The 16 Best Ambient Albums of 2020

Whether offering solace, transport, or simple numbness, these albums perfectly suited a year of lockdown.

By Philip Sherburne
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When Pitchfork invited electronic composer Keith Fullerton Whitman to initiate us into the mysteries of ambient music a few years back, he asked, “What music isn’t ambient in the 21st century?” He meant it rhetorically, as an observation about listeners’ increasingly imperiled attention spans. All music these days, from the three-minute pop song to the IMAX-juiced film score, is by default “as ignorable as it is interesting,” as Brian Eno’s famous formulation goes. But in a year in which many of us found ourselves staring at the walls for long periods of time, the notion of “wallpaper music” no longer seemed quite so trivial. More than any other genre, ambient frequently offers a kind of emotional blank slate, and its very featurelessness suits listeners in search of wildly divergent things: solace, transport, or even simple numbness.

Even without the pandemic shuttering clubs and pulverizing any collective sense of linear time, 2020 probably would have been a banner year for ambient music. Ambient—a nebulous style characterized by fluid lines, beatless atmospheres, and, frequently, an emphasis on timbre and texture over melody or rhythm—has been on the rise for a while. But this year, spurred in no small part by the pressures of enforced solitude, the idea of ambient truly did seem to be everywhere, from country to Christian music—even on TV.

Members of Future Islands and Napalm Death undertook nominally ambient side projects. Totally Enormous Extinct Dinosaurs made a record around birdsong, reflecting the sudden absence of city noises. Craig Wedren, William Tyler, and Deradoorian explored atmospheric new pastures in their work; Big Thief’s James Krivchenia swapped his drumsticks for field recordings, and his bandmate Adrianne Lenker supplemented an album of fingerpicked folk with 40 minutes of wind chimes.

Ambient’s sudden ubiquity felt like the sign of a deeper cultural shift. Mood-based music made the leap from playlists to a record store. The “slowed + reverb” phenomenon introduced fans of Lil Uzi Vert and Trippie Redd to woozy, ambient-adjacent aesthetics; the “Caretaker challenge” propelled TikTok fans from 15-second videos to six-hour helpings of mind-erasing haunted-ballroom music. For the truly committed, the British producer Auntie Flo launched Ambient Flo, a 24-hour online radio station with an optional birdsong overlay. All the while, ambient continued to make inroads into unlikely places. With festivals canceled,
perennially amped-up trance mainstays like Ferry Corsten decided to turn down. Even Diplo—smirking, shirtless, ten-gallon-hatted Diplo—made an ambient album.

Beatless, formless, heavily abstracted music has always comprised a significant portion of my listening, so this was a banner year in my headphones (and on my turntables, too). I was struck, above all, by the many forms ambient music took, and the many forms of expression it enabled. I found new rhythms in the ebb and flow of Bellows’ Undercurrent; I discovered vivid fantasy worlds in Muka’s Water Levels; I encountered a welcome stillness in Chris Abrahams’ Appearance and James Rushford’s Missa Callada / See the World, both meditative albums of solo piano that are, essentially, ambient music by another name.

When I look back on 2020, one of the few fond memories I have of it will be the period this summer that I rose every morning before dawn and walked dirt paths through the countryside near where I live. For a long spell, my soundtrack was Roberto Carlos Lange’s Kite Symphony: Four Variations, a meditation on the skies over Marfa, Texas, whose pastel tones meshed perfectly with my own sunrise scenery. It was an opportunity not just to stretch my legs but to free my mind. These are the 16 albums, including Lange’s, that took me the furthest this year, even when I could venture no further than my own feet could carry me.

