

**KYLE GANN**

# Ambient Lives!/Stinks!

Swirled Music  
The Ohio Theater  
September 7

**A**nd so we have ambient music to herald the end of civilization. From now on musicians will churn out sonic wallpaper in six-hour stretches, no moment distinguishable in significance from any

making our very lives musical.

Oh hell, I don't know which is right. I'll provide some sentences and you can assemble your own damn review. The irony is, I was an ambient fanatic from day one, the moment Brian Eno's *Music for Airports* hit the shelves. Today, my son's favorite musician is Eno, even though he can't find another sixth-grader (or college student, for that matter) who's ever heard

and trios, letting their musical languages flow in gentle friction.

Stage three is Swirled Music, the marathonic get-together at the Soho Arts Festival, also programmed by First, in which two new-music types and one DJ would all play at the same time, in random combinations. I thought throwing musicians together randomly with no forethought given to affinity was a terrible idea. I was wrong. Because one of the features of unplanned ambient music is that, if it never rises above a certain level of ecstasy, it never sinks below a certain level of boredom, either. Whenever the textures of superimposed flute melodies, spoken-word recordings, and electronic chords grew surpassingly brilliant, some element would always change, leading to more pedestrian combinations. And whenever any moment became limp and lifeless, a performer would suddenly hear a space to move into with something poetic.

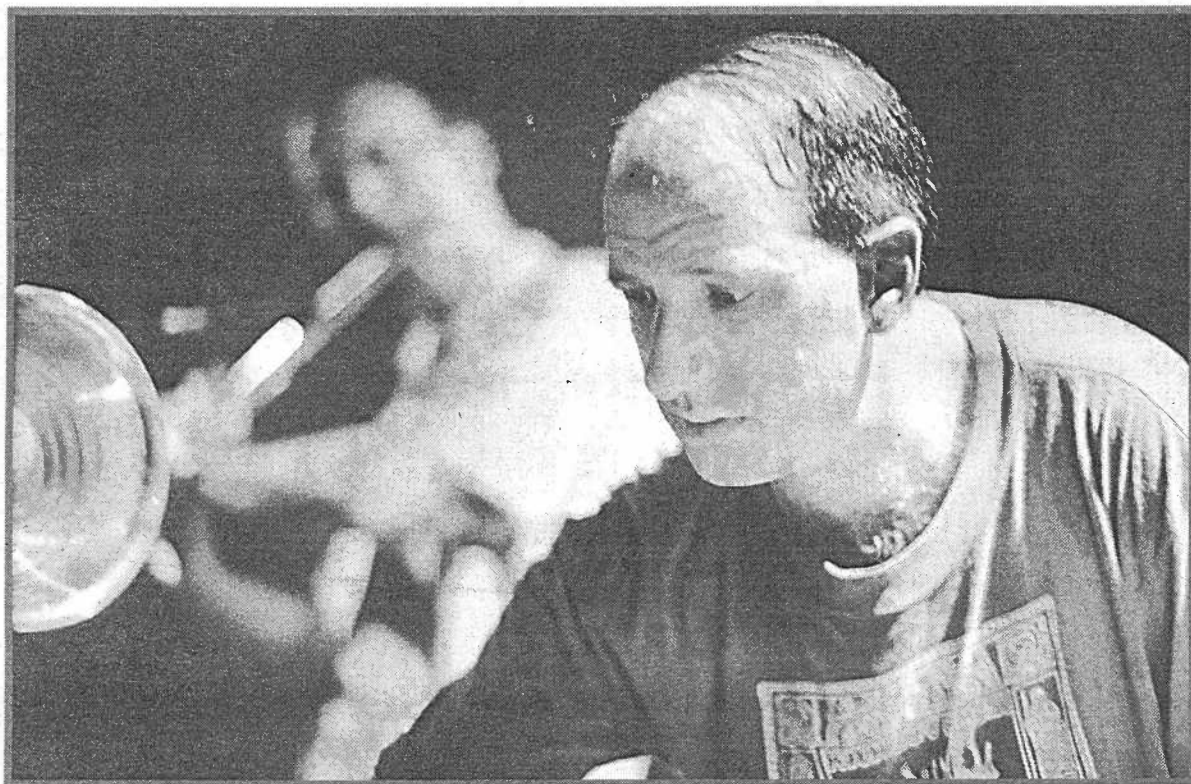
Naturally, some musicians have a knack for ambient gestures and some don't, but I was surprised at how many of the people I heard September 7 keyed into the spirit of the event. Not everyone. People who formed their idea of improv in the '80s scene had a style-too-mercurial and soloistic for ambient. Jim Staley's trombone mutterings and Robert Poss's guitar licks would beep into consciousness and get quickly lost. Yet the relentless intensity of

before DJ Olive boomed in, drowning them both out for good.

At one point, acoustic music took its revenge: a microphone left on created a feedback loop, shorting out the sound system three times. Each time, the fortissimo loudspeakers died, leaving only the lonely lines of Bruce Gremo's meditative flute. Around 9:30, though, the DJs decided it was party time, and for most of the rest of the evening they kept up one or another relentless techno beat, in which the musicians' contributions ceased to have any effect. If I had wanted to go to a dance club, I would have gone to a dance club.

