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# MUSIC

*technology*

## BRIAN ENO

*"Make the equipment unreliable"*

### ON TEST

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# ENO *sense*

*Musician, producer or philosopher? Brian Eno's involvement in music spans all three, from his successful production of artists like David Bowie and U2 to the introspection of a very serious composer. Interview by John Diliberto.*

**T**HE QUESTION, 'WHAT does it mean?' really asks, 'What does it symbolise?' Well, my notion is that art *does* something, not that it means something. Its meaning is what it does."

Those don't sound like the words of your average Top 10 record producer, and in many ways they aren't, although Brian Eno has certainly produced his share of popular albums,

including two by U2, three by Talking Heads and a few by David Bowie. But producing hit records isn't what makes Eno one of the most compelling figures in music today.

Brian Eno is a new kind of musician treating technology with philosophy; sounds as music. As well as his own "ambient" music, he's produced the avant-garde recordings of John Adams, Michael Nyman and Gavin Bryars, and the new wave of Ultravox and Devo. Eno organises elements of minimalism, rock and electronics into his own perception of music.

In the last 16 years he's cut a swathe across most major trends in music. As an original member of Roxy Music he extolled sexual ambiguity and future shock, making music for Orwell's 1984, in 1972. One famous photograph of the era depicts surrealist painter Salvador Dali having tea with an androgynous Eno, in make-up and shoulder-length hair - the epitome of *A Clockwork Orange* decadence.

Drinking tea in his management offices it's difficult to believe this charming, articulate man is the one who snarled the lyrics to 'Needle in the Camel's Eye', 'Dead Finks Don't Talk' and 'Baby's on Fire', from his first album, *Here Come the Warm Jets*. "Nearly everything I did before last week seems like it was done by another person", says Eno with bemused detachment. "There are so many voices in you all the time, and circumstance calls one of those people to the fore. I think of myself like a 48-track tape where the mix is always being adjusted within me.

"I still recognise some of that person, but the emphasis has shifted. He was a very extreme mix of the possibilities that make me. He was one extreme mix."

That person left Roxy Music after their second album and embarked on a solo career that has been nothing if not diverse. His first solo recordings, *Here Come the Warm Jets* and *Taking Tiger Mountain (By Strategy)* employed an all-star cast of musicians playing songs that ranged from whimsical to demonic.

By 1975's *Another Green World*, Eno had changed again. No longer the decadent artist, he had become a philosopher. Robert Fripp, one of the guitarists on *Another Green World*, says:

"Brian doesn't really have a strong musical background in terms of the craft of music but he does have a perception of what's right that very, very few musicians have. It's refreshing to hear a few notes, but right, rather than the many, many, many that are wrong from most musicians of my acquaintance."

On *Another Green World*, Eno became what he called a "non-musician" claiming his medium to be the manipulation of sounds and instruments through synthesisers and the recording studio.

"I certainly never meant to imply that musicians were therefore uninteresting", explains Eno, "what I meant to imply was that there were new possibilities which required new talents, and they were not traditional musical talents. Use of the studio was one of those things. That time was really the beginning of the 24-track studio and extensive processing and all of the things that we now regard as standard studio practice. Well, those were technologies and techniques that really weren't anything to do with traditional musical skills but were, of course, of great interest to musicians."

For most of the '70s Eno worked with the new technology on his own albums and in collaboration with other musicians, notably

Robert Fripp, who was then the guitarist with King Crimson. They recorded two albums of tape loop duets *No Pussyfooting* and *Evening Star*.

"When I worked with Fripp we became one musician", recalls Eno. "It wasn't a case of two musicians playing together, it was a case of me hearing what he was doing and somehow extending that by the things that I knew were possible with the studio and with synthesisers."

Eno pursued this direction, finding more musicians open to his new approach to sounds in music. With American pianist and composer Harold Budd he made the albums *Plateaux of Mirror* and *The Pearl* where Budd's processed piano became a haunting audio illusion.

"It's a nice position for the musicians to be in because they are responding to what I'm doing at the same time as playing. It's not 'you play your bit and then I'll tart it up in the studio', it doesn't happen like that. What usually happens is that they're playing and I am doing something with the sound at the same time, and they're hearing that and their playing is then a response to that. So the circuit is a live circuit, if you see what I mean. That's why I say it's like one musician rather than two."

