



• : what are the origins of ambient music?

Description



Background music, elevator music, environmental music, alternative classical, furniture music, minimalism, cosmic rock, krautrock, new-age, electronica, experimental dance, techno. These are all genres associated with ambient music but how did this fascinating genre really come about?

Brian Eno is widely considered the godfather of ambient music. In 1978 he released his seminal album *Â??Ambient 1: Music For AirportsÂ?•* which captured the tense and anxious atmosphere of an airport terminal. The album, made from a series of tape loops and patterns that fall in and out of synchronisation, was the first of EnoÂ??s four-part ambient album series.

This masterful album was genre-defining in many ways. Most notably, it gave a name to a so-called "environmental" music which triggers and cultivates varying moods and atmospheres for specific times and places. Music of "ambience" is, according to Eno, "as ignorable as it is interesting".

There is often a misconception that music of "ambience" is analogous to conventional background music, or elevator music. Eno himself refers to these genres as "canned music". He argues that "canned music" adds stimulus to a music void of doubt and uncertainty as it ultimately seeks to mitigate and alleviate the body's behaviour in certain environments. However, ambient music strives to enhance an environment's "acoustic and atmospheric idiosyncrasies".

Thanks to "Ambient 1: Music For Airports" and Eno's ground-breaking essay on its cover, he coins the term ambient music and most importantly offers us an open, yet enlightening definition.

Despite being a pioneering force in the birth of ambient music, it does not seem right to name Eno its sole creator. He may have made it palatable for a wider audience and kick-started its commercialisation, but there are other innovators who came before.

In the late 19th and early 20th century Erik Satie's avant-garde classical music captured the essence of Eno's "ambience". Satie coined the term "furniture music" - a genre from which "background" music emerged. His minimalist piano pieces turned away from the conventions of classical music and assumed a musical stance not dissimilar from Eno's.

The concept of minimalist background music was later developed by John Cage, a composer and music theorist who built upon Satie's non-standard approach to music. John Cage praised Satie's artistic efforts saying, "it's not a question of Satie's relevance. He's indispensable." Cage is most famous for his piece "4,33"; essentially a track of silence that is performed without deliberate sound. By pushing minimalism to the extreme, he eliminated any kind of stimulus that could regularise or "brighten" an environment for the listener.

Minimalism went on to inspire many other genres from krautrock and space rock, to new age and techno. Tangerine Dream, a German electronic band founded by Edgar Froese in the 60s, played an integral role in the development of new-age electronica. As part of the early German cosmic music scene, Tangerine Dream experimented with synthesisers and sequencers creating a spacey, alternative rock music. Turning away from the catchy hook lines and lyricism of their pop music predecessors, and turning towards electronic music technology, Tangerine Dream paved the way for experimental dance, techno, and ambient music in the new internet age.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rjvF36gzLF8>

And with the analogue synthesiser comes Kraftwerk. Arguably the most influential band in electronic and new-age music, Kraftwerk's futuristic approach significantly shaped the musical landscape we know today. Releasing music alongside Eno in the 70s, Kraftwerk's sparse, spacey and post-industrial sound has many stylistic similarities to Eno's music of "ambience".

In conversation with Billboard Magazine Ralf Hütter, lead singer and keyboard player in Kraftwerk, said "Electronics is beyond nations and colours" with electronics everything is possible. The only limit is with the composer. Kraftwerk used new technology to push boundaries and spark creativity in the digital age.

However, the evolution of ambient music didn't stop with Eno and Kraftwerk. It was further popularised by artists such as Aphex Twin, KLF and The Orb and continues to be adopted, developed and challenged today. Eno may have named and explicitly defined the genre, but with many artists adopting minimalist, avant-garde musical styles and technology's instrumental role in music production, ambient music has an exciting history behind it.

This short history is by no means exhaustive. Music of "ambience" could be dated back to medieval times in the form of ancient chants, and also has an interlinking history with drone music. This is just a little overview to prick your ears and offer ambient music newbies some basic insight!

Sources:

<http://ambientmusicguide.com/history-of-ambient/>

<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-invention-of-ambient-music>

<http://www.astrangelyisolatedplace.com/blog/2014/10/12/neither-scene-nor-heard-a-journey-through-ambient-music>

<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/jul/01/erik-satie-a-life-less-ordinary>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ambient_music#Brian_Eno