

AMBIENT HOUSE: 'LITTLE FLUFFY CLOUDS' AND THE SAMPLER AS TIME MACHINE

Justin Morey

This chapter presents a case study of perhaps The Orb's best-known release, "Little Fluffy Clouds".¹ Building on Kevin Holm-Hudson's² previous work, I argue that the use of multiple copyrighted samples from a range of sources, times and locations, allows the record to function at different levels of listener attention, and, moreover, allows the listener to construct different narratives and connections depending on their personal sociocultural and musicological knowledge and perceptions. With reference to the work of Jean-Jacques Nattiez³ and Philip Tagg⁴ on musical communication I will argue that Brian Eno's original intention for ambient music to create a "sense of doubt and uncertainty"⁵ is maintained in "Little Fluffy Clouds" through use of the sampler as a time machine that presents multiple realities simultaneously, and thereby allows multiple levels of symbolic meaning to be created. Some thought is also given to the ability of both ambient music and ambient house to create emotional effects through the power of memory and nostalgia.

1 The Orb, *Little Fluffy Clouds*, (Vinyl) (UK: Big Life – BLR 33T, 1990).

2 Kevin Holm-Hudson, "Quotation and Context: Sampling and John Oswald's Plunderphonics," *Leonardo Music Journal* (7) (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 1997): 17-25.

3 Jean-Jacques Nattiez, *Music and Discourse: Toward a Semiology of Music* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

4 Philip Tagg, *Music's Meanings: a modern musicology for non-musos* (New York: The Mass Media Music Scholars' Press, 2015).

5 Brian Eno, 'Ambient Music', liner notes from *Ambient 1: Music for Airports* (LP) (UK: Editions E.G., AMB 001, 1978).

Background

‘Ambient house’ is a term coined by the former E.G. Records A&R man, DJ and founder member of The Orb, Alex Paterson, initially to describe the low dynamic ‘chill-out’ DJ sets performed in the VIP room at Paul Oakenfold’s Land of Oz night at the Heaven nightclub in London in 1990, and later to represent The Orb’s own records. Although the main room at Land of Oz featured the pounding and repetitive beats of the acid house and techno of the time, Oakenfold was also interested in exploring dance aesthetics at slower tempos, as evidenced by his project Movement 98, which featured recordings that were all around 98 bpm.⁶ Paterson recalls that the DJs in the VIP room were given complete freedom by Oakenfold to play whatever they wanted, the only caveat being, “Don’t get them to dance”.⁷ There was a practical as well as aesthetic reasoning for Oakenfold’s instruction in that he “wanted to create a space away from the main-room frenzy, a place where people could talk and relax”.⁸ A sampler, a tape machine, and record decks were used to combine sound effects, and records of weather and nature sounds, with pre-prepared synthesised loops and other sampled textures, but with little or nothing in the way of drums.⁹ The lack of a defined rhythm meant that the sounds used did not have to conform to the same tempo and that the music could evolve at a much slower pace in comparison to something intended for the dance floor. E.G. Records had released many records by the pioneers of 1970s ambient music such as Howard Budd and Brian Eno, including the first self-styled ambient release, *Ambient 1: Music for Airports* (1978), and Paterson lays claim to coining the term ‘ambient house’ because of this influence:

6 See Chapter 6 of Richard Norris, *Paul Oakenfold: The Authorised Biography* (London: Transworld, 2009).

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 See David Toop, *Ocean of Sound* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1995), 60-63 and Chapter 6 of Simon Reynolds, *Energy Flash* (London, Faber, 2013) for further details on the range of music and sounds played in the VIP Room at Land of Oz.

