereas artificial sounds
were regular). The Mellotron was the first sampling keyboard, which had seventy tape loops
that spun continuously, and thirty-five keys that pressed tape heads to the rolling tape. Unlike
subsequent synthesizers, it had some degree of timbre and volume control; if one pressed the
key lightly many of the low and high frequency components would be missing, or if one pressed
it too hard it would saturate the signal, creating an interesting distorted signal. As any tape
could be loaded into any key, the possibilities for sound production were limitless, as were the
range of unpredictable effects from the tape breaking or stretching, the tape heads being out of
alignment (all of which happened on a routine basis).
using his parameters to generate unique compositions; the results were fed back into the process creating yet more compositions. Theoretically, others could put their own parameters into Eno’s “composition” and generate their own pieces of music.

Self-generating composition is not a new concept. In the early 1980’s Professor David Cope at the University of California, Santa Cruz, pioneered a computer program called EMI that would generate pieces “in a particular style” if fed the note lists of several works in that style. Cope thus created “new” Mozart sonatas and “new” Scott Joplin rags, which the Macintosh computer fashioned from important “motives” in the original pieces. But there was a problem with this program and the resultant compositions: They were dependent on the theoretical intentions of the computer programmer. By isolating only pitch classes and note durations, and focusing on repeating “motives,” Cope was conceiving of the original pieces in a set-theory framework, making the assumption that these had been important. Cope’s pieces, and those composed with the other Macintosh program MAX, have a discernible “sound” that stems from their focus on pitch and rhythm.³ Where Eno pioneered in the field of self-generating music is in the creation of models that don’t churn out notelists per se, but create evolving timbral regions. Eno’s parameters are concerned more with the shape and attack of the sound than the

³ MAX is one of the few commercially available programs which “composes” music. The user places constraints on selectable parameters, which govern the range of dynamics, the range of pitches and a hierarchy of importance, rhythmic motives and other attributes such as
pitch of it, and his pieces are not produced to illustrate an abstract theory of the universality of “motives” in the composition of melody and harmony in western music history.

Eno further distances himself from the avant-garde establishment of university composers with his production work for groups such as U2. Whereas the avant-garde is only interested in rock music as a source of sounds to make their compositions seem more “hip,” and actively works against rock, Eno is interested in working with the rock idiom and essentializing rock’s interest in the search for new timbres and structures for music.

Eno’s most famous ambient compositions are those from the mid-1970’s and early 1980’s; in particular, the albums Ambient 1: Music for Airports, Ambient 4: On Land, and the soundtracks Music for Films and Apollo. All four feature long compositions comprised of a singular timbral region. Although all the works unfold with time, they do not progress or evolve. Many of the songs seem at first to be tonal and based on major sonorities, but the prevalence of subtle noise-based timbres and the complete lack of goal-direction make a minimalist analysis in appropriate. In one interview, Eno describes his own endeavor (which inspired albums such as On Land) of “listening to the world in a musical way.” In describing the difficulties in hearing city sounds as ambient music, he states:

feedback or effects. MAX and EMI both involve long lists of numerical data, generating notelists (sequences of pitched frequencies).
Eno wasn’t always interested in hearing the sounds of the city: His fascination with city noises was justaposed with the soundproof room of his New York City flat (where he spent at least eight hours a day). In describing this room, where he composed much of his music and conceived of his videos and installations, he refers to it as his “sacred space” and its “silence and darkness” as its redeeming features. (*ibid.*, 67)

Other points to make out about Eno are that although he comes from a rich tradition of art school teaching, he himself doesn’t teach music, studio techniques, or art theory. Nor does he mention any teachers as gurus or inspirations for his work. He seems to find more inspiration in the ambient sounds of the countryside or the city than in the ideas and sounds of others. It is rumored that he stayed briefly at the Sherborne House of the International Society for Continuous Education (the Bennett school), but he doesn’t cite any of the texts or classes as an influence on his work or spiritual life. In all appearances, Eno is an asexual atheist who is strictly about his musical processes. There are no cults that mimic his dress (no one knows how he

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dresses on a day-to-day basis), no posters, and no knowledge of his personal philosophy or religion. Yet, his work has influenced the listening environments of many people – in particular, those in the ambient music taste culture – and artists who have never met him have rehearsed his compositional processes in hundreds of albums.

Most artists in the ambient music taste culture (with the exception of Richard James) have sizable lists of favorite composers and compositions, and drew inspiration from certain periods of avant-garde music (Bartók, Stravinsky, and others). No person nor any piece appears to have had an effect on the ideas of Eno. Just as literally he composes in isolation in his soundproof room, metaphorically he isolates himself from the rest of the music world, remaining an unapproachable composer who, even in collaboration, really works by himself. It is no coincidence that the record buying fans listen to the music in the same isolation in which it was composed.

Internet culture, on the Brian Eno mailing list, brings up many of these issues, and heated discussions take place over the quality of such and such album compared to an earlier work, etc. The news of the Microsoft “sell out” nearly split the small dedicated Internet fan base in two. One camp was happy to see him receive his just capitalistic reward for his hard efforts. Others, however, felt he was no longer a laudable ambient hero. His recently published book, A Year With Swollen Appendices, also provoked some argument. Whereas
some fans wanted to read the daily diary of Eno’s odd personal habits, others (musical purists) thought it demystified their idol. The most consistently mentioned issue in the Internet debate is the difference between Eno’s old and new compositional styles, including laments that he isn’t composing in the same vein as his *On Land* and *Music for Airports,*\(^5\) and many defenses, from fellow composers who understand how one can become bored with composing in the same style for twenty years. An interesting thread\(^6\) in late 1996 was spearheaded by Eno-inspired composers, who encouraged fans, rather than lamenting the lack new albums in the old style, to compose their own using the scores which Eno very plainly printed on back of each album, and many fans have done just this. If one searches the Internet, one can find a number of homepages that include audio samples of second-generation Eno compositions.

In summary, with Eno we find a cult following of an imageless man, an isolated composer who creates outside the music taste cultures but in the realm of philosophical perception, whose work explores timbre and process in groundbreaking ways. Opponents of Eno claim that all his supposed inventions in process composing are rip-offs of the work of John Cage and La Monte

\(^4\) Some of Satie’s music supposedly appeals to Eno, but mainly those works that fall into Satie’s category of “Furniture Music.”

\(^5\) 1990’s Internet culture is a very activist one, willing to create, sign, and carry through with thousands of petitions. One extreme example I observed recently was concerning the musical group Gentle Giant, which broke up in 1980 following a failed attempt at “making it big.” On the Gentle Giant mailing list, people first amassed e-mail addresses, then thousands of dollars, to convince the long deceased band to get back together to record one last album (there were plenty of rumors of songs that had been composed but never recorded, etc.) Currently, the main obstacle is not the $70,000 price tag to fund the band’s recording, but the musicians remembering how to play their instruments! In such a way, fans of obscure music movements are mobilized as was never possible before.
Young, yet even a superficial listen reveals that there are few similarities other than on paper. When Cage and Eno were brought together for an interview, they discovered that, although both were exploring the nature sound in a similar way, they were not interested in each other’s works. Cage was preoccupied with academic acceptance of his music and in influencing the avant-garde, whereas Eno’s affinity with the pop art aesthetic precluded a common ground. Eno has repeatedly stated that he is “not a musician,” that as a studio engineer he manipulates sound, which is different from someone who can play an instrument or read music. Thus, he intends us to read his dabbling with funky equipment as the tinkering of an amateur hobbyist, one who has an impeccable sense of how to construct a coherent artificial listening environment that seems deceptively natural. Eno is a clear archetype of the Experimenter – the inspiration for hundreds of ambient fans (and composers) who have tried to replicate his mysterious tinkering with old analog keyboards and reel-to-reel decks.

**Musician Profile -- Robert Fripp**

In 1969 I suggested that one could be a rock musician without censoring one’s intelligence. At a time when primitivism in rock was fashionable the idea was attacked as pretentious. Were I to suggest in 1980 that through music we have the capacity to realize a qualitative shift in human nature, probably the idea would attract the same

6 A “thread” is a term that developed on mailing lists to describe a long set of “posts” which all stem off of one original post.
hostility. In silence exist all possibilities. Music is the cup which holds the wine of silence. Sound is that cup, but empty. Noise is that cup, but broken. (Fripp 1980c: 35)

Discipline is not an end in itself, only a means to an end. (Liner notes to Discipline)

The first performer of Eno’s process composition Discrete Music, which involves two Revox reel-to-reel decks, a delay line, and a sound input, was Robert Fripp (see chapter 5 for an analysis of one of Fripp’s realizations). Fripp encountered the process in 1972 while visiting Eno’s home, and the two recorded the album No Pussyfooting. Two years before Eno released his first “ambient” album, he and Fripp had collaborated on this dynamic work, which has a wider range of dynamics and textures than later pieces in the process. Eno evolved the technique to feature a semi-tonal cluster of pitches that pointillistically dot a pleasant landscape; Fripp kept the dissonant edge that distinguished the song “Swastika Girls” and called the technique “Frippertronics.” Through this singular form of music Fripp began his move from famous hard-rock guitarist to proponent of personal discipline, and using his Frippertronics tour as a model, he wrote a series of articles on the nature of the music industry, touring, and methods for finding creativity in the “constraints” of music.

Fripp’s background in music is that of a virtuosic guitarist who played in many progressive rock contexts in the early 1970’s. From age twelve he took guitar lessons in the small town of Dorset, England, and attended Real Estate school (not art school) for one year before dropping out to perform with the Giles brothers (in the predecessor band to King Crimson). As the guitarist and “leader” of King Crimson, he wrote successively more virtuosic works that
evolved from R&B and hard rock to polyphonic, polyrhythmic, and “art” rock. King Crimson had several successful tours in 1971, 1972, and 1974, and pictures of Fripp at the time showed him in a leather jacket on a motorcycle – image counted at least for something. He was an odd stage personality, however. He sat on a barstool on one unlighted corner of the stage, almost unmoving during a concert except for his hands, which played some of the most complicated guitar parts ever performed with a rock band. While performing in King Crimson and composing epic progressive rock suites, he came across the music of Stravinsky and Bartók and became familiar with some Indian music, which influenced his polyrhythmic and occasionally modal compositions.

Following the demise of King Crimson in 1974, Fripp went on a three year retreat to the Sherborne House of the International Society for Continuous Education in the Cotswell Hills of England, the first school of J.G. Bennett. Fripp arrived at the school just shortly after the death its founder, Bennett’s wife, Elizabeth, had taken over. Although 1980’s interviews downplayed the importance of Bennett to his professional development, his school of Guitar Craft embodies much of the ritualized practice of Gurdjieff’s exercises or Bennett’s methods for achieving humility. In addition, Fripp’s tenure with Bennett’s teachings on personal discipline inspired him to structure his life in a unique and regimental fashion. From 1977 until the present, Fripp has

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7 (Tamm 1989: chapter 10). The music press was quick to accuse Gurdjieff and Bennett of being leaders of “cult religions,” associating their teachings, which include a mixture of Zen, Hindi, and Sufi practices, with “New Age.” Fripp probably wanted to distance himself from this stigmata, which is incongruous with his previous hard rocker-with-a-conscience image.
organized his personal affairs and professional musicianship into several-year long “drives,” which aim at an ultimate goal. His first “drive,” following his professional retirement from 1975-1977, was the drive to 1981, which primarily featured his Frippertronics tour, his most significant contribution to the ambient music genre. It was designed to be both a personal voyage around the world, akin to the travels of his grandparent teacher Gurdjieff, and a new stage in the ideology of the touring musician, that debuted the “small, mobile, intelligent unit” Fripp describes on the liner notes to several albums and in his columns in *Musician Player & Listener* magazine. The music, unlike his highly conscious and current compositions with the rock band King Crimson, was designed to be heard on many levels, at once a pleasant background to other activities (such as eating, shopping, or a haircut) and the focus of an attentive listener who is transported to another place by the power of the not-so-ambient music. In his accounts of his tour, he achieved a successful balance between the two extremes and was also able to refine his musicianship by becoming an active listener while performing (a value stressed by Fripp’s longtime friend Brian Eno in the notes to *Discreet Music* and elsewhere).

The venues of Fripp’s performances were small, and scantily advertised; thus, only a select few were able to hear Fripp’s performances of Frippertronics. His albums – recordings of live performances from the two-year tour – are what most people think of when referring to Fripp’s ambient period of composing. However, following his attempt at uniting the gothic dance aesthetic with the ambiance of Frippertronics in the short-lived band The League of Gentlemen,
Fripp incorporated many ambient ideologies in his school for Guitar Craft, started in England as a small-scale workshop and later brought to America, Argentina, and other European countries. Guitar Craft workshops are held in remote places; part of the allure is the retreat from civilization, similar to enrolling in one of Bennett’s classes for Continuous Education. They are live-in events with rigorous work schedules (including doing heavy repairs on the building in which classes take place and meal and bathroom shifts), and each day time is spent doing physical exercises reminiscent of some of Gurdjieff’s mandatory Movements.

The budding guitarist told what model of guitar to bring (an Ovation 1869, not a standard playing model of professionals) and must tune it in a system of fifths, disorienting guitarists with previous playing experience. Every aspect of the playing is disciplined and regimental. No one can play a single note until one has mastered the proper technique for holding the instrument; nor can one play more than one note until one has mastered the tone quality of the first note; no ornaments on a note are allowed until permission is given, and so on. Participants in the workshops advance levels by achieving mastery of the instrument and personal discipline, eventually becoming teachers of Guitar

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8 Fripp claims the inventions of many facets of guitar playing, including this “open” tuning which enables him to play in different modal systems than rock ‘n’ roll’s blues and major scales. The tuning, from lowest to highest, is C-G-D-A-E-G, requiring different gauge strings. Fripp also claims he has refined picking and fingering techniques; after trying to transcribe his incredibly fast solos such as “Fracture” or “Indiscipline,” many students don’t argue that at least his technique works for him. All these claims, and the subsequent proofs, are common knowledge of Fripp and ambient fans, part of the mythic folklore that surrounds his music.

9 Some personal accounts of discipline methods included requiring the class to admit in front of their peers that they were indeed idiots when it came to the instrument, putting all
Craft when they have advanced eight or more levels. All compositions the ensemble performed are group-composed works, meaning that fifteen like-minded guitarists with identical guitars hold a small, but significant, piece of the larger structure. The stresses on personal discipline, group conditioning, and the collective creativity are related to some of the fundamental teachings and practices of both Gurdjieff and Bennett. Through creating and maintaining this instructional system, Fripp attained the guru level of respect from his students, and I contend that he never would have attained his semi-mythic status in the ambient music circle without the mystique surrounding the Guitar Craft schools. It would be easy to dismiss his ten columns in Musician Player & Listener and Guitar Player as the ramblings of a disgruntled miscreant of the music industry, but they take on a new light, and resemble holy scriptures of sorts, when they become the framework and justification for a widely known school (that has produced other known ambient music composers).

In 1992 King Crimson reformed, with a larger line-up (including one ex-Crafty guitarist), and Fripp has been operating under the drive to 2000. His role in the new King Crimson is different. He doesn’t play as many long, impossibly fast guitar solos, and has sublimated his role to a background wash. In this drive he has produced several albums of post-Fripptronics music, which he describes both as “radiophonics” and “soundscape” music. The music is more dynamic than previous Frippertronics efforts and features a high level of participants on equal ground. This is identical to the idea of the “remarkable idiot” that Gurdjieff penned in Beezelbub.
virtuosity, if not in his guitar playing then in his intricate timing with pedals and effects units. And though it is still possibly a good example of the “small mobile intelligent unit” that Fripp envisioned would overtake the music industry by the mid-1980’s, the racks of effects units are less portable and more assuming than his original analog setup. Though his modes of musical expression have changed recently, he is still known among fans as a great virtuoso, and at least in public perception this is the archetype he represents.10

**David Sylvian and Jon Hassell**

My Music provokes introspection, which allows individuals to find answers within. I think people who find my work uncomfortable or depressing are the kind who find it difficult to sit in a room alone, because there are elements within themselves that they are very uncomfortable with. (Drozdowski 1988: 51)

When I’m writing a piece, I’m trying to pin down very abstract things. A state of mind is never pure. If the music didn’t have that tension, that conflict, it wouldn’t give you the stress of personal relationships. No matter how ideal they may be, there is that feeling that it could all fall apart at any moment. (Schwartz 1987: 11)

I’m not a good keyboard player, or guitarist for that matter...I like the idea of being an eternal amateur and allowing that to show through. (Drozdowski 1988: 126)

David Sylvian (real name: David Batt) came neither out of art school nor formalized music lessons, but started with his brother as the guitarist and singer of a garage band that became the gothic pop band Japan. In 1982, *Trouser Press* stated that Japan had “bitten off more influences than they could

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10 On the *Elephant Talk* and *Discipline* Internet lists, which are centered around discussion of the musical projects of current and ex-members of King Crimson, a good percentage of messages concern the transcription or attempted duplication of Fripp’s solos and
chew,” a reference to the eclectic albums *Adolescent Sex* and *Tin Drum*, that have moments of rock and blues, gothic and new age music, and African and Indonesian musical styles. These influences and Sylvian’s research into North American shaman traditions made their way into his several influential ambient albums, where he collaborated with Holger Czukay, Robert Fripp, and Jon Hassell, among others. Accounts of his life vary, but there is some evidence that he spent time at the Sherborne house as well, possibly in the early 1980’s following the breakup of Japan (paralleling Fripp’s personal voyages after the demise of King Crimson in 1974). At the least, he was influenced enough by Bennett to include a fragment of Bennett’s recitation of Gurdjieff’s *Beelzebub* on his album *Gone to Earth*.

As a musical icon, Sylvian isn’t known for his experimentalism or his virtuosity, although many people are fans because of his deep baritone voice. His music has been described as “understated” and relies on subtleties of texture and multiple layers of perception (on the top is the somewhat broken melody and the muddled rhythms; the next layer is the drone, and coming out of that fabric are little keyboard sounds, sampled instruments and voices, and tape loops). The albums show an amazing command of dynamic levels and unconventional production techniques, such as removing the initial attack of sounds, making it hard for the listener to distinguish the intricate layers. Although most of his albums have many songs with lyrics, and even choruses

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his virtuosity in general. Fripp is inspirational to the ambient and progressive rock scene much in the same way that Eddie Van Halen inspires scores of young hard rock guitarists.

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and verses, his voice, like the keyboard sounds, seems to come out of the fabric of the music, almost as if it were an electronic keyboard, too.

Sylvian is interesting partly because of his similarity to many ambient music listeners I've met. His eclectic spiritual leanings are based on a loose foundation of Christianity, with strong passions for shamanism and animism (and his interest in Bennett). These beliefs coexist peacefully in his music, although there is a dark edge to his compositions that fans have suggested may come from his own personal troubles (divorce, cocaine addiction, strife with his record label). Many ambient listeners who grew up in suburban America, and were exposed to forms of exoticism as a possible escape from its tedium, have an identical basis for understanding the world, seeing unconvincing Christian ethics, fearsome peyote cults, and role-playing mythologies as three views of the same thing. Because of his eclecticism and the focus of his song lyrics, I consider him a model of the shamanic archetype, or the archetype of the mystical experiencer who reflects on his personal spiritual voyage.

Let's say there was a computer profile of an average man or woman. Put all the physiognomy, all the skin color and everything else together, what would you come out with? A citizen of the world. One of the ideas I have is to make a kind of music that has that kind of universal appeal. (Diliberto 1986: 70)

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11 Trouser Press page 51
12 Sylvian is not subtle about his use of spiritual imagery; some of his song titles are “In Praise of Shamans” and “Premonition” (obviously invoking ideas of shamanism), and the albums Secrets of the Beehive and Brilliant Trees are clearly about animism or naturalism. He formed a short-lived band called Rain Tree Crow that tried to link the two worlds with his previous gothic (the cult of blackness) dance band leanings (and of course there were Christian images in the songs, too).
Jon Hassell is another artist with an eclectic background. In the early 1970’s he was a jazz trumpeter in New York, and became a student of La Monte Young and eventually of Young’s teacher, the late Pandit Pran Nath. His first solo album was *Vernal Equinox*, the debut of his first experiments with a treated trumpet sound. One composition on this album, “Hex,” has a twenty-plus minute trumpet solo over an Indian *sruti* drone. The solo is obviously influenced by his studies with Pandit Pran Nath, as it is composed in the *raga* Darbari, though it differs from traditional North Indian classical compositions in that it doesn’t progress through the *raga*, staying in the lower fifth through the whole piece and never moving into the rhythmic sections (as if it were an extended *alap*).

Later albums are obvious about their ethnic leanings. *Aka•Darbari•Java* is described in its liner notes as “coffee colored Classical music,” supposedly unifying the rhythms of *Aka*, the *raga Darbari*, with the formal structure of the music of *Java*. There’s a little jazz thrown in, too. *Dream Theory in Malaya* and *Flash of the Spirit* extend the gamut of influences to Malaysian Temiar music (that he describes as part of the dream-recounting ceremonies) and the African percussion and vocal group Farafina. The late 1980’s brought the album *City: Works of Fiction*, that used the “sounds of the

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13 At first, this sound consisted of his trumpet miked and put through a chorusing box (chorusing is a term for a type of reverb that has regularly spaced echoes of about fifty milliseconds, which do not decrease in amplitude as in natural reverb. The sound is called chorusing because it mutates a single simple timbre into a complex combination of that timbre, making it sound as though there is a “chorus” of that original instrument. Later experiments with his treated trumpet sound used various delay units and a harmonizer (which will convert a
city” and rap music as the “ethnic” colors of the album. Hassell categorizes this music as “Music of the Fourth World.”

It isn’t known exactly where Hassell’s fourth world imagery comes from, but there are several possible sources. Navajo mythology divides the universe into four worlds, the fourth being the world of the Coyote and the world of the unknown, the world of the spirit, the world that people try to enter through rituals in dream houses. In geopolitical terms, the term fourth world has been used to describe systems that transcend the divisions of nations into first, second, and third world. In Gurdjieff’s and Bennett’s teachings, there is the notion of the “fourth stream,” a separate reality from the other three streams of consciousness. The “remarkable men” of Gurdjieff’s teachings were practitioners of “fourth stream” awareness. Hassell has performed with both Fripp and Sylvian and likely was exposed to the teachings of Gurdjieff and Bennett. “Fourth World Music” is possibly a derivative of both the fourth stream awareness of Gurdjieff and the Navajo conception of cosmology. Whatever the origin, Hassell’s Fourth World music is widely known among ambient fans as the mastery of world-music fusion with the awareness of experimental jazz and minimalism, and Hassell thus represents the Fourth World archetype.

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single played note into a two to four note chord), and eventually his array of equipment was so great that he no longer needed the trumpet but sang into the mouthpiece.
Robin Storey and Richard James

Contrary to all appearances, Robin Storey is a man far removed from the ordinary. Having spent five years of his life withdrawn and without communication, he later became addicted to heroin. This punctured holes into all sense of time and propelled him into even deeper experimentation. He has not listened to contemporary music for the last ten years. Now entering a fourth decade, life is no less ambiguous for this young father, husband and producer of some of the most evocative audio ever nurtured from a bedroom studio. (written by Desmond Hill on the official Rapoon homepage, October 1996)

The Rapoon homepage contains a particularly potent example of ambient fan writing on the artist Robin Storey, who is the founder of the groups: Zoviet-France: and Rapoon, who released about twenty five important ambient albums from 1979 to the present.

Chain-smoking roll ups, the complexity unravels. Born in 1955, he grew up in Cumbria before undertaking a degree at Sunderland, where he chose an experimental option on a Fine Arts course. Together with two colleagues he switched mediums and began to explore sound. Softly spoken and warily downbeat, Storey recounts his previous lives. As a painter, print-maker, and visual artist his work has been exhibited all over the world: Russia, Norway, Germany, England. His painted animation has been broadcast on Canadian television and syndicated to America and Europe. Two of his hand made works are displayed in the Berlin Museum of Modern Art. As a musician he co-founded Zoviet France and instigated an era of ardent analysis that will never be repeated. To the four young men who shared a 24 hours a day active involvement, between 1979 and 1993 Zoviet France was a means of living. Inspired by the cut'n'paste strategy of late '70s new wave, and influenced by Holger Czukay and Stockhausen, they bought dismantled cello parts, wired up ready made objects, utilised found sounds and provoked adaptability. A few electric guitars and sparse amplification impelled with the anxious energy of that era, characterised early Zoviet France material... These exponential extremes infused with a fascination for intra-dimensional realities, took Storey's consciousness to a place where "thoughts came faster than words ever could."

