

THE STOOL PIGEON MEDICAL FACILITY
PATIENT PROGRESS REPORT

Headline: PERSONAL VELOCITY

Subhead: R.E.M. mercifully not automatic for the people in Berlin
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IN TONIGHT'S IDYLIC FOREST AMPHITHEATRE SETTING, CONSTRUCTED IN AN EVEN DARKER POLITICAL CLIMATE UNDER ORDERS FROM HITLER HIMSELF, R.E.M. DECIDE TO KEEP THE BUOYANT SINGALONGS TO A MINIMUM. FACING A CROWD OF CLOSE TO 20,000, WHO TOWER OVER THEIR STAGE IN COLOSSAL SPECTATOR ROWS, IT SEEMS A COURAGEOUS MOVE FROM THE LIBERAL AMERICAN ROCKERS. THERE ARE NO STADIUM FRIENDLY CRIES OF 'EVERYBODY HURTS', 'THE SIDEWINDER SLEEPS TONITE' OR 'LEAVING NEW YORK' AND, MOST POINTEDLY, 'SHINY HAPPY PEOPLE' FAILS TO RAISE ITS POPTASTIC HEAD. INDEED, A BAND KEEN TO REDEFINE THEIR ARTISTIC EDGE DISOWNED THE SONG LONG AGO AND RATHER THAN ATTEMPTING TO BRAINWASH THEIR AUDIENCE WITH THE OBVIOUS, THEY TRY TO TRANSPORT US TO A DECIDEDLY LESS-CHARTED HIGHER PLAIN.

R.E.M.'S PERFORMANCE HAS A REFRESHING ELEMENT OF UNSTRUCTURED CHAOS TO IT. EVIDENTLY, THEY HAVE BEEN UNLEASHING DIFFERENT SONGS FOR EACH NIGHT OF THIS TOUR; AN ADMIRABLE TACTIC CONSIDERING FAR SMALLER BANDS MOSTLY CLING TO THE SAFETY OF CAREFUL CHOREOGRAPHY AND CAST-IN-STONE SET-LISTS. PERHAPS THEIR IMPULSIVENESS IS A BLOW FOR THOSE AUDIENCE MEMBERS EXPECTING A GLITTERY, BIG BUDGET SPIELBERG-CRAFTED SPECTACLE, BUT IT'S SOMETHING PROFOUND FOR THE MANY OTHERS WHO RELISH THE DARK FLIPSIDE OF ONE OF THE MOST INFLUENTIAL GROUPS OF RECENT HISTORY. BEING A POPULARIST ROCK BAND WORTHY OF ARTIST STATUS, R.E.M. OWE IT TO US AND THEMSELVES TO NOT BE REGURGITATING THEIR MTV-CENTRIC HITS OF 15 YEARS AGO.

IT'S NOT THAT R.E.M. ARE AGEING GRACEFULLY, EXACTLY. WITH HIS THICK NHS GLASSES, GREY STUBBLE AND NEWLY DISCOVERED SMOKERS' RASP, MICHAEL STIPE SEEMS TO BE EMBRACING WHAT WILL SOON BE HIS FIFTH DECADE ON EARTH WITH RECKLESS ABANDON. RATHER THAN DEFYING THE AGEING PROCESS WITH SOFT-FOCUS HOCUS-POCUS, HE APPEARS TO BE HIGHLIGHTING IT. AT THIS RATE HE'S GOING TO LIVE OUT HIS FINAL DAYS AS A DEAD-RINGER FOR WILLIAM BURROUGHS. YET STIPE REMAINS THE THINKING MAN'S ROCK STAR INCARNATE. HE LURCHES, DANCES BIZARRELY, YELLS "COME 00000N!" TO THE OVER-STIMULATED AUDIENCE AND STILL APPEARS POSSESSED BY A SUPERIOR SENSE OF ENIGMATIC BEATNIK COOL. FOR SOMEONE WHO CLAIMS TO BE EDUCATED THROUGH MAGAZINES, HE'S CERTAINLY DOING SOMETHING RIGHT.