Ana Roxanne: Because of a Flower

The Los Angeles musician Ana Roxanne’s second album, and her first for Kranky, draws on a range of traditions: new age, goth, ambient, and even post-rock. Her vocal harmonies are schooled in Hindustani singing; her spacious bass-and-guitar counterpoints are reminiscent of slowcore titans Low; traces of medieval music recall a moment when liturgical music and Eastern European folk could be found filed alongside Cocteau Twins and This Mortal Coil. Yet it all boils down to a music of sparkling purity. Roxanne’s intersex identity frames the album’s themes—the closing track samples a century-old recording of Alessandro Moreschi, one of the last of the castrati—but its message of finding joy in self-knowledge and self-love is universal.

Cosmic Surveillance: Cosmic Surveillance Volume 1

After a few years of lying low, Portland, Oregon’s Joel Shanahan enjoyed an unusually productive year. Under his long-running Golden Donna alias, he released a gorgeous, emotionally complex album of hardware-centric techno in March. Then, as Auscultation, he turned around and dropped an even more nuanced record just two months later, plunging into a shadowy netherworld of bittersweet ambient techno. Come September, he signed his given name to the more experimental Frozen Clock Hovering, where he grappled with depression via chilly, reverberant drones, dank as a moldy basement. Finally, last month, he dusted off his seldom-used Cosmic Surveillance alias for a self-titled album cut from even more Spartan cloth. Cosmic Surveillance joins the bleeps and pings of the BBC Radiophonic Workshop with the stately pads of the Berlin school and the charred circuitry of noise music; it hangs tentatively in the balance between numbing dronescapes and more contemplative harmonic progressions. The music, which Shanahan created by running field recordings through his modular setup, is swathed in static and hiss. That layer of obfuscation lends to its wisful yet guarded expressive character. There’s real beauty here, but it all takes place behind a curtain of ash.

Emily A. Sprague: Hill, Flower, Fog
Where Emily A. Sprague's first two albums were made of soft drones and fuzzy shapes, on Hill, Flower, Fog the Los Angeles musician elicits more clearly defined tones from her modular synths. Pinging brightly, they trace lazy circles in the air, carrying a suggestion of windchimes and woodland flutes, along with all the pastoral reverie those sounds evoke. Recorded during a single week in March, when the reality of the pandemic was just settling in for many in the U.S., the album is meant, she has said, “as a soundtrack to these new days, practices, distances, losses, ends, and beginnings.” Still, the tonalities tend toward major keys, and the textures are uniformly gentle; in response to upheaval, Sprague offers an abiding sense of balance.

Flora Yin-Wong: Holy Palm

Few albums summon a sense of place quite like Flora Yin-Wong’s Holy Palm. Drawn from field recordings and iPhone voice notes taken on the London-born electronic musician’s seemingly never-ending travels, the album pieces together the sounds of gongs, cawing crows, chanting monks, airport announcements, stringed instruments, footsteps in snow, even snippets of grime and UK garage encountered on someone’s car stereo. All these reference points swirl together into black, rolling waves of sound that swell like the winter tide, dotted with the flotsam of everything they have engulfed. It’s a record that could stop you in your tracks in the best of times; in a year as stationary as this, it imbued the very act of travel with dark magic, alluring and threatening in equal measure.

Geneva Skeen: Double Bind

Los Angeles’ Geneva Skeen is a kind of aural collage artist. “My compositional process is entirely reliant on listening to sounds and deciding how they fit together and flow,” she has said. “Rarely does a piece come together with all the materials created specifically for that piece—I’ll borrow from this folder, from that instrument, from another old tape run through a couple loops on the four-track.” On Double Bind, that approach translates to an album whose dynamism belies the idea of ambient’s supposed passivity. Across its seven tracks, she folds in ominous drones, scraped cellos, bells, buzzing organs, and haywire electronics. The mood is frequently oppressive: In “Mirror Glimpse,” terrifying Theremin-like tones recall Jonathan Bepler’s ear-piercing score for Matthew Barney’s Cremaster 3; In “Levelled Ground, Bottomless Pit,” tinny voices suggest intercepted radio transmissions, or perhaps a neighbor’s TV heard through tenement walls, while helicopter rotors throb overhead—a grim picture of the contemporary surveillance state, perhaps. But other tracks, like “The world has no visible order and all I have is the order of my breath...” evoke an uneasy peace out of choral airs and trembling oscillators. Abstract but vividly expressive, Skeen’s shape-shifting musique concrete amounts to a wordless form of storytelling.

