

FABLES OF THE RECONSTRUCTION

Now venerated members of the Rock'n'Roll Hall of Fame, **REM** are back stronger than ever before. Words **Dave Fanning**



Dave Fanning: It's been about 10 years since you've road-tested a bunch of songs in the way that you're road-testing material for the next album in Dublin. Is this a good way to do it?

Peter Buck: I've always felt that it's best to do the stuff live. These were the things we used to have to do when we were younger. We had no money, we were on the road 300 days a year, so you wrote at sound-checks to do the record the second you finished the tour. It seemed like the natural way to go about it. I personally want to make the record a little bit more spontaneous and a bit more like who we are as a band. It was Mike's idea to do some shows, so here we are.

Mike Mills: To me it's very much a whittling process. Back in the day when we were touring constantly, after a week or two of playing a song, you'd gotten rid of what you didn't need, made your bass parts better, made your background vocals tighter. There's nothing like the immediate feedback, and you can feel it. So I got thinking, since the way the process works now is we're not about to leave on the road every two days, I just wanted some way to tighten this thing up and get that immediate feedback, and have the energy of that to take into the studio.

What happens in a situation like this — you decide to play five dates in an intimate venue in Dublin and you have the music together with Mike and are waiting for Michael's lyrics?

PB: Yeah, essentially. And that's the way every single band I've ever heard of works. We did our first record with Don Dixon and he was saying, "So you guys write the music and then the singer comes up with the lyrics? I worked with Black Oak Arkansas and that's how they do it too." I said, "Really? Black Oak Arkansas? We have the same work methods?!" I guess all bands do. Routinely with every record we've done in the past few years, we'll play for two weeks and go, "You know, I wish we'd recorded the record next week," because all the songs sound better. The tempo gets where it should be and the arrangements get more dynamic. So that's what we're attempting.

MM: It was good that Michael agreed to do this, because he knew that it would put him on a very definite deadline to have enough songs finished where we don't go out there and say, "Well, here's two new songs and 20 old ones." We had to have enough new ones to make this worth doing. I think he enjoyed the self-imposed deadline of this.

Isn't there a point when an album takes on a life of its own and you suddenly don't really know which direction it's going? The album becomes bigger than you.

PB: Yeah, and sometimes a good album turns into a bad record. I thought our last record (*Around The Sun*) had the seeds of a really great record but didn't end up being that record. Partly because it just went on forever. This time we're all really conscious of the fact that we want to keep it spontaneous, quick, not over-think it.

Around The Sun was very direct; it was political, you were making a statement. 'Final Straw' was an open protest letter to the government.

PB: Yeah, well we were sitting there going, "You know, I can't believe we're going to start a war for no reason." And every sensible person knew that there was no reason for us to attack Iraq. It didn't accomplish anything and we knew it wouldn't. We finished it the week before the bombing started and put it up on the website and said, "Hey, it's free. Give it a listen." Just to say, "There's someone out there just like you who's wondering what the hell is going on, why is our country doing this?" It didn't stop the war and I didn't expect it to, but if nothing else, if my kids ask me, "What did you do when all this crap was going on, dad?" it's like, I did what I could.

I loved the lyrics on that record. Musically those three records (*Up, Reveal* and *Around The Sun*) fit together in a way. The new stuff is different. At

the end of the last tour we did, I was sitting with (producer) Charlie Francis, who's worked with us for the last two years and he said, "You know, the band's amazing. The band is better live than I've ever seen you. You should try and get that in the studio. You don't need to make a studio record, you need to make a record of the band performing." So we're trying to get the best of both worlds, to build on what we are as a band and have that effective material.

Do you feel you have to mature and be honest to who you are, the age you are?

MM: Eventually you do. I rail against the onset of age with more vigour than most people, but nonetheless you have to make concessions to it, because otherwise you will look kind of foolish if you try to pretend you're something you're not. I love Reg Presley, but when we worked with The Troggs many years ago it was quite interesting to see this somewhat elderly gentleman with his reading glasses going, "*Hotpants, I like your style.*"

It was kind of interesting and confusing at the same time. I was very happy that Reg could do that, and it turned out to be kind of a cool record. But it just made me think, you can approach this one way or you can approach it another. There are no official blueprints for how to grow old gracefully in a rock band, but there are examples that you can look at — Leonard Cohen, or Neil, or Dylan. All of these people that have done it with dignity. As you say, if you remain true to yourself then everything else falls into place because the honesty starts it and then everything follows from there.

You've covered John Lennon's '9 Dream' for the Amnesty Instant Karma album, and the song was released the day you were inducted into the Rock 'N' Roll Hall Of Fame this year. Bill Berry was there. Was it good to have him back?

PB: I love Bill and I miss him intensely. I still feel like he's a member of the band. But it would pretty much take an act of congress to get him to leave his house for more than a day or two at a time. The whole business is hard on him. He's a very sensitive person. It was just amazing being able to work with him, hang out with him, have dinner with him. Just doing the Rock 'N' Roll Hall Of Fame, he worried about that for seven or eight months. I mean, he made phone calls every day to people, "What should I wear; what should I do?" "It's eight months away Bill, let's not worry about it until the week before we go do it!" As great as it was having him there, I feel almost bad dragging him into that.