It was either come up with something to describe what we were doing, or get lumbered with a genre or style name we didn't want [...] Coming from working at E.G. Records, where the word 'ambient' was bandied around a lot, I knew it had to be in there in somewhere.¹⁰

Paterson had two colleagues at the Land of Oz nights. Martin Glover (better known as Youth), a school friend of Paterson, was a bass player, founder member of Killing Joke, subsequently noted record producer and part of the defunct mid-1980s pop band Brilliant. Jimmy Cauty was a guitarist in Brilliant and one half of perhaps the other most notable UK ambient house act, The KLF, whose other member was Brilliant's manager, Bill Drummond. The experiments in the VIP room at Land of Oz led the group to release music as The Orb, with their first single, "A Huge Ever Growing Pulsating Brain That Rules from the Centre of the Ultraworld"¹¹ being a slowly-evolving 20-minute piece with no drum track, using extensive samples of Minnie Riperton's song "Lovin' You",¹² featuring her distinctive whistle register vocal stylings, replete with its own nature sound effects in the form of birdsong. Cauty left the group after disagreements with Paterson, and the remaining members began to incorporate beats into some of their compositions thereafter.

Little Fluffy Clouds

The first version of "Little Fluffy Clouds" (1990), created by Paterson and Youth and released on Paterson's own label, WAU! Mr Modo, included a

10 Alex Paterson in Matt Annis, "Ambient House: The story of Chill Out Music," *Red Bull Music Academy Daily*, Accessed March 3, 2016, <http://daily.redbullmusicacademy.com/specials/2016-ambient-house-feature/> (2016).

11 The Orb, *A Huge Ever Growing Pulsating Brain That Rules from the Centre of the Ultraworld* (London: WAU! Mr Modo - MWS 017T, 1989)

12 Minnie Riperton, *Lovin' You* (Los Angeles: Epic - 32561, 1975).

version of the track over eight minutes in duration as well as a mix without drums that was subtitled “Ambient Mk 1”. The 1993 re-release, lasting a more radio-friendly 4’28”, included a chorus of sorts by repeating the vocal sample that is also the song’s title, and using the sampler to retrigger the first part of the word “little” to create a rhythmic stuttering effect, similar to that employed by Paul Hardcastle on his record “19”.¹³ At 104.5 bpm, the record is considerably slower than the house and techno tracks of the time, and is anchored by a prominent dub-influenced bassline, having a strong electronic kick drum on each beat of the bar, with syncopation provided by a sampled and pitched-down drum loop taken from the Nilsson record “Jump Into The Fire”.¹⁴ Perhaps the two most notable samples used are frequently juxtaposed during the track: a vaguely mystical-sounding voiceover (taken from an interview with the singer Rickie Lee Jones talking about her childhood) and three measures of Pat Metheny’s guitar performance of Steve Reich’s *Electric Counterpoint – Fast (Movement 3)*.¹⁵ The other recognisable music sample appears in the track’s introduction: a harmonica melody taken from Ennio Morricone’s “Man with a Harmonica”, heard in the soundtrack to Sergio Leone’s *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968)¹⁶. In his article proposing a typology of sampling, Kevin Holm-Hudson argues that the particular juxtaposition of the samples in “Little Fluffy Clouds”, combined with The Orb’s original electronic parts, creates a very different meaning from that provided by the original samples in isolation:

The most prominent sample in the song and the inspiration for its title comes from an interview with American singer Rickie Lee Jones during which she describes in rhapsodic detail the skies of

13 Paul Hardcastle, *19* (UK: Chrysalis - CHS 2860, 1985).

14 Harry Nilsson, *Jump into the Fire* (USA: RCA Victor - 74-0673, 1972).

15 Steve Reich, *Electric Counterpoint* (USA: Elektra Nonesuch - 79176-2, 1989).

16 Ennio Morricone, *Man with a Harmonica* (USA: RCA Victor LSP-4736, 1972).

her Arizona childhood home. In the context of the interview, this is fairly innocuous discourse; in the context of the Orb's electronic music and the techno/trance culture of which they are a part, it becomes a psychedelic epiphany. This dialogue is juxtaposed with, among other things, a short sample of harmonica from film composer Ennio Morricone's *Once Upon a Time in the West* (the title invites a connection with Jones' childhood memories) and a two-chord fragment from Steve Reich's *Electric Counterpoint* [...] Here, the connection is twofold: first, the normally detached resolve of Reich's music is invested with a psychedelic flavor due to its new context (early minimalism was also regarded by some critics as a by-product of 1960s drug culture); second, the process of studio composition by 'layering different sounds on top of each other' [a vocal sample that also appears on the record]... is itself a kind of 'electric counterpoint'.¹⁷

