



R.E.M.



BY ANTHONY DECURTIS

For a while in the early eighties, it sometimes seemed that nothing in the world of music was as important as R.E.M. Maybe even outside the world of music, too. This was well before the band had enjoyed million-selling albums, huge radio hits, and groundbreaking videos. Devotion to R.E.M. was far less clinical and far more intimate than such quantitative measures. Indeed, for years it seemed that everybody who loved R.E.M.'s music had personally met the members of the band, or at least seen them perform in the dingy new-wave clubs and out-of-the-way holes-in-the-wall the band played relentlessly. The Clash may have been branded "the Only Band That Matters," but there can be no doubt about it: R.E.M. mattered. R.E.M. mattered a lot.

From the release in 1981 of the band's debut independent single, "Radio Free Europe" b/w "Sitting Still," R.E.M. — drummer Bill Berry, guitarist Peter Buck, bassist Mike Mills, and singer Michael Stipe — represented a set of possibilities that enraptured an ever-growing coterie of rabid fans and inspired succeeding generations of bands. Ronald Reagan had recently been elected president, John Lennon had been assassinated, and the country seemed to be growing colder and meaner, less tolerant. The gigantism that would characterize the eighties and nineties — blockbuster culture, the triumph of commercialism over all other aspects of success, political bullying — was beginning to assume its muscle-bound shape. All the achievements and hopes of sixties progressivism were about to be attacked and, in many instances, rolled back.

In a quiet, determined, immensely effective, and deeply affecting way, R.E.M. stood counter to all those trends. The band's lyrics may have been impossible to understand literally, but their emotional meaning could not have been clearer. Whatever Stipe intended to say in "Radio Free Europe,"

his clarion vocal and the song's surging choruses seemed to demand a radio that was freer, more adventurous, more *meaningful* than the lowest-common-denominator corporate swill that was increasingly clogging the airwaves. That R.E.M. would play an essential role in energizing a new network of underground college-radio stations that were supportive of local music and open to new sounds from everywhere was just one of the band's contributions to the music scene of its day. Fans had heard their own "Radio Free Europe" — a blast of revolutionary fervor broadcast behind enemy lines to rally a previously dormant population. "The pilgrimage," as R.E.M. would declare on its 1983 debut album, *Murmur*, had "gained momentum," and there would be no stopping it.

The almost comical understatement of *Murmur's* title was, of course, entirely intentional. Other important albums of that era had far more portentous titles: *War*, *Thriller*, and *Born in the USA*, for example. It was a time that encouraged self-consciously big statements, garishly bright colors, lurid ambitions. R.E.M. rejected all of that. The band moved by indirection and subterfuge, confident that the power of its message required no bluster. In the artwork for their records, and even in the videos they had begun, however reluctantly, to make as MTV emerged as a force, the band members were only intermittently visible. They surfaced in and out of shadows like ghosts in a dream. And their reserve proved seductive. Dedication to R.E.M. was passed along by breathless word of mouth, from fan to fan, from town to town, like a talisman: "If you believe in the power of music to change lives, you have to hear this band."

To the degree that R.E.M.'s lyrics were decipherable, they seemed to convey ideals that, once again, fought the prevailing assumptions of the time. In a song tellingly called "Talk About the Passion," Stipe softly asserted that "Not everyone can carry the

R.E.M.: Peter Buck, Mike Mills, Bill Berry, and Michael Stipe (from left), 1986



Michael Stipe and Peter Buck perform with R.E.M. in New York, 1984.



Berry, Buck, Stipe, and Mills, at Stipe's house in Athens, 1986

weight of the world" – a call for compassion and a principled rebuke of the every-man-for-himself selfishness of the burgeoning Reagan era. In "Shaking Through," another song from *Murmur*, Stipe simply asked, "Could it be that one small voice/Doesn't count in the world?" Against the bombast of that era, R.E.M.'s implied answer was that one small voice could indeed make an indelible mark, and the band was in the process of demonstrating exactly how.

Needless to say, none of these symbolic resonances would have meant anything without music that was capable of lending them significance. Like so many great bands before and after them, R.E.M. sounded entirely fresh and instantly familiar. The two bands evoked most often when critics wrote about R.E.M. – and R.E.M. was the very definition of a critics' darling – were the Byrds and the Velvet Underground, two groups whose monumental stature is now considered undeniable but who had largely fallen by the wayside in the pre-CD, pre-Internet, pre-Rock and Roll Hall of Fame world of the early eighties. To listeners who knew that earlier music, R.E.M. echoed a hallowed era of rock & roll while also connecting itself to more recent artists like Patti Smith and Television, who drew on similar influences.

For those reasons, much of the writing about the band, and even some of the band's records, could seem forbiddingly hip. If you were unwilling to enter what sometimes must have appeared like a hermetic cult of overinterpretive acolytes, you could feel excluded – that is, until you went to see R.E.M. live. Those shows were ecstatic expressions of rock & roll conviction. R.E.M.'s home, the then relatively

secluded college town of Athens, Georgia, had gained a reputation for off-kilter, rhythmically charged dance bands like the B-52's, Pylon, Love Tractor, the Method Actors, and the Side Effects. As self-aware as Athens' small-town folksiness could be, all those bands eschewed punk aggression and hipster diffidence for high-energy, art-inflected fun. You could go see a dozen Athens bands and never hear a ballad, or a slow tempo. R.E.M. differed from those bands – the group played ballads, for one thing – but dancing was one hometown tradition R.E.M. enthusiastically honored.