MM: When you play with Bill it's amazing. I know he was really nervous and rehearsed his ass off for it, but I wasn't worried about it, and of course when he got up there and played he sounded like he'd been playing every day for the last 15 years. It's certainly easy to draw a distinction between before Bill left and after Bill left, and the fact is we are a different band. It's the same name, but it's a different band, there's no point in denying it.

But that means nothing other than the fact that it's a different band. It's neither better nor worse, I think, it's just different. You just plough through. We could've broken up, we could've said, "Yeah, this is the end, we're not the same band without Bill, we're not gonna do it anymore," but that would be cutting off your nose to prove a point, so we said, "No, we're gonna keep doing this," because we like it and we think we can do it well. I think *Reveal* is probably the most underrated record we've done, I really love it.

When Bill left before *Up*, would I be right in saying you three dealt with it in the worst way you possibly could?

PB: Honestly, we probably shouldn't have gone right in the studio to make a record the day after he told us he was leaving. I'm just really stubborn. My feeling was, I'm not going to let this stop us; we've written all the songs and we're ready to go. I think maybe another band would have taken three years off but I didn't want to take three years off. Looking

The first ten years of REM's career provided a blueprint for how an underground Amerindie act could gradually build from college radio roots to become the most critically acclaimed and commercially successful band of their generation, without compromising on principles.

Through an unbroken string of classic albums, from 1986's *Life's Rich Pageant* to 1991's *Automatic For The People*, it seemed the Athens, Georgia quartet could do no wrong. However, following the troubled *Monster* tour in 1995, the relative underperformance of 1996's *New Adventures In Hi-Fi* and the departure of drummer Bill Berry, the remaining three members struggled to maintain impetus and relevance throughout the late '90s. A triptych of post-Berry albums (*Up, Reveal* and *Around The Sun*) garnered the bombing started and put it up on the website and said, "Hey, it's free. Give it a listen." Just to say, "There's someone out there just like you who's wondering what the hell is going on, why is our country doing this?" It didn't stop the war and I didn't expect it to, but if nothing else, if my kids ask me, "What did you do when all this crap was going on, dad?" it's like, I did what I could.

Their decision to decamp to Dublin for a week of live rehearsal shows at the Olympia Theatre last week telegraphed a desire to exit their comfort zone. It also suggested that, with the help of producer Garret 'Jacknife' Lee, they might forge their most vibrant album in years. On the eve of the first of those Dublin shows, Dave Fanning spoke to Peter Buck and Mike Mills about the current REM-state.

back I'd do things differently, but on the other hand, who cares?

MM: It's hard to say how Bill affected us. I kinda knew it was coming, I just didn't know when. The timing of it was a little strange, in retrospect we've often discussed that maybe it would've been smarter to not go right into the studio and try to make the record anyway. But you know, I'm glad we did in a way, because I like that record, I think there's a certain weirdness about it that I really enjoy. It's one of those things where you don't really know the impact of it until years on, when you can look back and go, "Oh, well that's how screwed up I was."

Up until 1991, you were ten years hammering away on the road and in the studio, and then you decided, "Let's take a break." So you suddenly started going in a mandolin direction. *Out Of Time* and *Automatic For The People* were two of the biggest selling albums ever – you controlled the whole rock thing in the first five years of the '90s while sitting on the veranda in Athens, Georgia. How ironic is that?

MM: It's very ironic; it's also just incredibly lucky. There's a gestalt thing I guess, where we're getting really good, the world is just coming around to us, radio is embracing us, we had a massive, wonderful record company behind us that believed in what we did and believed in the music. Record companies hadn't gotten quite as corporate then as they became later, 'cos the people in charge, Mo Austin and Lenny Waronker, were music men, they weren't suits and bean-counters, they came from producing records and helping artists. And so we had that wave that we could ride and make great records and get them out there and people would like them, and we didn't actually have to tour. But that's such a rare confluence of events that doesn't happen but once in your life.

PB: Yeah, they were the best. Although you know, I think my favourite record and Michael's favourite is *New Adventures In Hi-Fi*, which we recorded at sound-checks on the hardest ever tour I've been on...

***New Adventures* didn't sell as well as the previous three or four had, even though it was received at least as well, if not better. Did that throw you in any way?**

MM: Oh no, we'd been waiting for that since the second record basically. We thought the second record was the one that wouldn't do anything. But the way it happened with us is you build an audience from one record to the next and by the time they get to *Green*, our audience knows we're gonna do something strange, and they don't care. They like the band, they like the band's music. But once you have hit singles and start selling records to people who only listen to the radio, they don't care about anything you've done before, or might do later, they only want this thing that they like. So when you have *Out Of Time*, or even more importantly, *Automatic For The People*, you've got 10 million people who say, "I like this record, I like this sound." And then if the next record doesn't sound like that, which of course *Monster* did not, your casual fans drop off and go, "Well, I'll go buy what I hear on the radio." And that's fine.