As with the analysis of any sample-based track, the particular direction taken by the analyst will depend on their level of knowledge both of the sources of the samples and their cultural significance, relevance and resonance. Holm-Hudson makes well-justified points here, but some of the samples that he does not mention potentially provide additional nuance and/or context. The song is arguably intended as a soundtrack to the post-rave comedown, and so the very first sound heard, that of a sample of a cock crowing, suggests that the "implied listeners",¹⁸ to borrow Nathan Wiseman-Trowse's term, are taking in the dawn because they have yet to go to bed. The next sample to be heard is of Radio 4 announcer John Waite introducing an item for the BBC Radio 4 programme *You and Yours*:

17 Holm-Hudson, *Quotations and Context*, 18-19.

18 See Nathan Wiseman-Trowse, *Performing Class in British Popular Music* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) for an argument for the use of this term as a means by which a song may be interpreted by listeners, whether or not they are part of the implied audience.

Over the past few years, to the traditional sounds of an English summer, the drone of lawnmowers, the smack of leather on willow, has been added a new noise.¹⁹

Given the musical context that follows, this quotation is clearly intended to refer to the sound of the open air, all-night raves that were occurring in the British countryside from the late 1980s until outlawed by the 1994 Criminal Justice and Public Order Act. John Waite has confirmed²⁰ that, as far as he can recall, the item concerned was indeed discussing raves, perhaps in response to what had been described as “moral panic”²¹ in some sections of the media of the time at the ways in which large numbers of young people were spending their weekends.

The subsequent sample, of a Hawker Hurricane aircraft flying overhead, is significant in that it is synonymous in the British consciousness with World War II, specifically the Battle of Britain that took place in the summer of 1941. During that period, this sound would have been heard above the fields of South East England as British airmen fought the Luftwaffe and witnessed, among many others, by my father²² as a 10-year-old boy. The outdoor raves of the late 1980s and early 1990s brought their own distinctive sounds and happened under the same Home Counties²³ skies, and in some instances

19 *You and Yours*, 1990. London: BBC Radio 4.

20 John Waite, email to author, July 7, 2017.

21 See, for example Kenneth Thompson, *Moral Panics (Key Ideas)* 2nd Edition (London: Routledge, 2005), 49-54 for a discussion of the term in relation to club and rave culture.

22 In 2016 I attended an outdoor event with my father that featured a fly-over by a Supermarine Spitfire, one of the two main aircraft used by the British in the Battle of Britain in 1941, and which sounds virtually identical to a Hawker Hurricane because both planes use the same Rolls Royce Merlin engine. On hearing this Spitfire flying overhead, I was struck by how this sound resonated on two levels – both as a signifier of a war that was over long before I was born, and as part of a memorable ambient house track from my youth. This led me to consider the time travelling properties of the sampler.

23 The term ‘Home Counties’ is generally used in reference to the English counties that surround, but do not necessarily border London, namely Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Essex, Hertfordshire, Kent, Middlesex, Surrey and Sussex, and is therefore synonymous with Southeast England.

there were close parallels in geographical location. The Sunrise Midsummer Night's Dream party of 24 June 1989 was held at the former RAF base of White Waltham near Maidenhead, home to the Air Transport Auxiliary in World War II. The event was reportedly attended by 11,000 people and was infiltrated by reporters from *The Sun* newspaper, leading to a borderline hysterical report in the 26 June edition headlined "Ecstasy Airport",²⁴ in which it was claimed that some partygoers had been sufficiently deranged to bite pigeons' heads off, and that the floor was covered in "ecstasy wrappers"²⁵, which were actually small pieces of tinfoil from a glitter cannon.

The Hawker Hurricane sample continues over the interviewer's question to Rickie Lee Jones, "what were the skies like when you were young?"; this potentially sets up a triple juxtaposition between the idea of 'out West' provided by the harmonica sample and Rickie Lee Jones's childhood recollections as outlined by Holm-Hudson, the British skies and sounds of 1941, and those of 1990. Considering the multiple layers of potential meaning created by this combination of samples, it is appropriate to consider some theoretical perspectives on how the listener contributes to the meaning of a piece of music.

