



The Corner and the Spotlight:

R.E.M. COMES OF AGE BY ANTHONY DECURTIS

A

32 few years back I attended a songwriters' night at the Bottom Line in New York. On the bill were Richard Thompson, Shawn Colvin, Dave Alvin and, the person whom I came to see, Barrett Strong. Strong had enjoyed a brief career as a recording artist in the early 1960s and then again in the mid-1970s, but he is best known—to those who remember him at all—as one of the mainstays of Motown's great stable of songwriters. His live performances are rare.

The evening's format was that all four artists would be on stage simultaneously, would respond in rotation to the host's questions about their songwriting process, and would perform a song after each brief interview. The format promised personal revelation—we were supposed to get the stories behind the songs. Thompson, Colvin, and Alvin are all artists whom I admire, and their performances that night were first-rate. But Strong's performances were truly extraordinary—all the more so for the differences they revealed between his aesthetic assumptions and practices and those of the other guests.

As each round progressed, Colvin and Alvin—and Thompson as well, though to a lesser degree—would describe their songwriting in deeply per-

sonal terms, often evoking all the trappings of romantic agony: long periods of unsparing self-examination; late-night battles with writer's block; music reaching and inspiring them in their profound isolation; painful relationships ultimately redeemed by the act of artistic creation.

Strong, however, indulged in no such self-mythologizing. His stories were the very soul of simplicity. He was at work one afternoon and the Temptations needed a song, so he sat down and wrote "I Wish It Would Rain." On another day, he needed to write one for Marvin Gaye. That became "I Heard It Through the Grapevine." He sang those songs beautifully, accompanying himself on piano, and they were the most satisfying and most rousing moments of the evening. He might just as well have mentioned such songs as "Just My Imagination (Running Away With Me)," "Papa Was a Rolling Stone," "War," or "I Can't Get Next to You." All are passionate, poetic, and compelling; all were written with collaborators and in strict adherence to Motown's merciless commercial demands.

The show's host was dumbfounded. However gently, he continually attempted to bring Strong back within the evening's romantic frame. Wasn't "I Wish It Would Rain" written about a specific woman? Not really, Strong shyly admitted. Maybe a friend had once told him a story like that, he added, trying to be helpful, but he couldn't really remember. Didn't he find the assembly-line aspect of Motown oppressive? Well, no, because he was able to write for a variety of artists and some of the best singers around.

The seeming paradox was glaring: Strong's songs were both artistically the best work performed on that stage that night, and the ones generated with the keenest, most unforgiving awareness of the marketplace.

In the arts—and especially the popular arts—the relationship between commerce and creativity is enormously complex. Of course, Motown represents an extreme example, both in the sheer quality of the songs the label's artists produced and in the unstinting commercial expectations Motown raised for every song. But, as I never tire of pointing out, they call it popu-

lar music because people are supposed to like it, and Motown took that credo very seriously.

In large part because its youthful audience thrives on such stereotypes, popular music trades on every conceivable romantic notion of the artist grappling with inner demons in a ravaging private struggle that excludes any consideration of potential audience. But no one really creates in such exquisite isolation; if they ever did or ever could, which is extremely unlikely, they certainly don't now. The market has so thoroughly permeated every aspect of American culture in the past twenty years that anyone who believes it is possible to create utterly independently of its strictures is delusional.

Which is not to say that being aware of the market or even responding to it is identical to being its slave. Even the tiny bohemian music scene in

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the college town of Athens, Georgia, that produced the B-52's and R.E.M. twenty years ago was conscious both of how it was being perceived by the New York media and how rifts in the local audience would ultimately determine the fate of local bands. Throughout its history, R.E.M. has followed its own internal impulses to a far greater degree than most bands who achieve anything remotely close to its success. Still, from its earliest days, the group believed it could attract an audience beyond Athens and took the critical steps to do that. Reaching that audience without compromising the band's evolving vision and identity was an essential element of R.E.M.'s rise to prominence.

Since the early 1980s, it's become much more difficult for musicians to emerge from out-of-the-way places and become successful in a way that hasn't been inscribed by market economics. No place is "out of nowhere" any-

more. With the proliferation of cable television and the rise of the Internet, every place is plugged in—and, more significantly, plugged into the market. The music industry has become expert at capitalizing on success, taking artists who might ordinarily sell five hundred thousand or one million albums and promoting them until they sell five or ten times as many. What the industry has almost entirely failed at in recent years is sustaining interest in those artists once they've attained those extraordinary sales. And anyone who doesn't quickly demonstrate the ability to sell in those kinds of numbers has a shortlived recording career, indeed. The notion of a slow-building success of the sort that R.E.M. enjoyed, in which a band maintains strict creative control over every aspect of its work, gradually builds an audience, and takes four albums to get a gold record, is hardly possible today.