In reflection he recognises, "There was a negative aspect of Zoviet France, spiritually. That was very hard to shake." This dissatisfaction drew him toward indigenous, native cultures pursuing a more developed yet incorporeal dimension. An interest visually evident within the markings of personal iconography which adorn the hand-crafted

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As Hassell studied and performed with La Monte Young for a number of years, and Young spent many years creating "dream houses" which were a type of long-term sound installation, it is likely that both are drawing from the same source in Native American lore.
artwork of his album sleeves, and the limited edition mono-prints he produced as a member of the True North arts collective. (ibid.)

As this music, like the early Eno works, inspired a wave of imitations, the author of this page and the larger ambient fan base are interested in the equipment and influences that makes Storey’s music possible:

His studio resources amount to a portable Sony DAT machine, two Tascam 4 track portastudios, a quarter inch reel to reel, an ordinary hi-fi, an Alesis effects unit and two keyboards, a Yamaha and a Moog. Littering the room, on every shelf, in every corner there are instruments: multi shaped tablas, wooden drums, metal drums, pipes, flutes, didjeridoos, guitars, a newly acquired sitar, many kelimbas of different shapes and ages. His current recordings are the result as he puts it, "of years of development" and making music is "a process of disassembly and rebuilding." Rapoon's work is infinitely sublime and infinitely sensuous. Literally metabolic alchemy, it negotiates the open spaces of sacred history, drawing upon Indian ragas, Arabic prayer calls and African rhythmic whispers. Curiously ancient, technically majestic, beautifully entrancing. (ibid.)

Storey is a complex figure, combining some of the mythology of Eno (the experimenter and tinkerer) with the Fourth World fusions of Jon Hassell, but underlying it all is the sentiment from the first quote, that portrays Storey as a sort of tormented soul who has artistically prevailed through difficult bouts of isolationism and drug addiction, through disagreements with his band to a lack of audience acceptance. Storey more than any other public ambient figure is the archetype of the Tormented Isolated Man.

If Eno seems like a modern-day Siegfried, Richard James (the composer of Aphex Twin) is undoubtedly the Wagner of the 1990’s. James is known both as the most commercially successful ambient composer and as the most pompous, claiming in every interview that he is “not influenced by music” but
inspired by sounds such as the transformer hum of power stations. Although he reportedly has a record collection of over six thousand techno and jungle 12" singles, he is bored by them and can’t listen to them for more than a minute or two (they put him to sleep!). These assertions have outraged his fans, who can’t understand how he could possibly not be influenced by anything. Among fans, the other contentious point is James’ insistence that his compositions are influenced by lucid dreaming. In several interviews in Melody Maker, James describes his work as music “for lucid dreaming,” and talks about his own personal experiments with hypnagogic states. According to several interviews, he apparently sleeps for only “two or three hours a night” (Reynolds 11/27/93), but funnels his R.E.M. activities into the lucid dream. Speaking of his popular album Selected Ambient Works Vol. II, he said “Some of the tracks were recorded under the influence of lucid dreaming. In other words, they’re based on sounds I first heard while dreaming. When I wake up, I go straight into the studio and try to recreate what I’ve heard in my dreams.” (Reynolds 1/22/94)

As of 1995, he was experimenting with actually manipulating the controls of his studio while in a hypnagogic state.

James borrows from the jargon of Eno in describing his personal experimenting with equipment and sound, though he is coming from the techno/rave scene, where an important element of any vital groove is the uniqueness of the timbre of the rhythm. One needs only to listen to the successful works of artists like Tricky (trip-hop), the Prodigy (jungle/house), or Banco de Gaia (ambient jungle) to hear a wide spectrum of the complexity and
unconventionality of the sound sources they sample. James has also gotten
attention for his freakish behavior; he drives a large army tank around the
English countryside, and is rumored to date senior citizens! Past the personal
gossip, though, he is best known as the archetype of the lucid dreamer, a model
for listeners who desire to experience the full intensity of Aphex Twin’s music.

Comparing six ambient composers and archetypes

My purpose in defining these composers as representative of six
archetypes is not to exclude all their other attributes and ideologies, but to show
the six fundamental psychological attributes that form the core of the ambient
music belief system. The ideology in turn explains some of the audience’s
affinity with the personalities behind the music, and many of the listeners’ own
experiments in sound, representing an approach to studying where the music is
coming from.

So far, we’ve seen that ambient music as a genre is a fusion of dozens of
other musical forms, many seemingly unrelated. To understand how a new
work can be considered “ambient,” we can see how it responds to a litmus test
of the six archetypes. Many works by industrial groups such as Controlled
Bleeding and Eyeless in Gaza, to name two of a hundred possibilities, might
seem ambient to a listener not only because of timbral similarities to some other
work they know, but because the musical vocabulary reveals the same
experimental ethic that permeates the music of Eno and Richard James. A
composition by Steve Roach, who is on the fence between hard-core ambient and new age music, will seem more ambient if it conjures up the same shamanistic images of a David Sylvian song. Likewise, compositions of the Hafler Trio, which are held dear by new music aficionados, industrial listeners, and the ambient community would be unarguably ambient if they conjured up the mood of the Tormented Isolated Man.

Several of the archetypes are relevant to the composer/DJ Jason Brown. His penchant is experimenting with semi-operational equipment; until recently his listening and composing was in isolation, and his all-night radio shows propel him – and the listening audience – into hypnagogic states. The following interview touches on the background to his interest in ambient and noise musics, as well as specific studio procedures and his philosophy of music.

Composer profile -- Jason Brown

Q: How many years have you been listening to ambient music?
A: I guess the first time I heard about ambient music was Brian Eno.. I heard Music for Airports on my college radio station in Riverside, six years ago, maybe more. It was a shockingly different sound, maybe 'cos college radio at that time didn't have very much smooth surfaces, a lot more jagged edges, or jazzy classical kind of stuff, so it was really shocking to hear a lot of space on the air, allowing silences. Since then I've been trying to track it down, but I... I found the Brian Eno records, but I wasn't able to find anything else for about three
more years, at least. And really, one of the things I first started doing, on my radio show, was so I'd have something to listen to... I was just making tapes so I would have something to listen to at home, because I couldn't find anything else in Goleta that I really wanted to hear; long surfaces, modulations instead of beats...and I kept looking for it. I was working at the Wherehouse [a large California music chain] at the time, and it was a really depressing search.

Q: They don't have the best ambient selection!

A: No, and especially not four years ago.

Q: So you mentioned Eno, and Music for Airports: Was there anything else, any other albums that were influential on you?

A: No, in the very beginning I can't remember anything else that was publicly played except for Music for Airports; maybe Another Green World... it wasn't until I met this other guy, John Lineker, my partner on the radio show, he's the one that met Negativland somehow when he was in high school, and he lived outside of Berkeley, and had access to a lot more music when he was growing up, so he knew acres more than me about most genres, especially German noise.

I used to listen to Einstürzende Neubauten back when I was doing a rock show, I really liked the noisiest Einstürzende Neubauten I could find. That was a little easier to find. I mean, stuff at that time that sounded really extreme to me, like, I don't know... Nirvana's first album?! and early Einstürzende Neubauten... oh and I just remembered, when I was at KCSB, I found a :Zoviet-France: album, it was '89 and I remember it just came out. I think it was Look
into Me, or... I remember to listening to it and thinking, 'oh, this is kind of interesting,' but I remember someone coming up to me and saying, 'oh, is that the kind of music you listen to?', and so... [laugh]... I think I was about nineteen...

Q: That's not a good age to be...

A: Yeah, the WRONG music. I don't think I had heard an album that was that much droning at that point. This brand new :Zoviet-France: record...

Q: Droning – that becomes a theme for a lot of recent ambient music.

A: Yeah, definitely. That's usually what I try to do. I've only just now... once we got computers it became a lot easier to do rhythms that are structured as rhythms, rather than pulses or three minute long cycles, so droning just technically has been sort of what I have been able to do, but it is definitely what I have been trying to do since... one thing, up until now it's been hard to find droning albums, with changing elements over long, long periods of time, and they just haven't been put out, except for maybe a few new age or environmental recordings that involve insects or something.

Q: [laugh] What do you think of new age, by the way?

A: It's maybe one reason why I wasn't looking more closely at some things that were out there, or I didn't know what was out there, because new age was out there, new age was selling, and other things that were more interesting I guess I couldn't find. I used to listen to "Music From the Hearts of Space," the radio show, and I would listen to it, and think, 'This is... close... similar!'

Q: Close...so what's the difference?
A: I think it may just come down to instrumentation, because the thing I really like about noise music is the complexity of the sounds, like what seems like chaotic noise having these very complex structures that only become visible when you give them a certain sort of attention and a cheesy synthesizer patch doesn't have that long term mystical complexity.

Q: [laugh] So if you generalize it, timbre seems very important too, or the color or quality of the sound.

A: I think so, timbre is definitely vital. I can listen to a really bent piece of metal being tapped for a lot longer than I can deal with the most interesting effects-processed synthesizer patch, so...

Q: There must be something...

A: Yeah, I'd like to think of it as the complexity of the sound, and it's also some kind of bigotry against keyboards, digital synthesizer patching, MIDI, I don't know. [laugh]

Q: I don't know...a lot of Music for Airports was created with very primitive keyboard sounds of Brian Eno, with primitive keyboards that have chaotic kind of sounds... they weren't very well made, they were on the verge of breaking. That was his interest.

A: Yeah, I thought that was a personal particularity, until I met some other bands, my roommate is really into noise, so I'm learning more about that. He knows the bands in L.A. that come up and play on the radio show and when they bring in their broken equipment and are talking about it, about "how great this ancient broken keyboard is", and like one of them mentioned how his

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roommate cleaned his Moog, and now it makes these pure tones, it goes "Beu-o-weeney," and he talks about how horrible that is! [laugh] I realize I wasn't unique in perceiving broken things as a lot more interesting than some nice, smooth...

Q: Well, let's take this further. I have an interest in broken things too, but I haven't quite figured out what it is. Is it the chaos, the unpredictability of the timbre, or the fact that since it changes so much, it's not a predictable flat sine wave or something, that maybe the unpredictability is interesting as the sound evolves. Or, how would you word it?

A: Yeah, I think that unpredictability is a real big part of listenability... and maybe it has something to do with taking the author or the composer out of the music a little bit, too. That makes it seem a little more interesting. Maybe you will get a feel for what the composer is going to do next, but you don't know what that broken drum machine will do next, or I don't know... Just doing it is a lot more interesting, and actually since I do it weekly I can't be quite sure its more interesting to listen to... because I've talked about this with other people that do radio shows live, and [in talking] about it's more interesting when you know people doing it or you're doing it yourself, but... you know, if you do it every week for hours on end, then how do you know if it's good anymore, 'cos you're just listening to these noises that are produced all the time so you hear something's that's almost a rhythm and go 'wow!' So I'm not sure if I've burned certain taste receptors...

Q: That's O.K., we can be as biased as we want to...
A: So what I perceive, at least from that angle, just making something up on a regular basis, is that the structures, and unexpectedness of something that's not working right usually comes out a lot more interesting than amateur musician cleverness which might replace it if I tried do something with my own directed will, and play exactly the right thing.

I didn't realize it until I re-read some of Eno's liner notes, that I probably stole the idea of creating a system, and having it generate the sound for me, is something I really try to pursue a lot. I've done things like bring several machines into the station and try to set them up in ways that the effect between them will generate the sound, with the most minimal input possible, so I've done things like bring fans into the station, like three... upwards of five tape machines, reverbing into each other, so even the slightest inputs, with the mikes turned all the way up, so even tiny pops and noises in the room, surface noises become sort of elements of musical structure, sound structure.

Q: Have you read Eric Tamm's biography of Brian Eno?
A: No.

Q: I was just curious, because Eno got his start at Ipswich art school, by creating sound sculptures, and he was very interested in no-input sort of things - he would create something and it would create music on its own, like self-generating machines, and then he went through a whole period of composition for twenty years, putting out all the albums you're familiar with, but now, he's into self-generating composition again. With Neroli, the piece generates itself.
A: I didn't know how _Neroli_ was produced, but I knew that things like the _Shutov Assembly_, things that seemed to go on their own without the human having to be involved, and I didn't know that he started off with that...

Q: Yeah, you know, he got specific training from his teachers at Ipswich, in removing the ego and the self; not being concerned by the product, but concerned only by the process that produces the sounds. The artistry is only in the process that produces nice sounds. It's not in the sound itself. But then again, Eno is still concerned about the sound, so it's kind of contradictory, a little emotional, and a little less subjective.

A: Yeah, I was thinking that some of the things just in the liner notes that he talked about, wanting to create the systems that duplicate themselves, and I guess I was thinking of that completely from an output perspective. He said specifically that he wanted to become an audience to the process, and at certain times I would have four six-hour [slots] of radio time a week and would have to fill it, and maybe that's where this is coming from, but I wanted to set up a system where I could sit back and have nice things be generated, with maybe the most minimal input just to change the system in an unpredictable way, but to have it generate itself based on some processes.. I've been concerned with that for a while, and maybe only in the last two years that I've read the liner notes more closely that I realize that it's probably a completely unoriginal idea and in any case its extremely old!

Q: Yeah, but it's something that very few people can actually attain. A lot of people aspire to it, but still are too preoccupied with the content. I find that, I
was having an argument with someone about John Cage, and they were lauding John Cage as some sort of God, of a timeless sort of era, and one of the things that they mentioned was that he wasn't concerned with the sound that came out of his pieces, and only concerned with the process. Yet how come is it that when I hear a John Cage piece, within five seconds I know it is a John Cage piece? [laugh] You know, there must have been some sort of point when he said 'I want this sort of sound,' or at least he would hire musicians that would produce the sound that he liked. He was concerned, so he lived in contradiction the whole time.

A: That's interesting, 'cos I had heard the name John Cage, because it is unavoidable... [laugh]

Q: Unavoidable!

A: But I hadn't heard much of his music until about four years ago, and even then little, but around the same time I heard him talk, and read some of his stuff, and I like his theorizing about his music so much more than his music. Like, some of the prepared piano stuff is pretty rockin', but most of it is...

Q: But that is actually so contradictory to what his entire process, because he's actually just creating a new instrument he's writing scored pieces for...

A: Well a lot of the stuff that I guess is signature John Cage just sounds like academic foo-foo, when I listen to it pleasurably...

Q: That's interesting because there are a lot of people who are trying to compare Brian Eno with John Cage, and there is some comparison, since they both went to art school, and have a similar background, and both began with a
certain process to their music, and approach, but I feel that the result is very different. Eno definitely creates a sort of sound environment, [but] being around environmental composers for a long time, I don't feel that John Cage creates that same type of aesthetic.

A: I think that's definitely true. Brian Eno, as compared to John Cage, creates something that is a lot more visceral, or experiential I guess, and John Cage seems to be aiming from [for?] more of a contemplation of the structure. I think just in general that's what attracts me a lot more about what seems to be the concerns of any music, especially now, when they're mixing things like dub and hip hop; it's designed for things like showrooms; there's a physical effect that's being thought about, and it's a lot more interesting to me, I think it might have actually been John [Lineker] that called it "ambient drug music," but that's kind of what I'm aiming for in a way, like tapes... I think it was when I first started making these tapes and I kind of figured I was on the right track is when John was listening to them back, and I didn't have anyone else...I didn't have any other frame of reference, because I didn't have anyone else that would want to listen to this weird noise for and hour and a half, and so he'd say things like, "I tried listening to that tape five times, and I haven't been able to stay awake to the end, yet" so I was like, yeah!

Q: Oh good! So that was the effect you were looking for...

A: Well, and it's no so much that I'm necessarily slamming people's consciousnesses, it's that I'm affective...um, is more what I'm trying to go for, as opposed to (contrasting to John Cage), like creating a structure for, it's like

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contemplation alone. Like, if I'm going to contemplate it, I also want to experience it, too. I don't want it to be something that's sort of on the screen, where I'm watching the dots appear and drawing lines between them, I want to be inside of it, I guess.

**on composing:**

Q: So why do you keep making music?

A: Another reason that I keep making music I keep listening to these CD’s [his small personal collection of commercial recordings] and I have to do something to them, so I loop this three second part of them, then slow it down five times... usually, if I going to sample something consciously, it’s because it had some certain quality that I found interesting, or more often because it had some association that was psychologically or socially interesting. Let’s make Elvis into a drone!

Yeah, I used to do that a lot, actually, especially in the beginning, grabbing different world music records, and maybe it was because the sounds wee more unusual, or it was some sort of college student imperialism [laughter]... I don’t know.

Q: So how would you turn an Elvis song into a drone?

A: I think that might be another reason I’m concerned with systems, is because when I think of that it basically becomes a concert of what technology I have available at the time. Three years ago it would have been cutting the tape loop of some portion of the song: usually at semi-random [points], so I wouldn't
really figure out that consciously what part I wanted to loop, so I’d just record some stuff and maybe play with the tape while it’s recording and then slow it down and then cut a tape where it sounded pretty good, and then looping that onto a layered tape – the cart machines at the radio station don’t have an erase head, so three, four, five layers of the same tape loop on a longer loop...

Some of the best things I think I did were caller loops, where I’d capture voices. They wouldn’t know what was going on or they’d be really drunk (on Saturday nights), so people in I.V. [the college town next to U.C.S.B.] would call and ask why I wasn’t playing punk, and I’d ask them to sing, and they’d be very confused and all their friends would be going “woo-oo!” and I’d catch them on a tape loop and slow it down and loop it and record it on the cart and it’d sound gorgeous. It would be beautiful because it was these abstract tones of the human voice...
Part 2

listeners and experiences

My interest in writing these sections initially stemmed from frustrations with the bulk of musicological literature, which focuses on major compositions by major composers and ignores the listener. Ultimately, despite any philosophical arguments to the contrary, musicians are hired to play music for other people – it is a social activity.

There are a number of ethnomusicological fan studies which were of interest, the most notable Thornton’s *Club Cultures* (previously cited). In conceiving of a similar study for ambient music, I was posed with a fundamental dilemma: ambient music fans are inherently anti-social. There is no public space for ambient music, except for the discussions on the Internet. Nevertheless, I have attempted a small-scale ethnography of the ambient music community in chapter 3, and approach several difficult issues of the ambient belief system in chapter 4.
Chapter 3

the ambient community

It is difficult to approach the notion of an ambient music “community” for the simple fact that most of the people that comprise it have never met one another. Ambient music fans are not unlike the fans of particular novelists, who share an interest in authors’ fictional worlds, but never engage in a mutual exchange of ideas. But in many ways what I am studying is a true community that communicates through the free virtual space known in 1997 as the Internet, a world-wide computer network that links university computer systems with thousands of corporate and home networks. As such, there are many discussion groups on the Internet about ambient music, and the mailing list housed at the webspace of www.hyperreal.com is the most extensive.

In this chapter, I will present some general demographic information about ambient music fans, some of it gathered from Internet browsing, and some of it from a survey I posted on the main Internet ambient mailing list. As the Internet is not only a space for discussion and fan interaction but also (and primarily) the home of an overwhelming amount of information, I will briefly describe what is available, including commercial and non-commercial web-sites, homepages, archives of band information, and Internet magazines. I have also reprinted some important pages from the largest ambient homepage, Hyperreal.
After that, there is a longer and more personal interview with one fan who is a good representative of many of the attributes I found in the survey and elsewhere. I chose him also for his ability to articulate his experiences of listening to ambient music.

**Demographics, and the Internet Survey**

After reading eight months of posts on the ambient mailing list, I developed a hypothesis about the style of life and affinities of ambient music fans. My original nine assumptions were:

1) Discussion of new releases was the main motivation of the people on the list.

2) People had developed strong opinions about what was and wasn’t ambient, and had codified personal definitions of ambient music.

3) Many of the list members had a tendency to collect and hoard ambient artifacts, and some of the same people were self-described audiophiles, so these defining personality characteristics would show up in other aspects of their lives.

4) Many list members were vocal about the nuts and bolts of album construction, so I figured that they must have some extensive musical involvement, either as performers, composers, or DJ’s.

5) With the large number of ambient web pages, I figured that computer literacy and computer interest was very high among list members.
6) As many fans mentioned finding CD’s in large-city record chains, or described concerts in big-city venues, I thought most of them lived in urban and suburban areas (making ambient music a primarily urban music form).

7) Clues led me to believe that most ambient fans lived and listened to the music alone. Taking account some of the other traits (particularly #2 and #3 above), I figured that the vast majority of fans were male.

8) I figured that about half the posters learned about ambient music from raves / clubs, for as many people talked about them as mentioned not going to such events.

9) The .signature files of many list posters made it seem as though many fans had completed some form of college and were professionals in engineering or computer industries. So I figured that those would be the most common professions and that the average age would be in the late twenties.

To test my hypothesis, I designed a seventeen question survey and posted it on January 24, 1997, to the ambient list. I hoped that the questions would, first and foremost, attract list-members to respond, so I began with the ever-popular questions of their “top-5 ambient albums” and a one to two sentence definition of ambient. Other questions were structured to ascertain geographic distribution, age, marital status, occupation (thus relative income level), similar interests, how they became involved in ambient music culture, what types of ambient (subdivisions) they favored, and in general what ambient meant to them. I also allowed the respondents to selectively omit questions.
they weren't interested in, as that would tell me something of what the fans thought of my questions.

This was the text of the interview:

Hello, I'm Eliot, an infrequent poster but frequent lurker on this list. I'm currently writing a Master's thesis here at Wesleyan University on ambient music and ambient music culture, and would love to find out some things about ambient music listeners that don't always come up between keeping up on concerts, new releases, and other discussion. Please respond via private e-mail, if you wish, and feel free to _not_ answer any questions that you don't want to!

Thank you very much for your help. As my work on my thesis progresses I will be putting up an ambient web page which will include some of this information, in addition to interesting interviews with some known ambient composers.

1) Your 5 favorite ambient albums:
2) Your favorite “ambient” web page:
3) Please think of a 1 or 2-sentence definition of “ambient,” or alternately, “what ambient means to you.”
4) How old are you?
5) When and where did you first hear ambient music?
6) Are you a student? If so, tell me your major and class-level.
7) If not a student, what's your main work?
8) Are you a musician? If so, what instruments do you play, or do you compose/DJ?
9) Do you have other hobbies and interests?
10) Where do you live?
11) Do you live by yourself, and do you normally listen to CD's by yourself?
12) About how many cd’s and lp's of ambient do you own?
13) What percentage is this of your total collection?
14) Do you have what you consider an “audiophile” stereo?
15) Do you go to ambient concerts, or to chill-out rooms? How is the experience different for you than listening to CD’s at home?
16) What do you think the appeal is of ambient music? Why do you listen?
17) What’s the main reason(s) that you read or contribute to the ambient list?

There were about thirty responses to this questionnaire. I say “about” because I discounted a couple whose facts seemed to be questionable, and were from Internet “transvestites” (male posters who use female personae when communicating on the Internet). Although respondents were given the option of omitting answers to questions, only one did so. Thirty responses amounts to approximately one percent of the members of the ambient list, which is hardly
the scope of a significant statistical survey. But there are many conclusions to make even with this simple questionnaire.

The median age of the fans was twenty-two years old and the age range sixteen to fifty-three. This makes sense, considering that students in their early twenties are the largest stratum that participate in, and have access to, Internet activities. The geographical distribution of the fans is truly international. Responses came from Australia, New Zealand, Germany, Italy, Portugal, Canada, England, and many different regions of America. What this proves, despite the small sample considered, is that previous barriers to musical acquisition (being near a specialty record store in a major metropolis, for example, or living in a place with frequent live concerts) are null and void and that the music transcends geographical constraints. Later in the chapter I will explain some of the history behind this development.

Ambient collections were pretty consistently large. Though one fan in Mexico had only four ambient CD’s, half the fans had over a hundred CD’s and LP’s, and one fan reported a collection of 420 items. And despite the young age curve, thirty percent of the fans had what they considered to be “audiophile” stereos. This was a contentious question among some, who felt the need to justify why they didn’t have audiophile stereos (lack of money), or appended their affirmative response with a grumble about the state of their credit card debt.

Most ambient music fans who responded to this survey claimed they were musicians, composers, or DJ’s, with the vast majority describing skills
with computer music, DJ’ing, and keyboard / synthesizer playing as their forte. Many work professionally as techno and trance DJ’s (the ones who live in large cities). A few fans described themselves as computer music composers, in ambient and avant garde idioms.

I was surprised by the small number of fans who had been to raves. Seventy percent of respondents had not attended either a rave or an ambient concert, and of the thirty percent who had, only two described the experience in positive terms (or as one they planned to repeat in the near future). Some of the negative comments dealt with the social nature of raves and concerts (which got in the way of the ambient music experience) and the generally different music that was performed (compared to the studio-recorded output of their favorite composers). At their homes, about eighty-five percent of the fans listened by themselves most or all of the time, but only ten percent lived alone. The fifteen percent who listened with others were all married, or living with a significant other.

