

Classic album

REM
Murmur – Deluxe Edition (IRS/Universal)

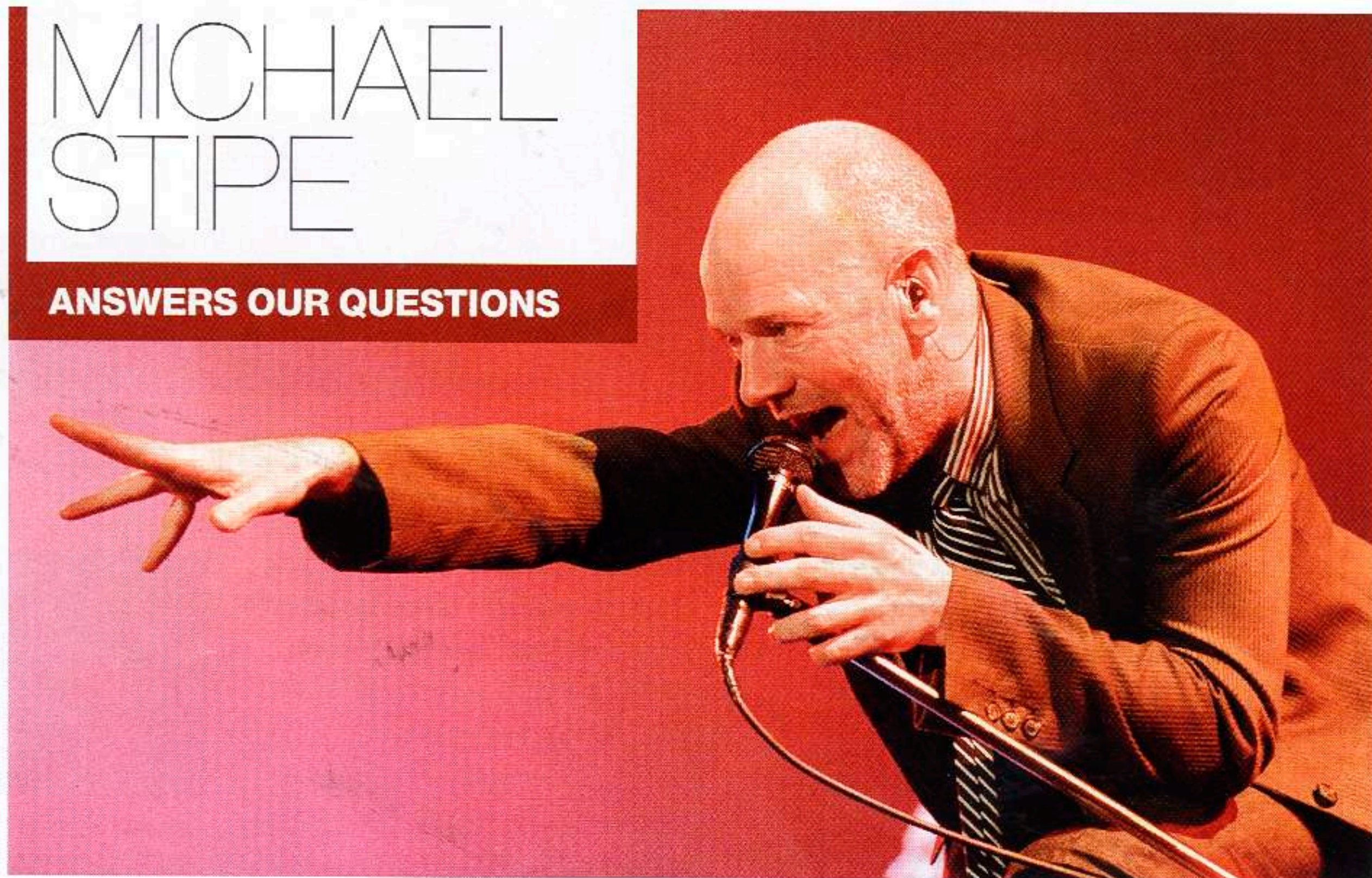
The whole thing started with this strange album – strange cover photo, strange murky sound, songs with what might have been strange lyrics if anyone could have worked out what they were. Without this moody, mysterious, memorable album, there would have been no 'Everybody Hurts', none of the introspective yet anthemic albums that have made REM one of the most celebrated bands in rock – and no Kurt Cobain and Nirvana. When their debut album *Murmur* appeared in 1983, it pretty much invented the whole alternative rock genre, inspiring a generation of bands.

But even then REM could write a stirring sing-along – such as 'Radio Free Europe', their first single and the song that took their album to the top of the US college charts and mainstream success. The album seemed contemporary and timeless. And, judging by this re-release marking its 25th anniversary (it comes with a bonus live CD of a 1983 club gig), it still does.



MICHAEL STIPE

ANSWERS OUR QUESTIONS



You made the album *Murmur* more than half a lifetime ago. What emotional effect do these old songs have on you now?

My contribution, other than a beautiful melody, is lyrical, and the lyrics to a lot of the old songs kind of don't exist – or if they do they don't make a whole lot of sense. Some of them are pretty bad, so it's a little embarrassing – I wrote it when I was 21. But at the same time there's something liberating about being able to just go, oh fuck it, everyone here knows about the strange lyrics. If you don't, you don't need to know.

What accounts for the songs' cryptic words and dreamy sound?

Well, it's like when we named ourselves REM – we chose something purposely vague because we didn't want someone to read our name and instantly figure out what kind of music we were. Only years later would it make sense to me that a huge amount of my instinctual inspiration as a lyricist comes from a kind of quasi-somnambulist place between sleeping and waking. So Rapid Eye Movement as the inspiration for REM suddenly made a lot more sense than it did when we actually named ourselves that.

What's your most vivid memory of making *Murmur*?

We didn't know what we were doing. We were complete innocents. I didn't even know until our second album that the bass guitar was the one that made the low notes and the guitar was the one that made the high notes. People think I'm being faux naïve when I say that, but I didn't.

Because you'd studied art, not music?

I went to art school only because it was closest to downtown where the cafés were – and I was basically a slacker, before they existed. I wanted to be around people who loved the same music as me and I wanted to get laid and I wanted to do something exciting. Art and English literature were the two things that really excited me.

How would you describe REM's state of mind, and your own, today?

We're at the top of our game, confident about what we're doing, rather than a bunch of guys trying to find themselves. I've reached the age, and I think the maturity and wisdom, to realise that if one has a choice one should not do things that one doesn't have to do. Life is just too short.