

Learning to Love Something I've Hated

--OR--

Forty-five Minutes with Brian Eno

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"Her sense of taste is such  
that she'll distinguish with her tongue  
the subtleties a spectrograph would miss"

Brian Eno

I always feel an immense thrill when purchasing new music, even though a vague feeling of uncertainty often intrudes upon my first listening experience. I wonder if this album will evolve into a favorite, or if it might be destined for the used record bins. Such doubts can become pervasive, in part because albums and compact discs are so expensive. Also, and more to the point, there's simply no way I can fully comprehend a decent album the first time I hear it. In fact, I'm lucky to get much of anything out of the first few spins. I generally get a feeling, a sense of direction -- an inventory of vocals, guitars, synthesizers, and percussion. The lyrics come later, usually much later, as I begin to find a structural coherency in the music itself. Pieces become more tangible and unique, somehow merging into a distinct whole. Several songs eventually stand out, and then there's no going back as I'm struck with a full sense of impact.

Some albums are more difficult to comprehend than others, but this disparity became particularly apparent when I was first introduced to the music of Brian Eno. Three years ago, I was a junior at Carleton College and my new roommate was a devout Brian Eno fan. At the time, I knew of Eno only through his production of the three best Talking Heads albums. Randy liked most of Eno's stuff, but to tell the truth, I could stomach almost none of it. It sounded too much like a lot of other weird avante-garde experimental music Randy made me listen to, and I subsequently developed a healthy aversion to almost anything involving Brian Eno. My reaction to Eno's music became almost

foreordained in that I had already made up my mind not to enjoy the experience.

Randy knew this, and tried his best to respect my pleas for sanity, but the alternatives were rather bleak. Randy's music collection was full of albums just about as unusual as anything Brian Eno had to offer. So we tried to compromise, and since our shared interests managed to outweigh the overt differences in musical taste, the outcome was often successful. This in mind, I just couldn't fathom the appearance of Brian Eno's "Here Come the Warm Jets" (1973) in my mailbox early last summer. If nothing else, Randy has always been persistent. I now realize this unforgettable anomaly launched a brilliant career, but at the time, I failed to recognize the extent to which Eno had irreparably altered musical history. A greater sense of perspective is essential before embarking on the substantive portions of this paper.

Brian Eno has explored a number of different avenues in his development as a musician. His early career was dominated by his involvement as a member of the influential group, Roxy Music. He left that band in 1973 and prospered as a solo artist, recording albums with a number of other independent artists. He has also produced records for a variety of groups, including such acts as Talking Heads, David Bowie, Devo, U2, and Ultravox. Eno's sometimes intense involvement in several of these projects extended his role beyond that of producer, contributing invaluable assistance in singing, songwriting, and accompaniment.

Brian Eno's career reached an unexpected apex in 1975 with his discovery and development of ambient music. These projects generally involved several collaborators, and expanded upon a single basic thematic component such as acoustic guitar, piano, or trumpet. The philosophy that governs ambient music will be developed later in the paper. Suffice it to say here that Brian Eno's career continues unchallenged and unmatched in terms of diversity, integrity, and intelligence.

Process: Step I (Enjoyment)

"Baby's on fire, better throw her in the water  
this kind of experience is necessary for her learning"  
-Brian Eno

My first exposure to Brian Eno's music left me absolutely dumbfounded. I realized the extent of this utter lack of understanding when vague feelings of bodily tension arose from the disquieting experience. Some songs seemed superficially reasonable, but others almost defied explanation. My initial reaction resembled the dull expression of incomprehension I imagine on the face of an algebra student facing his first calculus problem. He knows just enough to realize how little he understands. Strange symbols are interwoven amongst a few more familiar variables, but the formula as a whole provides no basis for interpretation. Eno sings "file under futile, that should give you its main point of reference" and confusion becomes epidemic.

I can think of no single word, but estrangement, distance,

unfamiliarity, ridiculous, fragmentation, opaque, oblique, and obtuse all capture a fraction of the feeling. Somehow, things just didn't seem to fit together. Eventually, I did come to respect, admire, and love the style and grace of Brian Eno's music. The process was often slow and somewhat painful, and one might justifiably wonder what inspired me to continue under such adverse circumstances. I must admit that I have immense respect for Randy's musical opinions, so I continued to listen to the tape he'd sent me. More than once, I have grown to enjoy something I initially couldn't stomach, so that curiosity alone propelled me further. Common sense would seem to dictate that eventually I'd begin to discover some sort of coherency in the confusion.

Even so, I began to notice a persistent problem I encountered in each of my forays into the world of Brian Eno. I want to put into words the music I hear, but I feel the limits of language. I'm thinking how I might convey a sense of music through language, creating semantic images where before only auditory experience had been necessary. The exchange appears to be cognitive, but there's something inchoate and intuitive involved for the both of us. Even though I've always thought of music as an intensely spiritual experience immune to quantification, I nonetheless felt a desire to at least qualify my reactions to such dissonate music. I realized that I would need to explore even more of Eno's music, expanding my horizons and developing an understanding. I always found enjoyment first,

but not far behind lurked a growing awareness of purpose.

