

R.E.M.

They've rediscovered their mojo.

Ever since 1991's *Out Of Time*, any new

R.E.M. record is always an event. Yet even by past standards, the buzz surrounding their 14th studio album is already approaching fever pitch. In July 2007, they road-tested new songs onstage at Dublin's Olympia Theatre over five nights of "working rehearsal".

Within days, YouTube was ablaze with amateur video preview clips, while the critical response was rapturous: Q boldly declared that the new material "promises to be their best album for more than 10 years."

"It was an experiment and it worked," says a jet-lagged Stipe, sat sipping coffee in London's Soho Hotel. Two weeks from now, he'll be joined over here by bassist Mike Mills and guitarist Peter Buck, where they'll argue over which of the 17 finished tracks will make the final mix. "I had no desire to perform live in front of people but the material benefited from it. I took notes onstage each night during songs, going back and changing them."

Work on the album began in spring 2007, with the announcement that U2/Snow Patrol producer Jacknife Lee would take the helm. Between sessions in Vancouver, Dublin and R.E.M.'s hometown, Athens, Georgia, it became, claims Stipe, "the fastest record we've made in 20 years. I came in prepared."

As borne out by the Dublin rehearsals, it sees a return to the guitar-heavy rock of R.E.M.'s formative years ("I'd just say it points towards our limited abilities as musicians," deadpans Stipe). Titles include *Living Well Is The Best Revenge* (a quote from 17th-century poet George Herbert), *Staring Down The Barrel Of Middle Distance* ("I'll leave the listener to work out that one," says Stipe) and the political rant *Mr Richards*. Elsewhere, the apocalyptic disco of *I'm Gonna DJ* is a lyrically meaner update of 1987's *It's The End Of The World As We Know It (And I Feel Fine)*. The mandatory big R.E.M. ballad is the epic *Until The Day Is Done*, chosen as the soundtrack to CNN's recent documentary about ecological crisis, *Planet In Peril*.

Already, the omens suggest the record, titled *Accelerate*, is a conscious effort to regain the crown that seemed to have slipped in recent years, particularly on 2004's poorly-received *Around The Sun*.

"I think the songs on *Around The Sun* are great," he frowns, "but in the process of recording we lost our focus as a band. Now, that focus is back. And it's razor-sharp." ■ SIMON GODDARD

'Our focus is back.
And it's razor-sharp.'
MICHAEL STIPE



INFO

Title: *Accelerate*

Recorded: Vancouver, Dublin, Athens, Georgia

Key Tracks: *Until The Day Is Done*, *Living Well Is The Best Revenge*, *Staring Down The Barrel Of Middle Distance*, *Mr Richards*

Released: April

Strange But True:

Stipe Googled new song title *Man-Size Wreath* to check it was unique. It was - the closest match was *Mansize Rooster* by Supergrass.

"They're amazing artists," says Stipe.