The following excerpt from the biography of R.E.M. that I've been working on describes the band's origins, beginning in 1981 in Athens. The music scene in Athens had been started by art students at the University of Georgia and their friends; by the time R.E.M. formed in 1980, that scene was well in motion. With singer Michael Stipe, who was himself an art student, serving as the linch pin, R.E.M. essentially took the mystery and spontaneity of the art bands, but rejected the irony and experimentalism. It was the first time, though hardly the last, when the band would be, in guitarist Peter Buck's words, "the acceptable edge of the unacceptable stuff."

At the time depicted in this passage, Stipe, Buck, bassist Mike Mills, and drummer Bill Berry had just debuted by playing at a local party. They had lined up some other gigs, and now, they needed a name for their band. The process of picking a name itself had commercial, as well as aesthetic, implications, as the passage makes clear.

With the prospect of two club dates looming, Berry, Buck, Mills, and Stipe had to get serious about coming up with a name for their band, or at least as seri-

ous as they could get about anything at the time. Slut Bank, for example, was considered as a band name, then rejected. So was the Male Nurses. “We couldn’t think of a name at first,” Buck said in *Creem* in 1984. “I liked Twisted Kites. Then we thought maybe we should have a name that was real offensive, like Cans of Piss. That was right up there at the top. Then we thought we didn’t want to be called something that we couldn’t tell our parents or [would] have to mumble. R.E.M. just popped out of the dictionary one night. We needed something that wouldn’t typecast us because, hell, we didn’t even know what we were gonna do. So R.E.M. was nice—it didn’t lock us into anything.”

In a typical gesture that early detractors of the band found infuriatingly precious, the members of R.E.M. routinely insisted that their band name meant “nothing,” with Stipe often adding “We just like the dots.” In picking a name that, as Buck put it, “popped out of the dictionary,” “wouldn’t typecast us,” and “didn’t lock us into anything,” the foursome made the sort of decision that would characterize their rise: the choice moved things along—they would now be able to make advertising posters, for example, and speak with club owners around the region—while committing them to hardly anything and leaving open as many options as possible.

It was a choice both cautious and bold. What, after all, was a band called R.E.M. supposed to sound like? The openness of the name presented freedom and a challenge. But whether those three letters magically popped out as Michael Stipe thumbed through the dictionary or not, all four members of the band were smart enough to know that the initials R.E.M. stood for “rapid eye movement,” a term that specifies “the rapid, periodic, jerky movement of the eyes during certain stages of the sleep cycle when dreaming takes place.”

The choice was instinctively right. Even though the band’s music at this point was nothing special, the name R.E.M. suggested a kind of imaginative environment the group could inhabit and evoke, something to aspire to, in a way. Just as people do, bands often become their names. It may simply be a coincidence that dreaming and travel, motion and introspection, physicality and a richly sensual surrealism are all recurring elements within the music that

R.E.M. would create for the next two decades. And it may even be a coincidence that all of those aspects flow easily from the poetic idea that the deepest state of sleep generates both nervous, fluttering movements and an overwhelming profusion of imagery, the bodily eyes responding almost erotically as the mind’s eye yields its visions. But, coincidence or not, they named themselves R.E.M., and that is who they became.

On June 4, 1981 at Tyrone’s, a little over a year after the band’s debut, I saw R.E.M. for the first time. It was a Thursday night, and in the immortal tradition of college towns, the weekend was well under way—everywhere the talk was of parties and bands and clubs.

Located near the edges of both downtown Athens and the UGA campus, Tyrone’s was a woody college bar with exposed rafters and a dance floor in front of the stage. It had opened in January of 1979 and, in an adventurous departure from standard Athens club fare, started booking so-called New Wave bands right around the time of R.E.M.’s first date there in April of 1980. New Wave represented the mainstream, more commercially viable wing of what had been the caustic punk movement. Tyrone’s, similarly, sought to bridge the gap between the rarefied tastes of the art school aesthetes at the University of Georgia and the more conventional preferences of the college party crowd.

In the relatively brief time the group had been together, R.E.M. had come to own Tyrone’s—not to say the entire town of Athens. The band had played the club at least fifteen times, drawing larger and larger crowds and gaining a significant local reputation. Most notably, R.E.M. was able to draw the frat guys, sorority girls, and standard-issue college kids who found Athens art bands like Pylon, Love Tractor, and Limbo District too challenging, too weird, or just too off-putting. This was R.E.M.’s first manifestation of the definition Peter Buck would off-handedly provide for the band years later: “We’re the acceptable edge of the unacceptable stuff.”

