

QUARTER NOTES

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BRIAN ENO'S Sounds of Silence



BY GEORGE RUSH

Brian Eno

Rock's Svengali pursues silence

UNDERNEATH NEW YORK, in the subway tunnels echoing with clangor and screech, gunshots and shrieks, graffiti proclaim ENO IS GOD. The spray paint refers to angel-haired Brian Eno, who for a decade has been recording some of rock's most provocative experiments and guiding performers such as David Bowie and the Talking Heads toward stardom brighter than his own. Of late, Eno has forsaken rock. Evading and angering the spray-painting punks, Eno has pursued a "luscious silence," a discreet music to ease the din and tension that pervade the subway tunnels and much of the rest of the world.

He grew up in the British countryside, in the Suffolk town of Woodbridge, near two U.S. air bases that emanated rhythm and blues. The G.I.s' doo-wop sounded like "Martian music" to the young Eno, who bought as much of it as he could. He began studying art, eventually enrolling in Winchester College of Art, where, nettled by the overfastidiousness of his painting, he began devising concepts that let him off the creative hook, leaving his paintings' execution up to others and to chance. He grew interested, too, in experimental music and the texture of sound. He taped static, amplified the travel of earthworms, invited avant-garde composers to lecture to audiences often consisting only of Eno.

After college he joined Roxy Music, the band former art student Bryan Ferry was assembling in 1971. The band's first single, "Virginia Plain," camped up the Fifties style of crooning and became a British hit. Two years and two albums later, Ferry's arch torch songs, studded with Eno's electronics, were the toast of the Continent and Roxy Music stood prominently among those early Seventies bands dedicated to "progressive," or "art," rock (a movement that is often traced back to the Beatles' orchestral experimentation on *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, that later reached an unlistenable pitch in the symphonic kitsch of Yes and Rick Wakeman, and that eventually revolted against itself in the minimalist punk and funk of New Wave). By the time it reached success, however, Roxy Music was teetering under

the tussling outlooks and egos of Ferry and Eno. "There's not enough chaos in music now," Eno declared, adding after he quit the group, "I was easily the most photogenic person in Roxy. I don't say that I was therefore the most attractive, but if they ever wanted to print an article about Roxy, they'd always have a photograph of me... and people always think, You must be the leader of the band, which is what Bryan got so uptight about."

Eno, in those days, did cut quite a figure. Bedizened in peacock plumes, mascara, and beret, he prompted the British press to hail him as the "sylphlike electronics guru," the "Scaramouch of the synthesizer," the "cadaver we've all come to love and recognize." (More lively than a cadaver, however, he was a lady-killer—reportedly spending as long as thirty hours having sex with no fewer than six women.)

While in a "mad mood" in 1974, Eno recorded his first solo album, *Here Come the Warm Jets*. The album brims with what he calls his "idiot energy." Its songs are at once quirker than Roxy Music's—Eno's voice being full of other voices, impersonations—and poppier, at times McCartney-sweet. There are brash tracks, too, showing Eno's sardonic humor.

