AMBARCHI, NECKS, ENO/WOLFE: TOWARDS AN UNTIMELINESS IN MUSIC

14 November 2025

> *“The absence of traditional markers such as verse or chorus, percussion breaks or riffs - the elements that tell us ‘something is about to happen’ - allows us to lose ourselves in the sound, free from expectations.”*
> *(Sword, 2022).*
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> *“I would like to see - and I shall succeed in producing it myself - a music completely free of ‘motifs’, or rather composed of a single uninterrupted ‘motif’ that never folds back upon itself.”*
> *(Claude Debussy in Toop, 2023).*
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> *“...spaces in harmony, rhythm and melody, but also spaces in the mind.”*
> *(Williams, 2011).*

Faced with a music market - in the commercial sphere, of course - increasingly saturated with fleeting, ephemeral hits, dominated by easy catchy choruses and compositional sterility, another world is quietly advancing in search of a mental space utterly opposed to mainstream hyperkinesis, almost as a form of resistance, a stubborn movement in the opposite direction. It is music that makes the dilation of space and the expansion of sound its stylistic hallmark, creating galaxies made up of minimalist elements, repetition, musical drones, ambient suggestions and improvisation. By a curious coincidence, some of the musicians who best represent this dimension have engaged with large-scale triptychs: some spreading their releases over roughly three years, some gathering them into a single work, and others allowing only a few months to pass between one release and the next. Despite sometimes marked stylistic differences, the result is the elaboration of a single sonic polyptych, an interconnected and strongly relational musical space of extended dimensions, shifting almost imperceptibly in some cases and more substantially in others.

Expanding Rhythms

Let us begin with what is probably the least familiar project, born from the collaboration between Australian multi-instrumentalist and composer Oren Ambarchi, bassist Johan Berthling and drummer Andreas Werliin, both Swedish and the rhythm section of saxophonist Mats Gustafsson's Fire!.

Oren Ambarchi has countless collaborations to his name, from Sunn O))) to Chris Abrahams, from Jim O'Rourke to Alvin Lucier, to mention only a few, as well as an extensive solo discography in which he has displayed, with insight and artistic sensitivity, his experimental approach to the electric guitar - his main instrument - built from drones, electronic sounds and minimalism, all wrapped in rock energy and trance-like ecstasy. The two Swedes, for their part, are a genuine rhythmic machine in perpetual motion, propulsive and metronomic, a kind of Sly & Robbie of the improvising world. Ambarchi and Berthling had already worked together in 2014 - although their association goes back as far as 2002 - recording the excellent *Tongue Tied*, released the following year by Hapna. Earlier still, in 2011, the Australian had taken part in the recording of Fire!'s *In The Mouth - A Hand*, released by Rune Grammofon in 2012, and in several Fire! Orchestra concerts, particularly the Nantes performance in France, also issued by Rune Grammofon in 2014 under the title *Second Exit*.

In 2018 Ambarchi, Berthling and Werliin decided to enter the studio and record an improvisation session that remained unreleased for about four years before appearing on vinyl through Chicago's formidable Drag City in 2022. *Ghosted*, the title of both the album and the project, consists of four tracks listed with Roman numerals, outlining a sonic universe based on repeated rhythmic grooves over which Ambarchi improvises textures made of electronic sounds, vibrating flows and electrical currents, in a continuous assembly and creation of hypnotic worlds. Track I is exemplary: it features Christer Bothén, the veteran Swedish musician, Don Cherry collaborator and Fire! Orchestra member, as a guest on n'goni, the West African string instrument. Bass riffs recall the beautiful *Mra* by Chris McGregor's Brotherhood of Breath; Bothén's n'goni traces African-inflected phrases; the drums pulse incisively; and Ambarchi hovers over the rhythmic bed with sounds and effects.

The whole album travels on the same frequencies, and it is a beautiful journey: hypnotic, vibrant, trance-inducing. Evidently satisfied with the work, the three returned to the studio and in 2024 released *Ghosted II*, again on Drag City: four more tracks, this time listed with Swedish numbers, inhabiting the same environment but with, if possible, an even greater degree of refinement. The thirteen minutes of *Två*, marked by evocative double-bass harmonics and spare, percussive drumming, allow Ambarchi to trace arcs of ethereal, dreamlike sound - a kind of endless voyage through deep space - establishing the overall character of the album. The third chapter, *Ghosted III*, released this year, contains six tracks, listed with Persian numbers, and probably represents the culmination of the journey. *Yek* interweaves a double-bass riff with a guitar arpeggio, accompanied by Ambarchi's characteristic electronic flows and enriched by a poignant, moving harmonic change. *Do* is classic space ambient, while *Seh* features a double bass rich in space and melodic lines, enveloped in a vast expanse of cosmic sound, and *Chahar* offers hypnotic Afrofuturist rhythm. *Panj*, perhaps more than any other track, recalls the other protagonists of this article, The Necks, with its measured, reflective movement; *Shesh* closes both the album and the triptych with a fascinating guitar arpeggio supported by essential, minimalist drums and bass, underscoring an atmosphere of deep, intimate reflection.

