

The shock of the new

Will R.E.M.'s real debut album please step forward, asks Danny Eccleston.

R.E.M.

★★★★★

Murmur: Deluxe Edition UNIVERSAL

MODERN CULTURE is full of depressing instances where 'improved' does not mean better (we're not just talking about bendy buses or The New Fred And Barney Show). When R.E.M. first appeared, the scarecrow-looking dweebs behind 1982's *Chronic Town* EP, it was a tendency they appeared to stand foursquare against, and the more febrile among us imagined them instant allies – with The Smiths and perhaps The Go-Betweens – in a rearguard action against the garish neophilia of the dawning decade. Unemphatic, nostalgic, hinting at disappeared worlds and lost values, R.E.M.'s plangent grooves came from no time, no place, speaking a secret language that seemed as resonant as it was conventionally indecipherable.

Although the band have made brilliant and beautiful records since, *Murmur* remains the cornerstone of the R.E.M. legend, the reason they are important. Partly it is what *Murmur* set in train – something Americans, with no hint of irony or disdain, called 'college rock'. Partly it is the perfection of the record itself, its utter evocation of its own, exclusive world, as arcane and overgrown as the kudzu vine infestation of Carl Grasso's cover art.

For the band, this cornerstone has also been a millstone, a measure against which their *soi-disant* "better" records have been found wanting. Perhaps inevitably, they think *Murmur* overrated, and have found it easy to deprecate on account of Stipe's inchoate lyrics (they dubbed it "Mumble") and a production they consider out-of-focus. They're similarly ambivalent about 1984's *Fables Of The Reconstruction*, and they're similarly wrong.

Now they're fixing it, because they can, going beyond the spring clean to deliver a thorough re-upholstering. The new *Murmur* is tougher-sounding, with that everything-in-the-foreground sound that's grown fashionable since the universal acceptance of mp3. But with it comes the nagging feeling that they've overstepped the bounds of correction into the theatre of reconstructive surgery. R.E.M. are rewriting history, but are they allowed?

By any standards, but especially for a debut, *Murmur* remains an incredible collection of songs. Some bands impress first of all with innovations in style; the songs come later. From the off, *Murmur* was a package. Opener *Radio Free Europe* had already achieved instant anthem status, urgent and weird, ambiguous about the value of 'freedom' (Radio Free Europe being the CIA-funded radio station that broadcast to the Communist Bloc) as the Cold War kicked on under Reagan's paranoid aegis. *Talk About The Passion*, by contrast, was a timeless, limpid meditation that balanced on one of the record's clearest statements: "Not everyone can carry the weight of the world." R.E.M. were capable of up-tempo, blissed-out melancholia (*Laughing, Shaking Through*) and aching reveries (the ever-miraculous *Perfect Circle*), while the Berry/Stipe/Mills vocal harmonies were streets ahead of anything else on offer.

None of these elements has become any less striking under the cold-eyed microscope of the remasters. Yet the new *Murmur* is a lesson in how profound a change in emphasis can appear. In 25 years of regular listening, the MOJO office's *Murmur*-heads had never remarked upon the piercing quality of Bill Berry's hi-bats on



FACT SHEET

- The remastering was overseen by Greg Calbi, the man in charge of 2005's Bob Dylan SACD reissues.
- *Murmur*'s original recording sessions began with synthpop guru Stephen Hague, before the Chronic Town team of Mitch Easter and Don Dixon was restored.
- *Murmur* peaked at Number 36 on the Billboard album chart and was Number 1 in Rolling Stone's albums of 1983.

Key tracks

- *Talk About The Passion*
- *Radio Free Europe*
- *Perfect Circle*

Radio Free Europe, but once noticed, it was hard to take anything else in beyond the too-loud TICKTICKTICK.

If nothing else, there's something bold and technically miraculous about the clarity and separation they've achieved, and if you'd been told that the entire record had been re-recorded, last week, in a 21st-century studio, you might even have been fooled. Some of the newly excavated elements are an unalloyed delight. Mike Mills's McCartneyesque bass runs are revealed in all their counter-melodic glory; Buck's guitars emerge from the indistinct jangle of memory in a multitude of guises: a xylophone in *Pilgrimage*'s verses, or the tangled barbed-wire fence of the inverted 9-9. Suddenly, there's the lone cello winding out of *Talk About The Passion*. There was a cello there all along! Who knew?

The variety of the undersung Berry's percussion ideas is similarly revelatory: the whip-crack simulacra of *Moral Kiosk*, the portentous thundersheet that rumbles through the superficially jaunty *We Walk*. Even so, your correspondent could have lived without his attention being drawn to the bongo spazz-out previously submerged at the end of *Pilgrimage*. Fans have often wondered what could be keeping the former R.E.M. drummer busy since his 1997 departure. Perhaps he's been toiling on the 'Bill Berry mix' of *Murmur*...

Maybe the most significant result of the strip-down is to emphasise R.E.M., the new wave band, stark and angular, parsable from their avowed post-punk

influences: Gang Of Four, Pylon, Wire. The band's early-'80s rehabilitation of long-unfashionable '60s benchmarks (specifically The Byrds – the fount of Buck's Rickenbacker arpeggios) seems less pronounced. This is a *Murmur* for those who found the original too fey (there's one sitting not far away from me in the MOJO office). But what's been lost is the way the songs used to come swimming out of the mist like something supernatural. The Disc Two payoff – a punky and beautifully recorded 1983 gig at Toronto's Larry's Hideaway which, if nothing else, shows how tough those harmonies were to pull off in anger – is not quite generous enough.

So which, is it so mad to ask ourselves, is the real *Murmur*: the cryptic, 1983 vintage or this bright'n'breezy remodel? For music buyers of a certain vintage, it will always be the former. For newcomers to R.E.M., it could easily be the latter (last time I looked, *Deluxe* was 2,000 places higher in the amazon.com bestsellers chart than its cheaper, dowdier fellow). But over time the distinction will become dilute; fewer will know, and fewer still will care which is the authentic version. The fate of the original, 'Bowie mix' of The Stooges' *Raw Power* is cautionary; it's still available on second-hand vinyl, but Iggy's crude mid-'90s redux is the only version you'll find on the CD shelves in HMV.

The fact is that however talented and however assiduous, bands luck into records as great as *Murmur*. Sometimes they have no idea how they made anything so good. Sometimes they never work out what the fuss was all about. Many would leap at the chance to go back in time and, for better or for worse, change the records they've made. But the very thought of a wholesale 'rectification' of the rock canon sends a cold shiver up the spine.

Maybe it's silly to lose sleep over such things; no one 'curates' rock'n'roll, neither its creators nor the commentators. But a recording is a document of a moment in time and whatever truth it contains is tied up in that. We tamper with it at our peril.