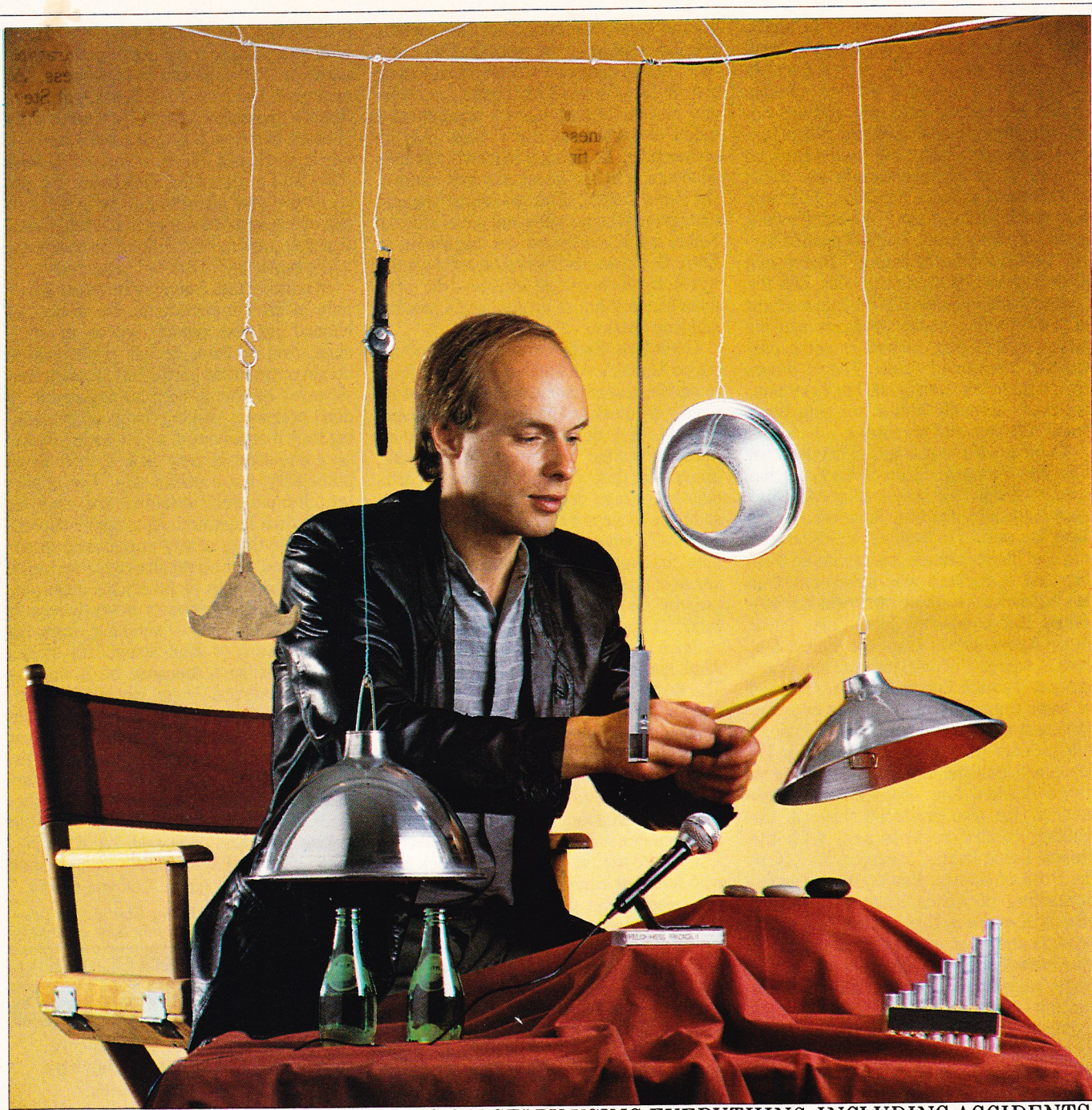
"I had been reading about spontaneous human combustion," Eno recalls. "And I was rather maliciously interested in the idea of a baby bursting into flames and the parents throwing the child into a swimming pool. It was like a perversion of that expression 'throwing the baby out with the bath water.'" The idea's outcome—in which a line from Auden's elegy to Yeats also gets perverted—was "Baby's On Fire," one of Eno's most-liked songs.

Another baby appears on *Taking Tiger Mountain (by Strategy)* (1975), Eno's second and perhaps best song-album. Here, on "Put a Straw Under Baby," a Baby Jesus doll rests in a crib in a convent where nuns allow good children to cushion the doll with straw and ask bad children to remove the straw. "I went to a Catholic school," Eno explained, "and I remember the sinister, archaic quality I felt there—every action was charged with repercus-

sions in heaven." A listener is hard put to deduce all this from the lyrics; indeed, all the songs' characters are capricious in revealing details about their little worlds. But we do discern a sort of *Maltese Falcon* satire and repeated parodies of the military mind. *Tiger Mountain* takes its title from a Chinese people's opera. Its music does have an Oriental tinge, and a catchiness that could qualify many of its numbers for a good musical. Moreover, the texture of sound derived from four basic instruments is so marvelously dense that it undermines Eno's stance, then, against virtuosity: more striking, even, than his synthesizer playing, Eno showed, was his mastery of the recording studio.

In 1975 a taxi hit Eno and nearly killed him. "I was fairly convinced," he recounted, "that the accident had happened because I'd been squandering my energy. At the time I was working very hard on my records and other people's but not really generating any new ideas. And subsequently I lay in bed thinking, 'What kind of work do I really want to do? What aspects of me do I want to develop?'" Eno's meditative temperament had shown through before on two albums of minimalist instrumentals made with King Crimson guitarist Robert Fripp. He had been growing more retiring, advising his management that he found touring boring and that he feared

ENO'S ambient records do not suggest emotion so much as mimic a half-waking dream. In this, Eno hopes, the records may encourage dreaming or induce meditative calm.



