

AMBIENT MUSIC

Critical Explorations, Wicked Problems, and Small Wonderments

Why is everybody listening to ambient music these days? Beatless music, or music with almost inaudible percussion or beats, seems to be one of the quiet successes of contemporary music culture.

Ambient music finds audiences across differences of age, gender, race and ability. It is frequently associated with soothing, healing and contemplative qualities, but it also oozes into all sorts of other genres, styles and artistic movements. It affords a variety modes of listening and it is made, performed, mediated and circulated in heterogeneous social contexts, local traditions and scenes. It organizes relations between sound, space, bodies and attention, producing affects that may be soothing or unsettling, immersive or distancing, intimate or political.

Ambient has become a truly planetary, if unevenly distributed, musical category. Its histories, affinities and offshoots connect with minimal music, krautrock, gamelan, soundscape composition, noise, sound design, raga, film music, neoclassical music, hauntology, New Age, Muzak, and lo-fi hip hop. Ambient practices take shape through different listening cultures, technologies, environments, musical traditions and political and social conditions. Is ambient music becoming a dominant model for popular music production in the 21st century, challenging the backbeat of rock 'n' roll and the percussive patterns and loops of EDM? Is ambient music particularly suited to playlist culture, workplace mood regulation, attentional optimization, and what has sometimes been called "Spotifycore"? Once dismissed, in some critical contexts, as embarrassing, escapist, or clichéd, ambient music is now widely embraced by artists and listeners – and widely promoted by streaming platforms – across the globe. Yet ambient is neither a stable nor a self-evident genre.

For this special issue, we are looking for audio papers grounded in particular histories, places, scenes and practices. We invite contributors to explore uses and understandings of ambient music that may be common in one local context but

unheard of in another. We are particularly interested in audio papers that question the geographical and conceptual assumptions underlying established histories of the genre, as well as engaging with ambient music beyond the best-known cities and cultural hubs of Europe and North America, including contributions grounded in Africa, Asia, South America, the Middle East and Oceania.

The idea for this international special issue grew out of *The Ambient Music Conference: Critical Explorations, Wicked Problems, and Small Wonderments*, held in Copenhagen on 15–17 September 2026. The conversations at this conference are a point of departure for the issue, but not its boundary. A participation in the conference is neither required nor expected. Conference participants are welcome to submit proposals, that are original audio papers, where the sonic argument is clearly and audibly at the center.

Possible topics include, but are not limited to:

- local ambient practices, scenes and social formations in different regions
- practices that complicate, resist or reject the category of ambient music
- ambient subgenres and hybrids, such as dark ambient, lowercase, isolationism, witch house and goblincore
- ambient music and ambient listening strategies in architecture, art, design, games and film
- ambient music, health, mood regulation and affective control
- listening technologies and production networks for ambient music, including immersive and spatial sound formats
- ambient music, streaming platforms, distribution networks, social media and audiovisual media

We welcome contributions drawing on music and sound studies, artistic and practice-based research, cultural and media studies, anthropology, sociology, philosophy, environmental humanities and related fields.

LITERATURE FOR YOUR INSPIRATION

Adkins, Monty and Simon Cummings (eds.). 2019. *Music Beyond Airports. Appraising Ambient Music*. Huddersfield: University of Huddersfield Press.

Chattopadhyay, Budhaditya. 2022. *Sound Practices in the Global South: Co-listening to Resounding Plurilogues*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Henry, Dusty. 2025. *20th Century Ambient*. New York: Bloomsbury.

Kim-Cohen, Seth. 2013. *Against Ambience*. New York: Bloomsbury.

Lanza, Joseph. 2004. *Elevator Music: A Surreal History of Muzak, Easy-Listening, and Other Moodson*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Larkin, Brian. 2014. "Techniques of Inattention: The Mediality of Loudspeakers in Nigeria." *Anthropological Quarterly*, 87(4), pp. 989–1015.

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- Newman, Scott and Susanna L. Sacks. 2023. "Sound Studies from Africa." *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 35(4), pp. 353–357.
- Roquet, Paul. 2016. *Ambient Media: Japanese Atmospheres of Self*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Schmidt, Ulrik. 2023. *A Philosophy of Ambient Sound. Materiality, Technology, Art and the Sonic Environment*. London and Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Steingo, Gavin and Jim Sykes (eds.). 2019. *Remapping Sound Studies*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Szabo, Victor. 2023. *Turn On, Tune In, Drift Off: Ambient Music's Psychedelic Past*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Toop, David. 1995. *Ocean of Sound: Aether Talk, Ambient Sound and Imaginary Worlds*. London: Serpent's Tail.

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SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

– AUDIO PAPERS

DEADLINE → ABSTRACT

Monday, December 7, 2026

PLEASE SUBMIT

- An audio abstract of 60–90 seconds in MP3 format
- A written abstract of 150–200 words
- A bibliography in Chicago 17th style
- A biography of up to 100 words for each author
- Optional portrait photographs (with photo credits)

SUBMISSION

Please send the files, or a download link, to ambient@soundstudieslab.org. The written abstract, bibliography and biographies should be collected in a single Word document.

EDITORIAL RESPONSE

Following editorial review, selected authors will be invited to submit a full audio paper.

DEADLINE → FULL AUDIO PAPER

Monday, March 8, 2027

PLEASE SUBMIT

- An audio paper of 12–15 minutes in MP3 format
- A written abstract of 150–200 words
- A bibliography in Chicago 17th style
- A biography of up to 100 words for each author
- Optional portrait photographs (with photo credits)

SUBMISSION

Please send the files, or a download link, to ambient@soundstudieslab.org. The written abstract, bibliography and biographies should be collected in a single Word document.

THE AUDIO-PAPER FORMAT

An audio paper is a 12–15 minute-long audio production that presents and explores a research question or focus through speech, narrative and sonic argumentation. It may incorporate field recordings, produced sound, vocal and bodily practices, everyday objects, musical instruments, computer software or other sonic materials and agents.

Submissions will undergo editorial screening followed by anonymized review by at least two referees. Reviewers are asked to consider:

- The clarity and contextualization of the research question or focus
- The clarity and vitality of the argument or exploration
- The meaningful and original use of sound in developing the argument
- The relationship between dramaturgical composition (tempo, density, narrative structure) and content
- The appropriate use of references in the accompanying text and/or audio production.

Submissions must be original and must not have been published or be under consideration elsewhere.

For further reflections on and examples of audio papers, please visit seismograf.org/fokus/fluid-sounds.