

listening. More than that, he wanted to distance himself from pop philosophically: “Pop music isn’t by any means the central issue of my life, it’s hardly a peripheral one.”³

Eno has always had paradoxical views on the subject of rock music, and even with his solo progressive rock albums of the early 1970s, he was in a sense not so much making rock music as he was making music about rock music. As we noted in Chapter One, critic John Rockwell has singled out such a self-conscious attitude as the unifying factor behind the genre of art rock, and if Stravinsky was right in saying that the real criticism of a piece of music lies in other pieces that are “about” that piece, then we should expect to find Eno’s real critical voice in his music itself. However committed to his art he has been and continues to be, Eno is simultaneously curiously aloof, removed from everyday pop realities. In 1974, early in his career, he was interested in somehow uniting the two kinds of music that interested him most, the “fiercely intellectual, fiercely anti-physical” quality of avant-garde music and the “fiercely physical, fiercely anti-intellectual” quality of rock. “I wanted to try to find a meeting of the two which would actually not be frightened of either force. Rock musicians are frightened of any kind of discussion of what they do ... I do think that rock music is the most important art form right now.”⁴

The key concept here is his reference to rock as an art form. It was a concept that was idealistically shared by many musicians, critics, and fans in the late 1960s and early 1970s. For Eno, rock held out this possibility – that music could be mentally stimulating as well as sensuously accessible, intellectual as well as physical, conceptual as well as popular. That this was more often an ideal than a reality was one of the main lessons of his experiences with Roxy Music. In 1975 he discussed their early and subsequent music:

If I listen to the first album now, I still find it a bold statement. But what happened is what happens to most bands: they become successful

...

Unfortunately, if you want to make a lot of money in rock music you have one good idea and then you do it again and again. You don’t even have to have a good, original idea if you conform to the existing pattern.⁵

Clearly, if Eno had once proclaimed rock the most important contemporary art form, he stopped far short of embracing all rock music as being equally valuable, and was only too aware of the homogenizing pressures of the music industry. In a 1980 interview he argued strongly for risk-taking and experimentation, criticizing rock musicians for being too narrowly goal-oriented, unwilling to “dabble and play.” “Any music worth anything is born in clumsiness and chaos ... Rock isn’t dangerous any more.” Eno thought that rock was losing one of its greatest strengths, its ability to incorporate ideas from a variety of musical traditions. Rock was becoming “a progressively more insular form.”⁶

³ Steven Grant, “Brian Eno Against Interpretation,” *Trouser Press* 9 (Aug. 1982), 28.

⁴ Cynthia Dagnal, “Eno and the Jets: Controlled Chaos,” *Rolling Stone* 169 (12 Sept. 1974), 16.

⁵ Allan Jones, “Eno – Class of ‘75,” *Melody Maker* 50 (29 Nov. 1975), 14.

⁶ Bruce Dancis, “Studio Plays Big Role in Music Composition, Says Brian Eno,” *Billboard* 92 (22 March 1980), 29.