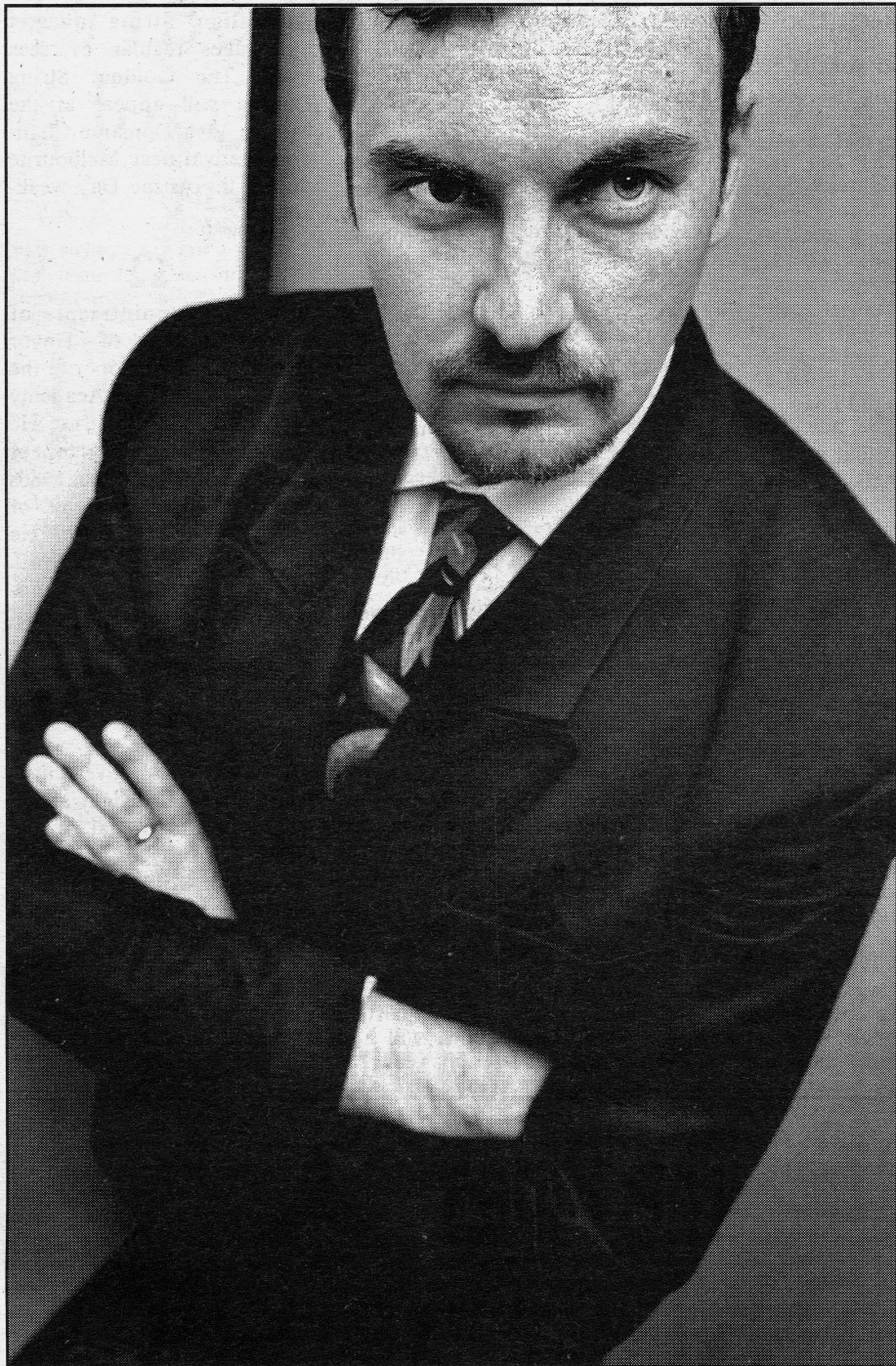


Ambient anniversary on the airwaves



George Cruickshank . . . "The whole point of the program is to go beyond the boundaries that limit people's understanding of music." Photograph by ELIZABETH DOBBIE

TONIGHT, for the 232nd time, the spatial sounds of ambient music will be sent over the FM airwaves, and late night listeners will hear: "Hi, and welcome to *Ultima Thule*. I'm George Cruickshank . . ."

