

# CHAPTER FOUR: THE EAR OF THE NON-MUSICIAN

## Art School and Experimental Works, Process and Product

As many have observed, there was something about the atmosphere in British art schools of the late 1950s and 1960s that seemed to breed rock musicians. Among the leading rockers to emerge from art school backgrounds were John Lennon of the Beatles, Pete Townshend of the Who, Bryan Ferry of Roxy Music, and Ray Davies of the Kinks. Eno's experiences at Ipswich Art School between 1964 and 1966 were to decisively alter his views of art and the nature of creativity. As he has described it,

I guess that we were all united by one idea – that art school was the place where you would be able to express yourself, where the passionate and intuitive nature that you felt raged inside you would be set free and turned into art. As it happened, we couldn't have been more wrong. The first term at Ipswich was devoted entirely to getting rid of these silly ideas about the nobility of the artist by a process of complete and relentless disorientation. We were set projects that we could not understand, criticized on bases that we did not even recognize as relevant.<sup>1</sup>

The emphasis in Eno's art school education was on "process over product", it was the height of the 1960s avant-garde philosophy that the residue left by an artistic gesture was less important than the conceptual nature of the gesture itself. Under this set of ideological conditions, Eno thrived, producing a variety of student works completely consonant with the artistic climate of the times. With Ipswich's taping facilities, he made his first musical piece by recording the sounds of striking a large metal lampshade and then altering the speed of the tape – a process which resulted in pronounced acoustical beats. He made "sound sculptures," such as a vertical cylinder with a big loudspeaker mounted on top, with various objects placed on the speaker which moved themselves into different arrangements according to the nature of the vibrations shaking the membrane. Eno hung loudspeakers from trees in a park and piped different music into each one. He made a painting and placed it at the bottom of a river. Rarely did he work on making pictures for their own sake, he found himself too impatient to finish a canvas, and more interested in designing "scores" "to tell myself how to construct a painting. I looked for designs that would contravene ordinary decisions about whether something looked nice or didn't look nice."<sup>2</sup> Paintings became performance pieces. In one experiment,

I did a whole series ... that involved more than one person doing the painting. In one, I gave four people identical instructions of the type,

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<sup>1</sup> Eno, Trent Polytechnic lecture, *More Dark Than Shark*, 40.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Zwerin, "Brian Eno: Music Existing in Space," *International Herald Tribune*, 14 Sept. 1983, 7.