The beholder's share, codes and competence

Twentieth- and twenty-first century thinking about the communication of ideas has tended to move away from the notion of the audience as largely passive to one where they are explicitly involved in the creation of meaning. Harold Lasswell's societal communication model²⁶ offers an explanation of the transmission of a message but in a fairly mechanistic way:

24 Unknown Authors. "Ecstasy Airport," *The Sun*, June 26, 1989.

25 Ibid.

26 Harold D. Lasswell, "The structure and function of communication in society." *The communication of ideas* 37 (1948): 215-228.

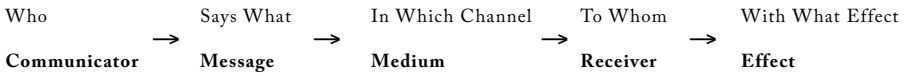


Fig. 1: Lasswell's communication model²⁷

The advantage of this model is its simplicity and applicability to a range of different methods of communication, yet it is problematic because its linear structure does not allow for the possibility of feedback from the receiver, and there is no consideration of whether or not the communicator's intended message is accurately represented by the receiver's apprehension of it. In his book *Art and Illusion* E. H. Gombrich describes the receiver's contribution as the "Beholder's Share"²⁸ – how individual knowledge and personal psychology combine to create meaning. Semiotics concerns itself with signs that create a common understanding between the producer of a message and a receiver, in terms of both the literal meaning of a sign and what it signifies, its *symbolic meaning*. Jean-Jacques Nattiez, with particular reference to music, and expanding on the work of Jean Molino, identifies two distinct stages in realising this: *poiesis*, the creation of a work, and *esthetics*, the reception, with the combination of both processes creating the symbolic meaning or *trace*:



A symbolic form (a poem, a film a symphony) is not some "intermediary" in a process of "communication" that transmits the meaning intended by the author to the audience; [...] it is instead the result of a complex *process* of creation (the poietic process) that has to do with the form as well as the content of the work; [...] it is

27 Adapted by the author from communicationtheory.org, 2015.

28 Ernst H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961).

also the point of departure for a complex process of reception (the esthetic process) that *reconstructs* a “message”.²⁹

Unlike Lasswell’s model, and as with Gombrich’s notion of the Beholder’s Share, the apprehender of a work of art contributes to its symbolic meaning. Philip Tagg’s communication model acknowledges ideas similar to Lasswell’s in terms of the flow of a message, but also emphasises the contribution of the listener in providing reconstruction and potential *feedback*, both to the store of symbols from which the music is derived, and to the sociocultural norms necessary to interpret its context. If the transmitter and receiver do not share the same store of symbols, then the message will not be decoded as intended due to “codal incompetence”.³⁰ If they have differing sociocultural norms, then the full context of the message may not be apprehended as intended, leading to “codal interference”.³¹

In describing codal incompetence, Tagg uses the example of Bulgarian harvest songs, which employ a different musical symbolic language from traditional Western forms:

[Y]ou’ll hear a lot of semitone clashes similar to those often used to help create tension, horror or discomfort in Western film music. The Bulgarian women’s semitone dyads and clusters may sound harsh and discordant to us Westerners the first time we hear them: that sound will at best come across exciting or exotic. But to the Bulgarian harvest singers themselves [...] there’s nothing bizarre or exotic about their own music, nothing horrific about their semitones. It would in fact be codally incompetent, from the receiving end, to apply the

29 Jean-Jacques Nattiez, *Music and Discourse: Toward a Semiology of Music* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 17.

30 Philip Tagg, *Music’s Meanings: a modern musicology for non-musos* (New York: The Mass Media Music Scholars’ Press, 2015), 178.

