

Perhaps times have changed; or perhaps Brian Eno is simply unusually literary for a pop figure – and unusually open-minded when it comes to taking in different perspectives that hold the potential to develop and advance his own work. He told me that reading my book made him want to go back and listen to some of his old pieces again, re-evaluate them with this new knowledge, and, possibly, to try composing new music with some of the tools he'd gleaned. As a music theorist and analyst, I felt that this was the most gratifying tribute a musician could have possibly paid my work.

Eno's Music of the 1990s

In the past five years, Eno has continued to issue a steady stream of music, installations, articles, interviews, and lectures; he has lent his gently stimulating touch as a producer, keyboardist, and collaborator to an almost countless number of studio sessions; and he has maintained his position in the forefront of quality rock music, notably through his design of the U2 1992 Zooropa world tour stage set, complete with a torrential, visually overwhelming array of video images and effects.

In short, he is a person at the full height of his creative powers.

Eno released four major musical works during this period: *Wrong Way Up* (1990), an album of slightly skewed poppish songs with John Cale; *The Shutov Assembly* (1992), a colorful anthology of varied ambient pieces; *Nerve Net* (1992), an astonishing set of studies in rhythm and near-atonality; and *Neroli* (1993), a rather severe exercise in dark modal minimalism.

Wrong Way Up

In 1990, Eno gave his public what many of them had long been waiting for – a new album of songs. Unfortunately, in this instance the chemistry and contrast between Eno and Cale is not enough to produce much in the way of tangible musical interest. Most of these songs sound amateurish: silly, over-produced ditties without the acerbic edge that turned some of Eno's songs of the 1970s into something admirably demented.

A number of the songs are campy, in the vein of the Beatles' "Yellow Submarine," borrowing elements from folk music, British music hall, and nursery rhyme. But here the campiness, instead of being jolly and light-hearted, gets bogged down in bulky, ponderous, unconvincing electronic arrangements. There's little light, little transparency here – little in the way of the unique, unreasonable textures that Eno is capable of creating – textures that are capable of turning a ho-hum song into a compelling piece of music.

In a way, *Wrong Way Up* exposes Eno's weaknesses as a songwriter – for in reality he is not a songwriter. Songwriters craft melodies and chords, and arrangers and singers create the performance. Eno does not write real vocal melodies – they tend to be static, they don't "go" anywhere – and he doesn't really understand the power of functional harmony to create, support, and propel emotional movement. Eno is not a songwriter, but rather a deft manipulator of sounds, colors, and blocks of music. So when he writes a song and the arrangement isn't up to snuff, there's little left to sustain interest.