**B**UDD WAS PART of Eno's Ambient Music, a series of records concerned with environmental sound which grew out of his enthusiasm for minimalism and his own album, *Discreet Music*. Eno placed two Revox tape recorders side-by-side, recorded a synthesiser onto the first, threaded the tape to the second, which played back the music and fed the signal back to the first deck in a continuous cycle. It was a variation on the processes used by Terry Riley on *A Rainbow in Curved Air* and Steve Reich on *It's Gonna Rain*.

Brian Eno claims always to have been influenced by minimalism. The first work he performed in public was "X for Henry Flynt", an hours-long piece by LaMonte Young, where the player's forearms are pounded on the piano keyboard.

"*It's Gonna Rain* was very, very important to me", says Eno with deference. "Both those albums had a lesson for me that I've never forgotten, which is that the relationship between input and output is a very complex one within a piece. *It's Gonna Rain* uses a very, very small amount of original material but it produces a very complex shifting output. It interested me that an artwork could be a system of amplifying detail, amplifying by analysis in a way. And for me what's interesting about minimalism is not that people use very few elements, but that very few elements can mean a lot.

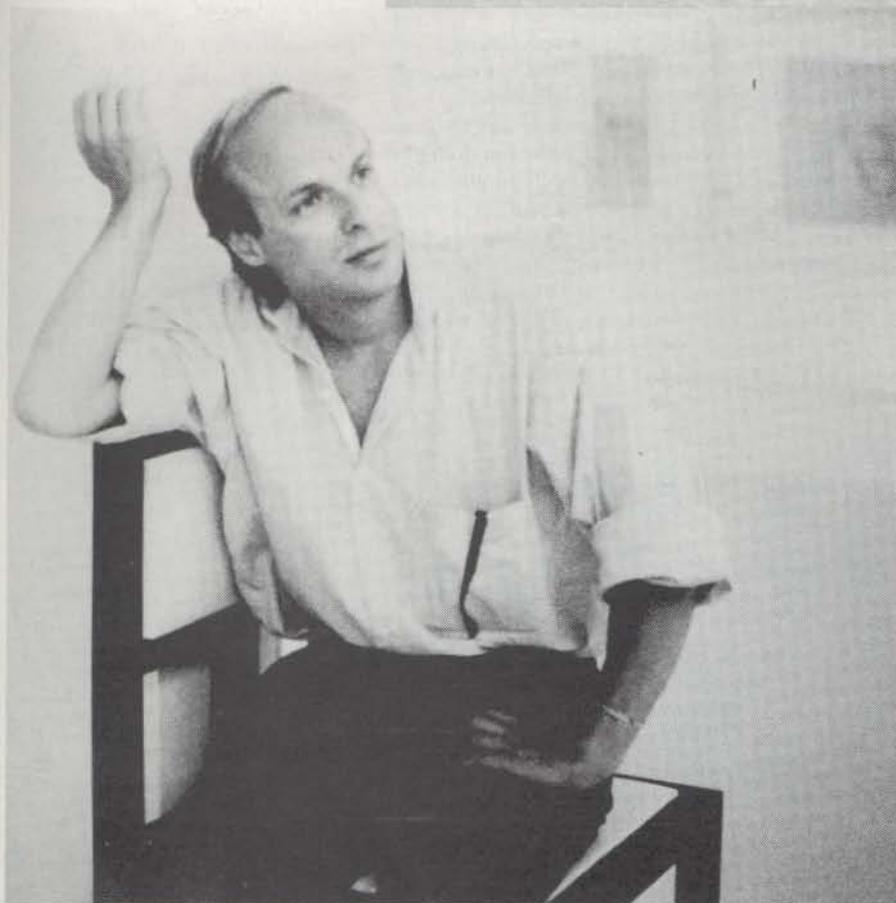
"Minimalism makes it very clear that listening is not only a very active process, but it's a very creative process as well. When you're listening to *It's Gonna Rain*, if you're enjoying it, what you're enjoying is your own perceptual processes. They're reconfiguring that material; they're making constructions out of it; they're comparing this moment with that moment; they're filtering things; they're amplifying other things. So really a lot of what's happening with minimal music is not so much to do with you looking at a work operating outside of yourself, it's to do with you looking at your brain operating on something and that's a very fascinating process.

"Now, to a composer like myself of limited technical resources, this is good news because it

"There were new possibilities which required new talents, and they were not traditional musical talents."

► means that not only do I have the technologies that I'm used to using, like recording studios and synthesisers, at my fingertips, I also have this big device, the human brain, which I can also somehow make use of as part of the work."