31 *Ibid.*

semiotic conventions of semitones in Hollywood film music to the sound of Bulgarian women singing traditional harvest songs.³²

Tagg is keen, however, to note that codal incompetence and codal interference should not be construed as negative terms:

Now, *incompetence* and *interference* both sound quite negative but neither term is intended in any pejorative sense. The two words are just shorthand for two types of breakdown in musical communication...Each concept simply highlights a particular set of mechanisms causing the varying degrees of difference that inevitably arise, in semiotic terms, between object and interpretant or, in terms of intentional communication, between intended and interpreted message. Codal incompetence and codal interference are in fact essential to the renegotiation of music's possible meanings and to its survival as a sign system capable of adapting to different functions for different individuals in different populations at different times and in different places.³³

In other words, codal incompetence and codal interference “are prerequisites for shifts in musical meaning. Signs from one culturally specific store (or vocabulary) can be appropriated into another where they acquire a different meaning or function”.³⁴ These ideas are clearly useful when thinking about sample-based music. By removing a sample from its original context and reframing it in a different musical setting, only part of the source code has been used, meaning much of the original message will be lost. Through the process of codal interference, a new message, arising from a different store of symbols, and often a different set of sociocultural norms, will be created.

32 Tagg, *Music's Meanings*, 180-181.

33 Ibid., 178.

34 Ibid., 193.

To an extent, this can be evidenced by some of the differences between Holm-Hudson's interpretation of "Little Fluffy Clouds" and my own. The combination of a musical theme from a spaghetti Western with Rickie Lee Jones' musings about the southwestern state of Arizona perhaps provides Holm-Hudson, an American, with a stronger sense of 'out West' than it does for myself, while events in the English Home Counties in both 1941 and 1990 are probably less likely to be applied to the musical material by Holm-Hudson than by me.

Although gaining insights into a composer's intended meaning is not necessary in order to analyse a piece of music, it can certainly aid understanding, and to that end I was fortunate that Alex Paterson agreed to answer some questions of mine about "Little Fluffy Clouds". Although Paterson has discussed a number of the samples used in the record in previous interviews, I could find no mention of the Hawker Hurricane, so it was interesting to discover, given my considerations about that particular aspect of the track, the intentions behind its inclusion:

The aeroplane was [...] a Hurricane, as my dad flew one in WW2. Sadly he passed on in '63 & I never got to know him & I suppose it was a heads up to him.³⁵

There seems, then, to have been some successful transmission of the intended message here, in that for both Paterson as composer and myself as listener, the sample points to the differences between our own experiences and those of our fathers (Paterson's father flying Hurricanes, and my father hearing them overhead during the Battle of Britain, and working on planes from World War II during his National Service with the RAF in the late 1940s). Paterson's own intentions were less aligned to Holm-Hudson's and my own analysis of the John Waite sample, in that while he acknowledged

35 Alex Paterson, email to author, February 8, 2018.

that it came from a radio piece about raves, his main reason for including it was “more to do with cricket & The Orb’s love of the sound of leather on wood”.³⁶ My interpretation of this sample, then, perhaps imbues it with more significance than may have been intended by the composers – yet, like the Hawker Hurricane sample, it locates this music as English³⁷ despite the two most repeated samples in the record being the voice of an American singer-songwriter, and the guitar playing of an American musician (Pat Metheny) performing the work of an American composer (Steve Reich).

Ambient and ambient house – commonality

There are similarities in the compositional and production methods of Alex Paterson and Brian Eno. In his much-quoted lecture, “The Studio As Compositional Tool”, Eno explains why studio technology is so essential to his practice:

I can neither read nor write music, and I can’t play any instruments really well, either. You can’t imagine a situation prior to this where anyone like me could have been a composer. It couldn’t have happened. How could I do it without tape and without technology?³⁸

Similarly, for Paterson the advent of digital recording and playback technology was essential for his practice:

The sampler was like the Rosetta Stone for DJs. With the Akai S700 I could now do all of those things that had been going around in my head [...] it was a case of ‘Bring all of your favourite records,

36 Ibid.

37 The “sound of leather on wood” refers to cricket, which while being an internationally played sport, is played widely at an amateur level across England in the summer months, and is arguably viewed as a quintessentially English pursuit by the English themselves.

38 Brian Eno, “The Studio as Compositional Tool,” *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, eds. Christopher Cox and David Warner (London: Continuum, 2004), 127-130.