Other problems were beyond the players' control. Most of the chairs were in rows, others were scattered across the room in places that you felt self-conscious sitting in. Doesn't ambient imply couches, pillows, even plush day beds and bean-bag chairs? Less avoidable was the late summer's sweat-bath humidity, which made it difficult to stay inside for more than half-hour stretches. The visuals—people scanning books, objects, and people into computer screens, thence onto overhead canvases—were a great idea, but ambient needs a new visual aesthetic. More than one customer remarked on how nostalgically '70s the screens looked, psychedelic without the drugs.

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David First: the birth of a new aesthetic?

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in well, as he loudly pinged an antique cymbal for what seemed like 15 minutes nonstop. I thought it was a recipe for disaster that all of the keyboard players were pretty much limited to the same synthesizer setup, from altered-tuning mystic Elodie Lauten to Annie Gosfield, who usually works with a sophisticated array of samplers. Yet both managed to find synthesizer styles that were recognizably their own but provided solid ambient backgrounds for the other players.

The marathon's real challenge, only partially solved, was that ambient means very different things to DJs and instrumentalists. Just as both sides in the 19th century's musical wars traced their heritage to Beethoven, rockers and new-musickers look back to different sides of Eno, one raucous and bass-driven, the other delicate and even subliminal. Earlier in the day, DJs Masa and Tom Stir seemed to get into the poetic spirit of the collaborations, sometimes letting the instrumentalists lay down the sonic washes. That was a tentative balance. Eve Beglarian and Christina Wheeler once had a beautiful counterpoint going, one plucking a delicate Indian stringed instrument, the other whispering into a microphone. It only lasted a few moments

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If this was the birth of a new aesthetic—if we're going to learn from Swirled Music's mistakes and formulate some empirical ambient principles about foreground, background, incessant sound versus intermittent sound, and so on—that's fantastic. The danger is, once a movement picks up steam in New York, it lives out its life without self-criticism. I found about 40 per cent of Swirled Music delightful, and there are too many Downtown musicians for whom that's sufficient. In the early days of the free-improvisation fad, there were a few improvisers who spoke out, in print and rehearsal, about the dangers and limitations of unplanned ensemble improv, and about how some kind of rigor was needed to keep it sharp and surprising. That was short-lived; within months economic necessity was propelling a scene that no longer worried about its habitual self-indulgences.

I'm afraid the same thing will happen with ambient. If we can agree that some ambient strategies work gorgeously and others create mush, then composers, performers, DJs, and even entrepreneurs can start stealing from and building off each other the way Haydn and Mozart did to create classical music. But if we refuse self-criticism and say, "Oh well, it's just ambient" (the way one noted improviser is rumored to have said after a miserable performance, "Oh well, it's just improvisation"), then I'd rather scrap the movement now and just tell people we had it. ❖

other, signaling the death of our will to read meaning into the world. The fragmented detritus of past ages, in the form of recycled recordings, will drift into our ears like the smoldering ashes of a volcano-charred city. Memory is neither helpful nor desirable in this pastless present. Authorless musical forms will collide randomly, not with the rigor of Cage's *I Ching* but with the dispirited haphazardness of people who no longer look where they're going. The postmodern era is a lazy, postapocalyptic garbage heap.

No, wait: that's wrong! Ambient music has at last freed us from the anachronistic strictures of European concert-hall performance. The totem pole hierarchy of composer/performer/listener has been uprooted in favor of a healthy, community-oriented anonymity in which individuality can flourish outside the envy-poisoned cult of personality. Performers can extemporize in laid-back environments that give them leeway to spin off each other's creativity, while listeners enjoy the results without feeling intimidated by the power play of linear form. No longer separate from life like the bad, old elitist avant-garde, ambient music pours into consciousness like a rush of sea water, seeping into every crack and pore and

the name. For one thing, I was astonished by Eno's ability to subtly but pervasively paint the atmosphere any shade from neutral light green (*Discreet Music*) to suicidally foreboding black (*An Index of Metals*, my favorite). Secondly, I always considered the doctrine of *ars gratia artis* a nefarious Republican plot; ambient music, drowning out (as Erik Satie prophesied) the clatter of knives and forks and filling up the empty spaces in conversation, proved that music could be useful and artistic at once.

I wish I could report that I stuck out the '80s as an ambient champion, ahead of the curve, but I dropped my interest when the movement seemed to fizzle out. And now ambient's back and I hardly recognize it, like a cute toddler I waved goodbye to one day who's suddenly returned with dreadlocks, a leather jacket, and pierced eyebrows. Rockers have finally prodded the ambient idea into the minds of new-music composers, who should have listened a little harder 15 years ago. First, Ben Neill started the "Tone" evenings at the Kitchen, where DJs followed up concerts with record-spinning environments. Next, David First started the Corporeal Mergers series, which matched Downtown totalist types together in carefully picked pairs

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