

STEREO

LOOKING PAST THE SURFACE OF MUSIC



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Ambient Music Isn't a Backdrop. It's an Invitation to Suspend Time.

When I heard the news that my mother had suffered a stroke, the feeling that surfaced wasn't despair, but an impulse to problem solve.

First, the doctor's medical jargon flooded into my brain like ticker tape: a cerebrovascular accident due to embolism of the left middle cerebral artery. Five milligrams of Eliquis and 50 milligrams of Losartan and 50 more of Metoprolol, in addition to four other pills at morning, noon and midnight. My brother and I compiled passwords to medical insurance platforms, patient portals and bank accounts in a shared Notes app entry. We filled out paperwork for long-term disability payments. We consulted lawyers, wondering how to handle my mother's employer, who had threatened to fire her if she did not return to work. A month after the stroke, the night before my 29th birthday, we were in an accident that totaled my mother's car. In the hopes that she would eventually be able to drive again, I gave her

a few thousand dollars of my savings toward buying a new one.

The stroke wasn't the only crisis. There was the dread of the upcoming presidential election; the ceaseless drag of the pandemic; the expectation to complete my master's degree while I cared for my mother; and the reality that, as an immigrant family, our full support system was back home in the Dominican Republic. For the most part, my brother and I were on our own.

So, I Googled. I made playlists.

I called one "if you need to breathe," all lowercase. I populated it with the soft-focus synth tones and obliterating loops of ambient music. I scrolled through Spotify and stumbled upon dozens of playlists engineered for mood regulation and self-care: "Peaceful Indie Ambient," "Lo-Fi Cool Down," "Ambient Chill." On Headspace, the meditation app that costs \$69.99 a year, I found curated soundscapes by the savant producer Madlib and the songwriter John Legend intended to conjure soothing atmo-



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Graphic by Callum Abbott

It was clear that I was not alone. In recent years, ambient music has become an escapist salve for a planet coping with mass death, political instability, climate anxiety, the incessant culture of overwork and the dissociation these conditions cause. The tech world has been quick to cash in: In 2017, the critic Liz Pelly wrote about the proliferation of Spotify's "chill" playlists, referring to it as "an ambition to turn all music into emotional wallpaper." This is late capitalist Muzak, smooth-brain anesthesia to pacify the mind. But in the months following my mother's stroke, after I rematriated into her one-bedroom apartment in Chicago, ambient music was not just some commodified act of self-care. Listening to it demanded that

I relinquish control. It asked me to dispense with progressive time. It forced me to slow down and confront collapse.

At the top of "if you need to breathe" is Alessandro Cortini's "Iniziare." Cortini, the Italian musician who started out as a guitarist, keyboardist and bassist for Nine Inch Nails, is also known for his ghostly, narrative-driven synth music. On "Iniziare," Cortini arrests time. A single synth tone, at first bound to the earth, floats 40,000 feet in the air, spiraling into astral fragments. Ripples of electronic feedback crest into peaks and valleys of stretched echoes, decayed into hollowed abysses. Time becomes supple, pliant, disobedient. Listening to it, I am forced to close my eyes, to feel the way that sound travels over

the body, shape-shifting into nonlinear drift. I am detached from any deterministic version of the future. In this place between lightness and darkness, pleasure and pain exist in equal measure. I experience all the fragmentation of life, the reminders of trauma and uncertainty I have woken up to for the last four months. Here, I refuse to let grief become self-definition: I live unfettered from the speed of emergency.

Ambient music has always contained a kind of subterranean knowing. The British musician and critic David Toop, who wrote "Ocean of Sound," the defining 1995 text on the music, recently argued that it has become severed from the philosophical qualities suggested during its genesis in the 1970s.