Alex, and let's see what we can do.' That's how it all started, to be honest, and I've never been afraid to say it, because predominantly the Orb is not about a vocalist, it's about a DJ being the frontman.³⁹

While Eno did not use phonographic samples in *Music for Airports*, aspects of the compositional and production process appear to bear distinct similarities to the sample layering approach of "Little Fluffy Clouds". Eno describes how he encouraged the four musicians with whom he was working to perform improvisations simultaneously without being able to hear each other, which he would record:

I found this very short section of tape where two pianos, unbeknownst to each other, played melodic lines that interlocked in an interesting way. To make a piece of music out of it, I cut that part out, made a stereo loop on the 24-track, then I discovered I liked it best at half speed, so the instruments sounded very soft, and the whole movement was very slow.⁴⁰

This compositional approach seems very similar to a DJ selecting, cutting, looping and time-stretching samples with a digital sampler, or, as Eno argues, "It puts the composer in the identical position of the painter – he's working directly with a material, working directly onto a substance, and he always retains the options to chop and change, to paint a bit out, add a piece".⁴¹ Even with *Music for Airports*, Eno samples and resamples his own recordings, a practice that he developed further in his work in the 1980s. In the liner notes to *Ambient 4: On Land*, he discusses how he moved away from the use of synthesisers to more "organic" sounds such as field recordings, as well

39 Paterson in Richard Buskin, "The Orb: 'Little Fluffy Clouds'," *Sound on Sound*. (2011), accessed July 5, 2016, <http://www.soundonsound.com/people/orb-little-fluffy-clouds>

40 Eno, *The Studio As Compositional Tool*.

41 Ibid.

as “the complete body of my own earlier work”,⁴² with the result being that “some earlier pieces I worked on became digested by later ones, which in turn became digested again”, a process that he likens to “composting”, in that he is transforming “what would otherwise have been waste into nourishment”.⁴³ A similar process can be heard in “Little Fluffy Clouds”; unlike the sample collage dance hits of the late 1980s and early 1990s, which Simon Reynolds argues were constructed from recognisable “audio quotes” where “listener enjoyment was largely bound up with reference-spotting”,⁴⁴ the majority of the samples used by The Orb were sufficiently obscure⁴⁵ for their origin not to be known to the vast majority of listeners. Although the two main samples, the Rickie Lee Jones interview and the excerpt from *Electric Counterpoint*, are contemporaneous (both issued in 1989), their obscurity comes from their relatively limited audiences⁴⁶ rather than being rarities unearthed through the process of ‘crate digging’, meaning their recycling and repurposing by The Orb to provide ‘nourishment’ for a fresh audience is achieved without the audience being aware of the source materials.

42 Brian Eno, liner Notes 1982, revised February 1986, from *Ambient 4: On Land*. (CD) (UK: E.G. - EEGCD 20, 1986).

43 Ibid.

44 Simon Reynolds, *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to its Own Past* (London: Faber, 2012), Kindle Edition, Chapter 10.

45 The most recognisable sample is arguably the solo harmonica from *Once Upon a Time in the West*, given that it is both a motif from a popular film and had also been used on other dance records of the time, such as “Dub be Good to Me” by Beats International (Go Discs, 1990), and “Return to Brixton” by The Clash (CBS, 1990), the latter being a remix by DJ Jeremy Healy of The Clash’s record “The Guns of Brixton” (CBS, 1979), released due to the success of “Dub be Good to Me” which had interpolated (copied rather than sampled) the bassline from “The Guns of Brixton”.

46 The interview with Rickie Lee Jones was included as a bonus record with promotional copies of her album “Flying Cowboys” (Geffen, 1989) and therefore would only have been known to a relatively small number of journalists, DJs and record collectors. While Reich is an important figure in late twentieth-century minimalism, his work would not have been known at the time by the vast majority of pop and dance fans, and even those familiar with *Electric Counterpoint* may not have recognised the sample, given that it is a mere three measures (lasting eight seconds) from near the end of a 15-minute piece, re-edited to fit within the 4/4 time signature of “Little Fluffy Clouds”.