The result of these musings was a series of records made with pianist Harold Budd and zither player Laraaji. Ambient music was a collection of environmental sound pieces that could be used as background sound (the *original* musical wallpaper), or listened to closely for



their subtle changes. *Music for Airports*, *On Land*, *Day of Radiance* and *Plateaux of Mirror* were all harmonically simple, melodically refined albums that created an environment of sound.

"I meant it to be a prescription for composers to think of their own sound as environmental sound", says Eno. "Composers were still making music as though people were buying the record, rushing home, putting it on and sitting in front of their stereo with their ears glued in the way that one watches a film or something like that. I'm sure you'd agree that that isn't the common experience of people listening to music any more; music has become part of the tapestry of your life, like lighting or like the environmental background sounds that you hear anyway. I was excited by the idea of making music that acknowledged that and said 'here's a music especially for that, here's a music that is intended to merge into the environment'."

You might ask why Eno didn't directly record environmental sounds. Well, he often did.

"On nearly every track of *On Land* there are environmental sounds, but quite often they're so processed that they aren't obviously environmental. For instance, they're slowed down a great deal or treated or mixed in with electronic sounds.

"Another way of using environmental sounds I worked with was recording things through specially constructed microphones. An ordinary

microphone with a big tube on the end, for example, and sometimes the tube would go out through a car park and back into the studio. So there would theoretically be some resonance from the outside world affecting the sound as it went down. These experiments were limited in scope and not all that successful", he laughs.

**T**ALK OF TAPE loops and repetition brings one of Eno's *Oblique Strategies* to both our minds: "Repetition is a form of change".

In 1975, Eno and artist Peter Schmidt developed *Oblique Strategies*, a series of over 100 cards, each with an epigram printed on it. Whenever Eno reached an impasse in the recording studio, he selected an *Oblique Strategy* card. These cards bore directives such as "Discover the recipes you are using and abandon them", "Make a sudden destructive, unpredictable action", "Honor thy error as a hidden intention", or "Tape your mouth", and carried an obligation to do whatever they said.

"*Oblique Strategies* were really a way of getting past panic by reminding myself that there were broader considerations than the ones I could remember at that moment in the studio", explains Eno, "so when I got into a panic of some kind, thinking, 'where is this going? It's not going anywhere . . . this sounds like what I was doing two years ago' - all the things that frighten you - I'd pull out one of those strategies and it would tell me something and I was quite religious about them. I used to absolutely drop everything and follow that course of action, so I didn't pull them out lightly because I knew it could mean jettisoning whatever I was doing at the time to do something completely bizarre, like take a long walk or something - the last thing you want to do if you're panicking about not doing anything that day."

Eno doesn't carry the cards with him any more; they're embedded in his consciousness. But *Another Green World* was heavily influenced by their use. *Oblique Strategies* are similar to the *I Ching* as used by Cage, in that they took the decisions out of the composer's hand. Eno describes how one piece on *Another Green World*, 'Spirits Drifting', was shaped inadvertently by an *Oblique Strategy*.

"When I started making that piece I was really at the end of my tether. I'd been working on it for the whole day; it seemed that we had almost nothing on tape and it sounded like a piece of crap to me at the time. I was - this is the truth - I was standing at the synthesiser crying as I was playing it because I thought 'I don't know what I'm doing', and I took out an *Oblique Strategy* and it said 'Just carry on'." He rocks back in his chair, laughing at the recollection. "And I pissed myself laughing because it was such a low level answer to what I was expecting. I was expecting something that would have me sitting down and scratching my head and it said 'Just carry on', so I just carried on. In the next half hour or so that piece suddenly gelled into something, and in fact it gelled into something that I still like very much."

Over the years, Brian Eno has been surrounded by musicians and artists of like mind, who look at music as an adventure, not a calculated product. At first, he worked with lesser-known musicians, often on their debut recordings. In the late '70s he produced the *No New York* anthology, Devo's *Are We Not Men? We* ►

"I have this big device, the human brain, which I can also somehow make use of as part of my music."

► *Are Devo!*, Ultravox's *Ultravox!*, and John Cale's *Fear*. Towards the end of the decade he began working with more established artists, notably David Bowie during his controversial *Low* period in West Berlin. They recorded a trilogy of albums together, *Low*, *Heroes* and *Lodger*, that sank Bowie deep into Eno's thickly textured sound-pieces. The second sides of *Low* and *Heroes* were dense atmospheres orchestrated by Eno in the studio. The opening sides, however, were a new kind of rock with sharp, angular rhythms, chopped guitar chords and fragmented lyrics. Listen to the drum sound and you'll hear the origins of the Phil Collins gated drum sound that has since become so popular.