Improvisational Relationality

The Necks, then: forty years of activity, a twentieth album, and creativity and brilliance still fully intact - by now an indispensable model for many musicians. With *Disquiet*, The Necks cast into the alternative imagination a kind of extended manual of improvisational relationality, a triptych of extraordinary clarity and maturity with few equals. Three CDs: the first contains *Rapid Eye Movement*; the second *Ghost Net*, almost an hour and a quarter of music; and the third *Causeway* - twenty-six minutes, released on digital platforms as a single! - and *Warm Running Sunlight*. Chris Abrahams, Tony Buck and Lloyd Swanton - piano and organ, drums and double bass - once again hit the mark, naturally conceiving sonic nebulae that seem to generate themselves, changing shape imperceptibly but constantly, with the right sense of time, patience and emotional responsiveness to one another.

Rapid Eye Movement opens with one of their classic movements: Hammond organ building the drone and delicate, spacious arpeggios; a few deep bass notes; cymbals illuminating the atmosphere. Everything then evolves into a spiritual world, impalpable yet rich in emotion, an improvisation in quiet motion. *Ghost Net*, by contrast, represents the more animated soul of the set, characterized by polychromatic polyrhythm, touches of guitar, deep bass, persistent organ and a hypnotic, unsettling improvisational universe: more than an hour of imaginative creative changes that gradually thicken and intensify.

Echo- and reverb-laden guitar movingly envelops *Causeway* before giving way to energetic drumming and a piano that simultaneously evokes nostalgia and flashes of the future. *Warm Running Sunlight* suspends time, crossed by silences, distant voices and indistinct sounds: an abstract Hammond in perpetual dialogue with Tony Buck's cymbals, while Swanton's elemental notes act as the pivot of the entire improvisation. As noted above, this is a genuine manual of improvisation, of the construction and enhancement of space - space that has rarely sounded so resonant as it does on this triple album.

Three Visions of Ambient

We now come to certainly the best-known name of the group: Brian Eno, inventor of ambient music, musician, artist and producer, tireless in his continual experimentation yet always faithful to his idea of space, breath and the dilation of musical matter. This applies both to his more explicitly ambient albums and to his most famous productions, capable of transforming even rock bands with strongly defined identities - above all Talking Heads on *Remain in Light* and U2 on *The Unforgettable Fire*.

This time we find him alongside Beatie Wolfe, an Anglo-American artist, musician, composer, painter and environmental activist - her meeting with Eno took place during a conference entitled *Art and Climate*. To understand the breadth of Wolfe's interests and activities, it is enough to add that she has held a solo exhibition as a designer at London's Victoria & Albert Museum, produced the world's first bioplastic record together with Michael Stipe of R.E.M., and created a collective mail-art project with DEVO singer and keyboardist Mark Mothersbaugh. Versatility is clearly one of her defining traits, and one that is certainly compatible with Eno's personality and character; together they decided to produce no fewer than three works.

If the *Ghosted* project unfolded over roughly three years, while The Necks' trilogy was released as a single album, the duo's releases followed a distinctive rhythm: *Luminal* and *Lateral* appeared together in June of this year, and *Liminal* last October, all on Eno's Opal label, distributed by Verve - the peculiarity of the label's name will become apparent later. Their similar covers are drawn from Eno's colorful light-painting works. The musicians themselves described the first two records respectively as “dream music” and “space music,” while the third is a hybrid of the previous two: in their words, a space between song and non-song. The whole undertaking has a very particular flavor, with differences dissolving into a single spatial vision: a kind of psychedelic ambient music, soft, intimate and expansive.

Luminal is a collection of delicate songs strongly reminiscent of the unforgettable Opal (!) of former Dream Syndicate bassist Kendra Smith and former Rain Parade guitarist David Roback - who sadly died in February 2020 - but also of the uneasy atmospheres of Nico's Velvet Underground: an expanded psychedelia, suspended, delicate and evocative. Guitar, organ, voice and subtle electronics trace simple melodies, as in *Play On*; dreamlike ballads, as in *Shhh*; uncertain breaths, as in *Breath March*; or the anxious drones of *Never Was It Now*. Everything is continually overflown and caressed by Wolfe's soft voice, at times spoken, at times barely hinted, at others tracing seductive melodic lines, while Brian Eno gives the music spatial depth and distant horizons. “Fascinating” is perhaps the most appropriate adjective: music in which to cradle oneself during imaginary journeys.