Process: Step 2 (Appreciation)

"Changing water into wine  
Putting grapes back on the vine"  
-Brian Eno

Several months of intensive listening ensued, resulting in the development of a great personal love for Brian Eno's music. The rewards have often been strange and sometimes beautiful, but I have never lost my overwhelming sense of curiosity. In fact, I sensed something unusual about my reactions to Eno's music. Somehow, loving wasn't enough in this instance -- I wanted to know more about the music itself. It had taken months to put several songs together; now, I wanted to take them back apart. Even after I had overcome many of my initial reactions to Eno's music, I still felt a compelling desire to understand it. Emotionally, I found great satisfaction any time I placed something on the turntable with Eno's name on it. Cognitively, I had a need to know why, and this essay will henceforth explore how I managed to make sense of the great disparity between initial hate and subsequent love for Brian Eno's music.

I immediately encountered yet another hurdle, however, realizing that I have no formal knowledge of music. I contemplated this for awhile, but then recognized that most human knowledge involves subjects about which we have no explicit knowledge. For example, I know a fair amount about what computers are capable of doing, but I have no understanding of

how they do it. Therefore, I focused my attention directly upon the music, deciphering lyrics, uncovering mishapen melodies, creating (sometimes cosmic) connections. Things became clearer, but I soon recognized a fundamental error in my approach. I had assumed that analyzing Eno in isolation would be sufficient to grasp the evolution of my feelings for his music. In fact, I needed to create a context in which I could explore music philosophies. My enjoyment of his music intact, I knew that appreciation could only function as a stepping stone to other conceptualizations.

Process: Step 3 (Metacognition)

"Don't you wonder sometimes  
about sound and vision"  
-Brian Eno

In order to know why I had found Eno's music difficult to comprehend, I needed to know how it differed from other music. This approach should be useful because the instantiation of information has been shown to vary as a function of prior experience and knowledge. These schemata are constructions of knowledge which are based on both the current influx of information and the specific organization of past experiences. New information consistent with existing schemata will be easily assimilated into that schemata, whereas information inconsistent with existing schemata can be either rejected or accommodated into new schemata. The tacit assumption being made indicates a

significant reorganization of schemata through accomodation due to the difficulty encountered when simple assimilation of Eno's music failed to yield understanding or enjoyment. I began this inquiry by making explicit my own existing "schemata" for rock music. This required considerable effort, in part because the process drew attention to things unexamined and intangible.

Nonetheless, I outlined a variety of elements common to most rock music. In order of ascendancy, rock-n-roll generally involves four instruments -- drums, guitars, bass guitar, and synthesizers. (Eno often completely reverses this hierarchy, placing primary emphasis on synthesizers and entirely deleting drum sections in many instances). The vocalist often dominates the group image, absorbing most of the media attention. Mick Jagger (Rolling Stones), Robert Plant (Led Zepellin), and Jim Morrison (The Doors) all come to mind. Much of Eno's music is absolutely devoid of lyrics, relying instead upon the structural cohesion of synthetic instrumentation. Also, musicians are generally cognizant of the problems encountered when performing live in concert. Their albums reflect this awareness, whereas Eno often concerns himself only with studio perfection.

I found the preceeding observations to be helpful, but only superficially so. Alone, they simply failed to explain why I found his music so difficult to comprehend. Once again, I changed my approach, examining deviations in the structural elements of many Eno songs. I eventually uncovered three radical departures from conventional pop forms, which I subsumed under



three descriptive classifications: transmutations, subversions, and environmental. These seemed to characterize the bulk of Brian Eno's music. Each represents the development of entirely new schemata that accommodate specific variations endemic to Brian Eno's music.

### Transmutations

One rock song is like every other rock song in that each follows a similar pattern of specific, internal relationships. This holds true for almost all bands, be it The Beatles, The Who, Sex Pistols, Simple Minds or Bob Dylan. Song structures are not identical but nearly all are adequately described by the following model: AB(VA)B(GS)(VA)B (A=lyrics; B=refrain; VA=variation of A; GS=guitar solo). The reasons for this uniformity are debatable, but I'll argue for one assumption. Songs seldom deviate from basic formulas for the simple reason that if a song isn't "user friendly," it will not receive airplay. FM radio thrives only to the extent it can sell commercial time, and this entails an active and attentive audience. The listener demands a product easily accessible and readily digestible. Every song can't be something new, but something new must be like every other song. The AB ... formula allows the listener to know a new song even before it's over, and this happens for two reasons. One, the song structure has an eminent familiarity in that it duplicates every other song you've

ever heard; and two, sheer repetition within the song itself facilitates comprehension.