Jake Muir: the hum of your veiled voice

There are no hard edges in Jake Muir’s the hum of your veiled voice. Smearing together vinyl samples and field recordings, the album barely betrays its component parts at all. Everything blurs, a pastel swirl of synthesizers, bells, crackling white noise, and innumerable flashes of uncertain provenance, all as fleeting as a stranger’s glance from a moving vehicle. However amorphous, these self-contained universes of sound are rooted in the bodily world. Muir, who completed the album following a move from Los Angeles to Berlin, has said its humid atmospheres were inspired by “gay bathhouses and spas, club back rooms and decadent boudoirs.” There are echoes here of the foggy, Ioamy fantasia of GAS, Phillip Jeck, and Jan Jelinek, but ultimately Muir’s nebulous
forms, forever on the verge of dissipating into nothingness, evoke their own inimitable flavor of fog. Inchoate fantasies played out against closed lids, they feel like snapshots of mystery under cover of darkness.

**KMRU: Peel**

Joseph Kamaru’s *Peel* appears at first like a series of impenetrable matte surfaces, but the more time you spend with these tracks, the more they soften and open up—like monoliths that, up close, turn out to be made entirely of moss. The Kenyan sound artist put out at least a dozen releases this year, including an hour-long installation piece made of environmental recordings and a gorgeous set of wintry synthesizer études, but *Peel* feels like his most important statement to date. Abstracted field recordings and drawn-out tones pile up in onionskin layers of rustle and drone; seemingly static, monochrome expanses gradually reveal rapid-fire rhythmic movements, as well as slower, steadier cycles. The longer these pieces go on, the more you begin hearing things that you’re not sure are really there, as the sounds of birdsong, moving water, and thunder dissolve into an expansive, all-encompassing shimmer.

**Perila: META DOOR L**

Over the past few years, the Russian-born, Berlin-based artist Perila (Alexandra Zakharenko) has established her very own language of whisper and hiss, combining the close-mic’d intimacy of ASMR with the gaseous synths of ambient at its most amorphous. In the course of her prolific year—self-releasing almost monthly, co-curation of the broadcast platform radio.syr.ma, and collaborating with fellow outer-limits traveler Ulla Straus—she seemed to draw inspiration from 2020’s uncertainties. That’s not to say that her music is exactly a balm for these troubled times. Dread lurks at the margins of *META DOOR L*, her tape for Barcelona’s Paralaxe Editions. Based on field recordings made in the forests outside Tbilisi, Georgia, the album suffuses droning synths with muffled clunks, creaking metal, and what might be cawing crows; in places, it sounds like a particularly unsettling remix of the Monument Valley soundtrack. But unlike that video game’s world of Escher-like architecture, Perila’s music contains no right angles—just fog and dust.

**Pinkcourtesyphone: Leaving Everything to Be Desired**

The music Richard Chartier releases under his own name tends toward ultra-minimalism: seismic rumble, electrical hum, and cavernous reverb. It is profoundly austere, a vacuum where emotion implodes. But as Pinkcourtesyphone, Chartier indulges his more sentimental tendencies. He calls it “negative mood music”; sourced from rich orchestral sources that have been stretched and warped into undulating waves of purplish tone, it suggests a strange inversion of easy listening. *Leaving Everything to Be Desired*, the follow-up to 2017’s *Indelicate Slices*, contains elements as outwardly “musical” as anything in his catalog: rosy chords, slow-motion horn fanfare, symphonic strings. Pinkcourtesyphone’s viscous frequencies recall lysergic loopers like the Caretaker and William Basinski; in places, it sounds like he has layered a dozen different John Williams soundtracks, all slowed and blended into a thick, syrupy goo. A heavy undertow runs through all nine tracks, tugging even the most melodic piece (the gorgeous “elaborate patio dining,” featuring a delicate fantasia by Luigi Turra) into the darkest realms of the unconscious. This is a new spin on sleep music, offering the sonic equivalent of a weighted blanket.
Rafael Toral & João Pais Filipe: Jupiter and Beyond

