

Midnight Colours

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Geographic North

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You learn interesting things about ambient music talking to [Rafael Anton Irisarri](#). For instance, that Harold Budd goes by "Hal" -- who knew?

The nickname of one of the most revered ambient musicians of all time is the kind of information you'd expect Irisarri would possess, occupying as he does something close to the geographical center of ambient music. Name a recent ambient album, and there's a strong chance it's gone through his Black Knoll Studios. He's mastered albums by everyone from ambient perennials Grouper and Julianna Barwick to retro-funkster Starchild & the New Romantic and minimalist legend Terry Riley. But he's still best-known for his recordings, both as the Sight Below and under his own name.

His latest album *Midnight Colours*, which came out via Georgia label [Geographic North](#), is a meditation on the end of the world, which seems closer than ever given the threat of global warming and nuclear war. The 40-minute record uses degraded tapes to evoke old newscasts from the 1950s, another time when the threat of nuclear war hung heavy over popular culture and everyday life. That might seem like a lot to tackle in a genre most people associate with falling asleep, but ambient music's changed a lot since Brian Eno first heard those harps in his hospital room.

Let's talk first about *Midnight Colours*. The album addresses a lot of heavy themes: the end of the world, the Doomsday Clock. Ambient music is often thought of something unobtrusive, something that's less of an emotional commitment than most music. Would you argue differently?

Yeah, I would think so. I feel my generation of artists have built a new framework for the genre where it is no longer a "passive" listening experience as [Brian] Eno posited. If you think of my works and the work of some of my colleagues like Tim Hecker, and Lawrence English, we are all expanding the genre. Same can be said about the live concert experience for the music, physical experience you know?



Content is everything these days. We all came from a transition period in the music industry. When I started releasing music almost 12 years ago, it was an entirely different beast, and now there is so much content, more than ever before. So I feel making thematic records are a good way to keep the listener engaged. We live in really messed up times, and I feel the current state of affairs has weighed heavily on all of us, so writing new music, whether you want it or not, is informed by the state of the world.

Do you see *Midnight Colours* as more of a political statement or a personal reflection? Or somewhere in between?

Oh, certainly a personal reflection. I'm not clever enough to make grand political statements. In the age of Twitter, I try to avoid politics. Sometimes, of course, it's completely unavoidable, and you get sucked into the arguments, etc. It's an unprecedented time to be alive. In terms of the clock itself, it's also a reflection on our own mortality, a metaphor of some sorts. When I assembled the album, the Doomsday Clock was at two and a half minutes. Well, things are so fucked up it moved to two minutes by the time the record came out -- not a very good sign.

Could ambient music be used to make grand political statements?

Could be, of course. It's music, and there's a long tradition of "protest" music. I just don't think I'm remotely qualified to make one; I'll leave that to people smarter than me. I'm more interested in how we are all affected by the state of the world. So I've been writing, more than likely involuntarily, from that perspective. We all internalize the heaviness of it all in different ways. And since music has been an outlet for me for the longest time to cope, the album is rather personal.

When you set out to create an album, do you usually have an idea in your head for what it'll be like thematically/aesthetically/sonically?

Yes, for the most part. Almost all my records since 2010 are like this. *The North Bend* explored the Pacific Northwest, a sort of postcard from the region. *The Unintentional Sea* is based on the ecological disaster of the Salton Sea in California. *A Fragile Geography* deals with personal issues and simultaneously mirrors the political/social climate of the US at the time. *The Shameless Years* was written at the end of 2016 and early 2017, in the aftermath of the U.S. presidential election. I sketch quite a lot and have a lot of different ideas laying around, I can develop them later on and make them work within the parameters of a concept. I improv a lot in the studio. I'll set up a patch of some sorts, either analog or digital software, and record improv sessions. Then I manage those improvisations and compose from them.

I've noticed a lot of your albums are around 40 minutes. Why that length?

Many years ago I started a small-scale festival in Seattle called Substrata. As I was developing the ideas for it, I had decided that an ambient performance shouldn't be longer than 40 minutes. That's about the right amount of time to enjoy something and leave you with the

desire to come back to it. I guess my own recordings influenced that aspect of the festival, and I was pretty strict about that rule too. Some of the best shows I've seen were fairly short too. I remember seeing Oren Ambarchi totally destroy a stage in under 20 minutes. Very inspirational.

I remember reading about super short punk sets when I was a teen. Suicide had some notoriously short sets, mostly because they were getting kicked off the stage. As a big fan of Larry David and *Seinfeld*, I remember very well that line Jerry tells George: "Showmanship, George. When you hit that high note, say goodnight and walk off." I'd much rather people tell me "Oh, that was quick" than have them think: "Oh man, this like an Energizer bunny, is it ending soon?"

The same could be said about recorded music, and also, the vinyl format has something to do with that. I'm a mastering engineer by trade, and I'm very conscious of optimal cutting lengths on a 33 1/3 rpm. This is a point I stress a lot to my studio clients: "Do you really need 15 songs on the album?" I'm always shooting myself in the hip in a way. Obviously, billing 15 songs as opposed to eight is better for business, but the OCD part of me thinks: "Oh man, I need to address this and maybe talk them out of songs!" It's the producer/artist side taking over sometimes.

You recently remastered one of my favorite ambient albums, First Narrows by Loscil. I'm interested in the process of making changes, no matter how minuscule, to a work that's already been heard by thousands of sets of ears. Tell me a little about that.

Sure. Part of it is coming with a new perspective after not listening to the material for such a long time and also having another set of ears work on it. Those early releases were self-mastered by Scott [Morgan of Loscil], which is fine, they sound great. But as I tell everyone all the time, the whole point of mastering something is having a system of checks and balances in a way, being able to listen how the songs translate in another studio, different speakers and, more importantly, the perspective that only comes with the separation from the work as an artist.