PB: For me, it's more important that I feel like I made a record that's good for the band and that I like. Yeah, I'd love to sell more records. On the other hand, I look around and I'm not sure we fit in with what people are buying nowadays. If you look at the charts, really except for U2 and a couple of other bands, there isn't anything I like in the top 20 ever. We can't compete with Britney Spears or Justin Timberlake and that's the way it works. (But) there's great music everywhere. I probably buy more records each week now than I did in the early '70s when I was a kid. There's always great stuff out there, it's just you don't necessarily hear it on the radio anymore and you



certainly don't watch it on TV. Although in America now, Modest Mouse and The Shins were number one and number two. Of Montreal is a great group but I can't imagine them ever getting played on the radio. I just saw The Apples In Stereo, they're another Athens band. It's a totally great commercial record that probably 20 years ago would've gotten airplay.

You've got a new producer, Irish again, like Pat McCarthy. So where does Garret 'Jackknife' Lee fit into this?

PB: He's really good. He knows the history of the band and he's also not afraid to tell us when something isn't working. You always need that. He's got a good ear. This is one of those records where I've talked to everyone *ad nauseam* about the fact that we need to be spontaneous. I didn't want to labour over things and get bogged down.

How do you think the new record will sound?

PB: I don't think it's going to sound like the last three records at all. I'm more excited about this one than I have been about anything we've done in years and years. I think everyone feels that way. We're really focused; the songs are really strong. I think the idea of knowing before even starting recording the record that we'd be here recording these songs in public at the beginning of July really pushed us in a good way. It isn't a side thing doing these shows, this is an integral part of what this record's going to be — us performing these things here in a theatre we all love. The Olympia is the theatre that I saw The Waterboys in on the *Fisherman's Blues* tour. They

had every local musician that played on the record come onstage. I saw the first night and went, "You know, I've got to see the second." And I talked to somebody and said, "Do you mind if I come back?" You know, this place has good memories for us and this is a really important part of what this whole thing is going to become. And we'll be doing it in the next few days.

Finally, do you think REM could happen now, if you had to start up again?

MM: (*Exhales loudly*) I think if REM were to start up now we'd find some way to make it happen. I wouldn't want to, because things are so different now. A lot of bands feel, and perhaps rightly so, that the best way to get exposure is to get your music onto a TV commercial. As far as I'm concerned, I'd rather cut my finger off, but it's sort of accepted now. Back in the day, as it were, that was looked down on, you were a commercial sell-out, you were a whore, you would do anything to get your music out there, and that's not what it's about, selling cars, or ice-cream or what have you. But now it's just sort of accepted and understood, because radio is so almost gone, especially in America, that you can't really get exposure that way, unless you're already huge. So I guess that's what bands feel they have to do. But I think there's still a way to do it — to get out there and play, and play, and play. And if anybody asks me, that's what I would tell them. I'd say, "Find somewhere to play, and do it. Do it every day for five years and if you haven't made it by then, go back to your job. But give it a shot." 🍌



Hair apparent: REM in their pre-megastar days.

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JUSTICE

† [ED BANGER RECORDS/BECAUSE MUSIC]

Justice are Parisians Xavier de Rosnay and Gaspard Auge, a producer duo who remixed Simian to create the 2006 dance anthem 'We Are Your Friends'. Emotion is key on *f*, the pair's debut album, which features tracks on universal themes like love and sadness. The pan-genre pop mix created on *f* is highlighted on tracks like new single 'D.A.N.C.E.', a song about the innocence of Michael Jackson sung by a London children's choir.



THE ENEMY

WE LIVE AND DIE IN THESE TOWNS [WARNER RECORDS]

Hailing from Coventry, The Enemy first began in 2002 as a way to escape their boredom of their hometown — hence the title of their debut album. The band has drawn comparisons to fellow countrymen Oasis, not to mention The Jam, and two singles from the album, 'Had Enough' and 'Away From Here' broke the top 10 in the UK music charts. Definitely keep an eye on this band.



INTERPOL

OUR LOVE TO ADMIRE

[PARLAPHONE/EMI]

The New York indie rockers' third album, their first on a major label, is definitely a bit of a departure from the sound they created on their earlier releases, most notably because of the introduction of keyboards into their otherwise straightforward line-up. Fear not though, as the first single 'The Heinrich Manuever' has been getting rave reviews across the board.



FOO FIGHTERS

THE COLOUR AND THE SHAPE [RCA]

Dave Grohl and Co. released this classic album in the spring of 1997 as their first effort to feature the full band. 10 years down the line, the album is now considered a classic, and it cemented the Foo's place as one of the finest acts in modern rock with a string of hits including 'Everlong,' 'My Hero,' 'February Stars,' 'Monkey Wrench' and 'Walking After You'.



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