Rafael Toral has spent much of his three-decade recording career exploring space as both a physical and metaphorical concept. On titles like *Saturn, Moon Field*, and his multi-part *Space* series, he has used electric guitar and electronics to sculpt evocative, almost tactile drones that seem as much a product of three-dimensional space as they do time. *On Jupiter and Beyond*, he keeps pushing outward alongside percussionist João Pais Filipe. Channeling fountains of dissonance, it sounds in places like *Sunn O)))* without the exaggerated low end; elsewhere, it's reminiscent of the "isolationist" ambient of the early 1990s. Utilizing just gongs, bells, and feedback, Toral sketches out a world of activity teeming with suggestion of vinelike tendrils wrapped around glassy stems, and mechanical birds roosting on metal branches, and, of course, spherical craft drifting past enormous orbs, engulfed in the silence of the interplanetary void.

Roberto Carlos Lange: Kite Symphony, Four Variations

When the pandemic hit the U.S. last March, Brooklyn's Roberto Carlos Lange and his wife, the visual artist Kristi Sword, were in Marfa, Texas, working on a multi-media piece involving mylar kites and recordings of the wind. Unable to get home, and with support from the nonprofit arts organization Ballroom Marfa, they settled in for the long haul, to see where the project might take them. *Kite Symphony, Four Variations* is a snapshot of a much more sprawling project, one involving "ephemeral sculptures" and the desert landscape itself. But as a listening experience, the four-track, 32-minute album is elegantly self-contained. To make the album, Lange—best known as the experimental electro-pop singer-songwriter Helado Negro—worked with graphic scores drawn by Sword, utilizing field recordings and homemade instruments fashioned from gourds and found objects; local musicians Jeannin Dara and Rob Mazurek contributed viola and cornet. By turns lyrical and purely atmospheric, the results are both intimate and expansive: in one moment, a buzzing bee brushes against a mic in the dirt; in the next, strings, horn, and a piano in a locked-up church take on the pinkish-blue hue of a dusty prairie sunset.

Roland Kayn: A Pan-Air Music

The late German composer Roland Kayn espoused a concept he called "self-sufficient cybernetic music." His job, he believed, was to devise an arcane electronic system, hit record, and walk away. Much like his acolytes Autechre, he was undaunted by sprawl: His 2009 piece *A Little Electronic Milky Way of Sound* is nearly 14 hours long and bracingly atonal, both gorgeous and impenetrable. A 6x6CD set was reissued in 2017, six years after his death, kicking off a reappraisal of his work that continues today. *A Pan-Air Music*, recorded in 2003 but never released until now, is less intimidating; often, it's positively enveloping. Just 87 minutes long—a breeze, compared to some of Kayn's work—it trades Milky Way's glassy dissonance for burnished bell tones and luminous drones. The graceful pace suggests the rhythms of whale song; ringing harmonies lend a grounding consonance. Few recordings have come so close to approximating the music of the spheres.
Sarah Davachi: Cantus, Descant

Recorded on four different pipe organs, reed organ, and electric organ, Sarah Davachi’s *Cantus, Descant* boasts her most sumptuous set of materials yet, but it shares the same patient method of inquiry inherent in all her music: *What happens when two tones brush up against one another?* Here, the answer plays out in a cascade of vibrations—a forest of minuscule trilling motions set against a broad plain of stillness. As is customary in her work, these 17 pieces are ruminative and slow-moving, with minor changes playing out against held tones. Much of the action seems to take place between or even behind the notes: in the soft clunk of hand-pumped organ bellows, the flutter of dissonance between two microtones, or even the rumble of a car outside. Davachi has said that the album was influenced by her thinking about impermanence, endings, and the passing of time; she speaks of the five-part “Stations” scattered throughout the album as meditations on different states of being. In a year in which so much of life was placed on hold, *Cantus, Descant* offered a more rewarding kind of pause.