The crowd at Tyrone’s on this night was just the sort of mix the club aspired to. Ambassadors from the underground, garbed in the Athens bohemian-

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an uniform of cleverly assembled thrift store duds, moved among students in relaxed preppy fare, everybody out for a night of their version of fun. The place was close to filled, though not jam-packed—R.E.M. would be playing another, later set—and everyone’s attention became riveted once the band took the stage. This was not a crowd that had merely come to hang out at a club, content to hear or ignore whoever ambled onto the stage. This was a crowd that had come to see a specific band. Still, the tone of their attention was not so much intense as welcoming, as if some friends had just dropped by the house. When R.E.M. started playing—a sloppy cacophony of evocatively familiar melodies, tuneful bass lines, bashing drums and Michael Stipe’s jaggedly punctuated vocals—the dancing began.

Stipe danced, too, his skinny hips shook, and his hair—an improbable construction that was long, thick, and curly on top and in front, short everywhere else—endlessly fell into and flew off his face. His dancing took inspiration from and inspired the dancing taking place in front of him on the floor. Guitarist Peter Buck, who still suffered from terrific stage fright—sometimes to the point of vomiting before the band took the stage—ventured the occasional windmill, the odd leap, but otherwise was content to remain relatively still, as if veering between bravado and insecurity. Mills and Berry played with their characteristic reliability: the one with a grace, precision, and inventiveness so subtle it was easy to miss, the other merrily bashing away, at times driving the band, at other times desperately chasing it.

I was in town that weekend to write a story about the Athens scene for *Rolling Stone*, and I still have my notes from R.E.M.’s performance that night, which ran for perhaps an hour. They read as follows: “4-piece band—curly, red-haired singer, bass, guitar, drums—power pop sound. Much more traditional rock & roll sound than that of typical Athens band... Byrds-like sound, too. Buddy Holly-like vocals, moptop haircuts on the guitarist and bassist. Singer uses more New Wave moves than anything else, hiccuping vocals with jerking spasmodic stage moves. Cover of ‘There She Goes Again.’ Less distinctive than

most Athens bands, but more immediately accessible, engaging—real positive, high energy. Drummer and bassist sing background vocals. Band has a large Athens following. Singer can be Dylanesque, a tough folkie, but always with the Buddy Holly feel. R.E.M. does a rockabilly number, something no other Athens band would touch without a healthy dose of irony.”

I instantly responded to R.E.M. that night, and when I reread my notes sixteen years later I was struck by their nearly deadpan quality—however unintentionally hilarious in retrospect the description of Michael Stipe as “Dylanesque, a tough folkie, but always with the Buddy Holly feel” may be. The clinical tone derives partly from my desire to get the information down simply and accurately, and partly, I think, from my desire to conform to the tastes of the people around me that weekend. I was afraid to make my enthusiasm too obvious for fear of embarrassing myself.

Athens’ tastemakers took a far more detached view of R.E.M. My guide to Athens for the weekend was Michael Lachowski of Pylon. Earlier in the day, he had introduced me to the members of Love Tractor, his current favorite band, and he and I were going to explore the club scene that was beginning to burgeon in the town. We intentionally caught R.E.M.’s early set, saving the night’s climax for an appearance by the Atlanta band Vietnam at the 40 Watt Club—a much edgier venue.

Lachowski and virtually everyone else I met in Athens that weekend made it clear that R.E.M. was a “pop band,” as opposed to an “art band,” and, as such, was not really to be taken seriously. An essential sense of fairness required that we drop in to see R.E.M., but catching Vietnam—who, in truth, really were very good—was meant to be the night’s most meaningful point. Part of the resentment—condescension may be a better word—toward R.E.M. in Athens had its source in aesthetics. Most of the other Athens bands knew little and cared less about the infectious style of rock & roll R.E.M. was beginning to define. But jealousy was also part of it. In a relatively short time, R.E.M. had become the most popular band on the scene, and excited all the competitive feelings such a quick rise inevitably brings forth. “There was

always huge success for R.E.M.,” says Lachowski in retrospect. “There was never a time when you would say anything except, ‘R.E.M. is huge.’ It was true when they were just playing Tyrone’s here in Athens, because from the start they got so many people into what they were doing.”