Ambiguity, uncertainty and the sampler as time machine

In his liner notes for *Music for Airports*, Eno states that “Ambient Music must be able to accommodate many levels of listening attention without enforcing one in particular; it must be as ignorable as it is interesting”.⁴⁷ “Little Fluffy Clouds” also accommodates different levels of listener attention in that it can be background music to “chill out, drop off and nod to the beat”⁴⁸ as Paterson puts it, or to talk over, as was the intended outcome for Paul Oakenfold of The Orb’s performances at Land of Oz. However, in the right frame of mind it might encourage dancing, and in a different frame of mind become an immersive or even psychedelic listening experience. In the same liner notes, Eno also argues that while “conventional background music is produced by stripping away all sense of doubt and uncertainty (and thus all genuine interest) from the music, ambient music retains these qualities”;⁴⁹ the discussion above has provided examples of the different ways in which the samples employed in “Little Fluffy Clouds”, both singly and in combination, provoke a range of responses in the listener.

Another area of common ground is that of manipulating time. In running some of his recordings for *Music for Airports* at half speed, Eno is literally playing with time, and as a tool, the sampler not only allows users to speed up, slow down, reverse or extend a moment in time, but it also encourages composers to look forwards by looking backwards: sounds found on many rave, ambient house and techno records of the late 1980s and early 1990s have little connection to any music that came before yet are constructed in part from music of the past. As Kodwo Eshun puts it, “[y]our record collection

47 Brian Eno, ‘Ambient Music’, liner notes from *Ambient 1: Music for Airports* (LP) (UK: Editions E.G., AMB 001, 1978).

48 Alex Paterson, email to author, February 8, 2018.

49 Eno, *Ambient Music*, 1978.

becomes an immense time machine that builds itself through you”;⁵⁰ Gerald Simpson (A Guy Called Gerald) echoes this idea: “With a sample you’ve taken time. It still has the same energy but you can reverse it or prolong it. You can get totally wrapped up in it. You feel like you have turned time around”.⁵¹

Vanessa Chang also employs the “sampler as time machine” metaphor and makes the point that it allows the past to be explored, but without a sense of awe that would not permit modification to purpose:

The sample is revealed as the space of simultaneous play and rupture, where the past both defines the present and is effaced by it. As such, sampling creates a tradition that involves the past without deferring to its structures and limitations, restoring a revised mode of agency to the practice.⁵²

Reynolds echoes the time travel aspect of sampling, describing sample-based compositions as being “[w]oven out of looped moments that are like portals to far-flung times and places, the sample collage creates a musical event that never happened; a mixture of time-travel and séance”.⁵³ The layering of multiple samples from multiple times and places in records such as “Little Fluffy Clouds” creates uncertainty about the intended meaning behind those combinations, and allows the listener to construct a range of meanings based on their personal combination of codal competence and codal interference, as can be evidenced by the differences in apprehension between Holm-Hudson

50 Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant Than The Sun: Adventures In Sonic Fiction* (London: Quartet Books, 1998), 20.

51 Simpson in Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant Than The Sun*, 76.

52 Vanessa Chang, “Records that Play: The Present Past in Sampling Practice,” *Popular Music* 28(2), (2009), 143.

53 Simon Reynolds, *Retromania: Pop Culture’s Addiction to its Own Past* (London: Faber, Kindle Edition, 2012), 313.

and myself, and indeed one of the composers. Each of us has created our own imaginary landscape, in the broad sense in which Eno employs the term in his liner notes to *Ambient 4: On Land*, to cover “places, times, climates and the moods that they evoke. And of expanded moments of memory too”.⁵⁴ In the same notes, he also argues that “[w]e feel affinities not only with the past, but also with the futures that didn’t materialize, and with the other variations of the present that we suspect run parallel to the one we have agreed to live in”.⁵⁵ The implication here is that, as listeners, we can be affected by memories that are not our own, or be nostalgic for aspects of the past, or indeed the future, to which we have no direct connection or of which we have no personal experience. Reynolds argues for something similar in popular music when he identifies “that peculiar nostalgia for the glory days of ‘living in the now’ that you didn’t [...] actually [...] *live* through”,⁵⁶ citing the music of the Swinging Sixties as affecting nostalgic emotions even among those who were not alive at the time. With “Little Fluffy Clouds”, there is some evidence of the influence of nostalgia in creating the audio landscape; Paterson notes that the Nilsson record from which part of the drum track was sampled belonged to his brother, suggesting some shared familial musical memories, and he also admits to a “love for westerns and their soundtracks”,⁵⁷ which explains the incorporation of the motif from *Once Upon a Time in the West*. The inclusion of the Hawker Hurricane sample provides a sonic gateway to his father’s past, which is perhaps all the more affecting for Paterson given that he has few personal memories of him. As a listener, this sample can have a similar nostalgic effect; the Second World War is something most people have only experienced second hand, through family memories, feature films and historical accounts, yet the sound is nonetheless curiously affecting and emotive. Given that nostalgia is necessarily