Eight tracks, all titled *Big Empty Country* and listed with Roman numerals, make up *Lateral*, although in reality we can just as easily speak of a single composition of pure ambient music: drone, a few simple consonant notes strung like pearls, all surrounded by a clear, limpid and enveloping sound. It is apparently static music, yet in reality it is traversed by a placid, infinite motion, like the breathing of the universe - music for meditation, or even for yoga, such is its ability to induce surrender and relaxation.

The perfect blend of these two approaches to sound, space and composition is indeed contained in *Liminal*, the third chapter in the Wolfe/Eno journey. The barely suggested voice returns, as do the guitar's reverberation and the faint melodic line, but everything is wrapped in the spatial sound of electronics, as in the opening track *Part Of Us*. In *Ringing Ocean* and *Before Life*, even the Pink Floyd of *Meddle* seem to appear in the distance, evoking a psychedelia from another time that runs through many of the album's compositions, above all the beautiful *Laundry Room*, perhaps its most evocative track. Yet this is psychedelia steeped in ambient music, extraordinarily ethereal and at the same time concrete, where the voice merges with the sounds in *Shallow Form* and *Little Boy*, or seems to leave an echo even in its absence, as in *The Procession*, characterized by crystalline, dazzling guitar. Eleven tracks to savor with an open mind and heart: a journey that is simultaneously the end of the triptych and a new beginning, in a dimension that overturns temporal linearity to construct a new, cyclical and hypnotic one. Undoubtedly the peak of this trilogy.

Space, Time, Breath

As suggested at the beginning, these nine albums form an overall picture whose outlines are blurred yet clear in their approach, despite the differences arising from the characteristics of the musicians involved in constructing these musical universes. A harmonious interconnection underlies the three projects, a powerful relational capacity able to convey a single, homogeneous vision while fusing the protagonists' different spirits. Three Cartesian axes appear fundamental to the movement and projection of their music.

First, the ability to work on sonic space, to stretch musical matter into broad forms that envelop the listener and project them into other worlds, far removed from a competitive, stressful reality in neurotic motion. This space assumes different dimensions: it is not static but imperceptibly shifting and mutating, endowed with an intrinsic capacity for variation fully connected to the unfolding of the musical narrative. Within this narrative, time is overturned. It is not linear but repeatedly changes dimension and transforms: in the *Ghosted* project it is often bound to an obsessive, repeated rhythm, like an African trance; in The Necks it is at times superimposed, uneven and veiled; while in Eno and Wolfe the conception of time hides within an apparent stasis that instead stretches the sequence of events almost to infinity.

Finally, breath: the achievement of another relationship with music, one not mediated by late-capitalist voracity but founded on relaxed listening wholly devoted to perception. The ability to work with cells, to keep them in tension and then alter them slightly and harmoniously - the result of the minimalist approach shared by all the

musicians involved - creates the breathing space necessary to project oneself into another dimension, or more simply, to travel.

This is music that brings relief, allowing the listener - and the musician as well - to breathe, to feel on their own skin the breath, the current, the vital energy of the cosmos. Even in the absence of true musical themes or fully developed melodic lines, these triptychs express a richness of universes that ask only to be perceived with attention and an open mind: a journey into other contexts and other times. This alternative approach, certainly an outgrowth of the minimalist revolution initiated in the 1960s by Terry Riley, Steve Reich, La Monte Young and Philip Glass, seems year after year to generate music endowed with a very particular attraction, increasingly opposed to a world devoted instead to excessive, immoderate, uninterrupted consumption.

From this perspective, alongside the three projects discussed here, equal prominence should be given to Cooper Crain's Chicago-based Bitchin' Bajas, also on Drag City, and Joshua Abrams's Natural Information Society, likewise from Chicago. The latter have made two albums together with Bitchin' Bajas, *Automaginary* and *Totality*, the latter released this year, again by Drag City. Both projects are fully involved in this kind of improvisational neo-minimalism. It is a picture in constant motion and expansion, an undoubtedly instinctive attempt to respond to the increasingly alienating, anxiety-producing and neurotic social, cultural and political dynamics that dominate our time. Or perhaps it is simply a matter of stepping aside, withdrawing from the flow of events and creating an alternative space in which to immerse oneself spiritually as well as physically.

> *“You start the music, and the music starts you.”*
> *(Williams, 2011).*

LISTENING

— Bitchin' Bajas, *Inland See*, Drag City, 2025.
— Natural Information Society & Bitchin' Bajas, *Automaginary*, Drag City, 2015.
— Natural Information Society & Bitchin' Bajas, *Totality*, Drag City, 2025.

READING

— Harry Sword, *Alla ricerca dell'oblio sonoro*, Edizioni di Atlantide, Rome, 2022.
— David Toop, *Oceano di suono*, add editore, Turin, 2023.
— Richard Williams, *The Blue Moment*, Il Saggiatore, Milan, 2011.