I rarely master my own music unless I have a very specific thing I'm doing, like the cassettes. Otherwise, I send to someone I trust to listen to it and give me a fresh opinion. I relish that feedback. It makes me learn more about my way of doing things too as an artist. With *First Narrows*, the idea was to stay true to the intent of the album, respecting the mixes, which I do anyway on everything I master in the studio, and just putting a new perspective on how it should sound.

I've re-mastered quite a few things in the studio. Sometimes it is very nerve-wracking, like when I re-mastered the Terry Riley vinyls Beacon Sound put out. How do I improve the sound, without changing something that already in my mind, as a fan, sounds perfect the way it was? Then of course, as you start to put it under the microscope, from a technical perspective -- because that's what mastering really is, technical work -- then you find little areas that could be better. There are many ways to cook an egg, as the saying goes.

You've also had a lot of interesting people master your work, like Stefan Betke from Pole and Lawrence English. Do you notice anything new about your music that you might not have thought about before after it's been mastered by someone else?

Yes, totally. That's exactly right. Most recent example: I produced and mixed the new Steve Hauschildt album that will be announced very soon. We worked on it for seven months. By the time I delivered the pre-masters to the label, we were both exhausted from listening to it. We got the masters back from the mastering house, and man was that great. Lots of things we had forgotten about came to the surface. For example, one song I had forgotten I played guitar on. I heard the masters, and I told Steve, "Man, I totally forgot I played guitar on that song!"

So that's the thing. It's not that I wouldn't be able to do it myself. It's that because I've been working on something for so long, I'm too fatigued to be objective, and having someone else work on it makes the most sense. Good mastering embellishes the mixes while respecting the artist's intent. Mastering is not about making things sound louder: it's about making it sound nicer, with a certain character and uniqueness to it. Perspective is something you can never get from an algorithm. You need a human ear.

Would you call mastering an art form?

To most people, it's a "dark art" form. Not much is known about it, and a lot of engineers relish that. I'm quite the opposite. I'm constantly inviting people over to the studio so they can see what mastering is about and learn a thing or two because ultimately it's a learning process for the artist and will make them a better producer in the long run. Mastering to me is a technical occupation: part art, part science. I've been told by many clients I have a certain "sound," the Black Knoll Studio sound: the combination of my room, speakers, equipment, and knowledge, with a little artist's perspective thrown in there.

Speaking of the artist's perspective, I really have to thank you for that list of the 100 best ambient albums that you published in *Self-Titled Mag*. I've found so many wonderful albums through that, and I was really happy to see Vladislav Delay's *Entain*, my favorite ambient album, on the list.

Did I? I can't remember! Such a long time ago. I love Sasu's music. His releases as Uusitalo are so great also. Scandinavians making minimalistic music is built into their DNA.

Another artist I was happy to see on there was Harold Budd. Something interesting about Harold Budd is that he's never really been comfortable with ambient music or being called ambient despite being right there at its inception. You seem very comfortable with the term ambient; what's your relationship with the term?

I really don't think much about this stuff, terms, genres. The older I get, the less important those things are to me. If people call my music ambient, cool. If they don't, cool. I get a kick sometimes when I play live and a sound person that doesn't know my music sees the rider and

setup for a live show and thinks "oh, it's quiet ambient music, piece of cake" and they start seeing all the amps getting on stage.

It seems like what's called ambient has moved pretty far from what Eno originally postulated, ignorable and interesting.

Oh totally. But that has a lot to do with how technology has evolved. When Eno made those early ambient records, there was so much you could do technically speaking. And also, with the kind of music we are making these days, it's more of a fusion of things: metal, shoegaze, ambient, whatever -- it's all mixed in there. I use metal bass amps during my concerts, similar to what a band like Earth or Sunn O))) would use. Having said that, records made by Brian Eno, Harold Budd, Cluster, and many others 40 years ago still sound fresh and interesting with every new listen.

The ambient label seems like a bit of a mess now.

True, but there are lots of really great proposals today and lots of room for innovation. If you think of where early ambient or experimental electronic music was and some of the music we hear today, there's a wide range of ideas. Compare, for example, Eno's *Discreet Music*, considered by many the quintessential ambient album, to *Love Streams* by Tim Hecker. It's miles away apart sound-wise, yet, it all fits in the same ecosystem.

Ambient music never reached critical mass, probably due to our general lack of patience. As you know, this kind of music requires a degree of time commitment. It's not the usual four-and-a-half-minute song. In fact, the "standard" piece is usually 10 to 15 minutes long. It's also an acquired taste; it doesn't necessarily provide instant gratification to the casual listener. Lastly, it's a deceptively simple style of music. It seems as if anyone can do it at home, and that is true to a certain extent. It's not hard to do at all from certain technical perspectives. The important part is not so much the sound quality or the performance of the musician but rather the content itself: is it memorable? That's why X is a masterpiece and Y and Z total rubbish.

In my view, I find a piece like "Not Yet Remembered" by Harold Budd and Brian Eno memorable and significant. I can't say the same of most music I've heard on commercial radio, dance clubs, or else for the last 25 years. Then again, it's all in the eye of the beholder. The best correlation to ambient music is stand-up comedy: it's one thing to tell jokes to a couple of drunken friends at a party and another to build an entire routine that works with a crowd at a comedy club.

One last thing: what's a piece of ambient music you'd really like our readers to drop everything and check out?

Cluster's [1976 album] *Sowiesoso*. Certainly at the top of my "deserted island" picks.

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