54 Brian Eno, liner notes from *Ambient 4: On Land*, 1986.

55 Ibid.

56 Reynolds, *Retromania*, Prologue.

57 Alex Paterson, email to author, February 8, 2018.

accompanied by a sense of loss, it could be that the digital sampler, as used in “Little Fluffy Clouds”, is helping to create nostalgia for a pre-digital, even pre-jet age, when the sound barrier was yet to be broken and genteel games of cricket were played on the village green.

The two main samples in “Little Fluffy Clouds”, by the creators’ own admissions, have far less personal associations. In an interview, Paterson’s co-composer Youth reveals that these were on a cassette tape sent to him by a fan called Simon who worked in a Birmingham record shop, with “a note saying it would be perfect for The Orb”.⁵⁸ Paterson confirms this story, adding that he and Youth received “different versions of the same tape” and were unaware both of Reich’s music and the Rickie Lee Jones interview at that time, adding that he was drawn to the latter because “RLJ had the sweetest stoned voice ever!”.⁵⁹ This reveals another connection between Eno’s compositional approach and “Little Fluffy Clouds”: Eno’s *Oblique Strategies*⁶⁰ is a series of prompts designed to inject an element of randomness and/or risk into the compositional process when needed, and The Orb also appear to have embraced chance in the creation of their record. However, with its opening implications of idyllic English summers – lawn mowers (the Hurricane sample even briefly segues into one of a lawnmower travelling right to left between 0’32” and 0’35”) and cricket on the village green – followed by the double whammy of “once upon a time” and “what were the skies like when you were young?”, “Little Fluffy Clouds” as a whole appears to be inviting the listener to explore nostalgia and memory.

Ambient house, originally little more than the live mixing of obscure low-dynamic records, soon developed into a sample-based genre and “Little Fluffy Clouds” is an example where the range of samples used provides a number

58 Dave Simpson, “How we made the Orb’s Little Fluffy Clouds.” *The Guardian*, January 11, 2018. <https://theguardian.com/music/2016/jun/07/how-we-made-the-orb-little-fluffy-clouds-interview>.

59 Alex Paterson, email to author, February 8, 2018.

60 See <https://www.enoshop.co.uk/product/oblique-strategies.html>

of intertextual readings, which point to the “esthetic process”⁶¹ being part of the symbolic communication taking place. Ambient house also provides good examples of the “revised mode of agency” argued by Chang in that potentially any record could be mined for something suitable as long as the result was less frenetic and more comforting than the sounds emanating from the main room.

I close this chapter with a final and fanciful thought on the sampler as time machine metaphor. Fictional accounts of time travel frequently involve someone (or something) from the future travelling to our own time to ensure that a particular chain of events unfolds for the benefit of future generations. It is intriguing that Simon, the Orb fan from Birmingham, was sufficiently keen for the band to use the Rickie Lee Jones and Steve Reich samples for him to send each member their own version of these recordings on cassette. What if, just like the music of the band Wyld Stallyns in *Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure*⁶², “Little Fluffy Clouds” is more important than we know for the future of mankind, and “Simon from Birmingham” was in fact a time traveller, charged with ensuring that the record got made?

61 Nattiez, *Music and Discourse*, 17.

62 *Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure*. Directed by Stephen Herek. Hollywood: Interscope Communications/Nelson Entertainment, 1989.