



# Surround Sound

Music Editor Oisín Lunny explores the fine art of situational ambience, from the evolution of lift music to the innovators blurring the lines between sound and space

ILLUSTRATION JAMES BOAST

Have you noticed a subtle improvement in the music that follows you through your daily life? Perhaps you were intrigued by the in-store music during a recent visit to your favourite brand's flagship store? Or maybe you've realised that you're just as likely to enjoy subversive audio in the lobby of a hotel as you are to hear it on Beats 1. These are all ambient notes in an ongoing soundtrack: the evolution of music made for spaces.

Brian Eno is credited with inventing ambient music in 1978 with his pioneering album *Ambient 1: Music for Airports*, composed to provide an elegant sonic backdrop for the discerning public space. This was music to be experienced on the periphery of attention, as opposed to the centre, and a pivotal development in the history of music recorded for mass playback.

## AUDIO WALLPAPER

The first boom of background music came in the 1950s, with one company dominating the space so thoroughly that a genre was coined in their name. The original Muzak Corporation used top studios, orchestras and session musicians to churn out

libraries of mood-themed backing tracks for every occasion: jaunty, futuristic, carefree or corporate. This was audio wallpaper to complement the modern lifestyle in all its splendour, from increasing workers' productivity (a tactic that led to accusations of brainwashing) to soothing NASA's astronauts during their downtime. Today, this library of background music has been rediscovered and celebrated by a new generation, with the likes of French music catalogue Tele Music being remixed by Soulwax and Joakim.

In the late 1970s, much of the world transitioned to foreground music, with original tracks by well-known artists licensed and bundled into endless looping playlists of rock, pop, jazz, blues, classical and, of

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course, easy listening. By comparison, the audio environments we are exposed to today are far richer, resulting from a multitude of diverse collaborations between venue and artist.

MUZAK FOR THE MASSES

With research from the UK music industry bodies the PRS and MCPS suggesting that the right kind of background music can indeed make staff more productive and entice retail customers to stay longer and spend more, it's no surprise that the world's most prestigious retailers are investing heavily in bespoke audio. Hermès recently commissioned French electronic producer Chloé to compose an original soundtrack for its Christmas stores across Switzerland, while Manchester dub trio Marconi Union were contracted by Selfridges to compose an ambient soundtrack for "A Distant Light", a bespoke installation in its Oxford Street flagship store. Meanwhile, Burberry and All Saints are busy inviting artists to play instore gigs to align their brands with the right soundtrack.

SONIC SUITES

The travel and tourism industry's major players sit cheek by jowl with their gilded retail cousins in the ambient arena, jostling to furnish their hotels and resorts with the most appropriate soundtrack. Hôtel Costes, in Paris, and W Hotels were releasing excellent compilation CDs of their tastemaker music selections long before streaming services rendered the discs passé. Today, Hôtel Costes has its own Apple Music channel, offering monthly music selections and must-hear artists. In June this year, W Hotels

took its audio to another level entirely with the launch of Europe's first W Sound Suite at touring musicians' favourite W Barcelona: a music studio and writers' room kitted out with state-of-the-art equipment and a vocal booth. So an artist could conceivably record and produce a track in a W Sound Suite (now installed in W Barcelona, Bali, Seattle and Hollywood) and have it appear on a W Playlist by Stella Santana or Becky Tong, broadcasted via the hotel chain's cleverly positioned Bose speakers. Very meta.

AUDIO ART FOR ART'S SAKE

Ever since Max Neuhaus' influential 1977 sound installation in New York's Times Square – the piece, "Times Square", which still runs today, envelops pedestrians in sound as they walk over a grate – the world has experienced a rise in audio works inspired by location and time. These works often draw on the sounds of the places themselves, such as Brighton producer, singer and visual artist Anneka's sonic interpretation of Bexhill's De La Warr Pavilion, a commission that sampled everyday sounds and recordings of her own voice made in different areas of the venue. "By bringing a range of sounds and unique acoustic qualities from various locations into the performance area, it was as if I was folding different spaces into one," Anneka said.

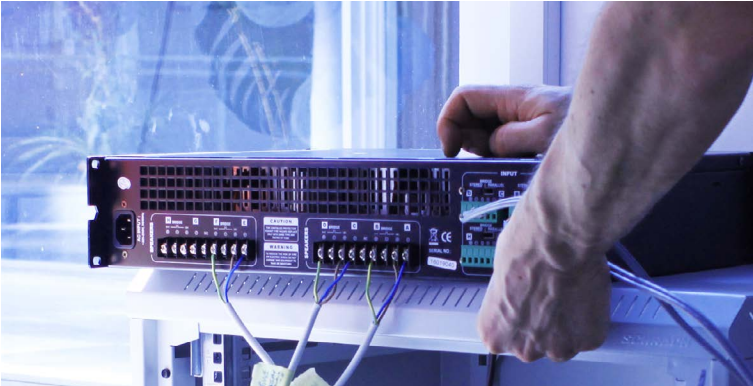
In 2015, Danish indie outfit Efterklang toyed with similar ideas in "Stream of Noma", their hour-long sound piece for the Copenhagen restaurant Noma, made from recordings of the restaurant and their local supplier's chicken farm and installed in the restaurant's bathrooms, while Björk collaborator Matthew Herbert and five other composers recorded sounds of machinery from the industrial revolution for "Music for a Busy City", an installation commissioned for this year's Manchester International Festival. Herbert's idea was to make music for the spaces we pass through every day, crafting them into a thoughtful "celebration of Manchester's sonic heritage".

Finally, blurring the line between recording spaces and space itself, British singer-songwriter Beatie Wolfe will be broadcasting her recordings into space via Bell Labs' Holmdel Horn, the large microwave horn antenna that helped scientists prove their big bang theory and win a Nobel Prize. Here's hoping our interstellar neighbours like radio-friendly classic rock.