About half the fans were enrolled in school, and the most common majors were computer-related (computer science, computer graphics, computer music, or software design). Of the people out of school, many were employed as webmasters, or as software or systems specialists. The most popular hobbies were computer-related, as well, including computer art/design, programming, or just plain computer use.

As for Internet ambient resources, most mentioned Hyperreal as the best ambient homepage. I now realize that this question is quite misleading, as
some respondents interpreted it to mean the “most informative site,” while only a few meant it as the “most interesting site.” If I had asked for the best ambient band / artist homepage, I’m sure the results would have been entirely different. The question was partly there as a lure anyway. The overwhelming response to the last question was that people were on the ambient list to find out about new releases, or old releases they might wish to purchase. A couple of people were attracted to the arguments and vehement artist-promoting that fills the daily list digests.

As it is harder to quantify responses to question number three, (asking for a one- to two-sentence definition of ambient), and question sixteen, (why the respondents listened), I have chosen to reprint a number of responses to each question exactly as they were written in the original e-mail message.

3) Please think of a 1 or 2-sentence definition of “ambient,” or alternately, “what ambient means to you.”

“Speaking strictly of ambient music, I like Eno's definition: It's the sonic equivalent of wallpaper; not intended to be focused on but just to set a mood or atmosphere.”

“In the words of Dr Alex Patterson or was it Eno? "Patterns and textures!"”

“I think of ambient as music centered on texture or timbre (rather than lyrics, melody, rhythm, etc.) that is relatively unobtrusive.”

“Deep hypnotic swirls of sounds drifting into the mind.....creating a visionary world filled with horror, laughter, happiness and bliss all at the same time.”

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“Generally speaking, improvised music for the sake of creating an environment or an atmosphere in which the music ebbs and flows, retreats and advances towards and away from a listener's conscious attention.”

“music that promotes identification with emptiness/the void”

“music that defines space as it fills it”

“Ambient music consists of the gaps between other music genres. It fills these spaces with unconventional sounds that, in other circumstances, might not be taken for music at all.”

“Ambient is sounds you hear when you're not listening.”

“Ambient is the sound of the things. The things that newer speak to you by words... A way to leave your perceptions free... to amplificate the feelings that your sorround is transmitting to you...”

“ambient is heavenly noise.”

“The only difference between ambient and noise is whether it's desired or not. Ambient is, for all practical purposes, persistent and ongoing: turn off the nature cd and open the window, you're *still* listening to ambient! Ambient doesn't mean "beatless" or "minimal." Most of my favorite ambient is quite complex, musically.”

16) What do you think the appeal is of ambient music? Why do you listen?

“Ambient is becoming less and less a taxonomic division of music and more and more seems to be evolving into a method of listening and valuing what we listen to.”

“because it silences my inner voices.”

“Because of the settings that it build around my fantasy... Ouch, it's hard to explain.. i speak a makkeronik-english“

“the subtle complexities.”

“I like all the little things going on in the background in ambient music. A lot of the other music I like requires a lot less attention then ambient does.”

“Non mainstream, non-repetitive. It doesn't irritate me, quite the opposite very (shudder to use this word) relaxing. Or at least more intense,
and requires far more concentration than your normal 3.5 minute pop song. I think it help to increase attention span.”

“it makes you not want to move”

“Relaxation and concentration.”

“relaxation, stimulates the brain without a heavy beat to give ya a headache, free flowing, good trip muziq, builds new "mind" worlds.”

“it helps me relax, meditate, visualize, think, explore psychedelic states of mind without the drugs, etc. The sounds are appealing to me like a painting or a well written book.”

“to counterbalance the high speed & noise & violence of modern urban life. to try to relax.”

Internet resources

Most of the ambient music activity on the Internet is centered around Hyperreal, an underground art service, that includes links to hundreds of band homepages\(^{15}\). It is also the home for several mailing lists\(^{16}\), including the ambient mailing list, several techno and IDM (Intelligent Dance Music) lists, and a few lists that specialize in just one artist. Hyperreal's “ambient homepage,” called Epsilon, includes many interviews and record reviews, as

\(^{15}\) A homepage is essentially a file stored at a computer “server” (Internet network computer), which has information about one particular person / group / thing. Homepages are listed by subject in commercial directories. In the context of the ambient music community, I use the word “homepage” to describe either the main informational site for a band, a fan, or an Internet publication. A link is a simple Internet graphical user interface that allows a click of a button to view the contents of a webpage not housed on the local server.

\(^{16}\) Mailing lists are essentially a batch list of e-mail addresses and are either “moderated” or “unmoderated.” The ambient mailing list is moderated, meaning that someone looks at the posts before they appear in the e-mail of all the subscribers to the list. The ambient list generates between forty and one hundred messages a day.
well as the online fanzine, *EST*, with seven back issues, that discusses industrial music and the ambient artists inspired by early industrial.

Other existing mailing lists specialize in industrial and experimental music, avant garde music, or discuss only the work of Brian Eno, Robert Fripp, and other individual artists. They tend to generate fewer messages, but have much longer posts by subscribers, going into greater depth on issues about a composers’ work.

Homepages are an interesting matter. Some artists such as Scanner designed their own homepages around non-intuitive interfaces that produce somewhat unpredictable results. The majority of the homepages are unofficial, however. The artist represented didn’t created them, nor did the artist and label approve their use. They are the work and tribute of devoted fans, who believe that information about their favorite artist should be readily available for a potential worldwide audience. The amount of work in unofficial homepages ranges from text-based discographies (with a few pages describing the general sound of the band), to pages of scans of the cover art of every album, low-fidelity samples from dozens of songs, computerized videos of the artist in live performances, all the known interviews of that artist (reprinted without permission), and extensive histories and reviews by other dedicated fans. The Brian Eno page is possibly the most involved, as it includes reprints of hundreds of interviews from 1974 to the present.¹⁷

¹⁷ To this date, almost every artist I discuss in this thesis, and hundreds of others, have homepages. Some artists have four or more homepages (Robert Fripp, Brian Eno). Fewer than
The proliferation of homepages on obscure artists has changed the way that underground and special interest music is marketed in general. Because there is a free and international medium for communication where fans can promote their favorite artists, and because many Internet users are searching specifically for new albums to buy, artists and labels have much less work to do to promote their work. In fact, though many of the ambient artists I'm studying make their living exclusively from their recordings, I never see advertisements or promos in music industry magazines, and I have read that their labels spend very little on marketing. For these reasons I describe ambient as a “fan-promoted genre.”

The Internet is also a place where people can purchase CD's. Besides the mammoth all-genre services such as CDNow! and Cdcollection, specialty services for ambient music are found in many countries. In the U.S., the most comprehensive ambient source is the Soleilmoon homepage, that sells all the in-print CD's, LP's, DAT's, and videos of all the artists on the twenty three-label conglomerate distributed by World Serpent Distribution. The FAX record label (featuring musical projects of Pete Namlook) and the Axiom/Subharmonic homepage (with all the collaborations of Bill Laswell) are also well run, though

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18 These two services have a catalogue of over 140,000 CD's, at prices several dollars below any retail outlets, and boast quick service and high fill-rates. They have sophisticated interfaces that allow you to search for CD's by author, title, label, style, and other categories, and as such are much more versatile than even the best organized CD stores. CDNow! also contains biographies of many of the artists, and both have a rating system (based on their customers) called the All Music Guide.
they sell a more homogeneous product. People who live in cities or wherever stores stock good ambient selections, tend to patronize those outlets, but I have seen dozens of posts on the Internet praising the virtual stores for making this music available to those who live in rural areas, in the Midwest and Canada.

Software innovations in network software have made it possible for most users to access text, graphics, and audio and video files stored on remote servers. Thus, all the Internet sites – commercial, private, and informational – can transmit a wider variety of media than any traditional published magazine. The risk involved in knowing whether or not one will like a particular CD or artist is reduced when one can download sounds from that very disc, see the cover art, read a biography, or a review that compares it to well-known albums in that genre, and see a video of the artist that appeared at some concert or rave! Also, the amount of information one can easily access is greater than ever before. Ask any music student who had to write a report in the 1980's on a popular music artist about the tedium of flipping through pages of the *Music Index*, the *Reader's Guide to Periodicals*, and indexes of music journals. Much more information is available, instantaneously, in the current “Information Age.”

It is instructive to study exactly what people talk about on the ambient mailing list. In my questionnaire, the overwhelming response to the question “What’s the main reason(s) that you read or contribute to the ambient list?” was to find out about new releases, learn of older CD’s they might want to buy, and keep up with the activities of their favorite artists. Though it’s an information-intensive list (statistics about track lengths of CD’s, discographies, concert
dates, etc.), actually a good deal of interpersonal communication of a more subjective nature goes on. Some new CD’s are quite controversial, being ecstatically received by some and vehemently denigrated by others, and conversations of this nature tend to go well beyond the artifact at hand and delve into definitions / redefinitions of ambient, why people listen, what they listen for, and their expertise in music (as DJ’s, composers, performers, and expert reviewers).

One of the most information intensive activities is performed by list members who want to compile some “top 5” or “best of...” lists. Such lists have been: “top 10 ambient CD’s,” “top 5 ambient CD’s of 1996,” and “top 5 non-ambient CD’s that ambient fans like,” and the results sometimes get posted on the list but always end up on someone’s ambient web page. Since there are so many artists with so many CD’s, consensus is rare with a particular album, though from these lists one can compile lists of the “top 5 favorite artists.” I began my questionnaire with a top-5 list, because I figured it might be a draw for ambient list members who would otherwise not be interested in answering questions.

About five percent of the ambient list posts I reviewed dealt with technical issues, such as the working of certain equipment (samplers, synthesizers, antique keyboards, tape decks), the compositional structure of songs (“what is that sound on track 3?”), or the components in ambient-list members’ audiophile stereos (one long-running thread concerned the best
headphones with which to listen to ambient music). Some people on the list have considerable expertise with computer music or experience as DJ’s and electronica composers,\(^\text{20}\) and occasionally there will be a long post of twenty pages with footnoted sources about a complicated technical issue. (One post related the history of the theramin, one of the first synthesizers.)

The conclusion of this section is short excerpts from various Internet resources that I include in full in Appendix D. The first post is from an unofficial and short-lived :Zoviet-France: homepage, a story by the page owner who wanted to represent the sound of the band in prose form. The second post in the first few paragraphs of the ambient music FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) was written on January 6, 1994, by Mike Brown, who has been active on Internet ambient archives for several years. His is the only such posting that is widely recognized to have a semblance of accuracy, and some mailing lists refer general ambient questions to this article. Thus, thousands of ambient fans have probably read this manifesto a number of times. Finally, I include the subscription information form from the ambient mailing list, that defines among other things the criteria for moderation and posting (what can and can’t be written in messages, and who will enforce it). Note that the non-standard use of capitalization, the misspellings of band names, and other grammatical oddities were present in the original copy.

\(^{19}\) from July, 1996 to January, 1997
\(^{20}\) Electronica is a sub-category of techno music that began in late 1995 in England.
“Let me tell you about a place. Not just any place but a special place. My favorite place. A place not just in space, but in time. A place that really exists only in my mind.

“I am young and walking through the forest with my mother. It is cloudy, and mist shrouds the tops of the tall, thin firs. Wind is blowing through the trees. They sound like the ocean, which is not far off. We are in the coastal range of Northern Oregon.

“When I walk through the forest, the wind through the trees sounds like the ocean. When I am on the coast, the mist so thick that I cannot see the waves even though the sand under my feet is wet, the ocean sounds like wind through the trees. It is impossible to say which is more real - wind or wave.

“There is a bird associated with this memory - a raven. On the surface, a raven looks like a crow. But a raven is to a crow as an eagle is to a robin. Ravens are large, majestic, and powerful birds. They are prominent in the mythologies of the natives of the Pacific Northwest, sometimes as benevolent demigods, more often as mischievous tricksters responsible for things in the universe that cannot easily be explained. Unlike the awkward croak of the crow, the raven has a piercing, powerful cry. You will often see them perched in the fir trees of the coastal range, giving you a look that is both oddly and disturbingly wise before they take wing, proving their wisdom.

“There are colors that belong to this memory - grey, green, and brown. Grey for the mist that shrouds the treetops. Grey for the dual impenetrable
masses of sky and ocean, seemingly stretching to infinity. Green for the fir needles, bristly and sharp. Green for the huge ferns that carpet the forest floor. Brown for the tree trunks, rough and deeply textured. Brown for the earth, a rich reddish soil unspoiled by pesticide or fertilizer.

“But most of all, there is the sound, the sound of wind and water and tree and sand. Echoing without limit, unchanging and infinite, this sound has reverberated in my ears ever since I first heard it, and it continues to color everything I hear.

“This first most aesthetic experience in my life has forever colored my perception of beauty, nature, and their corollary, art. Anything that brings me closer to that primitive and almost preconscious state is something to be treasured. I would like to live in that place, but if it does not exists [sic], I will be content too.”

(unknown poster, 1994)

“while some may like to adhere to the same kind of conventions in musical styles that are actually still evolving—in particular i am thinking of those who prefer to think of Ambient Music as only what it was defined to be by Brian Eno— it is my belief that in time the innovative combinations, intentional or not, of elements of the academic, Eno-esque ambiance with other modern styles (trance, noise industrial, jazz, world music, etc.) will be validated and accepted under the banner "ambient", despite the fact that such new combinations may be only reminiscent of Eno's pieces in the vaguest of constructs. indeed, some
music was only called "instrumental" or "industrial" for years until just recently the definition of ambient has evolved and expanded enough to safely encompass these older works by the likes of David Sylvian, Peter Gabriel, Einstürzende Neubauten, and Chris & Cosey.

“we are now seeing an overlapping of definitions as well. some space music can be called ambient. some droning guitar rock can be called ambient. some trance techno can be called ambient. where, then, can one draw some boundaries in an attempt to describe the state of ambient music as it exists today?”

(from “definitions of ambient music” by Mike Brown, 6 Jan 1994)

**The ambient listener**

A general survey is a good tool for arriving at empirical, demographic information. I was surprised by the interesting and well thought out responses to the more open-ended questions, too. However, one can’t begin to understand how ambient music becomes incorporated into an individual’s life without a much more detailed interview.

This section will profile one ambient music fan with whom I have talked about ambient music for five years. We went to school together at U.C. Santa Barbara, and in the summer of 1996 I conducted two long interviews with him on his personal history of ambient music listening, his philosophy of the meaning of ambient, and the nature of the experiences he has while listening.
Listener Profile -- Alex Donahue

Alex grew up in the Southern California city of Manhattan Beach. Until his senior year in high school he didn’t know any other ambient music fans, though he started listening in the mid-1980’s to the “Music From the Hearts of Space” syndicated radio show. It was here that he learned first of the space music related artists like Roach, Stearns, Rich, Brook, and others mentioned in the fifth trajectory in chapter 1, and, later, of Brian Eno, Jon Hassell and David Sylvian. By the time I met him, in his junior year of college, he had met one other fan, who had replaced the radio show as his source concerning new release information, though he still listened exclusively by himself.

Some biographical points about Alex are relevant to understanding where he is coming from. He began playing the tuba and saxophone in the early 1980’s and became an accomplished classical musician, though he never took the instruments into the realm of jazz. His music lessons and the listening habits of his parents (his father had studied classical piano in college) gave him a sophisticated knowledge of classical music well before he had heard any ambient. He also was involved with Dungeons and Dragons for many years and was well read in fantasy and science fiction literature.\* His major activities,

\* Some of the most important books to him were the epic writings of Stephen Donaldson, The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant, the Unbeliever, about an American leper called into a fantasy world to be in heroic adventures. He relates the imagination of Donaldson’s writing with
outside of his major career pursuit of political science (specializing in international public policy), are ambient listening and automobiles, as he is a skilled mechanic and hot-rodder as well as a performance driver.

For Alex, there were many requirements for ambient music listening. Besides the selection of appropriate musics, he had to listen on headphones, lying in a comfortable position in a dark place where he wouldn’t be disturbed. He didn’t burn incense or perform other ceremonies, but the insistence on perfect listening conditions was his form of ritual. When he listened, sessions would last from thirty minutes to three or more hours. The programmable CD player, which can repeat certain songs infinitely, and the auto-reverse tape deck, with carefully made tapes that had almost no silence, were the best listening medium, since they didn’t interrupt the flow of the motionless state of his body. Some ambient music wasn’t suited for auto-reverse cassette functions, and in these works (generally shorter songs) his perception of time began when the tape ended. Otherwise, Alex describes his listening experiences as existing outside his normal frame of reference of time. With short ambient pieces, though, he describes them as having “reference points.” In his words, “I came to know these intimately, in that I felt like I could conduct the music, with all of its details... the sad thing is that as soon as the music stops I can’t call it back up in my head.”

ambient music: “Many landscapes in those stories as I saw them had some similarities to what I adventured in, myself, in ambient music.”

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It took a bit of practice and experimentation and listening to the same works hundreds of times to be able to “conduct” these pieces. A more difficult endeavor was the sensation Alex calls “flying.”

The first time I was ever able to relax myself, a lot, I found that I could fly, and that only happened in my quiet, dark ambient world. What I did was I laid on my back in the dark with headphones on, so I have nothing but the music as my environment – no visuals, no sensory. I feel like I am supported perfectly under my body, all around...the body feels gone because you are perfectly supported. And what I found was that my sensation of self would leave my body and go up to the ceiling, above my head and it would swoop up and down and I could control the spins, and the sensation of flying up and down, in and out of my body, way down below it; down, down, hundreds of feet into the depths.

These experiences wouldn’t happen when Alex wanted them to, only when he wasn’t trying. In this variation of a looking-glass world, “...as it started, then I could exert some control over it. And I could ride it up and down and I would kind of say, ‘go down’ and it would nudge down and then it would slowly... go... down... oh! [Alex makes a swooping gesture] and I could make the spins go different ways but I had to wait until it decided to happen.”

Through the interview I was intrigued by Alex’s vocabulary to describe his situations. It wasn’t bogged down with misused terminology from pop psychology (a problem I have in deciphering the well-meaning posts I sometimes encounter on the Internet). It expressed in a clear language what his experiences meant to him psychically. In fact, Alex hadn’t read any books on lucid dreaming, out-of-body experiences, or even meditation, and it wasn’t until a number of people told him that he was practicing “meditation” that he researched the rudiments of Zen, Taoism, and Hinduism. At many points
through the interview Alex stressed that he considers himself to be a grounded and reality and logic-based person.

Alex doesn’t meditate without music. As he concisely put it, “You can’t swim if there’s no water around.” This brought up one of his favorite definitions of ambient as a “physical-spatial medium.” He agrees that this is a related definition to Eno’s and Hassell’s notions of landscape music, as his experiences in listening are generally those in other-worldly landscapes. “Weaves and tapestries and various schemes of colors are what ambient is visually, besides landscapes.”

An accidental reference to New England weather (that he has never experienced but heard about during my first year of studies at Wesleyan) triggered a memory of one vivid landscape that is always conjured up by a particular fifteen minute song from the David Sylvian / Holger Czukay work Plight and Premonition.

I am looking at a valley, a snow-covered valley in Eastern Europe somewhere, everything is grey and foggy, and there is a train passing from right to left in this valley, so I'm probably a quarter mile up a slope on one side of the valley, looking down at the train going by right to left in the center of the valley floor, and I'm also on the train at the same time...the train is floating above the ground without touching it and it's going somewhere... no, it's not going somewhere, it just is... it doesn't matter where it's going because there's no place before the valley and no place after the valley. When I look at the train from the hillside, I can look at the train going by for fifteen minutes, and it never ends. I don't move, and it doesn't move; I mean it moves past me but it never ends... and at the same time, I'm also on the train feeling the movement and watching the landscape move past me outside the window, and it's completely quiet and dull and damped down by the fog. It's a place: It's a state, it's a feeling, it's an emotion, and there's no before or after.

I wondered if possibly the strength of the image was aided by any references to Czukay's Eastern European heritage on the liner notes, or in clues built into the
song titles, but Alex didn’t even know the name of the song from this album that conjured up this consistent visualization, nor could he recall a thing about the liner notes. A conversation about packaging revealed his thorough disinterest in it as well as song information, composer information, or anything separate from the pure musical experience.

I’m not getting what the composer of the music intended at all because he’s not communicating with me! He happened to make a compilation of sound vibrations I like, and it may have been just luck, it may be that his body responds the same way as mine, and so he made sounds that please him and they so happen to please me, but it could be for different reasons!

The experience is definitely the desired result of ambient music listening, but many musical benefits can be gained by the timbral exploration that results from repeat listening. We discussed rhythm and ambient, as the ambient category in record stores generally encompasses all the slowed-down-techno forms of ambient, not the sort of ambient music we seek out. Alex wasn’t able to get any sort of ambient experience from music that inspired parts of his body to move (from some motivational rhythm), nor any enjoyment from listening to works that were light on the timbral exploration (he described the Orb and some Aphex Twin as the “Coors light” of ambient listening). I queried him about one of our favorite composers, Jon Hassell, whose music almost always contains some manner of rhythm, though he mutes drum sounds and mutates the timbre. For Alex, this music was different. “I don’t concentrate on the beats or the rhythms, I concentrate on the timbre of the sound that echoes off the end of the beat.”
Scientists tell us that music consists of sound waves moving through air, nothing more, but why is it that some sounds affect us in such strong ways?

And I think its [ambient music’s] power is because I am a living being that is affected by sound waves, and I think the power of music comes from its being arranged specifically so it creates certain vibrations that affect me, and I don’t know why they affect me, but they do. And they affect me in a visceral way that is physical and emotional and not intellectual... I primarily listen to non-vocal music, because I don’t get the point of what people are singing. I can directly feel harmony and melody and it’s the most direct communication I know.

The final anecdote from the interview with Alex is his own description of one particular listening experience – not to composed ambient music but to power tools in the office building he worked in. It clearly fits the nature of listening that Brian Eno claims to practice, which advocates “listening to the world in an ambient way.”

One day I was working in a building, doing some computer work, and so I was standing in one spot, and just working along, and the construction people on the floor above started jackhammering, and they were jackhammering into the concrete structure of the building and the vibration was traveling through all the walls and floors and it was quite strong. It was a certain speed and timbre, and what it did was create an instant reaction in me – I relaxed so much so that I could barely keep standing, and I felt so happy and dreamy... and I was enjoying it so much. I couldn’t even talk to anyone who came up to me. It was like getting a massage. That’s a real basic reflexive sort of thing, you know – ambient music is much more complicated than simply one frequency vibration, but that’s the principle. And so really, an ambient composer could be a workman with some power tools, making a sound environment, and I would enjoy that about as much... that’s an interesting idea, maybe I should try to make ambient power-tool music sometime.

I could have six carts going, make a cart of those six carts, and repeat the process, so I could go up exponentially in terms of the layers of echo, sound and noise that I was getting. Unfortunately, I guess, we have [on the computer] the capability of doing simultaneous looping, but I get a lot less exercise. That’s
another thing about the physical experience – it made me sneer at someone sitting at a keyboard and playing the cart patch five octaves down, ‘cuz when I was doing a radio show it maybe sounded like that same reverberating bass note, but I’d have to run between two studios, around four sets of doors, while there was either dead air or one loop going, and so I’d have to go get the cart, make the cart, wait a minute, and run back into the studio, and repeat the process six or seven times just to get one nice layer. I knew it was a good show if I was sweaty or tired, or had a big wound because I ran into a door. It used to be definitely interesting to watch!
Chapter 4

the ambient experience

The basic Internet survey that I analyzed in the last chapter brought up a number of colorful ways of describing what ambient music means to a listener. Following the extensive discussions with Jason Brown and Alex Donahue, I began formulating theories about various ambient music affinities, and these theories partly surfaced with the ambient archetypes of chapter 2 (of the Experimenter, the Virtuoso, the Shaman, the Fourth World Explorer, the Tormented Isolated Man, and the Lucid Dreamer). I introduced them without explaining fully why I chose the term “archetype” or what its implications mean for ambient music as a whole. In the philosophy of C.G. Jung, Joseph Campbell,¹ and their contemporaries, archetypes are signifiers for the presence of a working mythology, either personal or collective; they can simultaneously be the part of myth that communicates an understanding of why or what to a confused individual, and the cultural belief in those myths, while acting as the justification or theme for art and personal expression. My research of ambient

¹ I chose to frame my work in the language and theory of Campbell and Jung because I have more experience with their works than with other comparable schools, and the vocabulary is also be familiar to many ambient music fans.
music culture has led me to define ambient is as a belief system rather than as a set of compositions or a style of music.