ENO CREATES HIS "PSYCHOACOUSTIC SPACE" BY USING EVERYTHING, INCLUDING ACCIDENTS.

pop stardom would constrain his experimentation. Now, after his accident, two occurrences magnified Eno's reflectiveness, cast it strongly upon his work.

One day, still aching, Eno put on a record of eighteenth-century harp music. Then, after returning to his bed, he realized that his amplifier was set too low. Too exhausted to improve matters, he lay there listening to the record play on almost inaudibly. For him it was a new way of hearing music—"as part of the ambience of the environment, just as the color of the light and the sound of the rain were parts of the ambience." On another day, four months after this sickbed experience, Eno was at

home preparing some concert tape loops for Robert Fripp. Long fascinated with cybernetics, Eno had set up a taping system designed to do some of its own "composing" via delay and echo units. Eno intended simply to mete out two small synthesizer melodies, occasionally altering their timbre with a graphic equalizer. Again and again during the taping, Eno's doorbell and telephone rang, interrupting him, making him work absentmindedly. "Then, when Fripp came around," Eno later told interviewer Stephen Demorest, "I played it back at half speed by accident and found it was so beautiful. It's music you can stand in any relation to that you want:

you can ignore it, it doesn't get in the way, but it has enough substance if you want to listen.... That track started me thinking about composing almost automatically. If not for the interferences, I would have been fiddling with it.... I've tried to do it again—pretend I'm not paying attention—but I can't." One can hear Eno's spare, shimmering accident on *Discreet Music*. The album was the first of Eno's half-dozen "ambient" records that, to varying degrees, admire cybernetic systems and accidents and, in their melodic modesty, take no offense at a listener's indifference.

Next, though, came *Another Green World* (1975). Here Eno discarded a half

year's preparations, walked into the studio cold, and nervously began creating "psychoacoustic space." The record consists mostly of instrumental études: choppy organs, Peruvian percussion, and airy violas, suggesting landscapes. Its critical success unnerved Eno. For two years he worked, recording over two albums' worth of tracks and abandoning them. "I became sure that if I didn't finish it, I wouldn't work again for a long time. Finally I pushed myself past the limit of caring." *Before and After Science* (1978) showed that Eno the popster hadn't perished in the taxi accident after all; on four songs we again hear his glitter-rock swoon, as well as some previously unevincing funk. These songs aren't quite as strong as his first pop, however; certainly better are side two's bosky lullabies and nocturnes.

These are the last songs of his own that Eno has released. Since *Science*, he has tried to scrub "all traces of personality" from his music. He has, however, kept a hand in rock. Throughout Eno's career much of his reputation has stemmed from the host of rockers who have petitioned him to minister to their work. He has produced and counseled John Cale, Nico, Kevin Ayers, Devo, Ultravox, Television, and a variety of astringent No Wave groups. Though Eno still declines to read or write music, he plays almost every instrument and on the synthesizer may be the premier performer in the world. He produced and helped compose much of David Bowie's *Low*, *Heroes*, and *Lodger* albums. He also produced three of the Talking Heads' records and, with the Heads' David Byrne, recorded *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*. Eno's strong-handed imprinting of Africa upon the Talking Heads' *Remain in Light* album reportedly brought the band near to breaking up. It also embellished the picture some critics began to paint after the first Bowie collaboration—that of Eno as the shadowy Svengali who beguiles commercial performers into avant-garde uselessness. But Eno replies, "There's no covert action. I make it clear that I'm there in the studio as a fully functioning composer—if I want to be. I assume that's why people want me to work with them."

In his own composing during the past four years Eno has harkened back continually to that day in his sickbed. His ambient music—with its scant notes and choral voices bathed in reverb—has been set behind a number of films and television documentaries and behind Eno's own video pieces. For brief stretches his ambient music has been played as a Muzak alternative in British hospitals and in airports in Chicago, Minneapolis, New York, Pittsburgh, Buffalo, and Reykjavík, Iceland. Some have found Eno's *Music for Airports* (1979) and his half-dozen other solo and collaborative ambient records little better than Muzak—simply innocuous back-

ground music. Certainly, because melody is nearly absent on the records, Eno's ambient music defies us to find much feeling in it. It does convey faint moods, however, and just as Muzak has its predominant mood of perkiness, Eno's music has its melancholy. At times it narrowly escapes schmaltz. On his latest ambient record, *On Land* (1982), Eno means to suggest exaggerated landscapes and memories (as Fellini did in *Amarcord*, an inspiration to Eno). But in several places he employs the worst B-movie sound effects—the ominous haunted-house drone, bird squawks, and frog croaks.