OLD NUGGETS LIKE 'ELECTROLITE' AND THE MIKE MILLS-SUNG '(DON'T GO BACK TO) ROCKVILLE' ARE PERFORMED SUPERBLY, BUT IT'S THE NEW TRACKS THAT REALLY RESONATE. THE POLITICISED SHRIEK OF LATEST SINGLE 'MAN-SIZED WREATH' IS TIMELY WHILE REMAINING AS BOUNCY AND VITRIOLIC AS ANYTHING OFF THEIR 1987 LONG PLAYER DOCUMENT. ALL YOU SAD AND LOST APOSTLES HEAR THIS: THE SPARK THAT MADE R.E.M. LEGENDARY IN THE FIRST PLACE HAS RETURNED IN FIERY ABUNDANCE.

Q&A: Mike Mills

With your latest call-to-arms record, *Accelerate*, coupled with the largely obscure set-lists you've been performing on tour, it seems R.E.M. have reclaimed themselves from the rock establishment by becoming outsiders once more...

I WOULD AGREE WITH THAT. IT'S DUE TO THE CYCLICAL NATURE OF EVERYTHING. IT WAS AMAZING TO ME THAT WE WERE SO POPULAR FOR AS LONG AS WE WERE. BUT, OF COURSE, NO ONE CAN MAINTAIN THAT FOREVER. PEOPLE ENJOY TAKING YOU DOWN A PEG WHEN THEY GET THE CHANCE, BUT ONCE THEY'VE DONE THAT THEY ARE PERFECTLY HAPPY TO WELCOME YOU BACK.

Has touring *Accelerate* altered the way you perceive the record?

IT HASN'T. I NEVER LISTEN TO OUR RECORDS. THE ONLY TIME I DO IS WHEN I NEED TO RE-LEARN ONE OF THE SONGS. TOURING HAS REINFORCED WHAT I THOUGHT ABOUT THE ALBUM: THAT THE SONGS ARE ALL GOOD AND VERY FOCUSED. WE ALWAYS THOUGHT THEY WOULD BE VERY GOOD TO PLAY LIVE.

You've remained musically relevant for a virtually unprecedented time in the world of pop music. How have you achieved that?

I DON'T KNOW. I THINK WE'RE ALL PRETTY SELF-AWARE; WE DON'T OPERATE IN A VACUUM AND WE'RE ALL PRETTY INTELLIGENT PEOPLE. WE'RE NOT CONCERNED WITH FADS, BUT WE'RE VERY CONSCIOUS OF THE CURRENT REALITY AND I THINK THAT FILTERS INTO OUR MUSIC AND OUR LYRICS. WE'VE NEVER BEEN MUSICALLY TRENDY; THE MUSIC WE PLAY HAS ALWAYS BEEN WITHIN US, AND HAS ALWAYS BEEN OUTSIDE WHATEVER THE CURRENT FAD IS. BY DOING THAT, YOU NEVER BECOME DATED BECAUSE YOU'RE NEVER OF A PARTICULAR TIME. I THINK MUSIC SHOULD HAVE A TIMELESS QUALITY TO IT, AND WE'VE NEVER BEEN PEGGED INTO A PARTICULAR ERA.

It must have been a battle to stick to your musical guns within the overbearing infrastructure of the music industry.

WE'VE ALWAYS DONE WHATEVER WE WANTED TO DO AND WE'VE ALWAYS REJECTED THE THINGS THAT PEOPLE TOLD US WOULD MAKE US POPULAR. LIKE, 'IF ONLY YOU WOULD HAVE THAT EIGHTIES SOUND,' OR, 'IF ONLY YOU'D HAVE THAT EIGHTIES HAIR.' I THINK THAT HAS STOOD US WELL.

What is people's biggest misconception about R.E.M.?