"George who?" you may ask, if you're not a late-night radio listener. But there are many Sydneysiders who could tell you, from high-school students to 30-something inner-city dwellers to northern suburbs retirees.

When Cruickshank goes on air at 11 pm, in the 2MBS studio at St Leonards, it will mark the eighth anniversary of a program that began in 1989 as a way of letting people know

Mike Oldfield and Tangerine Dream.

In his first year out of university, Cruickshank had bought so many CDs that he decided the best way of hearing them was to start up his own radio show on a community station.

"I contacted 2NBC [southern Sydney] and said, 'I want to give vent to my creative urges,' and they said, 'Fine, you can start next week,'" he recalls. "That shocked me, because I had never touched a control panel in my life. For the first six months I prerecorded every program because I was so terrified of making a mistake on air."

In the year he was at 2NBC, one of the only other ambient programs in Sydney, on JJJ, was cancelled. Cruickshank determined that a larger audience should be able to hear the type of music he describes as having "a sense of resonant space and atmosphere", so he and his program moved lock and stock to 2MBS.

Seven years later he is still there, with fans so interested in the show that it has become weekly instead of fortnightly and starts two hours earlier than its original time of 1 am.

Ambient music is frequently dismissed as New Age fluff, but don't tell George that or you will get a serious dressing down.

"Ambience, for me, is not whale music and it is not crystal noises," he says. "It is not only quiet music that just has rhythm and no vocals. I will play anything from Byzantine chant through to Kate Bush through to film soundtracks through to works of people like Dead Can Dance and Cocteau Twins.

"I like juxtaposing music from different periods. I play Dead Can Dance, who are influenced by medieval music, with a piece of Gregorian chant, which in terms of its resonant space is very similar.

"I also play a lot of contemporary classical music by Arvo Pärt and Gorecki. People feel the program has a real classical sensibility about it. I don't necessarily agree with them, but maybe all those years at 2MBS are rubbing off."

The name of the program, *Ultima Thule*, comes from an ancient Greek term for the air in the Arctic Circle, or "the land beyond the realms of the known world". Cruickshank thinks that is a perfect explanation of what he is trying to achieve.

He says the whole point of the program is to go beyond the boundaries that limit people's understanding of music – to play work that they might have known existed, but would never have gone out and bought if they had not heard it first.

Many people who call him are in creative industries, he says, but the call he most vividly remembers was from a mathematician in his 80s who, after having heard a contemporary violin raga by Shankar, phoned up in tears saying it was the most mathematically pure piece of music he had ever heard, and asking where he could buy it.

The show has also created a spin-off record label called Archon Music, on which Cruickshank has released six CDs by Australian artists in the past five years. However, he decided last week that the label was not financially sustainable. Profits were negligible due to difficulty in promotion and distribution, and the mounting debts meant he had to return to full-time paid work.

Only 10 per cent of what Cruickshank

plays is Australian, but he is unapologetic. Australia is only a small part of the music world, he says. As a result, it not only produces less but has proportionately less music of internationally acceptable quality.

"If it's of an international standard, I'll play it, but I won't slavishly broadcast music just because it's from Sydney or Australia," he says. "I'm not musically jingoistic in that way."

Broadcast No. 232 tonight will include work from Spain that combines elements of flamenco, Arabic and medieval music, plus – as a birthday treat for Cruickshank and his audience – the Australian radio premiere of a piece from Arvo Pärt's *Te Deum*, which will not be released officially until March 10.

The eighth birthday broadcast of Ultima Thule airs between 11 pm and 1 am on 2MBS 102.5FM. The program also has a page on the World Wide Web: <http://www.zip.com.au/gene/ultima.htm>

JUDY ADAMSON talks to the man
who has given ambient music a
home on the radio.

what was out there in the ambient music scene. It was also a way for Cruickshank to hear what was in his massive CD collection.

He blames a university friend for introducing him to "the four pillars of my university education": the work of ambient composers Vangelis, Jean-Michel Jarre,