That early response instilled a deep sense of confidence in R.E.M. “From the first time we got together, I thought we wrote and played really interesting stuff,” Buck told me in 1996. “And we had such immediate feedback. At those open rehearsals, where everyone we knew would come by and watch us play, everyone thought we were great. People were acting like it was something really impressive.”

R.E.M.’s instant popularity profoundly altered the complicated social dynamics of an extremely social town. “The genesis of the Athens scene was originally about the gay aesthetic, which ran underneath everything,” says Mark Cline of Love Tractor. “We were all these little sissy bands playing really weird music. Then R.E.M. came along, and we were so impressed—‘God, they can really play this stuff and they don’t sound like any of us. Michael really can sing. What a novelty, we’re seeing real rock & roll.’ Then, of course, we’d

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be like, ‘Well, we’ve seen enough,’ and go back into our little aesthete world and be ugly—I was definitely a little art school snit. But R.E.M.’s big success in Athens was the resurrection of macho rock & roll: the giant penis conquerers! Chicks went to see R.E.M., and they were looking at the band to get laid—there was a real smell of testosterone in the air. Believe me, with us and Pylon and the B-52’s, there never was that.”

“Totally, totally,” agrees Athens denizen and photographer Sandra Lee Phipps with glee, when told of Cline’s description of how R.E.M. had introduced testosterone to the Athens scene. “It was a big issue with people because

at the time it really wasn't that cool to be so testosterone-oriented," she says. "Everything had been so bisexual or unsexual or androgynous like Talking Heads or something. But R.E.M. initially was about girls and cars. They were four guys, and all the girls would come and scream. My friends made up these little cards that had a picture of the band playing and on them they wrote, 'Quien es mas macho?'—you had to pick which one of them was most macho. That was our statement about their being totally about guy rock, whereas Pylon had a lead singer who was a woman and the B-52's were totally about women—or whatever. But R.E.M. was definitely the testosterone band in Athens. It was like The Who was in town. It was that traditional, straight-guy rock thing, and all four of them had it—even Michael."

It wasn't really about looks. The four members of R.E.M. looked cool, to be sure, and were handsome enough. But a lot of the heat surrounding them was generated by the way they carried themselves. Very quickly their attitude about being in a band had shifted, based on the reception they had garnered both locally and in the few trips they had made out of town. They were always modest and friendly, self-effacing even, but the idea of what R.E.M. could be had come to loom large for them. In a quiet way, they had decided that what they were doing was important. It was fine for them to disparage the band in private conversation or even in public, but don't you dare try. If you did, you risked your standing with them—they were very unforgiving in that regard. Without being obvious about it in any way, they insisted on being taken seriously, acted as if they were part of something significant, and made you feel that being around them was something to be valued, something special. It was all quite compelling—and sexually enticing.

From the very start, Stipe was extremely seductive, his shyness and vulnerability off-stage an alluring contrast to his energy and command as a performer. His charisma referenced the sensitive celebrity of wounded 1950s movie stars like James Dean and Montgomery Clift—he drew you in rather than imposed himself upon you, made you feel that, somehow, he needed you but was too self-imprisoned ever to ask—but he was afflicted with none of

their self-destructiveness. He was far too controlled and self-protective for that, revealing whatever aspect of himself or version of himself he wanted to in any particular situation and keeping the rest concealed. "To give away everything is never good at any time," Stipe told me in 1984. "Even in a marriage or a love affair, you never reveal everything to that other person, no matter what. There's always something you return to yourself." Conscious of his image, he was smart enough to feel slightly embarrassed by what he jokingly called his "sad puppy" appeal—and he was also smart enough to exploit it. He was in the process of becoming the sort of figure that could only have arisen in the wake of punk: the reluctant rock star.

Before punk's essential deconstruction of everything rock & roll had previously meant, it would have been considered ridiculous, an impossible contradiction, to think that anyone who set out to be the lead singer of a band would somehow want or need to elude the spotlight that accompanied that sought-after role. But Stipe managed to make that contradiction credible. As a spectator, you didn't so much envy or stand in awe of his prominence as sympathize with his struggle. When he got on stage and smiled and shimmied and had a good time, you breathed a sigh of relief. It was like a triumph of the human spirit, as if the ability to accept and enjoy tremendous good fortune was somehow an extraordinarily rare gift. His complicated dynamic—"That's me in the corner/That's me in the spotlight," he would sing years later in the song that made him an international star—kept your attention focused on him, as if you were watching a play that you hoped would not turn into a tragedy. You wanted to see how it would ultimately turn out for the main character, and you wanted it to end well.