

This was a good year to listen to ambient music, whatever that is

In the early days of despair, I looked at Spotify and decided that everything sounded bad. All songs were boring, and I was sick of everything. What that really meant was I was sick of myself. But by the summer, I'd found the solve: ambient music. The best music I heard this year was barely music at all.

The notion of "ambient music" is pretentious, sure, but the concept is simple. If most music is centered around some alchemy of melody and rhythm, ambient music eschews that for whatever else: tones, moods, atmosphere.

I've listened to *Peel* by Nairobi-based artist KMRU roughly once a day since I first heard it in July. Like most music in the genre, the album is concerned with timbre and texture – a lot of shapeless, ambiguous noise that slowly escalates and envelopes you. (Or, if you are my sister, you might describe it as "scary" and "ominous" and "please turn that off.") Still, it was nice to put on something consistent in the mornings, which became as much of a ritual for me as taking coffee with oat milk and refreshing the *Times'* updated COVID maps.

Peel – and two other KMRU records released this year, *Opaker* and *Jar* – were quiet revelations for me, especially as someone who tends to listen to the same handful of pop songs on repeat. Though its production is often lush and maximalist, pop music is compact. It's designed to be played in many places: on AirPods, blasted from a car radio, through your tinny laptop speakers. It has to sound good everywhere, which is another way of saying that it has to sound the same everywhere. Pretty depressing when you're going nowhere.

Peel took on a different shape, depending on where I was listening to it – though this year, that just meant which room of the house I was in. The Sonos in the kitchen made the record sound expansive and often distant. In my office, where I listened to *Peel* passively while staring at Google Docs during the workday, the resonance seemed to fill every square inch of the room, making me constantly aware of the space's small dimensions. I'd sometimes play it through my phone after waking up – a calm and steadily escalating thrum. Yet listening to KMRU in the bathroom was too claustrophobic, too annoying, so I'd put on Dua Lipa instead. I even bought *Peel* on vinyl, not really so I could hear how it sounded, but because I'd gotten really used to soothing boredom and anxiety by ordering things online. And like a lot of things that went through the mail in 2020, the record still hasn't arrived.

I struggled to find any formal interviews with KMRU, but I did come across a few videos he'd done on YouTube. In one video, he sampled a broken piano he came across on the street, captured on a fuzzy portable mic. Like a lot of things on YouTube, it turned out to be an ad (this one for Ableton Live). But there was something romantic about seeing KMRU's field recording – someone out in the world, collecting precious little sounds, even if the finished product obfuscated their origins too much to be identified. At least it left something to the imagination.

KMRU doing field recordings.

Courtesy of KMRU

Browse YouTube for long enough and you start to recognize that video titles have their own kind of SEO. More than word choice, you see similar constructions over and over that declare what a thing is and who it's for. This likely makes it

easier for a robot to parse and for a recommendation service to serve.

It also allows us to reverse-engineer people's intentions. Look up footage of nature, and most of it will identify itself as a "relaxation" video, which is more of an intention than a genre. A one-hour 4K video of sunsets in Seattle sells itself as perfect for "sleep, relaxation, distress, insomnia." The meme equivalent is YouTube's anime-inflected "lofi hip hop radio – beats to relax/study to," which has spinoffs for anxiety and even depression. It's background noise by design. It's basically Muzak.

In the absence of Muzak, we just Muzak ourselves

In its heyday – the better part of the 20th century – Muzak was the soundtrack of the mall: familiar, pleasing, and most importantly, inoffensive. The company went bankrupt over a decade ago, and its assets now operate under a conglomerate called Mood Media. But if Muzak the corporation left us, its spirit never did.

In many ways, this is what we do to ourselves when we hit shuffle on a playlist or let YouTube guide our listening. Across platforms, a recommendation engine is reactive and reinforcing a suggestion that is, again, familiar, pleasing, and inoffensive. In the absence of Muzak, we just Muzak ourselves.

Brian Eno coined the term "ambient music" to put his work in opposition with Muzak. As the myth goes, stuck for several hours in a terminal in Cologne, Germany, Eno believed he could write better music for a public space – something calming to ease the bustle of frenzied travelers. The result was the seminal 1978 record *Music for Airports*. Not long after, in the mid-'80s, Japanese electrosynth polymath Haruomi Hosono would write a suite of dulcet songs specifically for Muji stores to set the tone for a pleasing shopping experience. There's an argument that the sound design of hospitals could save lives.

And in a year when far fewer people around the world traveled or frequented malls and more people were going to the hospital and never leaving, what do you do with *Music for Airports* and for Muji and for the morgue? You bring it home.

In the days when escapism was fruitless and indulgences were unsatisfying, the music I listened to felt less like feeding an algorithm and more like asserting control over a nonsense year. Like every personal revelation, it feels obvious in hindsight. But awareness – *mindfulness!* – is an active pursuit: introduce some friction, stay in the present. I think I always knew what that looked like. It wasn't until this year that I knew how it sounded.

Five ambient-ish albums for 2020

- *Blink a Few Times to Clear Your Eyes* – Grand River
- *Telas* – Nicolas Jaar
- *Shall We Go on Sinning So That Grace May Increase?* – The Soft Pink Truth
- *Harbors* – Ellen Fullman and Theresa Wong (debatably ambient, mostly abrasive)
- *Peel* – KMRU (also *Opaquer* and *Jar*)

<https://www.theverge.com/22175193/ambient-music-2020-pandemic-quarantine-at-home>