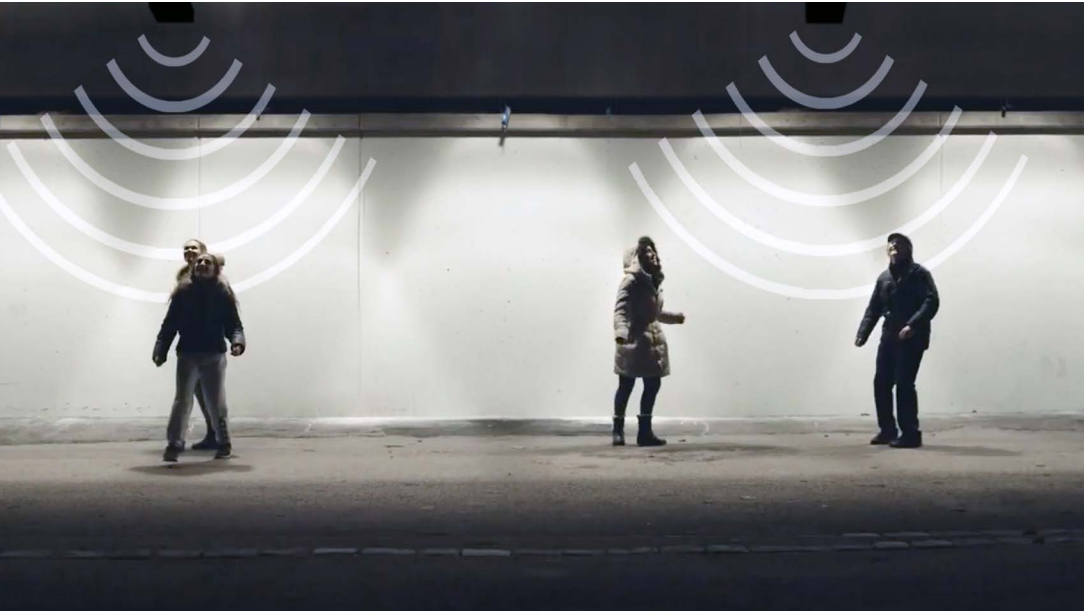
THE NEXT FRONTIER  
OF AMBIENT SOUND  
WILL LIKELY SEE  
LISTENERS TAKE  
A STARRING ROLE,  
CO-CREATING THEIR  
OWN SOUNDTRACK



Håkan Lidbo's sound installation at Rijeka airport, Croatia, 2016







THE AMBIENT SPHERE  
AND VR ARE A MATCH  
MADE IN HEAVEN -  
OR HELL, IF YOU GO  
BY ‘BLACK MIRROR’

JOYFUL AMBIENCE

Beyond commerce and art, there are of course those sound installations that seem to exist purely for fun, from birds chirping in a Tokyo train station to distant cowbells in Zurich airport via Turner Prize winner Martin Creed’s singing lift at the Royal Festival Hall. The toilets in Bethnal Green’s The Sun Tavern serenade visitors with whale sounds, Helsinki’s airport bathrooms are awash with Nordic birdsong, and the Street Pianos project offers anyone the opportunity to bash out their own soundtrack using any of the 1,700 street pianos located across 50 cities. New to this category is music festival Bestival’s

Ambient Forest, which invites revellers to wander among trees accompanied by downtempo sounds from genre pioneers Chris Coco, Mixmaster Morris and Flying White Dots. “Curated events like this offer a unique opportunity to experiment with journeys through sound, visuals and the space itself,” said Bestival founder Rob da Bank. “It’s become my favourite after-hours spot.”

AUDIO FUTURES

The next frontier of ambient sound will likely see listeners take on more of a starring role, helping to co-create their own soundtrack. For an idea of how these kinds of installations might function, we can look to Swedish artist Håkan Lidbo, whose sound installation for Rijeka airport in Croatia – created in collaboration with British dance veterans Coldcut and sound artist Jack James – was controlled by the travellers themselves. Working with local musicians to build a library of sounds programmed into media players, they positioned a series of Sonos speakers and motion detectors in a glass corridor by the security check, with passengers shaping the sounds with their movements as they passed through. “In a project like



Opposite Page  
Singing Tunnels by  
Max Björverud and  
Håkan Lidbo

This Page  
The Ambient Forest  
installation at Bestival

ours, music transforms the room, makes nervous travellers more relaxed, presents the local heritage and becomes a collaborative musical instrument,” said Lidbo. “For me, as a composer, making three-minute pop songs nowadays almost feels an insult to music and its potential.”

With the advent of the “internet of things” (ubiquitous web-connected accessories and devices) it may be possible in the near future for your audio surroundings to not only be influenced by your movements, but also by your emotions and purchase history. Your hotel could welcome you to your room, *Minority Report*-style, with your favourite song, followed by a playlist curated using artificial intelligence to match your exact tastes, based on an analysis of your current mood. You might even have the opportunity to influence it yourself, using hand gestures or vocal commands.

From AI to virtual reality, there is also the future of composing for space in the digital realm to consider. The ambient sphere and VR are a match made in heaven (or hell, if you go by the “Playtest” episode



of *Black Mirror*), united by their mutual interplay between spatial environment, sound and human psychology, and – given VR’s relative infancy and colossal commercial potential – we can surely expect a multitude of technical advancements and bespoke collaborations in this area. British folk-rock trio Daughter are riding this wave with their original score for the new video game *Life Is Strange: Before the Storm*, with frontwoman Elena Tonra commenting that “the [virtual] characters themselves really inspired the soundscapes we’ve created”.

Bring on our new audio overlords.