

Brian Eno

# *Music for Installations*



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by **Jesse Jarnow**  
Contributor

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Not long after Brian Eno coined the term “ambient music” in the late 1970s, he generated another Eno-ism with an extended lifespan, one with an appropriately slower dissemination.”I want to be living in a Big Here and a Long Now,” the producer wrote in a notebook. He thought of his then-recent recordings as sound “suspended in an eternal present tense.” Perhaps unconsciously channeling Baba Ram Dass's brand/mantra, *Be Here Now*, the always-conceptual Eno began to expand his sense of scale. Two decades ago, Eno helped start the Long Now Foundation, working to connect the present moment to the far-extended arc of human history. One project was the 10,000 Year Clock, for which he created patterns for the clock's chimes, each to be rung once and never repeated.

By the mid-'90s, the period representing the general starting point of the six-disc *Music for Installations*, Eno's “ambient” work had largely fallen under the subtly different rubric “generative” (that is, music that is created according to a system of algorithms, only partly under its maker's control). Each piece here represents its own individual slice of one possible Long Now, with Eno providing the finely considered coordinates so that the music itself can run infinitely, changing into new patterns like a river or an ocean. Grown from mid-'80s experiments with four tape recorders looping cassettes of differing lengths, *Music for Installations* contains what are essentially field recordings

from a series of different environments, each its own universe. Filled with gorgeous washes of bells and drones and unidentifiable luminous shimmers, deep vibrations moving across widescreen stereo fields, one might imagine them all as separate galleries and vestibules in a vast museum, each filled with light and sound, running constantly as night and day change outside and the seasons pass. Though *Music for Installations* contains sound created for specific situations and places, as a box set, it might be used to step outside of time.

Of course, a streaming service might still label all of the above as “ambient,” part of the new chill-out economy seemingly driving Spotify to its own kind of generative musak. But what *Music for Installations* proves beyond a doubt is that, to paraphrase Chevy Chase, he's Brian Eno and they're not. Though containing music that goes back as far as 1985 (“Five Light Paintings”), *Music For Installations* is hardly a retrospective in any traditional sense. It's more a whimsical line connecting ideas in Eno's own personal Long Now.

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TRENDING NOW

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Eno is everywhere and nowhere in this music, much of it not so much performed by him as willed into existence, like a character from a science fiction novel who dreams in sound. On several of the longest pieces, such as the 44-minute *77 Million Paintings*, low rolling notes played sparsely at long intervals seem to indicate melodies unfolding too slowly for immediate comprehension, perhaps even direct continuations of the similar motifs from 1978's *Ambient 1: Music for Airports*. Released in DVD editions in 2006 and 2007, *77 Million Paintings* constitutes the audio accompaniment of a generative video program Eno created. As he recounts in the liner notes, when he first set it up, he began to document individual frames of it with a still camera, shooting off some 800 pictures before surrendering to the ephemerality. The feeling of listening to *Music for Installations* is often similar. Its pieces are beautiful and always different, and yet always the same, generic without losing character.

Much of it is resolutely *not* chill-out music. The nearly 40-minute piece “I Dormienti” is filled with a ceaseless moving richness that's hard to reconcile with the idea of machine creation. High-frequency electronic tones and clusters of upper register piano notes flutter between percussive samples of vocalist Kyoko Inatome, amid other layers. Composed for a joint installation with the sculptor Mimmo Paladino in the subterranean space beneath London's Roundhouse, the music is perhaps more suited for the kind of contemplation that goes along with quietly freaking the fuck out, an accompaniment to Paladino's haunted work as it was seen in the darkroom, pieces displayed on the floor like strange creatures preserved after a Pompeii-like disaster.

The set's final two discs don't actually contain music for installations, except in ever more conceptual ways. *Making Spaces* was a CD *sold* at installations, and little of it feels generative in composition or structure, though the liner notes don't clarify. In the context of the box set, it feels not only like a separate, hidden Eno album of its own, but a brilliant one, demonstrating that Eno is still perfectly capable of seizing the means of production. The nine pieces feel less like spaces and more like the objects inside, sculptures with distinct shapes and boundaries and artistic intentions. The unearthly “New Moons” features a sparsely strummed guitar part with defined chords (and even a bridge), aglow from start to finish, perhaps one haunted vocal away from fitting perfectly onto the song-based album some strata of Eno fans always want dearly. “All the Stars Were Out” contains a background flutter that could equally be the sound of crickets or the flicker of a film projector, but is just one more expressive tone carved out by Brian Eno. Each of the tracks contains its own inventions and deployment of color-forms or unexpected tonal voices or structural turns.

The set-concluding *Music for Future Installations*, meanwhile, is perhaps the box's cheekiest conceit, music for new places, new situations that haven't yet happened."I often find it helpful to have an alibi for making a piece of music," he observes, and the seven discs of *Music for Installations* might serve many contexts. *Music For Airports* was never for airports (though it certainly is capable of providing calm inside one), and the function of *Music for Installations* is wherever the listener might like to install it, less about the purpose of the music and more about the listener's desired level of engagement. But no matter what level of engagement one chooses, Eno will be there, too.

The set's 60-page liner notes are filled with documentation, though it's sometimes unclear which recordings correspond to which installations, if any. More, though, it acts as a *Little Red Book* of Eno-isms, where he lays out one deeply awesome hot take after another."I thought of television as a light source rather than a narrative source," he writes about his video installations, "at that time the most controllable light source that had ever been invented." (I... had never thought of it like that.) No matter how vibed-out the music may get, there is always the sense of a voice and mind behind it. Even when trying to abdicate the order and arrangement of the notes being played, Eno's control over sound remains at a practically spiritual level. "Eno is God," ran the early '80s graffiti, and depending on how you define his domain it might still be true, manifesting in the smallest of breezes and the tiniest of bleeps.



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