The ambient belief system has two primary historical roots. The first is the continuum of belief in the individual, which can be traced back roughly to the time of Rousseau, evolving this century with ideas from the futurist and Dadaist movements. The second is wide-ranging, drawing on mystical and occult traditions including influences from primitivism, shamanism, modern cults such as those of Gurdjieff, and Alistair Crowley inspired experiments in altered states of consciousness and modes of perception.

In practice, we find four main components of the ambient belief system. The first, rites of passage, are primarily about consumption of product and the financial obstacles to being an ambient music fan. The second is ritualized listening, which happens in the sacred space of the bedroom. The third is the sacred history of ambient and the extensions into other art forms of this belief system – science fiction novels and fantasy / role-playing games, two of the main affinities of many ambient music fans. Finally, there is the ambient music experience, where I explore ambient as a trance-inducing music, look at the waking dream as a psychological phenomenon, and describe some specific listening experiences.

Belief in the individual
Although the first consciously “ambient” compositions were composed in the early 1970's, the origins of the ambient belief system extend back to the nineteenth century and the romantic “cult of the individual.” And although many seminal ambient albums are collaborative, there is still a feeling that the ambient composition is composed in complete isolation from other people and other musics (the Tormented Isolated Man archetype personified in Robin Storey). As it is “bedroom music,” the listener is isolated, too, and theoretically is striving to overcome any interference in his ideal listening environment.

The notion of the individual, as seen in ambient music circles (and other Internet communities) as the product of cyberspace, social fragmentation, and the development of modern society. However, this notion is really a romantic one, coming from the writings of Rousseau, during the time that Europe was undergoing the transition from a world made by God to a world made by men. With this came the notion of the individual's creative genius – the late music of Beethoven, for example, came not “from God” but from the mind of a suffering man.

Two nineteenth century composers epitomize the change in sentiment. Hector Berlioz was a classically trained composer, but his Memoirs are filled with references to his dissatisfaction with his schooling and his general dislike of music education. He claimed that his compositions weren't influenced by his studies (even though manuscripts show that sections of some of his most famous work were variations of school exercises), and he took pride in going against the grain of the musical establishment. Richard Wagner took this anti-
authoritarian idea a step further by claiming that he wasn’t really influenced by music at all (although he did like the works of Berlioz and Beethoven). We also see strong individualistic imagery in works such as the Ring Cycle, where the neophytic character Siegfried forges a sword partly out of sheer will and uses it to smash an anvil in two. Such images not only appear in the music of such industrial groups as Einstürzende Neubauten and Throbbing Gristle, who do “covers” of Wagner and Goethe, but permeate the myth of the isolated listener, who can voyage into unknown worlds without the guidance of “experienced” travelers.

From romanticism we move to futurism and the archetype of the Experimenter. Luigi Russolo’s manifesto The Art of Noises, a popular British art school read in the 1960’s and 1970’s, has been cited by Throbbing Gristle, the Residents, and newer ambient composers as a definitive influence on their exploration of music-making devices. In this work, Russolo introduces a series of new timbrally-named instruments that he constructed with the hope of creating a whole new type of music based not on discrete pitches but on rhythmic and timbral structures.² The industrial music movement challenged the notion of what could be considered music, and its consequences were far-reaching, making possible the existence of power station hum in Aphex Twin CD’s, Russolo-like percussive instruments in the Residents album Eskimo, and radio noise on albums by most of the ambient artists. The greatest futurist
contribution to the ambient belief system is in the archetype of the Experimenter, or the composer who changes the way people hear sound.

Though ambient music is keenly interested in exploring new ways to produce sound and is fundamentally about the discovery of timbre, much of it uses only existing forms, subtly altering their content. Ambient is a musical parallel to the surrealist art of the 1910’s and 1920’s. Compare the rhythmlessness and absence of melody in many Hafler Trio songs with the directionlessness of the film Ballet Mècanique, which surrealist filmmaker Ferdinand Léger described as the first film sans scénario. If the film has a theme, it is the similarities between man and machine as the movie intersperses, then combines, film clips of moving pistons and gears with the face of a beautiful model, her mouth and eyes opening and closing in synchronized rhythm with the turning gears.

Other surrealist art, such as the film Un Chien Andalou, is concerned with the mystery of the dream, and much of the art of Salvador Dali and others succeeds because it triggers something profound in the subconscious. The ambient belief system, particularly the part that emerged from the well-read industrial culture, is interested in the surrealist portrayal of the individual in the modern mechanical society and in the surrealist ability to aim for the subconscious. Though it is not valid for all artists, I believe that much ambient

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2 Some instrument names included “The Crackler” and “The Whistler,” which produced crackling and whistling sounds, respectively.

3 Walter Benjamin was alarmed by this possibility: “I can no longer think what I want to think. My thoughts have been replaced by moving images.” (Benjamin 1968: 238)
music is like surreal film, in that it is ostensibly about the strangeness and intangibility of dreams. The nature of ambient music, in communicating with the subconscious rather than the conscious mind, can be seen most obviously in the waking dream experiences which I will explore at the end of this chapter.

DREAM THEORY IN MALAYA is titled after a paper by visionary anthropologist, Kilton Stewart, who in 1935 visited a remarkable highland tribe of Malayan aborigines, the Senoi, whose happiness and well-being were linked to their morning custom of family dream-telling – where a child’s fearful dream of falling was praised as a gift to learn to fly the next night and where a dream-song or dance was taught to a neighboring tribe to create a common bond between differences of custom. The Semelai are another tribe not far from the Senoi but who live in the largest swamp area of Malaya. A recorded fragment of their joy-filled watersplash rhythm was re-structured and became the generating force for the composition, Malay, as well as providing a thematic guide for the entire recording. (Jon Hassell, liner notes to Dream Theory in Malaya: Fourth World Volume Two, 1983)

Dreams are a very personal part of the lives of Westerners, but passages such as the above one, as well as some anthropological studies indicate that this is not a universal. Even in the West, C.G. Jung was researching the unconscious and formulating ideas about a collective unconscious (around the same time as the art of the futurists and surrealists), and this passage from Modern Man in Search of a Soul brings up a general characterization of the unconscious, which echoes some strong images of the ambient belief system:

If it were permissible to personify the unconscious, we might call it a collective human being combining the characteristics of both sexes, transcending youth and age, birth and death, and, from having at his command a human experience of one or two million years, almost immortal. If such a being existed, he would be exalted above all temporal change; the present would mean neither more nor less to him than any year in the one-hundredth century before Christ; he would be a dreamer of age-old dreams and, owing to his immeasurable experience, would be an incomparable prognosticator. He would have lived countless times over the life of the individual, of the family, tribe, and people. and he would possess the living sense of the rhythm of growth, flowering, and decay. (Jung 1933: 215)

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There are many ways to analyze this passage. First, the *dreamer of age-old dreams* describes the out-of-body experience seeker, whom I will investigate more later in this chapter. The *living sense of the rhythm of growth, flowering, and decay* can be seen in several different lights. If we compare the different backgrounds, effects, and motivations of ambient music compositions across the spectrum of composers, some works and artists are consistently aligned with one of the above attributes. The industrial ambient artists are primarily pursuing an understanding of the decay part of the life cycle, whereas Hassell and Sylvian (connected to J.G. Bennett and Gurdjieff) can be thought of as concerned with the rhythm of growth and flowering. Growth and flowering are also reminiscent of Robert Rich’s construct of *glurp* that I introduced in chapter 1.

In the creation of “landscapes,” particularly self-sufficient ones, the demands of accounting for the entire life cycle, the necessary removal of bias, and transcendence of the mundane parts of this world are the same criteria Jung applies to the personification of the collective unconscious. The timelessness of the landscape is its ability to be entered and re-entered at any time with no fundamental change to its appearance.

Listeners bring affinities for these grand divisions of the life cycle, depending on their own relation to it. At certain times we want to explore the

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4 Compare the mythological-sounding album titles *Another Green World* (Eno), *Secrets of the Beehive* (Sylvian), and *The Surgeon of the Nightsky Restores Dead Things to Living with the*
dark side of decay: other times we reaffirm growth and flowering. Thus, the composers and listeners, unconnected in the “real” world, are brought together in the collective unconscious that exists in the medium of the ambient music composition. The composer can transfer his image not only of the visual landscape, but also an abstract understanding of the life cycle.

I can’t answer whether or not all, or even a few, ambient composers are consciously aware of this potential in their music, and I am sure that it is not applicable to many listeners who envision ambient music’s drones as the ultimate mental massage. However, elements of this passage of Jung appear in variations all over CD liner notes and the homepages of ambient fans. Jon Hassell is implying in the notes reprinted above that his music is somehow connected to the dream recounting of the Temiar. Maybe he considers the CD his transcription of a set of dreams he had some day, week, or month. Whatever his specific intention, his conception of the album, and the fans’ acceptance of the philosophy, frame some fundamental traits of the ambient belief system, which I next explore.

The components of ambient belief

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Power of Sound  (Hassell) with How to Destroy Angels (Coil), Soliloquy for Lilith (Nurse with Wound), or the song “The Death of Trees” (Zoviet-France:)

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I must preface the following section with the understanding that what I present is not a hard and fast rule obeyed by all ambient listeners when listening or participating in some part of their belief system, and that notable exceptions probably exist. However, after many months of reading and discussing small parts of this matter, I believe that some variation of these themes motivates most ambient music listeners, and that it holds true for the group in my survey. Much of my research and formulation of theories is based less on ethnomusicological and popular music readings than on popular psychology and comparative religious theory, as the discipline ethnomusicology has overlooked “bedroom cultures” as a whole, favoring studies of large, colorful, organized groups of people over a worldwide diffusion of closeted yet passionate music aficionados.

**Rites of passage**

To overcome the obstacles to ambient listening, the ambient music listener must first have a sophisticated musical background. As ambient music is concerned with timbre and almost always lacks melodic and rhythmic components, it is an immediate turn-off for many. The expectation on the part of the composer is that music listeners have gone through phases of intellectual contemplation, to arrive at the point when they have transcended rhythm and melody and are searching for meaning inside the very nature of sound. One is immediately struck by the parallels with film (surrealist films like the ones
mentioned earlier in the chapter) and art (the abstract painting), both of which require a prior initiation with the forms that they strive to manipulate. Sample musical backgrounds for ambient listeners include, but are not limited to, avant-garde classical and electronic music, modern free jazz, industrial noise, and world musics (particularly Indian music) with drones and ostinatos.

Though our world is filled continuously with music, broadcast by stores in urban areas, piped by the Muzak corporation into our workplaces, and adorning every program and advertisement on T.V., the average persons’ cognizance of it tends to be pretty short. Though the three and a half minute limit to the first wax cylinder and 78 RPM recordings of a century ago is no longer a technical constraint, it has persisted to this day as the average length of the American pop song. Two hour classical concerts, as a historical genre of performance, have attracted a steadily decreasing percentage of the American (and European) audience, and opera performances of six or more hours are hardly ever found. People just don’t listen to music for that length of time any more unless they are specialists, connoisseurs of music. Ambient is a connoisseurs’ genre with songs that last from one to two hundred and forty minutes. Ambient does not give a quick fix like a compact, visually overloaded MTV video; it appeals only to people with long attention spans. I was careful in the last paragraph to mention other art forms such as avant-garde classical, free jazz, industrial, and world music as “introductions” to the possibilities of
ambient. All these forms have songs that are at least fifteen minutes long, and performances that can last all night (in the case of heavy free jazz jams, an Indonesian wayang kulit performance, or a complete realization of a North Indian raga).

Many of the ambient fans I have talked with and interviewed also have backgrounds as working musicians, ranging from amateur instrumentalists to professional DJ’s, synthesizer players, and studio engineers. Of the DJ’s I have talked to, most have mentioned ambient as a logical step in their musical interests because it has some of the most unique timbres of modern musical forms. Guitarists, particularly those who work with feedback loops and distortion, admire some of the innovators in the ambient music scene – the industrial groups, for example, for their rekys into uncharted regions of noise. Studio engineers get ideas on unconventional mixing techniques from studying ambient albums. Whether a fan has an invested professional interest in the study of ambient music or is focused as a connoisseur of intense listening, I still contend that they must devote a great deal of time to overcoming obstacles to musical understanding.

The second requirement for an ambient listener is that he/she must have dedicated considerable discretionary money to purchasing recordings and

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5 Rumors abound on the Internet list about the possibility of seventeen hour-long pieces, with the new recording format called “DVD’s.”

6 From the Robert Rich song on the Storm of Drones collaboration CD.

7 Robert Fripp has written on the philosophical notion of off-center mixing in “Moving Off Centre,” published in Musician Player and Listener.
playback equipment. One can not get inside the elaborate timbre of a struck piece of iron when listening through cheap headphones on a Walkman, or on a clock radio. Ambient recordings, even those comprised of low-fidelity and noisy sounds, are extremely demanding of perfect playback conditions and high-fidelity playback equipment. Most ambient music fans have expensive stereos (often European components) that can play back compact discs and records. Vinyl is arguably the medium of choice for ambient music purists. On the matter of the collection, this depends on the nature of the individual listener, but often I encounter fans who have complete collections of many artists. Ambient artists are prolific and often put out several albums a year; for a person to have all the works of Eno and Fripp, for example, would involve purchasing some fifty or more items, some of them expensive and hard-to-get collectibles. The discography of artists such as Bill Laswell is so enormous as to require thousands of dollars of investment to acquire a complete collection. The limited edition collector item is quite popular in this circle. In August, 1996 the Hafler Trio released a limited edition set of 45-RPM singles that cost about $1000, and the remix group Scorn released most of their material on small-run 5- LP sets selling for hundreds of dollars each. The stylistically similar Muslimgauze offers a subscription service to all their new releases and gives fans the opportunity to receive a number of subscriber-only releases. The cost could run

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8 There have been considerable debates on the Internet about vinyl (analog) vs. CD’s (digital), and although there is no scientific way of proving the merit of one over the other, it is true that the LP has a greater potential for frequency response, but a decreased signal-to-noise
hundreds of dollars a year. Later I will discuss the ambient object and look at the artwork and presentation of the ambient recording as the built-in iconography of this subculture.

Collecting albums has an important place in the history of sound recording, and there are many parallels between some ambient collectors and past types of collectors. DJ’s are famous as record collectors, with a history extending back to Sound System owners in Jamaica in the 1950’s and 1960’s (such as Duke Reid and Clement Dodd) who had to purchase thousands of discs to keep on top of the newest sound. Modern day DJ’s have the same requirements, but with so many distinct styles of dance music (including ambient house) the number of recordings is that much higher. One of the famous style differentiations in 1950’s England was the Mods vs. the Teds, originally based on the dress and attitude of the two, and whether they were jazz or R&B collectors. Just as all the above collectible genres featured different availabilities and formats of recordings (7” singles, 12” dance singles, the signed numbered EP), ambient music supports exclusive, hard-to-get products. (Frith and Horne 1987; Thornton 1996; Chanan 1995)

Besides a musical background and money to invest in equipment and recordings, the prospective ambient music listener has to be willing to devote a significant amount of time to listening and contemplating the music. This is not as easily quantifiable, but if one considers the repeated listenings to potentially

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ratio than the CD; many mistakes and compromises are often made in the pressing of CD’s or in the digital mastering of material that weren’t factors in analog recording.
hundreds of recordings, it is evident that thousands of hours of time may be spent with the same works of ambient music. A good ambient recording is supposed to seem different with each listening, as it is comprised of complex timbres that reveal themselves only over the span of hundreds of listenings. In this way the temporal space of ambient music is not the hour length of the compact disc, but the hundred hour length of the one hundred listenings to that same disc. The sheer obstacle of required concentrated repeated listening raises an additional barrier to entrance into this subculture.

Furthermore, an expansive ambient music culture that lives on the Internet has evolved in the past seven years. The Internet has allowed the relatively obscure ambient music subculture to appear immense and international, provoking the explosion of re-releases and newly composed albums and turning previously obscure artists into “household” names. It is mainly through the Internet that ambient fans discover new groups or read reviews of new albums, as I detailed in the previous chapter, and thus we find a technological obstacle to ambient music listening in the dissemination of information. One has to be technologically literate, or know someone who is, to find out what to buy.

All these steps – the foundations of musical experience, the acquisition of expensive equipment and recordings, the devotion of time and the discipline to endure repeated listenings to the same material, and technological literacy – are unspoken prerequisites to “admission” into the ambient music subculture.

9 Personal correspondence with Gage Averill, 1996.
However, probably the most important is the ability and willingness to extend from this background into the realm of the lucid dream and the ambient listening experience, that purportedly not many people can do. Just as many religious cults involve difficult initiation rites and extreme acts of sacrifice, the ambient music cult requires the individual to let go of many conscious controls - basically, of one’s ego. In a world that places great importance on personal stability and material acquisition, attaining an altered state of consciousness or developing one’s personal mythology is all that more difficult to undertake. The rite of passage into maturity, at least as seen in the ambient music culture, involves a high level of sacrifice in both material and non-material ways.

**Ritualized Listening and Sacred Space**

In chapter 3 we saw that Alex Donahue had a specific requirement for his ambient listening environment: a dark space, enclosed by headphones, the body comfortably laid out prone, and no distractions. Most importantly, this place was his bedroom. Ambient music is a bedroom listening culture. There are concerts, but for many fans like Donahue (and seventy-five percent of the people I surveyed), they either take place too far from where they live or have features that make them a less-than-ideal listening environment.

Bedroom cultures, a relatively new sociological phenomena, thrive because of the services that can be accessed through the standardized communication network of phone lines (that in 1997 still carry modem data and
are the Internet’s lifeline). From the bedroom one can phone for a pizza to sustain physical energy, order CD’s to be shipped within a week to one’s house, and now in ambient culture, have pseudo-religious experiences. In America particularly, religion is a regional, familial, and specialized activity. In my home town of Santa Barbara, California, there were eighty different Judeo-Christian faiths represented, a Taoist and a Hindu temple, and several orders of witches and Satanists, but Alex and I pursued the experiential domain of religion in our bedrooms behind the sacred altar covered with newly acquired compact discs and records, dependent on electricity and the electronic boxes from where all the sounds came. Public spaces such as churches seemed secularized and unable to sustain any form of ritual practice (for us, ritual listening).

It’s not a stretch to define the bedroom as our sacred space. Alex and I and other ambient-listening friends of ours were all very protective of our bedrooms, which had to function in rituals more exacting than just a space for sleep. We had different rituals. Alex’s friend Steve hated the constraints of headphones, and also didn’t like to close his eyes, so he would create immense amounts of noise on high-end loudspeakers and move around his large bedroom. Incense helped dissolve some of the ego chatter for me, but at times annoyed Alex. Some fans on the Internet take hallucinogens or marijuana to help induce altered states of consciousness, but many others praise ambient music for its ability to induce the states without the aid of substances. We have all developed our own rituals that reflect our personal comfort needs during the vulnerable stage when we are less aware of our physical body.
Sacred history and science fiction

The sacred history of ambient, in keeping with the fiercely personal makeup of the ritual practices and the sacred space, differs for each fan. Ambient music is an outgrowth, I believe, of other forms of waking dreams and fantasizing. A number of fantasy and science-fiction novels, particularly those that deal with a hero and his control of reality, echo the same modern-day concerns that ambient composers elucidate in their music. For many ambient fans, sci-fi and fantasy are their favorite forms of literature, and I will look briefly at a few major books and show how they can be thought of loosely as part of the sacred history of the ambient belief system.

To some degree, introspection is a sign of a personal battle with the issue of individuality. For example, Aldous Huxley’s Brave New World, an early science-fiction book written in the same tone as some present-day conspiracy theory literature, depicts a technologically advanced society where individuality is machine-crafted and identity predestined in the baby factory. However, the system is imperfect, and occasionally a person comes along who realizes the ills of technosociety and attempts to escape to the wild “Indian” world and a primitive way of being. Huxley infuses the novel with predictions of America’s future, including the rapid expansion of technology, the inability of Americans to understand the workings of their quickly changing world, and the subsequent reduction of the individual's voice.
Cyberspace, as an organized and prophetic entity, was the creation of William Gibson in his famous *Neuromancer*. This book has a dub “soundtrack,” and in the futuristic vision of an amoral Earth the Rastafarians are one of the few intact religious establishments. Dub music, if we believe the writing of Paul Gilroy, is fundamentally about deconstruction, as it was one of the first studio-only genres to hinge on mutations, dubs, and distortions of classic reggae songs. The stripping of the melody and lyrics of dub is nearly the identical breakdown that spawned the ambient movement, except that, in ambient, composers stripped away rhythm as well as layers to reveal the spaces in between notes. *If Brave New World*, in part, reflects public angst about cover-ups, *Neuromancer* is a grand epic of conspiracy theory, as the author and hero never knows exactly who is controlling him, or who is controlling the person / computer / artificial intelligence that is controlling him. Many of the fractal images from ambient album covers are what the reader of *Neuromancer* would imagine cyberspace to look like.

*Ender's Game*, by Orson Scott Card, seems a little more conventional in relation to ancient mythology, with the construct of the “promised land” and the protagonist’s internal morality. Much of the book finds Ender gaining skill at manipulating an abstract computer interface, the wet dream of computer hackers worldwide, and it is the successful mastery of these controls (a metaphor for personal control of his surroundings) that makes him win in the end. The amount of reference to Ender's surroundings on the border between
real, virtual, and imaginary is what prompted me to consider this book an appropriate mythological component of the ambient sacred history.

All three books have sub-themes that echo the ideologies introduced with the six trajectories of chapter 1. Class consciousness, the impact of technology on the world and the individual, virtual reality and the difficulty of differentiating it from material reality, progress and dehumanization, and finally conspiracy theories are strong concerns of the industrialists and space musicians who create audial representations of the same themes.

Role-playing games

Another belief system that places a similar importance on personal mythology is the genre of role-playing games stemming from Dungeons and Dragons. During the process of interviewing Alex Donahue and Jason Brown, our conversations accidentally moved into the realm of our high school experiences with this particular game. It turned out that all three of us had been “Dungeon Masters” who invested a great deal of time in role-playing, reinforcing my initial thinking that a genuine connection might exist between ambient music and role-playing games.

I talked with Brown about this matter, and he definitely saw a link between the realm of the fantasy world creator, the Dungeon Master, and the fantasy sound world creator, the ambient composer. Donahue felt that listening to ambient music, for him a compositional process, was much like creating
maps and schemes in the artificial world of D&D. Surveying other participants in the ambient music scene in Southern California, I found that almost all of them had not only the D&D connection, but at some point maintained that elite role of Dungeon Master.

As not much exists in print on the nature of the Dungeon Master (save the books by TSR Games such as the *Dungeon Masters’ Guide*), I will describe briefly the nature of these role-playing games and how the Dungeon Masters’ role is different than the one regular players assume. The basics of the game are that the players create and maintain “characters,” each with physical and psychological attributes, which they navigate through a magical world structured around the differentiation of good and evil. The characters control only their intentions, as dice are rolled to determine the success – or failure – of planned actions. The Dungeon Master is in charge of creating all the other non-player characters that enter the game, including monsters, demigods, wandering forest animals, and other human-like creatures; he/she also controls the maps, the weather, the political climate of the region of the adventure, and basically the overall scenario. Before the game begins the Player Characters (the alter-egos of the real players) must create elaborate histories to justify their reasons for searching for monsters, treasure, or the conquering of land and items; the Dungeon Master must create the fantasy world the game takes place in, called a “module” (modules can be reused and combined with other “modules”). Depending on the size and nature of the game and the people playing, creating a module can be as simple as a one-page map with cryptic
treasure-marking symbols or as elaborate as hundreds of pages of detailed maps, descriptions of places and people, and even charts of weather patterns, moon phases, or general political and economic matters.

Besides creating worlds and characters, participants must research and memorize the contents of the dozens of D&D rule books. There are some fascinating sections to these books that include detailed diagrams of the links between the different “worlds” of the universe. Supposedly, we humans live on the Prime Material Plane, and through dreams and astral projection we are able to enter the Astral Plane that connects in turn to the Outer Planes (some of which are the seven Hells and the nine Heavens). The instructions for how to be a successful magic-user or cleric character teach players about life in these planes, and experiences are acted out in these alternative realities. The Dungeon Master must command the most specialized knowledge, as he needs to know at the very least the sum total knowledge of all the Player Characters, plus his own instructions (detailed in books like the *Dungeon Masters Guide*).

