Soundtracks To Live By

By Kyle Gann

"Before and After Ambient"

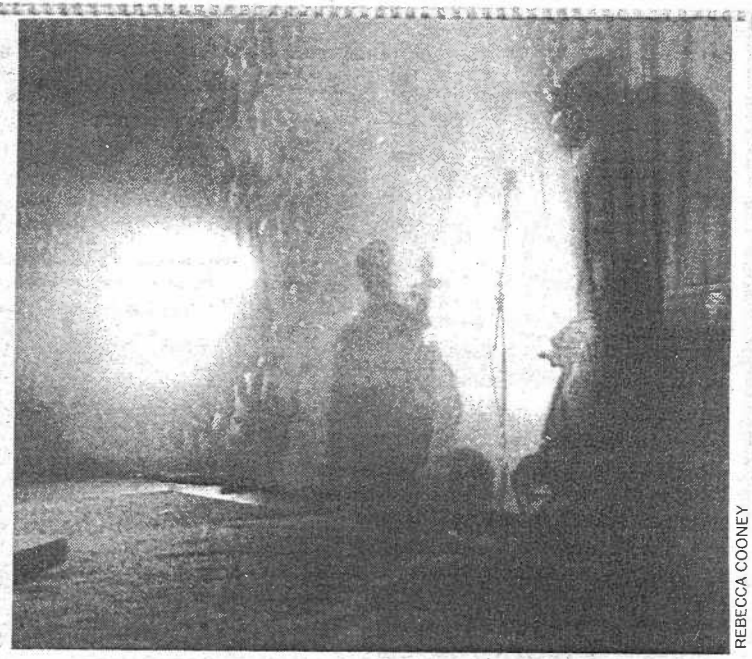
The Kitchen's "Before and After Ambient" program November 4 and 5 added up to more than the sum of its parts. Little of the music justified the excitement provided by the event itself. For one thing, the Kitchen has renovated its upstairs space into a comfortable and flexible listening area, and there was continuous music on both floors. If you didn't like the first-floor show, you went upstairs, and when you didn't like that either, you stepped outside. How civilized—as long as the sound from one group doesn't bleed into the other's space. Curator Ben Neill plans to turn such programs into a regular occurrence starting in January. It's good to see the Kitchen once again leading the music scene, a responsibility it abandoned during the '80s.

In jumbling ambient pop together with stasis-oriented new music, Neill is simply continuing the tradition of former curator Rhys Chatham, who in the '70s brought rockers in to play next to minimalists and conceptualists. Chatham's move sparked protest, for back then the lines separating new music from rock blazed like neon lights. Today, however, ambient music and minimalism's offshoots have edged so close together that it can require a qualified specialist (such as myself) to say for sure who's on which side. To my surprise, I've been finding out that I know more about ambient rock than most of my rock fan friends. That has something to do with the movement's origins in the '70s with Brian Eno, whose experiments in total background music, devoid of features the ear could follow or focus on, grabbed the attention of a lot of classical types. Concert life has been fading in relevance for decades, and ambient offered a chance for composers to move in a utilitarian direction, mapping out a whole new relation between music and our electronic society. Yet classical composers let the opportunity slip by. The idea of making music *not* to be listened to didn't offer enough ego strokes.

Pop musicians eventually developed Eno's idea into tunes for people to chill out to at English dance clubs, something less beat-oriented than dance music. One of the Kitchen performers, DJ Spooky, explained to me that in England and California, ambient rock tends toward subdued, melodyless instrumentals with environmental sounds added; the New York variety, naturally, is noisier and tends to consist of sound bite collages made by performing on turntables. Anything that isn't obnoxious and aggressive has trouble taking root here. And yet all varieties were represented in "Before and After Ambient" using only New York performers, except for the groups who appeared via live video connection from Santa Monica (Meridian Dream) and London (Future Sound of London, the weekend's star group, whom I didn't hear). Loosely defined as a genre, ambient has opened up a weird area in between art and vernacular. Its beat, intuitive subjectivity, and commercial concerns come from rock, but its infinitely extendable time-sense and acceptance of all sounds come from Cage and minimalism.

Zoar was the slickest band, conjuring as finely calculated an atmosphere as I've heard any ambient music elicit. The group's devices were simple: smoke machines, swirling geometric figures of light, sophisticated synth timbres, thunder, and unexpected chord changes that recurred until you finally learned to listen for them. Nothing's easier than taking this music apart and showing why it works, but it does work, without pretending to be anything more than it is. Listen too closely, which the music doesn't encourage, and you dispel the magic, but it's superb at setting up a darkly dramatic background. I couldn't imagine, though, wanting to underline my daily life with a soundtrack by Christian Marclay, widely considered the father of the turntable-playing type of ambient. Many of the noises he made in his set were not preferable to the jackhammer that's been operating outside my apartment lately. I far more enjoyed DJ Spooky and the Tetsu Inoue–Terre Thaemlitz duo, who created mellower and more slowly evolving flows of reiterative snippets of older recordings, including sound effects and system-testing records.

As its name implies, ambient can aim at total sensory experience, involving visuals in nonsynchronous counterpoint with the music; so, on the second floor, a guy named Feedbuck magnified images on a giant screen, training a camera and spotlight on one poor little dazed turtle until I was ready to call the SPCA. In the case of pianist Jaron Lanier, "ambient" became a synonym for "not standing up to close scrutiny." With eyes closed and head thrown back, Lanier locked his left hand in a position to play parallel consonant chords, and flipped his right hand around without much apparent care for what notes it hit. You've heard his name because he's famous in virtual reality circles. In music, he's strictly an amateur.



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A finely calculated atmosphere: Zoar at the Kitchen

The one experimental work that stood its ground like Gibraltar, as though born for this context, was a string quartet by Phill Niblock played by the Soldier Quartet. Accompanied by Niblock's mute videos of Southeast Asian farm workers, the Soldier players held endless sustained notes in a dissonant, amplified chord, modulating their tunings so slowly that you had to listen hard to hear the piece changing. Here was ambient music that didn't give a damn about seducing you, didn't care if you left, but would give you plenty to listen for if you chose to stay. As such it towered like an ancient warrior amidst the foamlike subjectivity of the rest of this concert to proclaim the granitic honesty of the older, more austere experimentalism. Rarely has Niblock's music sounded this powerful in his own performing space. It leads one to speculate how many of rock's advantages over new music have more to do with presentation than content. ■