THAT WE'RE THIS DOUR, GRIM, HUMOURLESS BUNCH. CERTAINLY THAT'S NEVER BEEN TRUE, AND I THINK PEOPLE REALISE THAT A LITTLE MORE NOW. BUT IN THE EIGHTIES AND NINETIES PEOPLE THOUGHT WE WERE THESE SERIOUS, ARTY, HAVE-NO-FUN KIND OF GUYS.

Has being famous ever felt creatively stifling?

I'VE NOT BEEN AWARE OF THAT CONSCIOUSLY. WE'VE ALWAYS MADE MUSIC THAT PLEASES US AND IF IT DOESN'T PLEASE US THEN WE DON'T DO IT. IF WE DON'T ENJOY PLAYING IT, WHY WOULD ANYONE ENJOY LISTENING TO IT? WE'VE NEVER MADE MUSIC TO SELL RECORDS, SO WE'VE NEVER FELT THE PRESSURE TO WRITE MUSIC THAT WOULD DO SO. THE LABEL WOULD LOVE IT IF WE DID, BUT WHEN LABELS SIGN US THEY KNOW WHAT THEY'RE GETTING. WE MAKE MUSIC TO MAKE OURSELVES HAPPY, AND SOMETIMES THAT ENDS UP WITH BIG SALES AND SOMETIMES IT DOESN'T. THAT'S JUST THE WAY IT GOES.

R.E.M. are synonymous with their political activism, how are you gearing up for the next election?

WE'RE NOT SO MUCH GEARING UP; WE'VE DONE OUR BIT AND HAVE CERTAINLY MADE OUR VIEWS CLEAR. I THINK OBAMA IS GOING TO WIN, AND WHILE WE'RE WATCHING THE PRESIDENTIAL RACE, WE'RE BUSY DOING OUR OWN THING RIGHT NOW, AND IN ORDER TO DO THE TOUR JUSTICE WE HAVE TO FOCUS ON THAT.

Would an idealistic young Mike Mills be proud of the man you've become?

WELL OF COURSE! I THINK WE'VE MANAGED TO KEEP OUR INTEGRITY, AND WE NEVER DID TOO MUCH STUFF THAT WAS OVERLY EMBARRASSING. ALSO, WHEN I LOOK OUT INTO THE AUDIENCE I SEE A LOT OF KIDS, WHICH MEANS OUR MUSIC IS STILL HAVING AN EFFECT ON PEOPLE.

How is R.E.M.'s birthplace of Athens, Georgia shaping up these days?

IT HAS CHANGED A LITTLE. WE HAVE A PRETTY PROGRESSIVE GOVERNMENT NOW, WHICH IS VERY HELPFUL. THERE ARE A LOT OF PEOPLE THERE WHO ARE CONCERNED WITH KEEPING IT A BEAUTIFUL PLACE AND THEY'RE DOING A GOOD JOB OF THAT.

You spend much of your time in LA, which seems a rather un-R.E.M. type of place...

WHAT CAN I SAY ABOUT LA THAT HASN'T BEEN SAID? IT'S EVERYTHING YOU THINK IT IS... AND LESS.

After the success of your latest record, in which direction do you see the band heading next?

I DON'T KNOW. IT COULD BE SIMILAR TO *ACCELERATE* BUT MORE SPREAD OUT. PETER AND I ARE ALWAYS WRITING MUSIC BUT WE'RE CURRENTLY FOCUSED ON THE PROJECT AT HAND, WHICH IS PUTTING ON A GREAT LIVE SHOW.

R.E.M. iconically joined the cast of *Sesame Street* for a singalong of 'Shiny Happy Monsters'. What other TV shows are you desperate to make cameo appearances on? BEING ON TV IS NOT AS MUCH FUN AS YOU'D THINK IT IS, BUT *SESAME STREET* WAS GOOD BECAUSE IT WAS SO FANTASTIC, IN THE SENSE OF FANTASY. YOU END UP TALKING TO THESE PUPPETS AS THOUGH THEY ARE REAL PEOPLE. I EVEN NAMED ONE OF THEM. I FORGET WHAT I CALLED IT, THOUGH.