Although many Dungeon Masters get their start as Player Characters in anothers campaign, few Player Characters become Dungeon Masters. The amount of work required is enormous – possibly hundreds of hours of planning before the first game, and ten hours of preparation for each playing session (and these are generally eight to twelve hours themselves). Even if a D&D participant had the time and motivation to undertake such a task, he/she needs to be a great storyteller, a fair arbiter in the many difficult situations that may arise, and able to improvise much of the game on the spot.
Much of the story of a D&D game generally takes place in a dungeon (hence the name), and game play thrives with a host of odd gothic images.$^{10}$ One would expect to find a logical link between the gothic music scene and these types of role-playing games. However, after interviewing many ambient music participants I have concluded that this is not necessarily the case – that ambient music in some way is a more appropriate complement to gaming (playing role-playing games). However, I’m not aware of people actually listening to ambient music while gaming (in California, games often take place outdoors), nor do I know of any music that is specifically about D&D.

The spiritual function of role-playing games, at least in the 1970’s through 1990’s, served as a vehicle for youth to enact mythological scenarios and develop their own set of archetypes, which they transferred to other aspects of life. As the scenarios pit good versus evil versus neutral, and require players to weigh various moral criteria (within the confines of the character they’re playing), the decisions (and their aftermath) become models for the gamers’ “real” lives. Essentially a creative act, D&D has many attributes in common with structured religions – a sacred history, which differs depending on the adventure; rituals, in the sense of the regular hours spent gaming and the sheets of possessions and character descriptions that are always changing but kept in perfect order; and a text, in the form of the large books that must be read to understand how to play the game.

$^{10}$ I’m using the term “gothic” not as an architectural term (although it is somewhat
People who, a few years ago, spent their leisure time gaming seem now to be inclined to ambient music listening. With jobs, college, and relationships no one has time for gaming, but we do have time for listening to music and entering the other worlds of Eno, Hassell, Zoviet-France. Listening to an ambient music composition is much like creating a D&D module – one visualizes the other world, returning time and time again to examine in more detail the places our consciousness takes us. D&D uses terminology of the occult (ethereal and astral bodies; traveling to other planes of reality; clairvoyance and clairaudience) and necessitates player characters to imagine (and experience) these altered states of consciousness. Ambient music also achieves the same goals – of astral traveling, clairaudience, and lucid dreaming.

Some amount of preparation is required for ambient music listening, from the mundane (lighting incense, turning out lights) to the abstract (researching CD’s to buy, meditation exercises, experience with other “high art” musics). Although there is no need to draw maps and diagrams, one must spend a considerable amount of time “training” the ear to hear differently – the core of listening to ambient music. At first, most people find that their attention spans are too short to deal with compositions that are forty-five minuted long. Shorter and possibly more rhythmic or melodic songs might be an easier first step. Gradually, the time one can spend listening expands, and the time necessary to get into a relaxed state decreases. In this way, the ambient music appropriate), but as a term to describe a particular subculture prominent in the 1980’s. Its distinguishing mark was a fascination with things dark and black.

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listener goes through extensive work to reach the same objective as the D&D participant – the altered state, the vision of another world.

Another direct connection is in the treatment of the method of attaining altered states of awareness. In D&D, the character must go through a complicated set of steps, including personal development, the acquisition of magical items, and the knowledge of the procedure, before he/she can “become astral.” Even then, that knowledge may only permit the character to “be astral” for a short period. Increased experience translates to increased powers and abilities and a mastery of the detailed procedure for undergoing these rituals. An ambient music composition is much like a diagram describing how a listener can achieve these states of awareness, although it is written in an abstract language (sound) that communicates to the subconscious. One does not see the whole landscape during the first listening; the diagram unfolds through repeated aural exposure. It is not uncommon for fans to speak of hearing new things in pieces they’ve been listening to for many years. Thus, I propose that the appeal of the role-playing game – its unfolding, methodological approach to the occult and other states of awareness – is much like the appeal of the ambient music composition.

Douglass Price-Williams, in his introductory “The Waking Dream in Ethnographic Perspective,” suggests that
The importance of role-playing in what has been called hypnosis has stretched to the point where the former term is considered a better choice than 'hypnosis' itself for the phenomena exhibited (Price-Williams 1987: 256)

And in studying the available literature on active imagination research (i.e., reports of hypnosis that invites the patient to actively use their imagination), he writes

The unconscious often appears to speak in an oracular way, as if it were addressing an audience, and as von Franz said, 'these contents often express themselves in a solemn and pompous way'...this is the language of the mythopoetic function. (ibid., 257)

To take this point back to the D&D constructs I have explored, it would suggest that at some level the participants in D&D, by their role-playing, are undergoing a sort of group “hypnosis,” or at least speaking more from their unconscious than conscious selves. Price-Williams equates the active imagination with a field of under-studied phenomena among many indigenous people of the world, which, he is quick to add, is fully understood by the indigenous people but not by the anthropologists. What I am trying to stress here is that this intense personal mythological expression is related to the personal waking dreams of ambient music listeners, and the similarities possibly explain this affinity.

Lucid Dreaming and ambient

As difficult as talking about the components of the music and how they induce trance is describing the altered states of consciousness that arise.
Again, this is not something that can be scientifically delimited, and as one anthropologist put it,

Today, in Western culture, we recognize dreaming as self-related but we do not accord this experience the same status as waking reality and thus we do not fully integrate dream experiences with our other memories. However, since reality itself is an indeterminate concept influenced by imaginative and symbolic processes, there are cultures other than our own in which waking, dreaming, and various in-between experiences, though they may be distinguished, may well not be sort out according to the simple oppositional dichotomy of real versus unreal, or reality versus fantasy (Tedlock 1987: 1)

Saudis say that the rhythm maqsum can make true Arabian horses dance, possessing them and transforming them into uncontrollable beasts. Mevlevi Sufis in Turkey contend that the proper sequence of hane, or rhythmic cycles during a zikr, with the proper sequence of makam as performed through the breath of Allah (on the ney, an end-blown flute), can create a link here and now between the dervish and Allah. In Cuba, the ceremonial use of bata drums causes participants to be possessed by one or more gods, such as Elegúa. All these accounts of possession are of interest to ambient musicians, and some, such as the performance artist Z’ev, the electronic trumpeter Jon Hassell, and synth player Michael Brook have studied many such traditions. However, one does not hear ritual drumming in ambient music pieces, nor does one hear the breath of Allah represented in the proper melodic structure of an Ilahi. There are also no accounts of possession as are described in vodou. What induces trance in ambient is different than the vehicles in other musical traditions, and how participants enter altered states of consciousness and what they do there is more akin to meditation traditions such as bhakti yoga than to ritual drumming.
With ambient music, there is something in the drone-like quality of the music that obliterates consciousness; I have heard suppositions that certain frequencies which exist in only ambient are the cause, or that the emergence of rhythm from static noise subtly provokes a rhythm-induced trance. Here, though, we can only speculate. There has been very little scientific research in the connections between musical timbre and trance, save a few government findings on the effects of 11hz. sounds (which can cause insanity in some people). In the course of composing ambient music I have performed spectral analysis on a lot of ambient timbres, and from these results I will propose a possible rudimentary understanding of what nature of things in ambient music inspire trance.

The first thing one notices with spectrographs of ambient music is that the timbres are, visually as well as audially, very complex. When I mean complex, I mean that there are many overtones, more than in single instruments, drums, or even the human voice. Many of the overtones are harmonic, or based on powers of two, while many are non-harmonic, or in non-integer ratios to the strongest fundamental frequency. When one applies a form of synthesis such as phase vocoding to an ambient music timbre, the resultant stretched sound makes clearer the actual overtones that comprised the original sound (devoid of the noise of the sound’s attack), and we find many layers of sound emerge. Some of the components of ambient music sounds are very quick rhythmic pulses of white or pink noise, while others are (relatively)
sustained clear pitches, while some are almost melodic (in the original form this might be called a “shimmering” aspect of the sound).

I propose that ambient music timbres work in two ways, on two different parts of the brain. Despite the fascinating detail at the micro-level, the overall generalization of the sound is one of a static drone, and this basic sound is very predictable. It’s been there for a while, it will be there for a long time; it sounds in many ways like the drone of machinery in the distance, or the cumulative total of all the little noises in everyday life. Its predictability engages the subconscious; not the analytical left brain, but the creative right brain. Ambient music is perceived differently than other genres (i.e., most pop music), because on the surface there are no things to analyze or grab onto, such as melody, lyrics, chordal progression, rhythm, or familiar instruments. With the predictable drone of ambient, a state of calm might be induced; the ego stops chattering, and the id takes over control of the person.

Though the initial component of ambient is the predictable, or obvious one, there is an intangible side to ambient that can emerge after the subconscious is engaged. This is the component of the music which we can empirically talk about with fancy spectrographs, phase vocoded samples, and psychoacoustical paradigms, but the fact remains that we can’t really be sure exactly what is going on. However, the subconscious uses the intangible element of ambient music as fuel for lucid dreaming, or creating visual representations of worlds that exist outside of everyday reality. In a gross reduction, we can think of ambient as a set of tools for potential dreams, with
the difference being the colors or landscapes available within the sounds of a particular disc.

One way of analyzing ambient music and trance is by thinking of the altered states of consciousness as representing guided imagery. In this aspect, we are describing the activities of the active imagination, but as it is guided by another person (who would be the composer in this situation). In the late 1970's, a school of hypnosis developed that worked at elucidating and studying states of consciousness which had been previously marginalized as psychosis (by Freud) or as unreal and delusionary hallucinations (by scientific disciplines), but which anthropologists have found are quite well understood by many ethnic groups around the world, particularly in shamanic traditions that even equate ability of leadership with skill in active imagination (the Temiar and others). 11

Douglass Price-Williams, scholar and psychoanalyst, writes

One way of distinguishing the two realities [the active imagination and the experiential dimension] is by the use of ritual space. The reality of the imaginative leap, the entities and actions encountered in imaginal space, is carried out in the temenos, the sacred ground, the altar. This is what marks the process off from sense perception reality. (Price-Williams 1987: 259)

The sacred space we encounter in ambient is the bedroom, or the listening room. Accounts by Donahue on the preparations of this space are examples of

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11 One stumbling block ambient fans have in describing the effects of the music is the lack of suitable vocabulary in the English language to describe the nuances of the active imagination. To demonstrate how this is a culturally based problem, the anthropologist Godfrey Lienhardt studied the Dinka people, but when conveying their conception of reality to the West he realized that there was no suitable opposite in English to the noun “actions” (as they relate to the human self). As ambient music is about non-things (non-rhythm, non-melody, non-focus, non-attention,
ways in which people differentiate this room from others in their house, and make it a safe place to embark on psychic journeys.

Without an extensive background in clinical psychology, or in the literature surrounding dream research, I will end this chapter with a few possibilities which can be further researched. The first is the possibility that ambient is a catalyst to waking and lucid dreams. The second is the possibility that ambient music is a language by which composers translate dream imagery to listeners. And the third possibility is that, referring back to chapter 1, the CD’s of ambient music contain aura, contrary to the theories of Benjamin.

and ultimately non-acting while listening) this would be a potentially useful word. (Price-Williams 1987: 254)
Part 3

analysis

What does ambient music sound like, and how is it structured? In the first two parts of this thesis I have often referred to ambient in negative terms, describing what it is not or what it does not have. The big absences are melody, harmony, rhythm, and goal-direction. However, affirmative comparisons can be made. If we were to take the opus of western European art composers, the “most ambient” would be works of Eric Satie (such as “Vexations”), Debussy (“Nuages”) and Ives (“The Unanswered Question”). In a harmonic sense, none of these works go anywhere. They have drone-like components, too.

Comparison to world music is much easier. The sruti drone of Indian music; the recording of Tibetan prayer bells; the sound of thirteen Istanbul mosques erupting in call-to-prayer; the three-note gamelan of the Bali aga – these are all “ambient” music in the sense that they can be listened to “in an ambient way.”

During the summer of 1996, and a trip to Indonesia, I spent a lot of time pondering what it meant to listen in an ambient way, and wrote this passage to describe one such experience:

Yogyakarta is one of the noisiest cities I have ever been in. Even from my hotel room, which was two blocks away from any thoroughfare, I was overwhelmed by the drone of the motorcycles and bima (minivans). It was hard to hear anything "natural" sounding.
in this mess of mechanical noises. There's a national ice cream company in Indonesia, called “Walls,” and their trucks have a really annoying ice cream theme song which is broadcast in a version of C major. The anthem plays day and night, though there are sometimes pauses when a truck returns to the factory to replenish the ice cream supply. I remember an instance a few days into the trip when the song was so pounded in my head that I couldn’t focus on anything else; I was swimming in the hotel swimming pool and the ice cream truck was driving away from this part of the city. The sound took a couple of minutes to fade into the drone of the motorcycles and trucks, and I couldn’t point out the moment when the sound actually disappeared from hearing and when my memory of the song superimposed its sound on my aural landscape, but after a while I realized that there was no ice cream truck anymore, and the sound I was hearing was echoing inside my own head. At that moment of realization, my hearing was opened up and for the first time I heard the chorus of birds and insects (which had always been there) as a musical motif above the accompaniment of the mechanical city noise, a sound which I can still recall.

Experiences like these appear in writings about all the composers whose work I analyze in chapter 5. Chapter 5 will attempt to get at the nuts and bolts of ambient music composing, and chapter 6 will go into further depth on studio techniques with a study of my own compositions.
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Chapter 5

the compositional process

Initially I envisioned for this thesis a chapter of transcription and analysis, that would represent different types of ambient music in graphical form. However, after trying to depict even the simplest (most pitch-based) compositions, I quickly saw that it was impossible at this point in time. The Western score has a two-fold dilemma. First, it is intended primarily as a performance guide (as a prescriptive transcription), but no ambient artists would find use in performing from a score. Second, it is a convenient system for representing pitch and rhythm, both generally absent in ambient music pieces. The reality is that ambient music is so centered around timbre, that until we can represent timbre in a convenient graphical manner, a transcription is essentially futile.

One tool now available to ethnomusicologists is the spectrograph, which makes funny-looking graphs that represent the average frequency spectrum of a short section of sound. I considered doing this type of transcription, but couldn’t conceive of what to do with the graphs once I had them. As a Masters’ student with little background in clinical psychoacoustics, I couldn’t possibly make any scientific sense of these representations, or draw any conclusions about which frequencies trigger what reactions in the brain. The graphs aren’t useful to represent an entire piece of music either, as they show only a few
seconds of sound, a “sound-byte.” Because of the structure of ambient music compositions, which slowly evolve through different, yet similar timbral regions, a spectrograph can not illustrate the craft of the composer in seamlessly flowing from one sound to another. Most importantly, I feel that a spectrograph can not demonstrate any of the differences between ambient composers, and thus fails one of its primary missions as a transcriptive tool.

Finally, I considered the use of color and some sort of color graphing. However, there is no standard color system for transcription, and my representation of pieces would stand alone – they couldn’t be compared to any other body of work. Also, color is a problematic issue with thesis reproduction.

In the process of determining why this chapter would not be about transcriptions of ambient music, I learned quite a bit about the compositional process and why it doesn’t lend itself to visual representation. This chapter begins with an introduction to the studio, detailing briefly the history of recording, and the major features of ambient composers’ home studios (their space of creative representation). The bulk of the chapter is comprised of six composition profiles, analyzing the techniques and source materials for each piece. Many of my sources for this information are derived from short anecdotes from ambient composer interviews on the Internet, and personal experience with creating and recreating ambient pieces. I will preface my analysis with the disclaimer that many of the specific practices of composers are secret, and the techniques and equipment I talk about are applicable only to a few composers; it is possible that I will inaccurately describe the components of
a particular work, though I have chosen musical examples that appear straightforward.

There is a lot of room for further research on the compositional techniques of ambient music, which like their parent genres are quite systematic and sophisticated. I challenge other scholars to address the analysis of examples such as four through six (:Zoviet-France:, Oval, and Nurse With Wound) of which little can be objectively said. While researching this thesis, I was perplexed by the question of why the most interesting ambient pieces evade objective critique, an unanswered question.

**Introduction to the studio**

There have been recording studios ever since the advent of recording at the beginning of the century, but not until the 1950’s and the introduction of multi-track recording did the studio recording engineer become a highly specialized occupation. The most comprehensive work on the evolution of music in relation to recording, studios, and advancement in technology is Richard Chanan’s *Repeated Takes*, and, rather than reprint most of it here, I will recount only the most basic history of the studio as it is relates to ambient. Readers are referred to this book for a more complete history.

After the late 1950’s, the role of the engineer and producer of the recording became progressively more important. By the 1960’s albums produced by famous producers like Phil Spector made it clear that the producer
was just as crucial to the sound of a band as all the musicians, if not more so. The placement of instruments “in the mix” and the treatment of those instruments’ sounds became the trademarks of bands, even more so than melodies or lyrics. If the reader is a skeptic, I suggest they turn on a classic rock station and see how quickly recognizable the “sound” of a band is, even if the song is unfamiliar. In rock ’n’ roll, the instrumentation rarely differs radically from the guitar-bass-drums-vocals quartet. How we can instantly recognize and differentiate hundreds of these units is evidence of the importance and artistry of the producer.

Production recently (though not for the first time) came under attack in the alternative rock genre. The production of bands so radically altered the sound of them that when they performed live they couldn’t reproduce the sound the producer had created for their albums and lip-synching became the norm; the audience was left wondering whether or not the musicians were actually involved in the pieces at all! One response to this was the MTV-funded “Unplugged” series of albums and TV shows, that showed your favorite rock group playing acoustic instruments, without any effects or production (so they claim), and singing without any vocal modifications. I bring up this modern situation to demonstrate how production has come to be viewed by some people as a “bad” thing, as it masks the authentic sound of the band and the musicians. There are also enough stories around about how record companies force bands to use certain producers, or produce an album in a way against the intentions of the composers.
One of the big impacts of the expansion of available technologies for music production, and the advents in multi-track recording (recently, hard-disk recording on an essentially unlimited number of simultaneous tracks) is that the number of people involved with an album has skyrocketed from the one or two engineers / producers in the 1950’s to dozens. The geography of the situation has also changed – it used to be that a band would record in a studio and be with the producer / mixer / engineer during the production and mixing stage, but now the tapes are recorded in several studios around the world, sent to producers in other cities, to mixers in other countries, and back to digital masterers in yet another locale; the creation of work has become fragmented to the point that there is no single author of a song anymore. The creation of an album is an expensive process now, and is compensated for with increased demands on CD sales, and royalties to a larger number of players in the game. The musicians on the album get a very small cut of each album sale, and the figure continues to fall as the number of engineers increases and the cost of the next generation of equipment exponentially rises.

One of the most interesting features of ambient music is that it was, from the start, a genre about production, and a genre born in the studio. However, it has a different relation with the studio than other genres of music like alternative rock, and economics has a lot to do with it. An ambient composer is not the creator of a melody, harmony, and lyric; he/she creates the entire album from start to finish. Though occasionally credits are given to one recording engineer, and some artists in the British scene trade multi-track tapes of their
sessions to similar bands, producing each others’ works, many works are the creation, start to finish, of one person. The studios are different than those used for production of Time Warner triple-platinum releases, too, as with only a few exceptions the creators of ambient music are not signed to any major labels and have no access to the big players’ studios. Some musicians have home studios, and there are several preferred small private studios that are used by ambient artists.

The Home Studio

There are obvious limitations to the sophistication of the equipment that is practical and affordable for the home studio, and many articles cite composers who use very old, semi-broken, analog equipment [c.f. Brian Eno, Richard James, Genesis P-Orridge, et. al]. Conspicuously absent in most composers' studios are keyboards and tall racks of effects processors. The typical touring keyboardist will bring eight or more keyboards and least twenty-four effects units for a live performance; studios often have every commercially available effects processor as well as many that aren’t, just in case they want a Lexicon echo on the drums, for example. It is reported that Robin Storey uses only one $500 unit; I know of many composers who use none. As for keyboards, their principal limitation is producing highly recognizable sounds. Within a few months of release, the sound of a particular keyboard is familiar to everyone,
and even a heavy application of effects won’t cover up the fact that the sound came from a “K-2000.” Keyboards and effects are also the primary definers of the sound of new age music, and the amount of echo and reverb applied to the sounds on Windham Hill and Narada albums is ridiculed by many ambient fans.

The center of most home studios is the multi-track recorder and accompanying mixing board. As I will explain later, ambient music is a composite of monaural and stereo commercial recordings and monaural field recordings, so the number of tracks required is significantly less than for rock ‘n’ roll bands (which use eight tracks just for the drum set). Much of the demand for increased tracks in professional recording studios has been the increased complexities of the production and layering of effects on sounds. Eight tracks, and sometimes sixteen, is quite enough for ambient. To give the reader an idea of the financial feasibility of ambient music production, the purchasing of a digital eight-track setup (mixer and recorder) in January, 1997 is between $2500 and $4000; digital sixteen-tracks can be had for $4500 to $8000.

The second most important unit is the portable DAT machine. Portable high-fidelity recorders were always prohibitively expensive, as until the late 1980’s the only reliable machine was the Nagra reel-to-reel recorder, that cost thousands of dollars. In January, 1997, there are four companies who market portable DAT machines, ranging from $600 to $1400 in cost. The sound quality, with good microphones, rivals the Nagra, and is even competitive with most studio DAT machines. The main advantage of digital field recorders is in
transferring the sounds to computer, which can be accomplished with no loss of sound quality or addition of noise.

Beyond these two arenas of equipment the rest of the studio is highly individual, based on the composers’ expertise and background. Through this chapter, and the introductory look at the techniques of ambient composition and the use of different sound sources, I will touch on various artists’ studios.

**Composition profile 1: “1986” (Robert Fripp, performing the “Discrete Music” score of Brian Eno)**

This composition is one of Eno’s process-composed works; it’s not about a set of pitch classes, or a specific realization, but about the intellectual system that generates music if it is set into motion with “interesting” input. Eno used this particular process on several of his first solo albums and on two collaborations with Robert Fripp (*Evening Star* and *No Pussyfooting*). Robert Fripp used it also, including on his Frippertronics tour in 1979 (“1986” was recorded during this tour.) Fripp still composes with a variant of this original composition.

The equipment set-up for this piece is simple enough that Eno included the “score” on the album sleeve for *Discrete Music*. The diagram looks like:

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VCS-3
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An explanation of the system will aid in understanding the immense flexibility and the reason why it can sustain many realizations while seeming new each time. The external sound input into the system is an unknown in the equation: potentially this could be anything from an instrument to the output of any form of recording or equipment. In practice, Robert Fripp has preferred the use of a treated electric guitar sound (called “skysaw guitar;” it was co-developed with Brian Eno in 1972), whereas Eno uses guitar, keyboards, synthesizers, or oscillators. The procedure is simple: A tape loop is stretched between two identical reel-to-reel decks. The sound is recorded onto one of the reel-to-reel decks (the erase head is removed for this effect to work), and the sound is played a second later through the play head on the other reel-to-reel. The output of the playback reel-to-reel is recorded on an external recorder of some kind. Sounds are added to the tape loop without erasing the previous sounds. The nature of analog tape is such that recording silence over a section of tape that has sound on it (with the erase heads disengaged) gradually deteriorates the volume and timbre integrity of the original sound, and at least
fifteen such repetitions can be made with the attack of the original sound still discernible (the variable is the quality of the reel-to-reel tape). When strong signals are recorded over other sounds, they tend to obliterate the original sounds faster.

Setting this system in motion, one can add sounds continuously to the loop at any rate desired (though in practice both Eno and Fripp tend to add one event per pass). Since the monitoring of the sound is delayed from the moment each sound is applied to the loop, there is quite a bit of unpredictability with the rhythm. The decaying sounds lose resolution and become a slowly evolving layer of drones. Thus, this musical composition, activated by clearly defined note events, unfolds through time into a highly rhythmic, developmental, and multi-layered composition.

Robert Fripp, in his offshoot genre called Frippertronics, would set these loops into motion and add a non-affected guitar solo on top, accompanying himself. These pieces are very satisfying because they give the illusion of exhibiting a wide array of timbres when they are really based on only one sound. Their portability was part of his philosophical quest for the ultimate small, mobile, intelligent unit, and it allowed him to fund a tour of small performance venues.

It is possible to attempt a transcription of realizations of the Discrete Music score. I conceived of using the five-line staff in a manner that made the fixed length of the tape loop obvious, and that showed the occurrences of notes at roughly the rhythmic point where they occurred on the recording. To show
the decay characteristics of the sound, I thought that some sort of vertical line, which went through each staff still affected by that note occurrence, would represent the duration of each note (in units of number of repetitions). I include the first page of such a score at the end of the chapter (page 180a).