On record, R.E.M. might have seemed like “Poets of the Wheat,” as one particularly good bootleg of the band was wittily titled, but onstage the band members were anything but mystic Southern recluses. By the end of the band's shows, it sometimes seemed as if the stage was going to levitate. Mills's bass lines lifted the band's jangling melodies while Buck's rhythm leads propelled the tempos, and his leaps and windmills recalled Pete Townshend of the Who far more than Tom Verlaine. Drummer Bill Berry didn't so much anchor the band as gallop along with it. And far from seeming remote and enigmatic (a term attached to Stipe in those days as reliably as a Homeric epithet), the singer proved himself to be a compelling rock frontman. The band's sets could seem like one long ringing song, and they often ended with much of the audience dancing right alongside the band onstage, everybody sweat-soaked, smiling, and bracingly satisfied.

From that illustrious start through the early nineties, R.E.M. reigned as what Buck once termed “the acceptable



Stipe demonstrating how to twirl

edge of the unacceptable stuff.” Millions of fans could respond to the band's music, which also served as an introduction to dozens of aesthetically adventurous, if less commercial, artists. The band's 1986 album, *Lifes Rich Pageant*, brought the group its first U.S. gold record; the 1987 followup, *Document*, went platinum. The band became international superstars in 1991 with *Out of Time* and its massive hit single, “Losing My Religion.” The next year, R.E.M. produced what is still its finest and most moving statement, *Automatic for the People*, an indisputable masterpiece.

The acclaim and the sales aside, however, R.E.M. never stopped being a band that moved only according to its



Berry, Mills, Buck, and Stipe, down south exploring the Georgia red clay, 1986



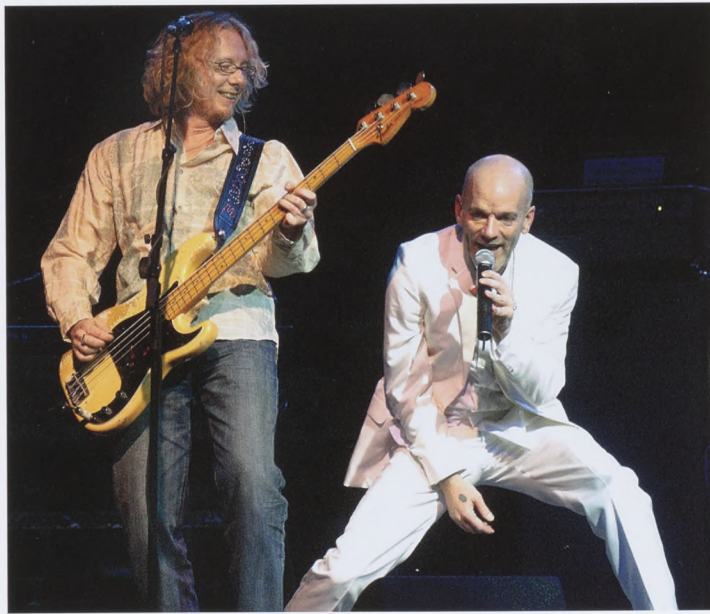
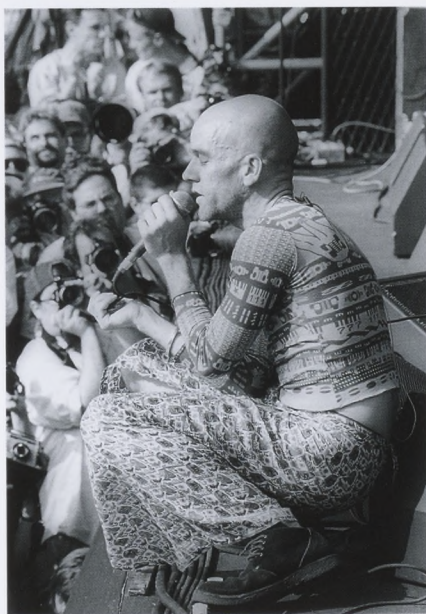
Stipe, Mills, Berry, Buck, and R.E.M. sideman Peter Holsapple (from left) on MTV Unplugged, 1991

internal dictates. Beyond its many hits and songs like “It’s the End of the World as We Know It (and I Feel Fine)” and “Man on the Moon,” which have entered American culture in ways that can’t be measured by sales or chart positions, it is the group’s commitment to its own artistic vision that is its greatest legacy. That’s certainly what the many, many artists who have taken inspiration from R.E.M. – Nirvana, Pearl Jam, and Radiohead among them – have learned, and it’s still how the band proceeds.

Bill Berry left R.E.M. in 1997 after suffering a brain aneurysm two years earlier, and since then R.E.M. has carried on as a trio, working with other drummers. Over this

past decade, the band has released a series of albums that, while not selling as well as the band did at its commercial peak, have maintained its reputation for carving its own artistic path. Onstage, the band remains as potent as ever.

R.E.M.’s popularity may shift, but it’s unlikely that its way of making music will ever change. The band has created a body of work of ongoing significance by looking inside itself first and then letting the world find what it will in the songs. That’s not a formula for hits, though hits have sometimes come. But it has been R.E.M.’s route to greatness, and for the wonder that its music continues to be. ❏



FROM LEFT: Stipe at the Tibetan Freedom Concert, RFK Stadium, 1998; Mills and Stipe on the opening of R.E.M.’s Vote for Change Tour, Philadelphia, 2004. OPPOSITE: Buck, Mills, Berry, and Stipe, 1994.