"Both sides of that record are new directions in a way", says Eno reflectively. "On a purely technical level, the drum sound on the first side of *Low* became the drum sound for the next 'x' years, it still is now to some extent, but the rhythm section feeling altogether was rather a new feeling for rock music. It was an industrial extrapolation of what was going on in soul and funk records. It had a much more European feel than those things had.

"On the other side of the record was another direction. It was one that I think I had already taken; it was very much the landscape direction. One side was urban and industrial, the other side was suburban", he laughs again.

In 1978 Eno teamed up with David Byrne and Talking Heads for their second album, *More Songs About Buildings and Food*, their collective interest in African and funk rhythms and unusual studio ambiances creating the most exciting rock music of the early 1980s. In a different area of rock music, Eno's work with U2 has helped re-popularise the rock guitar in the wake of the early '80s synth pop.

**W**HETHER PRODUCING FOR the avant-garde Obscure label or the African group Edikanfo, Eno has maintained a lingering reputation as a wizard of the synthesiser - and it's a reputation Eno really doesn't want.

"The problem with synthesisers has always been that the sound that you hear is a direct result of the movement of a very small number of electrons", he explains, "therefore the regularity and the evenness of the sound are awe-inspiringly boring. The sound of a grand piano is the result of the interaction of so many factors - environmental, climatic and physical factors - in fact, a piano never sounds the same twice."

Eno's whole approach to synthesis is textural. In fact, that's his sole aim in the studio, using everything from tape manipulation to signal processing he seeks to create a particular presence of sound. But, although he uses a Yamaha DX7 extensively, he still won't use samplers even though they reproduce acoustic sounds.

"I'm not very interested in samplers", confesses Eno, "conceptually, synthesisers interest me much more. A sampler is a tape recorder as far as I'm concerned, and it isn't conceptually very much more interesting than a tape recorder. Synthesisers, however, interest me for two reasons. One is because they do introduce new sounds into the world, and the other is because in working with them, I learn a lot about how sounds are made up. The DX7 has been very useful for that, I use it almost as much as a research tool for seeing how a sound is

made. What happens when this hits this? Why does this sound like that? You find that a very specific relationship between two operators produces something that sounds like a grand piano. And you think 'I wonder what it is in the physical make-up of a grand piano that demands precisely this relationship for its imitation'. I'm not interested in imitating grand pianos per se, but I am interested in finding out how sounds work.

"My solution has been to make the equipment unreliable in various ways. I used to like the old synthesisers because they were like that. My first synthesisers - the EMS, the AKS and the early Minimoog - were all fairly unstable and they had a certain character. Character has really to do with deviations, not with regularity, they were very Latin in that sense. And then, of course, I used to feed them through all sorts of devices that also had a lot of character: that were themselves in various ways unpredictable. The interaction of a lot of these things started to create sounds that had an organic, uneven sound to me."

Although it's not easy in computerised, digital synthesisers like the DX7, Eno has found a way to introduce character into modern synthesisers as well.

"I've found ways to de-stabilise the DX7 a little bit to create interactions between it and other instruments that are more interesting", he says with a gleam in his eye. "I don't have very good voltage supply, for instance. Within the patches, I build in certain elements that don't repeat. For instance, there's something wrong with the programming of envelope generator four on the original DX7 and you can use that to create non-repeating patches. If you have that set to a value under 50, you'll find that the synthesiser behaves unpredictably. Unfortunately they've sorted this out on the second generation of DX7s, so I still use the first one, and that's an important element of quite a few of my patches."

So far, all these experiments and the resultant music coming out of Eno's new 24-track home studio have been heard by very few people. Presently, the only place to catch them is at his video exhibitions - Brian Eno is bored with making records.

"Records haven't got quite that *frisson* of novelty that they had for me 15 years ago, or even 10 years ago", he admits.

Consequently he's been spending his time on multiple-screen video installations set in unusual locations like botanical gardens or churches. But he still makes music for them, using multiple auto-reverse cassettes. He has from eight to 48 channels of sound and music, running non-stop in random synchronisation. Coincidentally, one of Eno's early influences, John Cage, is currently working with a similar system.

"This is so much closer to the feeling that I wanted in ambient music", says Eno. "I want the notion of something that was always reliably similar, but never exactly the same. A little bit like any natural process. Like watching a river - it doesn't pull many really big surprises on you, but at the same time it never repeats itself perfectly. I wanted to make music that had that homogenous but ever changing character to it."

A curious quest but one that seems suited to this charming eccentric. I am left with only one nagging question: where will Eno's river lead him next? ■

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