Doubtless, Eno's wistfulness is preferable to Muzak's Airwick enthusiasm. And, to be fair, the ambient records do not sulk nearly as much as Muzak chirps. Over-ridingly, they do not suggest emotion so much as mimic a swirling, half-waking dream. In this, Eno hopes, the records may encourage dreaming. With a captive audience of airport travelers, the music—especially when paired with the video—may disengage the travelers' nervous sense of time, induce, Eno once told interviewer Gregory Miller, "meditative calm... a feeling of being alone again."

Since he rarely performs, Eno isn't sure what his audience looks like nowadays. The thirty-four-year-old composer says he does receive encouraging letters from listeners, whose ages range from twelve to sixty. He sells a modest number of records (his song albums have all sold between 100,000 and 150,000 copies; *Music for Airports* has sold about the same; the rest of the ambients hover just under 50,000 copies). There are, of course, many rock fans who feel that Eno has betrayed them. Of the people who proclaimed him God—because they saw so clearly how Eno had foretold New Wave, with his brash anti-musicianship bouncing against his essential cleverness and style—he says only, "Anyone who has that high an opinion of someone is bound to be disappointed."

"Effectively, what I've done is abandoned rock music," says Eno, who has stopped working with Bowie and the Talking Heads, "because, for me, rock isn't capable of producing that spiritual quality anymore. And, in fact, I don't really hear anything at the moment that disputes my feeling. Despite all the criticism that's been made of psychedelic music, it certainly was committed to the production of an expanded awareness."

Eno's ambient music itself is psychedelic—mimetic of dreams and memories, prescriptive of them. At last word, Eno plans to combine this head music with, after four years, his own lyrics. He describes the new songs as "quite different from anything I've done before. They use groups of voices and have an ambiguous, drift-y mood—of something denied."

Eno has never concealed his ambient music's derivativeness, his debt to com-

posers Erik Satie and John Cage. He is willing to portage concepts from the avant-garde to the popular consciousness. He once told *The New York Times* that Steve Reich's minimalist record *It's Gonna Rain* showed him how a simple piece "has in it whole worlds of music.... But *It's Gonna Rain* isn't a record I'd rush home and put on. Once you understand the point, you can use it to make music that's fun, music that you want to hear." For Eno to release it, the music has got to be "seductive."

In truth, Brian Eno may be avant-garde only in his conservatism. He describes himself (as the punks did) as an anarchist. And, indeed, he has confidence in no government or party. But ambient music won't be the anthem for any revolt. "I don't believe in shaking things up and hoping they'll come out in a new order. It will be some kind of new order. But, in all probability, not a useful one. The important human relationships are evolved rather than legislated. You can't really institute anything of any importance in society." And so Eno repairs to his reclusive life, disliking both of America's main parties, investing studiously nevertheless in America's economy—watching, from his loft just north of Wall Street, his stocks (bought, he says, because he is curious about all technical things, including "the incredible mythology of high finance"). He concentrates on taping his limpid notes that bespeak neutrality, detachment, withdrawal, and yet hope, in the face of anarchism, of instituting something of importance. "Luscious silence is rather what I'm looking for," Eno once said. "And I think, 'Well, why do I want that?' Well, exactly because I haven't got it. And you need it."

GEORGE RUSH wrote "Taking Care of Miss Liberty," which appeared in the July issue of *Esquire*.

JAZZ COUNTRY ROCK CLASSICAL PROGRAM NOTES

NEXT TIME YOU'RE in the record store, you might want to try buying a new record by its "brand name," choosing one of the small independent labels that are breaking the new sounds. Some labels we recommend are New York's Y America and Jimboco, San Francisco's 415, Minneapolis's Twin/Tone, and Atlanta's DB.

RECORD COMPANIES ARE finally breaking into the future by marketing video presentations of their artists. RCA leads the way with videodiscs of Blondie, Fleetwood Mac, the Grateful Dead, and Joni Mitchell, plus a dozen other works. Warner Home Video's first foray is a tape of Spyro Gyra. MGM/UA is releasing a "rockumentary" on the Beatles. MCA has Olivia Newton-John's *Physical*, and former Monkee Michael Nesmith now records only on video. His *Elephant Parts* is a best-seller.—W.T.