This transcription is wholly descriptive, and succeeds at describing some things, though fails at others. There is no set of symbols on the Western staff which correspond to an exact measurement of attack strength and decay slope – what I mean by this is that a heavy accent mark over a note is a useful symbol to a violinist, but doesn’t represent a quantifiable attack time or decay characteristic. Fripp produces many subtle variations of the same basic timbre with his guitar; these become some of his trademark features and signify his artistry and timbral control. Timbre is not notatable. This page of staff notation gives us an accurate sense of the pitch classes used in this piece. However, was this important to Fripp when he was improvising this work? Are the placement of the timbres on the loop an attempt at a deliberate rhythmic structure, or are they just a haphazard realization that later was deemed interesting enough to be released on LP? Even if we can isolate the pitch set from where the realization took place, does that tell us anything about the score in ambient terms? As none of the other works in this section (with the possible exception of the David Sylvian piece) could possibly be notated, this score is best used as an example of how non-representable is ambient music.

Composition profile 2: “Empire iii” (Jon Hassell)
This composition is from a five-part suite on the CD *Aka•Darbari•Java*, 1983. In the range of his releases, this was his fifth ambient CD, and by this point he had fully developed his treated trumpet sound and production skills and had finished his Indian music studies with Pandit Pran Nath. He had also traveled several times around the third world making field recordings.

To begin this analysis, I will look at how Hassell described his own compositions on this album, as his poetic and lofty-sounding liner notes reveal a basic self-analysis of his own composition.

**MAGIC REALISM** • Like the video technique of “keying in” where any background may be electronically inserted or deleted independently of foreground, the ability to bring the actual sound of musics of various epochs and geographical origins all together in the same compositional frame marks a unique point in history. • A trumpet, branched into a chorus of trumpets by computer, traces the motifs of the Indian raga **DARBARI** over Senegalese drumming recorded in Paris and a background mosaic of frozen moments from an exotic Hollywood orchestration of the 1950’s [a sonic texture like a “Mona Lisa” which, in close up, reveals itself to be made up of tiny reproductions of the Taj Mahal], while the ancient call of an **AKA** pygmy voice in the Central African Rainforest - transposed to move in sequences of chords unheard of until the 20th century - rises and falls among gamelan-like cascades, multiplications of a single “digital snapshot” of a traditional instrument played on the Indonesian island of **JAVA**, on the other side of the world. • Music which is to this degree self-referential, in which larger parts are related to and/or generated from smaller parts, shares certain qualities with “white” classical music of the past. **AKA/DARBARI/JAVA** is a proposal for a “coffee-colored” classical music of the future - both in terms of the adoption of entirely new modes of structural organisation [as might be suggested by the computer ability to re-arrange, dot-by-dot, a sound or video image] and in terms of the expansion of the “allowable” musical vocabulary in which one may speak this structure - leaving behind the ascetic face which Eurocentric tradition has come to associate with serious expression. • **JON HASSELL** (liner notes to *Aka•Darbari•Java*)

For lack of a better analytical method, I will reiterate short quotes and translate them into the actual practices he was describing.

“Trumpet, branched into a chorus of trumpets by computer” is Hassell's real-time and non-real time use of chorusing and a harmonizer. The harmonizer
splits one pitch into two or more simultaneous pitches; the choruser gives
“body” to the sound, by duplicating the original into hundreds or thousands of
closely spaced duplicates. In referring to his live use of such effects, Hassell
called his sound-processing unit his “black box,” indicating an interest in the
secrecy of the process of trumpet manipulation. What is not a mystery are the
fundamental effects he is using and his gradual abandonment of the trumpet
body, to the point that he simply sings into the trumpet mouthpiece to trigger
note events. His voice, and its capabilities of realizing the srutis of Indian music
and microtones of other modal systems, takes over the brass-plated machine;
the electronic machine takes over his voice.

“Traces the motifs of the Indian raga Darbari” Darbari is nominally the
set of pitch-classes Hassell employs for his melodies in this piece, but his
strange harmonization gets in the way of understanding the unfolding of the
raga in a classical North Indian sense.

“Over Senegalese drumming recorded in Paris...while the ancient call of
an Aka pygmy voice in the Central African Rainforest...transposed to move in
sequences of chords unheard of until the 20th century” This passage is simply
Hassell admitting that he is fond of ethnic music appropriation. It is likely that
he appropriated a studio recording from Paris world music archives, or he may
have made his own field recording. I doubt he proposed the new marriage of
styles to the Pygmies, though.¹ Hassell applied quite a few effects to the

¹ The fascination with the pygmies is the subject of Stephen Feld’s "pygmy POP: A
gEnealogy of Schizophrenic Mimesis," (Yearbook of the ICTM 38, 1996, 1-35)
drumming, such as echo and phase vocoding; the Aka pygmies are phase vocoded, pitch corrected, harmonized, chorused, and reverbed until they are much larger than life! However, the sound is really background, as is the drumming. The two have so many effects applied they are left only with the suggestion of being ethnic on the basis of the timbral characteristics, not on the content.

“Rises and falls among gamelan-like cascades.” Hassell had traveled through Malaysia and Indonesia and was intrigued by the structure of gamelan music (other albums of his use Malaysian sound sources). However, his reference to gamelan is abstract. There are no obvious gong cycles and no pathet, and the layers of sound are not derivative of the same “inner melody.” In the vague sense that the composition is more cyclical than linear (it has an ostinato, it is not goal-directed) it is more like gamelan than, say, a Beethoven piano sonata.

“Music which is to this degree self-referential, in which larger parts are related to and/or generated from smaller parts, shares certain qualities with ‘white’ classical music of the past.” I think he means serial music and motivic composing; also, he probably is thinking of New York minimalist works from the 1960's and 1970's, in which he occasionally performed. La Monte Young and Terry Riley describe self-referentiality in some of their pieces. The main way in which “Empire iii” is self-referential is in the consistent treatment of all sounds. None are dry, all are effected very heavily. Also, all the recordings,
which aren’t of subtle drones but of strong and commanding foreground music are mutated and sublimated into indistinct background layers.

“A proposal for a ‘coffee-colored’ classical music of the future – both in terms of the adoption of entirely new modes of structural organisation [as might be suggested by the computer ability to re-arrange, dot-by-dot, a sound or video image] and in terms of the expansion of the ‘allowable’ musical vocabulary in which one may speak this structure - leaving behind the ascetic face which Eurocentric tradition has come to associate with serious expression.” I think this statement is problematic, and if it is really what Hassell set out to do, he failed. He may consider this to be coffee-colored music, but the color comes from his theft of music from coffee-colored people, and to me it sounds like intellectually contrived white music. He didn’t ask the coffee-colored primitives whether they thought their music would sound better converted into a harmonized imitation of gamelan structures! Hassell has also not developed new modes of structural organization. His mentor La Monte Young structured most of his compositions in a similar non-goal-directed manner, borrowing from Indian raga, jazz, blues, and avant-garde expression. Likewise, Brian Eno had already released a dozen albums organized in a similar manner, and by this point there were quite a number of remix-groups like :Zoviet-France: doing the same thing with ethnic music recordings. The last point I will criticize is his cut on Eurocentric serious expression. Liner notes like these are just an affirmation of what he denies: The need to intellectually justify creative work is a favorite pastime of the Eurocentric people from whom Hassell feels alienated.
With all due respect, I think that this album was a milestone in ambient music composing. The compositions “Empire i-v” are five beautiful pieces in the same “virtual place.” They exist in an artificial space somewhere between Africa, Java, New York, and Hassell’s studio in Ontario, but all five are in the same space, referencing the same stolen sound sources, produced in similar manner and composed in the same absence of goal direction. They also embody the same vision of what Hassell has called the “Fourth World,” his personal imaginary space for forcing virtual pan-ethnic collaborations. It is the space from which he gives us glimpses of his vision of the human experience in a world that is increasingly difficult to define. It is his vision of the human psyche or, perhaps, of a collective dream.

Composition profile 3: “Upon This Earth” (David Sylvian)

Looking by chance in the open window
I saw my own self seated against the chair
with gaze abstracted...
I thought that I had suddenly come to die,
And to a cold corpse this was my farewell.

lyrics to “Upon This Earth,” narrated by Joseph Beuys

This is an excerpt from the spoken word used by David Sylvian in this song. On the same album (Gone to Earth) are several songs with self-written lyrics about mythological and shamanic themes, a poppy love song, and others with Christian imagery and the spoken word of J.G. Bennett. This piece, more than any other on the album, has a strong rhythmic component in the large guitar
and piano chords that mark the first three beats of the eight-beat structure (there are no note attacks in-between). The rhythm reminds the listener of a bell, tolling for the death of the man of the poem. Though I have stated elsewhere that ambient shuns rhythm, this particular percussion-less rhythm, so obvious and simple, frames a mysterious layer of drones, and the piece is immediately hypnotic to sympathetic listeners.

Only two musicians are credited on this song (other songs on the album are the virtual collaboration of seven artists): Robert Fripp (on atmospheric Frippertronics and solo guitar) and David Sylvian (everything else). The layering of the song is more complicated than might first meet the ear, and my analysis of this composition will focus on Sylvian’s artistry at masking the existence of layers of drones and music.

The first layers to unfold are the guitar chords, which occur on beats one, two, and three, and are large jazz chords based on the following pitches:

\[ \text{I put the D in parentheses because it is only present in one chord and is the least frequently used note in the piece. The chord sequences repeat every four measures, more or less, though there are subtle changes in the chords each time. On beat seven of each measure, a portamento slide seems to move seamlessly over two beats into the top note of the jazz chord on beat one, but in} \]
reality is produced (I think) by a Hawaiian guitar and is on a separate track. Echo is applied to both sounds, so the exact moment of attack is quite muddled.

The second layer is the piano realization of the same jazz chords in a different voicing than the guitar (but with the same pitch classes). Occasionally the piano will provide notes on beats six, seven, and eight. The most interesting feature of the second layer is the landscape sound that echoes off the piano’s attack. As the piano is less effected than the other sounds, it seems that Sylvian either was precise in overdubbing long, warm keyboard sounds or that in some way the piano notes triggered the landscape drone pitch changes. The first two layers are quite a bit of sound in and of themselves, but because of the third layer we don’t consciously notice the drones echoing off the piano attacks.

The third layer I think of as the Fripp layer, as there are two sounds he contributes to the song. The first is a soft, possibly melodic, possibly Frippertronic track of skysaw guitar, which intertwines with the echoes of piano and guitar so well as to be only rarely discernible as separate. Fripp also contributes several foreground guitar solos that are in the same modal system as the rest of the piece but have a definite lack of tonal center or hierarchy of pitches (other than the occasional use of the pitch D).

The fourth layer is the spoken word narration of Joseph Beuys given a little echo but basically straight from the source. With the understated mix of this narration, quite the opposite from most pop groups’ overamplification of the voice over the accompanying band, the voice seems to echo from the guitar chords, too, and parts of the poem are swallowed up in the drone of the music.
Though my analysis somewhat demystifies this composition, I chose to include it for several reasons. First of all, this piece is an accessible example of the layering principles that make up not only Sylvian’s but most of the space music-inspired ambient composers. The use of echo to confuse the source, beginning, and end of sounds is another technique that is deconstructible on this recording. And finally, I wished to show an example using abstract musical vocabulary to echo the spoken word that Sylvian uses in many of his ambient songs.

Composition profile 4: “Stocc Blawers” and “Fickle Whistle, Hand Over Your Ears” ( :Zoviet-France: )

These two pieces are based off the same sound sources, and occur sequentially on the album Shouting at the Ground, so I chose to analyze them together. They are two of the most sparse ambient songs – by any group – consisting of two samples from early Folkways recordings, a simple ocharina melody, and a bass note from a Moog synthesizer. The two Folkways recordings are of one-stringed fiddles, possibly of Druse or North African folk music (but conceivably South Asian, it’s impossible to tell), and they have obviously been altered to increase the distortion of the bow attack. Possibly the sound was played from the old LP into a DAT recorder at levels high enough to distort, then the whole sound brought down in volume (a process which
exacerbates certain timbral characteristics). Two fiddle sounds of these :Zoviet-France: songs were produced this way.

The second sound, which occurs only on the second piece, is an ocharina solo that has been put into extensive reverb. The reverb decay is small enough that the sound of the ocharina triggers a never-fading drone. Robin Storey is playing the ocharina melody, and it has a loose basis on some third-world music. I call this type of ethnic music appropriation “newly composed folk music,” in a twist of the similar ethnomusicological term.\(^2\) The melody, like the two fiddle melodies, has only four pitch-classes and is repetitive.

The bass sound probably comes from a Moog synthesizer, though the effects applied to it (echo and reverb) mask the original sound quality. The sound, one note, only happens four times during the whole piece. My analysis of the effects and the original sound is partly based on a knowledge of commercial effects units and synthesizers, and partly based on this passage from the Rapoon homepage (Rapoon was another project of :Zoviet-France: composer Robin Storey)

His studio resources amount to a portable Sony DAT machine, two Tascam 4 track portastudios, a quarter inch reel to reel, an ordinary hi-fi, an Alesis effects unit and two keyboards, a Yamaha and a Moog. Littering the room, on every shelf, in every corner there are instruments: multi shaped tablas, wooden drums, metal drums, pipes, flutes, didjeridoos, guitars, a newly acquired sitar, many kelimbas of different shapes and ages.

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\(^2\) Most ethnomusicologists use this term to describe situations where the government commissions musicians to create a new national folk music, based loosely on traditional music. Notable examples of this occur in Turkey, where the *baglama-saz* was officially declared the “national” instrument by Prime Minister Atatürk and following this declaration new “folk music” (*halk-musik*) pieces were composed all around the country. (Stokes 1992)
His current recordings are "a process of disassembly and rebuilding." (Rapoon home page, 1996)

Besides the effects I described above, the basic structure of the composition is very simple. The first fiddle sample repeats four times, fading out of the fourth. The second fiddle sample enters after a moment of silence, and four layers of the same looping sample are added at times to blur the distinction of rhythm. The ocharina sometimes plays with the buzz of the fiddles, and sometimes without. The bass sound punctuates four moments of the piece, but not predictable (or seemingly significant) ones.

Though the sounds of this piece are easy to discern, and the structure is simple, what this analysis lacks is a description of why this sparse piece works. What is it about these sounds that are compatible and appealing, and what is it in the music that invokes images of landscapes like the ones depicted on the album cover? How does this piece invoke the same hypnagogic states as the Fripp or Hassell pieces analyzed earlier?

**Composition profile 5: “Commerce Server” (Oval)**

This song is the only one I analyze in this chapter that was created with computers. Oval, as part of their compositional process, create software for the Macintosh computer which uses prerecorded CD’s as sound material for manipulation. They plan on releasing this software commercially, though at the time of writing it wasn’t available. So, the only analysis I can perform is
subjective, as the process of converting a commercial recording into an Oval remix involves some complicated signal processing. I couldn't even discern what type of music was on the original CD, if the sounds came from one or more CD’s, and if many layers of output of the Oval software program were mixed together to make the piece “Commerce Server.”

The mark of an Oval composition is the sound of CD skipping, which to many people is equivalent to the sound of fingernails on a chalkboard. Oval uses this sound as the only rhythmic component of their compositions, and it takes on a different quality of sound because it predictably repeats. This composition is one of the clearest at demonstrating another characteristic Oval sound, the modification of sustained sounds into periodic rhythmic pulses. In other words, the sound of the input CD is sampled in very small bits (about one-third of a second), and every third sample is output to the composition. If this were done consistently, the listener might be able to reconstruct the original sound from the Oval remix, but Oval does other manipulations to the sound, too.

When the Oval software is released in 1997, it will answer a lot of questions about construction and sound manipulation. It will also raise a lot of questions about the relation between composers and audience – in this case Oval is intending their fans to continue the remixing style they pioneered.

Composition profile 6: “Only Certainty” (Nurse With Wound)
This song is one of six long drones on the two-CD release *Soliloquy for Lilith*. The techniques and sounds are similar on all six songs, though this one evolves the most. There is little I can say about this piece, as the industrial-like timbres are of unknown origin and processed with equally mysterious effects. The piece basically consists of two sets of sounds: those that loop constantly for the seventeen and a half minutes, and those which come and go or only happen once. The volume of all the sounds are roughly the same, and they could be described as “semi-pitched.” I chose this piece because it is representative of the works of dozens of composers, including Muslimgauze, Current 93, Coil, Scorn, Controlled Bleeding, Nocturnal Emissions, and works of Steve Roach and other artists on the Somnibent / Asphodel compilation album *Storm of Drones*, and because (at least for me) it defies analysis.

From the compositional process of these seminal composers, which as I have already stated is only useful as a general guide to the prevalent sorts of processes and activities, we will turn to a case study of one composer whose compositional techniques are no mystery. Because of my background as a composer and a listener, which has alternated between attempting to reconstruct or recreate some of these ambient music pieces and moving into new territory and possible landscapes, many of the techniques and issues I bring up in relation to my own creative process are possibly relevant to a wide

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3 See appendix c for a description of semi-pitched sounds.
number of ambient composers. In addition, a self-reflective analysis will help
the reader to understand the biases and ideology underlying this ethnology of
the ambient music belief system.
Chapter 6 -- self-reflective case study

In the last chapter I gave an introductory look at six ambient music compositions, drawing from liner notes and interviews, and my personal knowledge of studio techniques. Ambient music, without a consistent set of pitch references, rhythmic motives, or clearly definable instrument sounds, is a genre which defies conventional analysis; although I proposed simple analyses of those six pieces, most of the sounds are mysterious, and the composers don’t readily talk about the sounds they used on their pieces.

Over the last few years I have worked on a series of ambient music compositions, that began as attempts to recreate the works of Jon Hassell and Robert Fripp, but evolved into original compositions. Because of the ambiguity of the analysis in chapter five, I chose to present six original compositions of my own music, in the hopes that they will give a more accurate portrayal of how a studio musician creates sounds and places them in an ambient composition. This chapter will begin with a history of my involvement with the composition of ambient music. Though it will repeat a little of sections in chapter 1 and chapter 5, I will give an overview of the equipment I used in creating these pieces, which I conceive as the most important component of a technical analysis of the ambient compositional process. Then I will analyze each piece, first as the result of a set of studio procedures, and second as the result of a conceptual idea.
**Composing History**

When describing the evolution of my compositions, I notice that there are three eras of my musical development that brought into practice different ways of thinking about music. In the first stage, I was a composition student at U.C.S.B., where the study of musique concrète and tape splicing techniques began my work with non-scored music. Professor Joann Kuchera-Morin taught me to create works similar to those of Morton Subotnik, Karlheinz Stockhausen, and Luciano Berio. She was also instrumental in teaching me cmusic, a tool structured like the c programming language. Theoretically, one could make any sound in the world with the right combination of instructions to cmusic's oscillators and modulators, though in reality it was difficult to make even one realistic simulation of an acoustic instrument. I spent several months performing spectral analysis on, and in trying to synthesize, Robert Fripp's "skysaw guitar" sound. Though I wasn't able to synthesize it from scratch, I did come up with an equally satisfying sound, which I then fed into the Fripp/Eno score of *Discreet Music*. (I also realized the score with dissimilar sounds such as prepared piano, *ud*, and samples from recordings.)

The second stage of development was during the year off between undergraduate and graduate studies, when I rehearsed and performed with an industrial band in Santa Barbara. Kitty Wright and I were the two composers, creating songs which ranged from sparse vague instructions given on cue cards...
to very detailed scores. Our primary sound sources were amplified gamelan instruments, electric guitar feedback, and distorted vocals. Often we performed with a sound man (Jason Brown) who would radically alter our sound in real time by sending it to outboard effects. Though a lot of the music was quite loud and disturbing, much of it was very spacious, and in retrospect I would compare the timbres and affect to some of the introspective work of Throbbing Gristle, Dome, or Controlled Bleeding.

The band recorded the soundtrack to two underground films, and performed several times live on KCSB radio. We had a lot of personnel problems, from nasty drug habits to chronically late performers to people who weren’t there (musically), so Kitty and I worked as a duo, with electric Javanese rebab, amplified gongs, and distorted vocals. The unpredictable element of the band (and the duo) is something I try to preserve in my compositions today, even though they are fixed recordings and theoretically sound the same every time they are played.

Wesleyan University is the location of the third stage of development. At Wesleyan there is an incredible diversity of sounds which come to concert halls every week, and the even wider range of sounds housed in the World Music Archives. I have worked since the spring of 1996 as a dubber in the archives, and have been exposed to Indonesian, Filipino, Hawaiian, Indian, African, and Native American music I’d never heard before. As the dubber is responsible not only for copying original reels to make preservation copies, but for noting what happens on the tape from moment to moment, dubbers paid a different kind of
attention to the music than if casually listening. I was also intrigued (though it wasn’t part of my job) with the wide array of natural distortions which happen to recordings, from deterioration of the tape, to improper recording levels, to poor-quality tape hiss, and would often go to the electronic music lab after work to synthesize those sounds.

Another stimuli was the course I took with Ron Kuivila on the history of sound recording (the second semester Masters’ seminar). The main issue this brought up for me was that of authenticity, which was something I hadn’t considered before. We studied the manifestos of Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, and had long arguments about whether or not “aura” was something that was digitally pressable onto a 4 1/2 inch disc of plastic. Issues of copyright, theft, and originality also came up, and I became consciously aware of an interest in using commercially available recorded sound as the source material of electronic compositions. I wrote a paper on the sonic history of progressive rock, and made a ten-minute piece which stole songs from about 75 prog rock albums. The piece was made on a Macintosh computer, with the software Deck 2.0 and Sound Designer 2.7, and the techniques I learned by laboriously cutting up prog rock samples and putting them back together into a coherent piece are ones I continue to use in creating ambient cut-ups.

In composing ambient music, I have adopted a number of premises which guide the reason why I create. These are:

1) Music can be (politically) subversive
2) Music can **transfer** very powerful **spiritual ideas**, if the right listener / composer connection is in place

3) The “interesting” avenue for musical exploration is the **microscopic** one – getting inside the character and **timbre** of sound.

4) Because of the nature of sound in the world in general, we have moved to a place where there is no longer a clear distinction between pitch and noise, background sound and foreground music.

None of these are original to my composition, but are taken from a number of composers who have been very influential on my own work.¹ To understand some ways these premises factor into the compositions themselves, I'll describe examples of each.

Though copyright restrictions on sampling have eased up a lot since the early 1990's and court cases such as those against John Oswald in Canada and Negativland in America, the appropriation of copyrighted material is still sometimes prosecuted, and at the least is scorned by composers who pride themselves in non-referential originality. I make conscious decisions to use copyrighted, and sometimes familiar, recordings, though I alter them so that few people would recognize them. However, I strongly believe that the original message of the music gets through to the listener in subconscious ways, even with stretching, echoing, ring modulation, putting it into a feedback loop, and

¹ A few examples: Political subversion is one of the spoken doctrines of Muslimgauze, Coil, and Merzbow. The transfer of spiritual ideas is articulated by David Sylvian and O Yuki Conjugate. The microscopic exploration of timbre characterizes the music of Brian Eno, Oval
pitch shifting. In particular, I think that the timbres which make up “sacred
music” (that I define as having an immediate spiritual impact on some culture of
people), can transfer a spiritual message to people not in that culture, even after
substantial alteration. In a sense, I am making a case for the strength of the
aura of music as it is pressed onto recordings. For my own listening purposes, I
find that the connotations I have with sacred music (from a cultural standpoint)
make listening prohibitive;² thus, my compositions are interested in removing
some of the cultural baggage and creating a new sacred music, based only
timbrally on the original.

I also see a strong dichotomy in my music between “natural” and
“artificial.” By “natural,” I am referring to non-mechanical sounds that exist in
nature (difficult enough to define in itself) or to effects which are created with
the sonic representation of real acoustical spaces. By artificial, I mean
synthesized sounds, both analog and digital, or sounds with electronic effects
applied to them (through effects boxes and such). I work with both types of
sound and effect, but have the least interest in artificial effects and natural
sounds. Part of my timbral exploration is in finding ways of creating natural-
sounding things that are actually artificial sounds treated with natural effects.

² One example that comes to mind is the famous song “Amazing Grace,” which can
produce revulsion in me like no other: there was a very untalented bagpiper in Santa Barbara
who knew only that song, and played such a lousy version of it for so many years that possible
enjoyment of that song was forever lost. The message of the song is powerful, though, and I
plan on doing a remixed version of the song that will not have the same melody but be based off
Another part is in studying mechanical sounds that exist in nature; for example, the hum of air conditioners, ambient noises in indoor spaces, and car horns. I think of sound recordings, too, as mechanical sounds which exist in nature, as the widespread use of musicmaking devices has made prerecorded sound a part of our natural environment.

**The studio**

The recording studio, as I define it, is the entire space where ambient music compositions are realized. Thus, the studio I used differs from most of the recording studios which are geared for the recording and production of bands, and the way in which I use the equipment is a departure from the intended usage. In this section I describe the most important equipment of my studio, starting with recording and playback units, and ending with computer software programs. More detail on the specific use of this equipment is in the technical analysis of each piece.

