

In the chill zone



Brian Eno

Eric Satie

Frank Joseph traces the origins of ambient music and one of 2MBS-FM's most popular programs, *Ultima Thule*

The origins of what is today called ambient music can be traced to late 19th and early 20th century French composer Erik Satie, who first articulated the notion of 'furniture music'. In Satie's opinion, the creation of unobtrusive music intended to complement the low-level ambient noise that is a natural part of human existence is as equally valid as the creation of music demanding the active attention of an audience. His popular *Trois Gymnopédies* suite (published in 1888) is considered by many to be the earliest example of ambient music.

The invention in the early 20th century of the first practical electronic instrument – the theremin – is also considered an important influence on the development of the genre. Throughout the 1930s, US-based virtuoso theremin performer Clara Rockmore gave numerous rapturously-received performances of works from the classical repertoire throughout the United States, and the instrument's characteristic eerie *vibrato* sound found its way into dozens of Hollywood film scores as a cue for the supernatural. French composer Edgar Varèse used the theremin extensively in his compositions, and is also viewed as an important precursor of contemporary ambient music.

The person generally credited with 'inventing' ambient music as a distinct idiom is British musician, producer, artist and performer Brian Eno. In 1976 whilst lying in bed recovering from an accident and listening to a radio turned down to a very low volume, Eno experienced a creative epiphany – the result of which was an album called *Music for Airports*. The recording, which consists of a number of impressionistic pieces, created using early synthesizers and other forms of sound manipulation, is considered the seminal work of the modern ambient repertoire. The term 'ambient' was first coined by Eno in the liner notes of this recording to describe its intended function as an unobtrusive soundtrack accompaniment to daily life.

However, while Brian Eno may have coined the term and established ambient music's philosophical foundation, he was not alone in creating it. Throughout the 1970s and 80s, artists such as Klaus Schulze, Tangerine Dream, Kraftwerk, Jean-Michel Jarre and Vangelis enthusiastically embraced the possibilities of the range of new electronic instruments then becoming commercially available, to develop their own unique – and often vastly divergent – interpretations of ambient music. The 1980s witnessed the emergence of dozens of ambient musicians as the style became popularized through an often unfortunate association with the New Age movement – while in the 1990s, such artists as Pete Namlook, The Orb and Aphex Twin gained global popularity by bringing what was now being termed 'chillout' music to the attention of an entire generation of youthful nightclub patrons.

So what has all of this to do with 2MBS? Well, many listeners may not know, but for over a decade and a half we've been the home to one of Australia's longest-running and most popular programs of ambient music. *Ultima Thule*, broadcast since early

1989, is heard weekly on Sunday evenings between 10.30pm and midnight is produced by a team of three stalwart producers – Mike Watson, Nev Dorrington and program founder George Cruickshank. Each show is compiled from the presenters' private library of over 5000 recordings, and delivers listeners a 90-minute ambient musical narrative to help wind-down the weekend. These 'gurus of the gentle groove' (as *The Sydney Morning Herald* once famously referred to them) must be doing something right, because the show consistently figures highly in 2MBS listener surveys and attracts a large, devoted following – many of whom live outside Australia and tune in each week via the internet.

Cruickshank says that the program was founded in response to the cancellation of similar shows on Triple J and ABC-FM. 'At the time there was no other outlet for this style of music in Australia, so I felt it was my social responsibility to do something about it,' he says. 'Little did I suspect that my first tentative broadcasting efforts would end up outlasting everything that had come before or since; we're now more than halfway through our second decade on air, and we have listeners everywhere from Azerbaijan to Zambia – which is a pretty sobering thought!'

So what can listeners expect from a typical *Ultima Thule* broadcast? 'Expect the unexpected,' says Cruickshank. 'In my opinion, ambient music is not so much a clearly defined idiom in itself as a sense of resonant sonic space that's present as an overlay in just about every style of music. That means we can and do program music from across the musical and historic spectrum – whether it's mediaeval sacred chant, world music and cross-cultural experiments, film soundtracks, contemporary classical composers, contemporary electronic chillout sounds – or even the occasional piece of popular music – if you listen to the show for long enough you're likely to hear them all – and somehow it all works.'

Later this year *Ultima Thule* will release its first recording – an 80-minute CD consisting of 13 pieces of music specially commissioned for the project from leading ambient artists from around the world, including such revered masters of the genre as Steve Roach and Robert Rich. Profits from the sale of the CD will be donated to 2MBS and 5MBS. ☺

ON 2MBS-FM

26 June, 10.30pm

Ultima Thule presents the exclusive world radio premiere of Ilan Eshkeri's unreleased soundtrack to the very popular BBC documentary *Colosseum*