

## Out of the Chairs

**Just as the '80s experimented with where you could play what (string quartets in bars, rock in concert halls), the '90s are playing fast and loose with how to present music socially, and what kind of focus to encourage. More and more youngsters never hear a live sit-down concert, and even my generation is backing away from the idea of rows of chairs. Ambient is the decade's underlying hue, coloring even music that doesn't subscribe to it. But are we sabotaging the possibility of certain kinds of musical meaning by encouraging the expectation that it's all right to walk away from a performance as soon as you're bored with it? Nonlinear messages can be funky, but aren't there valid points that can only be made through sustained development? We can afford to kick such questions around for a few years. Art always survives.**

—K.G.

# Cage Upstaged

TONE: unCAGED

The Kitchen  
January 13

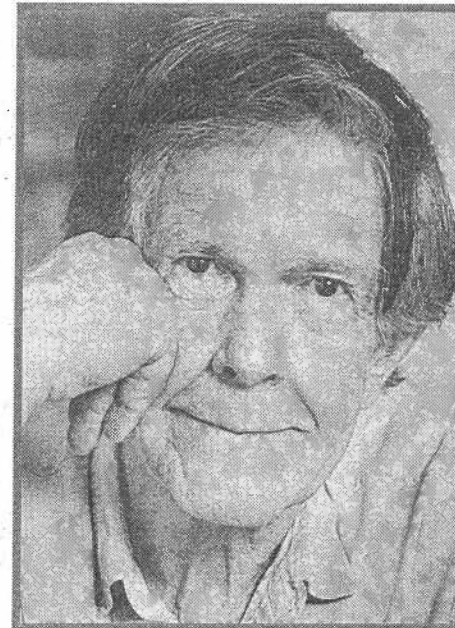
BY KYLE GANN

**I**s Cage's music ambient? In *Silence*, he wrote: "The way to test a modern painting is this: If it is not destroyed by the action of shadows it is genuine oil painting. A cough or a baby crying will not ruin a good piece of modern music." It's true that Cage's music is the easiest for me to listen to while I'm working, because it isn't trying to sell me anything: no personality imposes itself on my mood or thoughts. Whenever I suddenly listen, the music isn't less beautiful because I missed what came before. Brian Eno's ambient records, appearing in the late '70s, seemed to emerge from a Cagean aesthetic. *Music for Airports* was as blankly repetitive as the "furniture music" by Cage's hero Erik Satie.

But now that ambient music is back with a vengeance, we're listening to all music through a new filter. Kitchen curator Ben Neill picked up on resemblances between its monthly ambient "Tone" nights and Cage's Happenings of the '60s—a surprising connection but obvious in retrospect—and built one event around works by Cage. The result was a dark but engaging circus. In a revival of *Variations II-IV*, the mallet-wielding percussionists of Essential Mu-

sic wandered through both floors of the building studying maps to find where to make their next noise. Ben Manley toted two bags of electronic noisemakers, setting off burglar alarms and emitting dog barks. Between long silences Bernadette Speach hammered at a toy piano. Eric Kivnick sat on a stool reading a novel aloud. Lights flickered on and off illuminating the audience, who playfully made their own noises.

And that wasn't all. Upstairs, ambient artist DJ Spooky layered vinyl records into a moody tone collage. Downstairs, a picturesque sound installation by Dutch conceptualist Paul Panhuysen—12 wires stretching out into the stage like a giant spiderweb—bubbled with pungent high drones. At other times, experimental films by Richard Kostelanetz combined printed words and speech in thought-provoking patterns. It wouldn't have bothered Cage, I imagine, that these other musics, louder and more continuous but not personality-oriented, blended with and often drowned out *Variations II-IV*. He and his friends pioneered that



John Cage: an uneasy relationship to ambient music

came earlier, when Essential Music began a meditative performance of Cage's 4': jingling shell wind chimes, whooshing sand blocks, caressing a garbage can with a rubber mallet, and popping the occasional balloon. Outside in the lobby the crowd noise was 80 decibels louder than the pianissimo wisps coming from the stage, while Kostelanetz's films boomed overhead. If a cough or bawling rug rat can't destroy a Cage composition, what can? A jackhammer?

Ambiguities about the function of music run deep through Cage's writing, but he generally wrote from an assumption of concert performance. His music allows you to choose your own points of focus, while ambient is about keeping a blurred, peripheral attention with no sharp points of focus. The two aesthetics overlap, but juxtaposing them reveals,

kind of don't-know-who-did-what overlay in the '60s, and he would have kicked over the pedestal many performers now keep him on.

The moment that made me uneasy

I think, that Cage, incomparably avant-garde though he was, belongs to an earlier generation. We can plug him into our agenda and he won't complain, but it doesn't mean he'll fit.

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