The center of prerecorded sound manipulation are recording and playback devices. I used two types of field recorders (cassette and DAT) for recording drums, ocharinas, and other instruments, as well as recording the sounds of rooms and mechanical devices. I also used studio DAT and cassette recorders and a Tascam DA-88 digital eight track, hooked up to a professional 8-
buss mixing console. With the setup I was fortunate to use, I could record sixteen channels of sound simultaneously (though I never opted for more than eight), with virtually no hiss or mechanical added in the recording stage.

Many musicians and studio engineers have definite prejudices for particular microphones, but my philosophy in ambient recording is to use whatever I can find; good, bad, and semi-operational. Though expensive condenser microphones can pick up a wider frequency range than cheap dynamic mikes, sometimes I desire a low-fi recording. Since many of the computer manipulations I will describe later bring out undesired high frequency components of the original sound, a cheap microphone will save the stage of using a 10kHz. cutoff filter. Sometimes, if recording the ambient sounds in a space, I will place a dozen mikes randomly around the room and arbitrarily mix the sounds together into a stereo signal.

One technique I use for creating stereo effects involves broadcasting a prerecorded sound into an enclosed room. I used the stairwell next to the recording booth for a number of pieces, which was large enough to create a variety of room effects. Essentially, I put a speaker or two somewhere in the stairwell and one to twelve microphones somewhere else in the stairwell, depending on the desired effect. Sometimes I feed the sound of the mikes back into the stairwell, creating loud feedback loops. Other acoustical spaces which have attracted my attention and equipment are fat metal pipes (like those used as handrails in some staircases) and closets (with a lot of junk in them).
As a general rule, I dislike effects units. Although two of the pieces in this chapter took advantage of a Lexicon reverb unit, if I had the time I would have changed the way I recorded the sounds so that they didn’t need artificial reverb and echo. I absolutely refuse to use EQ units, compressors, limiters, gates, and aural exciters, too, since to my ears they make the sound less believable.

Part of my bias comes from using a computer to analyze the waveform of sounds. In this endeavor, I have discovered that without a doubt the most interesting and malleable sounds are those which have had the least amount done to them. A plain recording of a monochord with a cheap microphone, for who knows what reason, can be stretched (phase vocoded), convolved (multiplied to another sound), mutated (its spectrum mapped onto another sound), and spectrally extracted (made into two sound files; one of “stable” pitches and one of “transient” pitches) many times, each producing a fascinating new look into its sound character. A reverbed and polished recording turns into noisy static or electronic burbling when the same processing is done to it.

There were only three computer programs which I used to create this ambient music. All run only on Macintosh computers with a PowerPC chip, and one of the three is no longer made. For bringing sounds from DAT and cassette tapes, records, and CDs into the computer I used Sound Designer 2.8. It was also the quickest tool for snipping the ends of soundfiles and normalizing the volume of samples (bringing it to the point just below distortion), as well as removing high frequency hiss and low frequency rumble. SoundHack 0.861
was the centerpiece of my signal processing, with its excellent fully programmable phase vocoder, convolver, mutator, and binaural filterer (among many non-real time effects). I admit that I don’t entirely understand what all these manipulations actually do, even though I have a solid basis in electronic music theory. What I figured out early on was how to make drones and subtle sounds from non-ambient recordings. Since my pieces are about sounds, a sophisticated understanding of the electroacoustic process is secondary.

The third program was Deck 2.5, a multi-track virtual recorder and mixer. The interface is easy to use, as one specifies soundfiles to add to a “library” of sounds, and uses a mouse to drag the icon of that sound to the right point in time. The best feature of Deck, which makes it more versatile than a mixing console, is the ability to draw volume changes and panning diagrams on the screen (and edit them in real time). The graphical display, which shows the amplitude analysis of all the soundfiles, becomes the “score” for these ambient music pieces. (See figures 2-4 at the end of the chapter, examples of “scores” which depict waveform, volume curves, and panning diagrams.) Having such a user-friendly image of my piece changed the compositional process. When using a stand-alone eight track recorder, I was dependent on paper scores or good memory to recall when sounds happened, and more ahead-of-time planning needed to happen. In Deck, though, I could move sounds around at any time; change their volume and panning, and not be committed to any one configuration. There was no time obstacle to trying many combinations of unlike sounds. Despite its great advantages, there were some health-related
drawbacks to using a computer so much, and I executed two of these pieces on the DA-88.

Now I will turn to the compositions themselves.

**The compositions**

“De Prez”

I mentioned before an affinity with spiritual music recordings, and this song was my first use of them. I came across a strange 1950’s recording of a Josquin de Prez mass, sung by a midwestern choir. They hadn’t adopted the idiosyncratic performance practice mannerisms of other choirs at the time, and the main feature which drew me to the recording was that the singers slowly portamentoed between notes rather than clearly articulating pitches. Immediately I knew it had potential for computer manipulation.

I copied one and a half minutes of the song onto the computer, using the Sound Designer II software. Only a few signal processing functions were done to the sound. In SoundHack 0.873, I stretched seven seconds of the choir into a minute long drone, and then made versions one and two octaves down (both operations done with the phase-vocoder). All three sounds were then convolved with the original seven second sound (the spectral characteristics of the seven second sound were applied to the longer drones), and the convolved and original sounds were mixed together in equal proportions to DAT. The sounds were monaural.
The DAT tape consisted of these sounds:

1) original one and a half minute sample
2) seven second excerpt
3) one minute complex drone from this excerpt at original pitch
4) one minute complex drone minus one octave
5) two minute complex drone minus two octaves

The remainder of the compositional process was processing a few of the sounds with reverb or reverb and echo, and placing the monaural files onto six tracks of the DA-88. I didn’t work from a score, but had a sense that I wanted the piece to be in an arch form, beginning and ending with abstract drone, and the middle of the piece with the most clearly recognizable vocal qualities. The DA-88 tape was mixed down to stereo DAT with the addition of a very small amount of additional reverb. The reverb in both instances was made by the Lexicon LXP-15.

Although there was no specific “influence” for this piece, in retrospect I think it sounds like the works of Luciano Dari on his album Wajd.

“My Afghan”

This piece is one of two that was derived from a very small snippet of sound. I sampled .6 seconds of Afghani folk music, which had a mid-range drum and some sort of lute, and did hundreds of manipulations to the sound to produce all the sounds in these pieces. The first manipulations were using the phase-vocoder in SoundHack 0.873 to stretch the .6 seconds first to seventeen,
then 143 seconds in length. I was amazed at the 143 second sound, which was not at all percussive, but a multi-layered composition in itself with a high melody, a drone, and a semi-pitched rhythm.

Other manipulations I did included convolving and mutating derivatives of the .6 second, seventeen second, and 143 second sounds, and spectral extraction. With this operation, the sound is converted into two separate sound files; one of stable sounds (sustained or clear pitches) and one of transient sounds (non-sustained or noisy timbres). The transient sound file brought back a new rhythmic component which I later found out sounds like the compositions of Oval and Microstoria.

The sounds were assembled into the two pieces in the virtual 8-track recorder Deck 2.0. Deck 2.0 has the feature of mixing down eight working tracks into a stereo track, which allows the composer the possibility of infinite track layering, and at times in this piece there are up to twenty-four sounds going at once. Though I played a lot with volumes and panning, I tried to keep those operations to a minimum and favor subtle nuances of motion. Some sounds just wanted to move, though, and the transient rhythm I described above circles the listener several times before careening off to the left.

To me, this piece represents a detailed investigation into the timbre of Afghani folk music. By taking a very small original sample and stretching it out, multiplying it by itself and reassembling the fragments into “My Afghan,” I was undergoing an abstract form of spectral (timbral) analysis. I couldn’t have possibly guessed, before working on this piece, that the (simple) stretching of a
drum sound would produce a discrete three-layered composition. After finishing this composition, I worked at manipulating what would seem to be “pitched” timbres (clarinet sounds, flutes, and ocharinas), and found, much to my surprise, that the same stretching operation resulted in noise. The obvious philosophical question this raises is how our ear is able to discern pitch from sounds whose inner structure is noise, and only hear noise from sounds whose inner structure is pitch. I haven’t answered it yet, but I did make more compositions.

“Lament for Syd”

There are many frustrations with using computer manipulated sounds. Although I attempt to make live-sounding results with the artificial processes of SoundHack 0.873, sometimes I wish for unaltered sounds than in their original form are complex enough to make a timbral study. In “Lament,” I recorded three separate sounds. The first was a seven and a half-minute recording I made in my bedroom, singing an improvised, expanding melody through a cheap Javanese suleng. The second was a forty five second struggle I had with my Turkish zurna, which has a delapidated old reed which just refuses to produce desired pitches. I so happened to be doing a sound check in the stairwell next to the recording studio, and had a DAT tape recording the struggle, and upon listening back to the immense amount of natural reverb that the zurna enjoyed I figured the beauty of the natural acoustics outweighed the questionable zurna playing. The third sound was also recorded at my home:
For an instrument building class my roommate and I had built variants of the Renaissance *tromba marina* monochord, and I was fooling around with my roommates’ four-chord pickled *tromba marina*. It wasn’t tuned to any system yet, and I recorded strumming the strings with a stereo microphone placed inside the instrument.

The sounds were all brought into the computer via Sound Designer II, and the only modification I performed was making a new sound of the *zurna* played at half speed (and subsequently, down an octave in pitch). However, I did play back all three sounds into the top of stairwell I had recorded the *zurna*, and recorded them with a stereo microphone at the bottom. Thus, all the sounds seem to come from the same environment, although they are wholly unrelated sounds and were originally recorded in different places. Deck 2.5 was used to assemble the sounds into a complete composition. Because of the woeful sound of the *suleng*-modulated voice, I thought of this song as a lament, and rumors of the death of Syd Barrett (the original songwriter for Pink Floyd) completed the name.

“Ox Baby”

A late-night conversation with a fellow graduate student, Joseph Getter, moved into discussions of new music and western ethnomusicologists studying the instruments and performance practices of the east. He lamented not being involved more with composing and new music performing, and I loosely mentioned doing a collaborative ambient album. The next day I overheard him
practicing multiphonics on the clarinet and, after hearing the fascinating sounds he could create, suggested recording him in the stairwell with me manipulating live feedback loops. Though “Ox Baby” doesn’t come from the clarinet sessions, it comes from a recording we did the day after, when each of us played amplified ocharinas. If there is a score to this piece, it is similar to Eno’s score for “Discreet Music” and is the operating diagram for the equipment.
As you can see on this diagram, the sounds made in the upstairs ocharina are broadcast into the downstairs speaker and vice versa, and the stereo pair of microphones in the middle of the stairwell are broadcast into both upstairs and downstairs. With the large amount of natural reverb, in addition to that added by loud amplification, one little peep of the ocharina would resound...
for seconds. The eighteen minute recording session began and ended with Joseph solos on the ocharina – we hadn’t planned this, but it naturally happened. There were sections where we were playing close pitches and produced prominent interference patterns – these were as exciting during the recording (since they were so loud) as they are on the recording (since there are so many overtones interfering and buzzing around). On the album I am producing with Joseph, the unedited recording session is included in its entirety, since it functions as a nice ambient piece by itself.

On “Ox Baby,” unlike on previous compositions, I planned ahead of time the types of sound modifications I would employ. First I decided against any operations which would change the fundamental pitches of the ocharinas, either through slowing down / speeding up the recording or phase-vocoding. Second, I decided against spectral extractions and binaural filtering. I was left with convolving, mutation, and phase-vocoding to change the length of the sound. Using Sound Designer II, I also reversed some of the sounds.

In the interim stages of the piece, when I had performed all the manipulations to the sounds but hadn’t done any assembly, I had over one hundred and sixty separate soundfiles, taking up almost one gigabyte of hard drive storage space (that corresponds to about 110 minutes of sounds). In philosophy, this piece is the polar opposite of “Lament for Syd,” which featured only one manipulation and four soundfiles. I did all sorts of things to the sounds in “Ox Baby,” including making loops (which sounded to me like coyotes), extravagant changes in volumes and panning (though the piece maintained a
relatively calm and steady state). Though I had spent at least sixty hours in deriving the one hundred and sixty soundfiles, I composed the whole in one marathon twelve hour session and mixed it straight to DAT (without reverb). The session was the day after I saw the new David Lynch film, *Lost Highway*, which is easily the most disturbing movie I have ever seen. I now realize that the composition was my subconscious representation of the imagery and the sparse landscapes of the film, and I think the message is strongly imprinted, for when I played it for Joseph, he immediately described it as “frightening.” He had never thought the simple clay ocharina could make into such a foreboding voice.

“Desda Doña”

The title comes from the ranting of a homeless man, trying to say “goodbye” (in Russian) to a beautiful high school girl he had befriended. This etude is basically comprised of successive manipulations of a solo improvisation of my *ud* teacher, Necati Çelik, which I made in Turkey in 1996. I chose a seventeen second excerpt that had three of the ornaments I admire in his playing but can not realize myself on the *ud*. The song begins with the original, unaltered recording, the last note triggering an echo which doesn’t fade (I did this by sampling the last note attack and stretching it out to eighteen seconds in length). The second iteration has experienced some mutation, and it too triggers an echo. After six successive mutations, the sound is sufficiently altered that one can not recognize a discrete *ud* articulation, and most of the
rest of the piece lies in explorations of convolved and mutant *ud* drones.

Towards the end of the piece a more recognizable mutant enters once again, only to be swamped by the layers of mutant convolved Necatis.

This piece, which is more dynamic than the previous four, exists a little distant from my personal conception of ambient music. Listening to this piece doesn’t yet invoke an image of a particular landscape, and there are some comic and jarring sounds which punctuate the otherwise static layers. The dynamics of the piece remind me of Hafler Trio compositions.

The following Deck 2.5 diagrams were created during work on “Desda Doña,” though I ended up radically altering the structure and not using most of the sounds which are listed in the “library” (see the lower middle of the screen).
figure 2. Deck 2.5 screen showing waveforms
figure 3. Deck 2.5 screen showing volume curves
figure 4. Deck 2.5 screen showing panning diagrams.
afterword

In retrospect, *Ambient Music* succeeds best as an introduction to the composers and listeners of ambient music, and as an introduction to the ambient belief system. Although I focus on the bedroom and the studio as the defining spaces of ambient music, there are others I neglected. Ambient, since its inception, has existed in the form of sound installations (or in multimedia sculptures). Eno has been crafting such environments for almost thirty years, and many other artists such as Marianne Amacher have worked exclusively in this format. Ambient music also characterizes the chill-out room. I am not a club-goer, and did not pursue any research on this dance-hall fad from the early 1990's. The third public venue is the film soundtrack.

Besides the obvious space reasons for omitting these categories, there are three other reasons I chose to focus on the bedroom and studio. First: in these public venues, the way in which music is heard is different. Installations and clubs are social spaces which are not conducive for focused concentration on the music. Likewise, the visual imagery of the film is generally the center of attention, the sound only reinforcing the visual narrative. All three of these spaces also lack the repeatability of a CD. Although one could watch the same film a hundred times, or go to the installation every day it is open, people tend to watch movies once or twice and give a brief visit to a gallery.
The second reason is that the Internet fans I surveyed didn’t mention these venues as part of their ambient listening experiences. Though a few fans do attend chill-out rooms, all describe the experience as something wholly different from listening at home. Concerning films, Alex Donahue and Jason Brown mentioned that they had no interest in seeing the Brian Eno films which inspired the ambient album *Music for Films*; in the words of Donahue, the visuals would be “distracting.” The third reason is that very few ambient composers work in these contexts today. Although some artists, such as Aphex Twin initially became popular as club DJ’s, they have removed themselves from public performance to pursue their study of timbre. Irregardless of these reasons, I think there is much to be learned from studying these venues, too, and comparing the film compositions of artists with their purely ambient works.

In future writing I hope to expand on two issues which I only superficially introduced. The release of three Deleuze tribute albums in 1996 is evidence enough that his ideas have influenced the ambient community, and the brief liner notes to one CD hinted that some of the artists on the Sub Rosa label had been sending Deleuze albums for some time. The other philosophy which needs expansion is the notion of “virtuality,” which I brought up in relation to Internet activity and simulated landscapes. Despite several major topologies just on the notion of virtuality, it is a vague idea, and ambient music is a concrete example of a genre that embraces the simulated experience as superior to the “real thing.” The concept of time, as well, is affected by the idea of virtuality, and among the Internet fans there is a definite sense of what I call
“virtual immediacy” concerning new album releases. Although people are listening in isolated bedrooms at different instances in time, there is the feeling when the moods of the album are discussed that the experience simultaneously happened to everyone.

My original intentions for this thesis included more interviews, with more types of ambient music participants. In particular, I wanted to interview a couple of major composers in depth (Marcus Popp and Robin Rimbaud), but at the point I was doing that form of research I had not formulated investigative questions. I thought it would be useful to talk with the people who create the ambient web pages and information services, as well, to find out their motivations for investing hundreds of hours of time for the sake of dissemination of information. In that vein, I also wanted to do interviews with record label executives and distributors, to learn more about the insides of the economics of ambient. I do not believe that the results of any of these interviews would radically change the research I have done, but it would offer different points of view on many of the matters I could only speculate on in chapter 3.

It will be interesting to track the evolutions of ambient music as its market expands. In 1997 there is still virtually no advertising by labels, and few major label deals for artists, but many industry and pop culture magazines, such as Melody Maker, the Wire, huh, and Option are featuring more articles on ambient composers. With the MTV recognition of “ambient,” and the introduction of separate bins in major record stores, the genre is becoming
visible for the first time. However, unlike other MTV hypes (i.e. alternative rock, techno, electronica), ambient has a long history and an established fan base which won’t be deterred by ambient spinoffs. And since ambient is more a way of listening than a canon of compositions, I don’t think it will ever become “hip” and then “unhip.”
Appendix a

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**by Robert Fripp:**


**on Robert Fripp:**


**on Steve Roach:**


**on Tangerine Dream (and Edgar Froese):**


**on general matters:**


Appendix b

selective discography

Amp  *Sirenes*  1996, Petrol Records OILCD4


A Small Good Thing  *Slim Westerns*  1994, Soleilmoon SOL23CD

Brook, Michael  *Hybrid*  1990, Editions EG EEG41

Capsar Brötzmann Massaker  *Black Axis*  1989, Marat CM 14

Chris and Cosey  *Trance*  1982, Rough Trade / Wax Trax! WAX7123

Coil  *Scatology*  1988, Force & Form FFKCD1


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Current 93  *Of Ruine or Some Blazing Starre*  1994, Durtro 018

Dari, Luciano  *Wajd*  1989, Musica Maxima Magnetica eee03

Eno, Brian  *Discreet Music*  1975, Editions EG EEGCD23

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_____  *Neroli*  1993, Gyroscope 8190 6600-4  
  
Eno, Brian and Harold Budd  *Ambient 2: The Plateaux of Mirror*  1980, Editions EG EEGCD18  
_____  *The Pearl*  1984, Editions EG EEGCD37  
  
Eno, Brian and Robert Fripp  *No Pussyfooting*  1972, Editions EG EEGCD2  
_____  *Evening Star*  1975, Editions EG EEGCD3  
  
Fripp, Robert  *Let the Power Fall*  1981, Editions EG EEGCD10  
  
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Appendix C

glossary

Alap – in North Indian music, the unmetered improvisation that precedes a metered composed section. The alap is an introduction of sorts, and can be anywhere from a half minute to a half hour long.

Amplitude (see also volume) – the relative intensity of sound waves, measured in decibels. Note that amplitude is a scientifically measurable characteristic of music, as opposed to volume, which is in the realm of perception.

Analog recording (see also digital recording) – analog recording includes all manner of recording, from the imprints of the first wax cylinders, to the metal part mastering of 78 RPM records, die-cutting of LP’s, and analog tape medium. The principle is that there is some physical representation of sound waves.

Audiophile – a person who fetishizes aspects of home stereo reproduction of music, from the purchasing of expensive “audiophile” stereo components to the acquisition of recordings that demonstrate the full potential of the home equipment.

Binaural filtering – a studio technique, made most feasible with high-speed computers, which takes a monaural input sound and outputs a stereo signal, which emulates the characteristics of a pair of human ears. The intent is to increase the accuracy of “moving” sounds.

Decibel – 1) a measure of sound pressure levels, which ranges from 0dB (no sound pressure), to 40dB (soft background sounds like central heating systems), to 80dB (loud speaking at close range), to 100dB (the loudest sustained level of sound that won’t cause immediate hearing damage), to 110-130dB (the loudness of most rock concerts, from a distance to close up), to 140dB (pressure levels so high they cause brain fissures). 2) the measure of volume on a P.A., mixing console, or recording unit, with 0dB representing the ideal level for sustained sound, and -50dB the softest sounds one can capture without substantial problems with the signal-to-noise ratio. In analog recording, the advances in tape quality permit recording up to +10dB, though in digital recording the maximum peak is at 0dB.

Digital recording (see also analog recording) – a technique developed in the late 1970’s and released with the Compact Disc that converts sound into a stream of bits (ones and zeroes), and that depending on the sampling rate,
approximate the frequency and amplitude information of the sound. The Compact Disc, because of the problem of aliasing, is restricted to reproducing frequencies between 20 and 20,000 hertz (20-20kHz), though the standard for Digital Audio Tapes (DAT’s) is between 20-22kHz. Oversampling is a type of digital filtering that is standard on most playback units, to reduce the problem of aliasing. Because of the computer-nature of digital signals, units must be used to convert the analog signal to digital (A/D converters) and the other way around (D/A converters). Digital has the unique property, in the reduction to a stream of bits, of being perfectly reproducible and capable of being copied, without any loss of information.

**DJ, general history** – the DJ (Disc Jockey) began in the 1950’s, and at that time consisted of spinning popular dance records. The qualities admired in a DJ were his/her “hipness” to the dance fads, the size of his/her collection, and the loudness and sound quality of their equipment. As equipment became centralized in clubs, and advances in studio recording (the advent of multi-track) allowed different versions of the same song, the profession of the DJ was split in two, with one person spinning records and another MC’ing over the dance-hall-specific mixes. In Jamaica, particularly, the record industry released remixes of popular reggae songs without the melody and vocals, on the B-side of the 7” single, and the change in the use of these created the genre of *dub* music. At this point, a cross-fertilization of DJ’s in America and Jamaica led to the rapid proliferation of DJ-based genres, which featured a wider variety of spinning techniques, including scratching, tape manipulation, variable speed playback, looping, and outboard effects (such as the characteristic dub sound of putting drum sounds through an old spring-reverb guitar amplifier). With underground dance genres such as techno, house, acid house, and trip-hop, a wide array of equipment, from keyboards to drum machines, effects units, signal processors, and compressors are now employed, and sampling entered the arena as a staple technique.

**Effects, real-time** – there are hundreds of popular boxes that provide real-time effects, including echo, chorusing and reverb (see reverb, below), flanging (which emulates the sound of analog reel-to-reel tape saturation), harmonization (making mirrors of the original sound at other pitches; making chords out of single notes), and arpeggiation (using single input notes to trigger a sequence of different pitch articulations). Real-time effects are used for many purposes, including the simulation of acoustic spaces, the creation of artificial environments, giving “life” to a dead electronic sound, or special effects. Equalization (changing the spectral characteristics of a sound) is also a real-time effect.

**Effects, not real-time** – though many effects such as described above can be done in real-time, phase-inversion or reversing a sound require the sound to be recorded, manipulated, and then played-back. A phase-vocoder is a well-known unit (described in detail below), but many other effects, such as binaural
filtering, sound mutation and convolving, and any techniques that change the length of a particular sound fall under this category, too. These effects can't be used in a live setting, which is one of the primary reasons why ambient music has difficulties as a live genre.

**Frequency** (see also pitch) – measured in hertz (hz.), the number of times a second the measured sound-wave vibrates. Often confused with pitch, the “frequency” of a particular timbre would be a composite of many frequencies which a spectrograph reveals.

**Intonation** – refers to a system of tuning. Harold Budd and Jon Hassell are the two ambient composers who speak most about intonation. In classical music theory, there were benefits and drawbacks to the two major systems of Pythagorean (based on a series of perfect fifths, or intervals with the 3/2 ratio) and Just (based on a series of fourths or other intervals, intervals with 3- 5- 7- or other odd prime number ratios). Temperament refers to a system of note intervals that are tempered, or changed, off pitches that come from a tuned system (equal temperament is a system based on the interval defined by the twelfth root of two – all intervals except the octave are “out of tune” in this system).