I gradually came to realize that Brian Eno doesn't always employ the standard rock formula in his rather unconventional pop songs. Instead, many of his songs transform into something quite unlike a typical Top-40 hit. A "typical" Eno song contradicts the AB ... formula, diverging toward free-form expression in a format more accurately described by the following formula: (A)(Ba)(Cb)(Dc). The song retains some cohesive structure because each new segment mutates from the last, creating a system of infinite regress where sound continues to unfold and change as a function of previous patterns. Thus, the lyrical component (A) introduces the song, while subsequent mutations incorporate aspects of the previous segment (Ba). A single song transmutes into a number of distinct, but interrelated parts that do not always coherently merge into a definitive whole.

### Subversions

A number of Brian Eno's songs do not entirely abandon traditional rock forms, retaining much of the basic AB... formula. In fact, a majority of Eno's Independent, solo work only partially deviates from typical song structures. These songs often mutate, departing from a strict emphasis on refrains, and yet they generally resemble the patterns found in pop-rock. The most interesting examples of these songs parallel the

standard formula, and yet they subvert rock's pretense of seriousness in part through quirky pop forms surrounded with surrealist lyrical moments. Even though I cannot presume to know Brian Eno's intentions, the result trivializes conventional pop forms by undermining their integrity.

This occurs primarily because traditional rock-n-roll lacks a sense of humor. Certainly, there have been humorous moments, but such songs generally make fun of events external to the song. Eno, on the other hand, examines the song itself, contrasting patterns and permutations in song structure with variations of instrumentation. The alteration of a single variable facilitates the process. If transmutations mutate the structure of a song, subverted songs hold this variable constant, warping all other elements. Instruments are attenuated and off-key, while singsong vocals crack and careen like nursery rhymes. Lyrical mayhem ensues: "What do I care, I'm wasting fingers like I have them to spare." The result clearly indicates the development of new pop forms, creating unusual alternatives within existing structures.

### Environmental

The first time I listened to an ambient album, I actually forgot for a time that it was even on the turntable. It turns out this is exactly what Brian Eno has in mind. An obscure collection of expressive sounds, ambient music creates an encompassing atmosphere that surrounds, engulfs and threatens to

swallow you. Sometimes, it can feel like abandonment, but then quite suddenly something trickles into your awareness. It seems innocuous, but there's always a certain instability in the fluctuating rhythms. Somehow tangible and never formless, the environment becomes absolutely pervasive. The subtle moods and stark, hypnotic settings emerge from a conscious attempt to evoke dense, internal representations through electronically manipulated sound.

All music in the Western tradition requires the explicit attention of the listener at all times. Ambient music, in clear contrast, requires exactly the opposite. The listener need not, indeed should not, attend to the music. Instead, the music reacts with the environment, creating a situation where extraneous sounds intermingle with recorded silence. These spare and fragile sound paintings surround you in a somewhat vague and synthetic moment of warmth that proves sufficient to captivate your attention. Nothing appears certain, however, because next time around, that moment may not happen at all. An extension of Eno's work with transmuted song structures, ambient music obviously violates all the assumptions of rock music.

## Conclusions

I'm wondering if I continue to quantify and qualify my observations, that some of Eno's mystique and majesty might suffer in the translation. Nonetheless, I feel a few reflections

might clarify several issues. Specifically, I sense that the importance of schema theory to my understanding of Eno remains somewhat obscure and vague. I want to briefly develop some of those ideas, expanding upon some of what remains tacit in the above discussion. In order to do so, I would like to reiterate the amount of time it took for me to enjoy much of Eno's music. If you recall, I introduced several formulas in the section on transmutations, and because the total number of variables would be larger for a mutated Eno song than a typical song, one could easily surmise that it would take longer to comprehend the former than the latter. In fact, it takes so much longer that the difference cannot be accounted for by simply summing parts. Therefore, we need another explanation to uncover the great difficulties encountered in understanding Eno. I believe schema theory provides such an explanation.

People are constantly assimilating new information into existing schemata in such a way that it is consistent with prior knowledge structures. New information inconsistent with existing schemata therefore poses specific problems for the acquisition process. Accomodation may occur, but only if a changes in the superordinate structure allow for the assimilation of subordinate information. I believe the problems delineated by schema theory elucidate the problems encountered in comprehending Brian Eno's music. Faced with dissonate and obscure sound patterns, the listener invokes previous methods of instantiation. These inevitably fail, due in part to the limitations of existing

knowledge structures. Assimilation into these schemata is prevented because of limits to the flexibility of the structure. The radical departure from traditional rock forms also entails failure if we attempt to accommodate the information. The structural reorganization of existing schemata appears anachronistic in light of other alternatives. Brian Eno simply forces us to create three new schemata -- transmutations, subversions, and environmental -- if we are to understand and appreciate his music. And the creation of new schemata takes considerable time and energy.