The Soft Pink Truth: Shall We Go on Sinning So That Grace May Increase?

Each of Drew Daniel’s albums as the Soft Pink Truth has taken the form of a question, among them: *Do You Want New Wave or Do You Want the Truth?*, *Why Do the Heathen Rage?*, and *Why Pay More?* Daniel’s most ambitious solo album yet, *Shall We Go on Sinning So That Grace May Increase?* takes its title from Romans 6:4, in which Paul the Apostle investigates the nature of God’s forgiveness. For Daniel, an atheist, the question became an opportunity to rethink fixed ideas and creative habits in an era of rage and helplessness. Gathering friends, peers, and chosen family—his husband (and partner in the duo Matsro) M.C. Schmidt, percussionist Sarah Hennies, Horse Lords saxophonist Andrew Bernstein, and the singers Angel Deradoorian, Colin Self, and Jana Hunter—Daniel set aside his customary glitch techno and conceptual hijinks in favor of lush, lyrical electro-acoustic compositions. Crosscut by echoes of classical minimalism and deep house, it’s not all strictly ambient, but the overall effect is one of endless bliss and dissolving boundaries—particularly in those instances where his singers’ vocal harmonies carry the music skyward. Though Daniel completed *Shall We Go on Sinning* long before the coronavirus arrived, the album was perfectly suited to this moment of involuntary solitude, taking a genre synonymous with interiority and using it to reimagine the possibilities of togetherness.

Space Afrika: hybtwibt?

Where so much ambient is linked to the natural world—the wind and the stars, the pastoral and the sublime—Space Afrika’s *hybtwibt?* draws its energy from the city. Created in four days at the beginning of June, as Black Lives Matter protests were gathering momentum across the U.S. and UK, the Manchester duo’s self-released mixtape captures the flux of the contemporary metropolis in a melange of voices, siren’s, and abstract clatter, all nestled within an unstable weave of synths and samples. Reverb tails are frozen in mid-air; short looping snippets of soul and R&B tangle like wool scarves caught in a subway turnstile. The juxtaposition of hazy vocals with white-noise hiss sometimes resembles Burial, but despite the occasional rhythm, like the backwards trap beat of “wve,” this isn’t dance music. Field recordings from demonstrations situate it firmly in the turmoil of 2020; punctuated by the occasional sob or scream, it’s shot through with an overwhelming sense of sorrow. In “oh baby,” a child sobs beneath swelling strings and a mournful a cappella loop. “We are Black people and we shouldn’t have to feel like this. We
shouldn’t have to protest because y’all are treating us wrong.” A few seconds later, the child’s voice returns, even more
disconsolate. “It’s a shame that our fathers and mothers are killed, and we can’t even see them anymore. It’s a shame that we have
to go to the graveyard and bury them.”

**Ulla: Tumbling Towards a Wall**

Like Perila, Ulla (aka Ulla Straus) likes to tread the outside edge of perception: Her music feels at once tactile, like fistfuls of earth,
and immaterial, the stuff of pure shadow. (In fact, the two musicians worked together multiple times in 2020, releasing two EPs as
*Perila and Ulla* and another as *Log*.) On *Tumbling Towards a Wall*, Ulla’s concise, quiet album for the adventurous label
*Experiences Ltd.* features rivulets of hiss carve soft channels through fogged air. Occasionally, she will harness the ghost of a beat beneath
her filmy abstractions, claiming her place in a lineage that stretches through Oval, Dettinger, and Actress. Elsewhere, she plays
with abstraction at its most lyrical—a conductor of dust motes, sculpting silty clouds of near-nothingness into billowing
formations.