**Loop** – 1) a sound that periodically repeats 2) a segment of reel-to-reel tape, which is strung between one or more reel-to-reel decks and played back to make a sound that periodically repeats. Brian Eno and Robert Fripp pioneered a tape loop technique that allowed an unpredictable amount of alteration of the sound of the tape loop, thus defying some of the normal characteristics of looped sounds.

**Mellotron** – a primitive sampling keyboard that gained game from the Moody Blues albums of the late 1960’s, and in progressive rock acts like King Crimson, Yes, and ELP, though it was used just as much by ambient composers in the early 1970’s. There were thirty-five tape loops which spun around constantly, and pressing one of the thirty-five keys on the keyboard would move a set of two tape heads in contact with the constantly moving tapes. The construction allowed some possibility with dynamics, but the most noted and unpredictable feature was when one pressed the key too hard and saturated the tape, causing an erratic distortion. These keyboards were maintenance intensive, requiring a full-time tech crew, and fell out of fashion with the advent of more reliable analog synths.

**Mixing** (see also remix) – the process of working with sounds recorded onto the original multi-track (see below) master, and converting the 8, 16, or more channels of sound into a stereo signal. Issues such as post-recording effects, equalization, and panning / volume come up mainly in the mixing stage of studio recording. Mixing, with the proliferation of new idiosyncratic
equipment, became a specialized occupation in the 1970’s. Almost all ambient composers know how to mix down to stereo.

**Multi-track** – as opposed to monaural (one track) and stereo (two tracks) refers to the technological advancements that permitted four tracks, then eight tracks of simultaneous recording. Thus, the art of recording moved from the capturing of the sound of a group from one live vantage point to the art of recording discrete signals that are later mixed (see mixing) to a stereo pair. With the advent of digital and fast computer equipment, the number of possible tracks has expanded to virtually infinite, though I haven’t heard of more than 128 being used at one time.

**Musique Concrète** – a genre of avant-garde music in the 1940’s-1970’s created mainly with tape splicing and tape manipulation techniques. Luciano Berio, Milton Babbitt, Karlheinz Stockhausen, and Mario Davidovsky were pioneers of this genre.

**Noise, general** – noise is a culturally defined term that encompasses sounds thought of as non-pitched. Until the era of the futurists, there was no conception in western classical music of noise as a musical element, and even to this day there are people who use the term as an insult for what they consider unmusical.

**Noise, pink** – a type of electronically produced noise which is used to test sound equipment.

**Noise, white** – electronically generated random full-frequency sounds; the best real-world equivalent is the sound of a television antennae tuned to a non-station.

**Oscillator** – an electronic device that produces a discrete sine-wave (sound with only one frequency). Oscillators can control only the amplitude and frequency of the sound. In a keyboard or synthesizer, an oscillator can be used to produce a singular sine wave, or to modulate another sound (a low-frequency oscillator (LFO) modulates with a pitch in the range of human hearing, converting a “pure” sound into one with tremmolo or vibrato.) Ultimately, analog synthesizers consist of banks of oscillators.

**Ostinato** – a repeating rhythmic motif. In ambient music, the rhythm may be quite understated. Related to loop.

**Phase vocoding** – a technique of non-real time sound processing, which takes a sound and either stretches or compresses it, keeping the pitch the same, or raises or lowers the pitch, keeping the duration the same. There are interesting
results in phase-vocoding percussive sounds, which has prompted many composers to use this unit as a compositional tool.

**Pitch, general** (see also *frequency*) -- the perceived frequency of sound. Pitch is a culturally defined term, based on our conception of the fundamental frequency of a particular “pitched” sound, though the reality of acoustical phenomena makes this judgment a non-scientific one. For example, in spectrographic analysis the sound of a bell or gong has a number of different, non-harmonic fundamental frequencies, though western ears are conditioned to think of these sounds as “one note.” Another example of the principle of delusion and pitch is with handheld AM radios, which reproduce a pretty limited frequency response. We hear bass notes through these radios, although the perceived note isn’t being broadcast, as the ear has the property of filling in the missing lower harmonics of a sound if the upper harmonics are present.

**Pitch, semi-pitched sound** – semi-pitched is a fairly new attempt to reconcile the spectrographs of phenomena like bell-sounds and gongs with the fact that people hear these sounds as particular frequencies, but again this is a culturally defined term. In our culture, we think of it as a sound that contains fairly equal components of pitch and noise, whatever that means.

**Production, overview** – production is the component of studio recording that happens between actual recording and mixing. A producer determines a range of procedures that happen to the dry recorded sound, which can be as simple as deciding upon a particular reverb, to altering completely the sound of the band, pitch-correcting mistakes, adding other tracks of musical material, and the like. The producer, from the 1960’s on, had an increasing role in defining the “sound” of a band, and the achievements of producers are recognized in the annual Grammy awards. Ambient is the only consistently self-produced genre, meaning that the sound-manipulation decisions are all made by the composer.

**Psychoacoustics** – the study of the perception of sound. Some of the main studies include the hearing / comprehension / effects of subliminal messages in music; pitch perception and study, and music as a trance-inducing medium.

**Raga** – the modal system of India; also refers to any particular musical mode.

**Rave** – an urban/suburban happening, often in clubs, warehouses, or in remote outdoor venues, which are characterized by loud music (made by DJ’s), a sequence of affects of dance / music, and ritualized drug use.

**Re-mix** (see also *mixing*) – the concept of creating a second or subsequent mix from original master tapes that were already produced and mixed down to a studio album. A remix is generally not done by the composer, and often the composer has no say in the result. Remix also brings in samples absent on the
original master. Some musicians have likened the remix to the Deleuzian rhizome.

Reverb(eration) – is one of a number of real-time effects that are derivative of the principle of delay. A delay unit takes a dry sound and outputs that sound with one or more copies, at periodic time intervals and a specific decay rate (decreasing amplitude) from the original. Reverb is the type of delay that has the secondary attack between 40 and 60 milliseconds from the original; chorusing is in the range of 60 and 120 milliseconds, and echo is at least 120 milliseconds.

Sampling – the principle of extracting a segment of sound from a recording, commercial or field. Sampling brings up legal issues of copyright and theft.

Sine waves – sounds that consist of one frequency. Sine waves are not naturally occurring sounds, but must be electronically produced.

Spectral analysis – the principle of mapping the frequency versus time content of a sound.

Sruti – in Indian music, refers to 1) the electronic device which simulates the sound of the stringed drone instrument, the tanbura. 2) the intonation of a scale degree in a raga 3) an ornament on a particular pitch, related to the intonation (2).

Synthesis, overview – the idea of constructing, or synthesizing, sounds, begins with old units such as the Ondes Martineau and the Theramin, and continues to evolve as digital sound manipulation becomes easier.

Synthesis, Frequency Modulation – one sound is modulated by another frequency, both in the range of hearing. Synthesizers with this technique generally are based on algorithms, or combinations based on combinations of oscillators used as pitch generators and as modulators.

Synthesizer (vs. keyboard) – a synthesizer is a device specifically used to synthesize, or electronically create, sounds, without regard or relation to acoustical musical instruments. A keyboard is a commercial product with a number of applications, from using synthesized or sampled sounds of acoustic instruments, to being a unit that can easily play back electronic sounds. Every keyboard has a synthesizer inside; not every synthesizer is a keyboard.

Timbre – The Oxford Dictionary of Music defines “timbre” as “Tone-colour; that which distinguishes the quality of tone or voice of one instrument or singer from another.” (Kennedy 1985). This is inadequate for describing industrial sounds which aren’t produced by instruments, or that don’t have discernable pitches (tones). I define timbre as the “Spectral characteristic of a sound,” and
conceive of it as the aural equivalent of a fingerprint. A fingerprint is a unique, complex combination of simple lines – a timbre is a unique, complex combination of simple sine waves.

**Volume** (see also amplitude) – the perceived loudness of a sound. As pitch is the audial perception / impression of frequency, the ear registers sounds as “loud” or “soft” that, in reality, may be creating the same sound pressure levels (amplitude).
Appendix d

internet posts

definitions of ambient music  
by mike brown  
6 Jan 1994

a genre of music is defined in part by a concept or purpose which precludes or is developed during the creation of the body of work, and it is defined in part by the resultant work itself, its instrumentation, arrangement, and other similarities to existing works. one must look at stylistic pigeonholes as a dynamic set of commonalities that only becomes static after it is more or less suddenly abandoned as an art form. for example, it is easy to define ragtime or swing because for the most part those genres are no longer advancing. there are established conventions for the creation of this sort of music, and to stray outside of these "rules" is virtually unheard of today, and when it does happen the result is usually not considered a part of the "authentic" style.

while some may like to adhere to the same kind of conventions in musical styles that are actually still evolving –in particular i am thinking of those who prefer to think of Ambient Music as only what it was defined to be by Brian Eno– it is my belief that in time the innovative combinations, intentional or not, of elements of the academic, Eno-esque ambience with other modern styles (trance, noise industrial, jazz, world music, etc.) will be validated and accepted under the banner "ambient", despite the fact that such new combinations may be only reminiscent of Eno's pieces in the vaguest of constructs. indeed, some music was only called "instrumental" or "industrial" for years until just recently the definition of ambient has evolved and expanded enough to safely encompass these older works by the likes of David Sylvian, Peter Gabriel, Ejinderzende Neubauten, and Chris & Cosey.

we are now seeing an overlapping of definitions as well. some space music can be called ambient. some droning guitar rock can be called ambient. some trance techno can be called ambient. where, then, can one draw some boundaries in an attempt to describe the state of ambient music as it exists today?

i'll try:

AMBIENT MUSIC

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Brian Eno is credited with coining the term "ambient music" in the mid 1970s, although various examples of music with a similar sound and/or purpose can be found dating back to the early part of this century. Eno's version of ambient music, explained in part on the liner notes of his ambient albums, is rooted in theory and method, well defined as the concept moreso than the product. His music tends to be tonal and in certain keys, but not that melodic, usually consisting of heavily processed electronic drones and sparse, random notes. Basically the idea is to have a sort of music that is actually a part of the environment — "room coloring" or "sonic wallpaper". Instead of listening closely to the music, you play it at soft volume levels so that it gives the room or art installation a subtle feel it wouldn't have otherwise. Eno was strongly influenced by the soft piano music of Erik Satie.

AMBIENT INDUSTRIAL
Experimental electronic music has been around for 40-odd years, but it wasn't until Einsterzunde Neubauten ushered in a wave of noise-based atmospheric music in the mid 1970s that an alternative evolved in contrast to the dissonant cacophonies heard primarily in academic environments and at modern dance exhibitions. While Pink Floyd and Hawkwind were merely incorporating tape loops into their progressive rock epics, Neubauten and other industrial subversives were constructing entire compositions & atmospheres out of found sounds and layered effects. I haven't got much information on this genre, so if someone would like to fill in this section please do. In the mean time, I'll go listen to my Chris & Cosey album _Trance_ a few more times.

EXPERIMENTAL ELECTRONIC
Usually unmelodic, sometimes entirely atonal, and only for the most patient of listeners, experimental electronic music has an ambient appeal in that people who aren't used to it usually have to swallow it whole and listen to it as background noise. Again, it's a genre I know little about, so feel free to explain it a bit for me. The 'experimental' part refers to the deliberate purpose of the composition. Each work is intended to explore certain aspects of the electronic sound medium; aesthetics tend not to be a concern except to those who are creating the music. Almost any electronic music you find dating back before the late 1960s will be 'experimental'.

ELECTRONIC ROCK
Borne out of the psychedelic culture of the 1960s, some progressive rock bands began dabbling in electronics. Before long there were musicians working exclusively within the medium and for the first time contemporary structures & melodies were arranged using synthesizers & organs. Some bands dove headfirst into the psychedelic aspects, manipulating and shaping sound environments to tease the ears of listeners who were stoned or tripping. The amazing thing is that these forerunners of the ambient house movement were more or less accepted by the average stadium rock fan; it was not unusual to hear a Tangerine Dream instrumental space opus sandwiched between tracks

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by Yes, Emerson Lake & Palmer, or Genesis on prog rock radio of yesteryear. Tangerine Dream is by far the most famous of the electronic rockers. From 1973 to around 1986 they created textural soundscapes with the most advanced synthesizers and effects of the day, much of it customized for their rich timbral explorations. Most of their works from this time period shift through phases of moody solos and dark spaces, with repeating 16th-note sequences in many of the segments.

SPACE MUSIC
This sub-genre of electronic rock doesn't see that much action, but fans of space music usually can't get enough of it. Space music is hard to describe. It tends to be repetitive and lengthy, built in gradually multiplying layers, very electronic yet not entirely 'thick' or inorganic. Once you hear a few examples, you'll figure it out. Klaus Schulze, who was briefly in Tangerine Dream before they were using synthesizers, is the most famous space musician. His albums "X", Timewind, and Mirage are good starting points for the uninitiated, as well as the absolutely amazing _Sonic Seasonings_ by Walter Carlos. More accessible to ambient house fans is the rare and recently-bootlegged album called Space, a pseudonym for Jimi Cauty of the KLF.

AMBIENT HOUSE
Around 1987 the dance music scene saw the birth of a style of repetitive house music called Acid House, named not for drug influences but for the idea of actually stealing bits of other people's music for the construction of one's own song. Previously samplers had pretty much been used only to drop in sporadic samples or to chop up vocals in order to "spice up" a song. Very quickly, though, the clubgoers took the LSD and Ecstasy implications of the phrase to heart and the rave scene was born. The 60's returned with a vengeance and all-night psychedelic dance parties became commonplace again throughout England and Chicago first, then eventually the rest of the world. Chillout rooms sprang up at clubs & warehouse parties as places for weary dancers to rest for a while before returning to the main room to dance until the high, natural or induced, wore off. Alex

TRANCE and ritualistic stuff [unwritten]

AMBIENT INDUSTRIAL
Ambient industrial is, of course, a hybrid genre of ambient and industrial; the term _industrial_ being used in the original experimental sense, rather than in the sense of industrial pop. Ambient industrial makes use of Industrial principles such as use of anti-music, extra-musical elements and shock tactics, but wields these elements with more subtlety. Additionally, ambient industrial often has strong occultist tendencies, with a particular leaning toward Chaos Magick (the image of the Black Sun is one that comes up repeatedly in post-Industrial music), often giving the music a highly ritualistic flavor.
Ambient industrial is one of several directions that post-Industrial music took on after the breakup of Throbbing Gristle (the founders of Industrial as an art movement) in 1981 ended the Industrial period proper. Indeed, the last material that TG recorded, at least in the studio, Journey Through a Body and In the Shadow of the Sun, was ambient industrial work and pointed to the direction that several of TG's offshoots (most notably Coil and CTI) would take.

Among the many artists who work in this area are Coil, CTI, Lustmord, Hafler Trio, Nocturnal Emissions, Zoviet France, PGR, Thomas Koner, Controlled Bleeding and Deutsch Nepal. It is important to note, however, that many of these artists are very eclectic in their output, with much of it falling outside of ambient industrial per se.

A "typical" ambient industrial work (if there is a such thing) might consist of evolving dissonant harmonies of metallic drones and resonances, extreme low frequency rumbles and machine noises, perhaps supplemented by gongs, percussive rhythms, bullroarers, distorted voices and/or anything else the artist might care to sample (often processed to the point where the original sample is no longer recognizable). Entire works may be based on radio telescope recordings (Arecibo (Lustmord) Trans-Plutonian Transmissions), the babbling of newborn babies (Nocturnal Emissions Mouths of Babes) or sounds recorded through contact microphones on telegraph wires (Alan Lamb's Primal Image).

Some related terms are:

**AMBIENT NOISE**

A subgenre involving the construction of "noisescapes", that is, soundscapes created out of walls of extreme noise. Closely related to power electronics and "Japanese" noise, this anti-music may not strike the uninitiated listener as being very ambient. To those more familiar with noise, these works have a subtle ambient quality that distinguishes them from the straight-up noise of Merzbow or Whitehouse. An example would be the distorted low-frequency/high-volume sonics of Daniel Menche, which are evocative of the cthonic sounds of a subway tunnel, an underground boiler-room in a factory or the afterburner of a jet engine. Other examples of ambient noise would be works by Aube, Blood and Flame-era NON, Arcane Device and some of PGR's collaborations with noise artists like Merzbow and AMK.

**ISOLATIONISM**

Popularized by the British magazine The Wire and the Ambient 4: Isolationism compilation from Virgin, this is essentially just a new marketing term for ambient industrial, but also inclusive of certain post-techno streams of ambient, such as Autechre and Aphex Twin.

**DARK AMBIENT**

A term that's gained a great deal of currency in the last year or so, this is a catch-all that includes ambient industrial, "gothic" ambient projects such as Raison D'Etre, Love Spirals Downwards and Black Tape for a Blue Girl, and various other ambient musics, such as that of Jon Hassell, that have a "dark" quality. The Projekt/ Darkwave, Hyperium and Cold Meat Industry labels
seem to be the standard bearers of a self-consciously "dark" stream of ambient. However, the term has become such a broad catch-all that any music that is "darker" than the most self-consciously "positive" New Age and ambient techno work gets slapped with this label. Even Eno's work has been called "dark ambient"!

Synonyms include "darkwave" for the more gothic-oriented stuff, "death ambient" for some of the bands on Cold Meat Industry that have an ideological affinity to death metal, and "ambient noir".

* * *

LIST INFO
*** If you have just subscribed to the ambient music mailing list, you are responsible for understanding this information. Read this document carefully. Print it or save it!

Contents:
1. Mailing list mission and content
2. Moderation and when NOT to post to the list
3. New subscriptions
4. Digest version of the list
5. Archives
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   * spams
   * selling music through the list
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   * label & artist promotion
7. Other ambient music related forums
8. Who's in charge

1. MAILING LIST MISSION AND CONTENT
The AMBIENT MUSIC Mailing List, formed August 1994, is intended for information and discussion pertaining to all forms of ambient music, from Brian Eno's Ambient series to environmental sound effects recordings, from The Orb's ambient dub to Jim O'Rourke's ambient industrial drones. Originally conceptualized by Eno as 'sonic wallpaper', the word ambient as a musical term has come in recent years to embrace a very diverse range of artists and influences. Consequently, the ambient "scene" seems polarized, with fans of one style of ambient music rejecting or remaining ignorant of other styles –it is hoped that the Ambient Music mailing list will foster among its subscribers appreciation, respect, or at the very least increased exposure to the huge ever growing musical genre that is controversially tagged, "Ambient".

2. MODERATION
The Ambient Music Mailing List is "semi-moderated", meaning in this case that while subscribers are able to post directly to the list, the list administrators reserve the right to:

* remove disruptive or misguided/junk-mail posts from the digest queue, if caught in time
* order a disruptive thread to cease
* insist upon adherence to the list's clearly stated purpose of discussing ambient MUSIC, not "ambient poetry", et. al.
* unsubscribe repeat offenders and severe abusers of the list
* determine what constitutes disruptive behavior and gauge the severity of the abuse

That said, this power is rarely used, as the list is actually self moderating.

Subscribers are encouraged to not stand for immature postings and to use *private email* (not public posts) to express their dissatisfaction with each other. It is further expected that posts made to the list will not contain unconstructive flames or excerpts from other people's private email (unless with permission).

It is a shortcoming of this kind of forum that whatever is posted becomes incontrovertible fact until a rebuttal is posted, which in turn demands a reply from all who disagree, and so on. By choosing to create and administrate an unmoderated mailing list (well, mostly unmoderated), we have accepted the consequences of its nature, and likewise, those who subscribe to it also must accept that there is the likely possibility of having to read heated discussions that erupt between a relatively small number of impassioned individuals on the list. If, however, the ambient music content within a discussion becomes null and the debate deteriorates into purely personal jabs and defenses, both parties run the risk of unceremonious removal from the list and/or some creatively worded requests to "shut up" coming in private email from other listmembers.

If you are offended by the content of a post or feel that attacks are being made against yourself or others, confront the perpetrator immediately in private email. Ask them to clarify what was meant and explain how you interpreted what they said. Give them a chance to publicly post a clarification of their questionable statements, so that the discussion which follows won't dwell upon miscommunications and rebuttals of rebuttals. Likewise, if you are contacted in private by someone who took exception to things that you said in public, take responsibility for your statements and act accordingly.

3. NEW SUBSCRIPTIONS

If you haven't already subscribed to the list, you can join by sending mail to ambient-request@hyperreal.com and putting "subscribe" by itself in the body of the message. Your email address will be extracted automatically from your message headers, so send the mail from the address to which you want the list mail to be sent.

When posting to the list, post from the address at which you are subscribed. Mail sent to the list from non-subscribed addresses is sent to an
administrator who may or may not forward it on to the list, depending on its content.

4. DIGEST
If you want to receive the digest version of the list, you should subscribe to ambient-digest. On average, one or two 40K digests are sent out per day, and they contain all the posts made to the list since the previous digest, with rare exceptions. (see section on moderation).

New subscribers to the digest version of the list should send mail to ambient-digest-request@hyperreal.com and put "subscribe" by itself in the body of the message. If you are already on the message-by-message ambient list, send mail to majordomo@hyperreal.com and put "unsubscribe ambient" on one line in the body of the message, and "subscribe ambient-digest" on the next.

When replying to a message contained in a digest, only quote the relevant portion of the message itself; quoting the entire digest will result in your removal from the list.

5. ARCHIVES
The list's archives are stored at hyperreal.com with Epsilon: The Ambient Music Information Archive. Hyperreal is accessible via the World Wide Web. FTP and Gopher access is being deprecated in favor of web development.

Epsilon is located at http://hyperreal.com/ambient/
The list archives are at http://hyperreal.com/music/lists/ambient/

6. MORE POSTING GUIDELINES
Unfortunately the size and wide distribution of the ambient music mailing list has necessitated the following restrictions.

Spams - Expressly forbidden on the list is the rebroadcast of petitions, chain letters, alerts, calls to action, get-rich-quick schemes, rumors of the Imminent Death Of The Net(tm), political rant, the recurring Good Times Virus or Modem Tax hoaxes, or similar resource-hogging, bandwidth-wasting spams so often propagated by people new to the net. The ambient music mailing list is for the discussion of ambient music, period. It is not a public megaphone.

Selling Music via the mailing list - it is okay to post a short message (like, a screenful) for a personal record/cd sale or auction. For anything more than a screenful, just post a pointer to someplace else – like one of the rec.music.marketplace newsgroups or an email address to which interested people can write to request the full list. Auctions should be announced once and conducted in private thereafter.

Artist and Label promotion - If you are representative of an artist or label and wish to post promotional material on the list, be *very* polite, humble, honest and to-the-point with your post. The fastest way to undermine your reputation and fill your mailbox with four-letter words is to join the list, post a sales pitch / advertisement under the guise of "discussion," and sign off the same day. You are not going to make tons of money off the Internet, so don't
even think about treating it like just another advertising medium. Make your presence known and humbly invite people to visit your online resources. A respectable presence on the net entails demonstrating a sincere commitment to the music, not your bank account. Be more than just an information resource. Join mailing lists and participate in discussions. Answer all your email. Publish your email address and don't lose your net access. Make customer service, not customer acquisition, your number one priority, and you will do more for your reputation than you will ever know. Press releases may be posted, but please precede them with a Subject: heading that indicates the nature of the post – e.g., Subject: "new Brian Eno album [press release]" or Subject: "RELEASE: Smashing Pumpkins/Orb remix EP". Don't review your own records. Contact potential reviewers by email. Find someone who reviews the type of music you produce and who you think writes in a way that would benefit your label. Send them promotional materials and hope they like the music.

Crossposting - The general rule of thumb about crossposting is, if you are not subscribed to a list, don't try to post to it. Try to resist the temptation to post one message to multiple lists unless you are sure it is worthwhile. For example, just because you are talking about the Orb on the Ambient list doesn't mean everyone on the Orb list has to see your message, too. And the less directly-related to a list or newsgroup your message is, the better it would be for all concerned if you just posted a pointer to it. For example, when I post my reviews, which cover a lot of techno-related stuff as well as ambient and space-music, I don't post the entire batch to every mailing list whose members might find some of the reviews interesting. Instead I post the reviews in a couple of places (ambient, idm-reviews, rec.music.info, and in Epsilon) and then I post brief pointers everywhere else telling people where they can find the reviews if they are interested.

OTHER AMBIENT MAILING LISTS
There are mailing lists specifically for discussion of Brian Eno, The Orb, Space-Music (Klaus Schulze, Robert Rich, Steve Roach, etc.), Tangerine Dream, the KLF, and Intelligent Dance Music (Aphex Twin). For information about these lists and their archives please see the document Ambient Music Information Resources On The Net, which is kept in Epsilon.

WHO'S IN CHARGE HERE
The list administrator is Andy Thomas (andy@hyperreal.com).