

HANGING OUT WITH R.E.M.

Remembering: On the verge of superstardom, the four musicians soon to be hailed by *Rolling Stone* as ‘America’s Best Rock & Roll Band’ came to Bloomington where they recorded a transformative album.

BY DAVID BRENT JOHNSON ■ WFIU MUSIC HOST

Imagine that it's 1963, and you've just been told that the young Beatles are coming to Bloomington to record their next album, or that a boyish Bob Dylan will be setting up camp in this Midwestern university town to lay down an early masterpiece. For one generation of young Bloomingtonians, this sort of story came to pass in the spring of 1986, when the rock band R.E.M. — vocalist Michael Stipe, guitarist Peter Buck, bassist Mike Mills, and drummer Bill Berry — walked among us for a few weeks as they made *Lifes Rich Pageant*, the album that ultimately served as a bridge for the band's journey from college-radio icons to superstars. In doing so, they also left an indelible stamp on a number of students and town residents who encountered them — several of whom went on to become artists and musicians inspired by a rock band's example of aesthetic dedication, independence, and integrity.

I was a 20-year-old English major at Indiana University, at the zenith of my R.E.M. fandom, when a friend in my creative writing class casually informed me of the word-of-mouth news. (There was, of course, no Twitter, no Facebook, no email, or cell phones in 1986, and so people around town learned the news only gradually.) I went home and told my girlfriend that I'd just heard that R.E.M., the ultimate purveyors of Southern-mystic pop, would soon be arriving in town to make a new record.

My girlfriend was unimpressed. “So what?” she said, blowing smoke out an open window. It was April, and we could feel the air on our arms again. “They're just people, for God's sake.”

Three days later she came charging up the stairs and burst into my apartment. “I just saw Michael Stipe in Bloomingfoods!” she gasped.



R.E.M. cultivated an air of mystery and photographs of the band played to that mystique. (l-r) Peter Buck, Bill Berry, Mike Mills, and Michael Stipe.
© Sandra-Lee Phipps

R.E.M. and the B-town connection

This was not R.E.M.'s first foray into Bloomington; they had been here briefly three times before. The first was in 1982 when they were largely unknown. Lee Williams, the Bloomington music promoter who co-founded the Lotus World Music & Arts Festival, was instrumental in forging the band's early connection to Bloomington, setting up shows at the Second Story club in November and Jake's Nightclub the following spring.

"I think I paid them \$350 to play Second Story," Williams recalls. "I just loved the guitar work, and Michael Stipe's voice, and the whole college rock thing. I was 24 years old and I was living a dream; I'd never imagined that I could book bands. I kind of bonded with Michael a little; I think he sensed my love for music. The show was fantastic; it sold out. Everybody was dancing; Michael Stipe was dancing more than you'd see him later in their career when they got famous. At the very end, on the encore, he brought me up on stage and I got to dance with R.E.M."

"My favorite memory of the Jake's show was Michael Stipe dedicating a song to me from the stage during the performance — 'Talk About the Passion.' I think that song resonated for me, it sounded like he recognized someone who loved the music and had it in his blood and treated the artists well."

R.E.M.'s third visit to Bloomington came in November 1985, just a few months before their nearly month-long stay to record the album *Lifes Rich Pageant*. They were well known by now and performed at the IU Auditorium. The darkened stage featured a gothic, Southern-mansion backdrop. A train light and whistle preceded the band's entrance, and when lead singer Michael Stipe walked out, a silhouetted profile wearing a beret turning to look at the audience while the opening three-note guitar riff of "Feeling Gravities Pull" chimed like the tolling of a surrealistic clock, it seemed as if a spellbinding underground religious ceremony had begun.

Such was the mystical, celebratory power of R.E.M. for college students in the mid-1980s. By then R.E.M. was well past their peak of under-the-radar hip (circa 1982-84).

Somewhere, though, in the great mid-80s divide between the Grateful Dead and Joy Division, R.E.M. captured a large, fanatical audience. Young people listened to their albums over and over, hypnotized by guitarist Peter Buck's sparkly arpeggios and Michael Stipe's slurred and mumbled lyrics and vocal delivery. What the hell was he saying? It must be profound. And it was profound, in the sense that people came up with all sorts of interpretations that said far more about them than Stipe. No wonder some scoffed that the band's name stood for Remedial English Majors. [The name actually stands for Rapid Eye Movement, the state of sleep in which vivid dreams occur.]

By the time R.E.M. disbanded in amiable fashion in 2011, they had built a legacy of 15 albums, a clutch of worldwide hits such as "Stand" and "Losing My Religion," and a genre they had practically invented: alternative rock, a category scarcely imaginable when the band formed in Athens, Ga., in 1980. Guitarist Buck once described their music as "the acceptable edge of the

'They seemed to like Bloomington, and Bloomington loved them in return.'

unacceptable stuff." Their debut 1981 single "Radio Free Europe," was described by *Rolling Stone* critic Anthony DeCurtis, who earned a Ph.D. in American Literature at IU, as "all the energy of punk, but imbued with an incredible optimism." It was a call to arms for a new musical counterculture, fulfilled by the band's subsequent LPs *Murmur*, *Reckoning*, and *Fables of the Reconstruction*.

"That R.E.M. would play an essential role in energizing a new network of underground college radio stations that was supportive of local music and open to new sounds was just one of the band's foremost contributions to the music scene of its day," says DeCurtis.

An interview with R.E.M.'s Mike Mills

Why did R.E.M. come to Bloomington to record their fourth full-length record? They wanted to make an album with Bloomington-based superstar John Mellencamp's producer, Don Gehman — a move that caught many of their college rock fans off guard.



(clockwise, from left) *Lifes Rich Pageant* was R.E.M.'s bridge album from an indie-rock college band to global superstars. The band provided a framed thank-you commemorative for the folks at John Mellencamp's Belmont Mall Studio when the album reached gold-record status. Enigmatic singer Michael Stipe (left) with bassist Mike Mills, who was interviewed by *Bloom* for this story. © Sandra-Lee Phipps The Athens, Ga., band first performed in Bloomington at Second Story and then Jake's Nightclub before graduating to large auditoriums and arenas. Courtesy image

R.E.M.'s bass player, Mike Mills, now 55, remembers those days well. "We had just worked with Joe Boyd [a celebrated producer] on *Fables of the Reconstruction* in London, and it was a tough experience for us. We wanted to get away from the sort of murky feelings and sounds that we got out of Joe in London. The acoustic guitars sounded so good on the Mellencamp records ... we just liked that sonic quality that he had, and we decided to give Don Gehman a shot. He really knew how to get a lot of detail and subtle quality and at the same time make it rock."

The band worked at Mellencamp's Belmont Mall Studio a few miles east of Bloomington, on the album *Lifes Rich Pageant*. "The studio itself, the recording space, was larger than what we were used to," says Mills. "It was newer, the technology was more contemporary. Don Gehman of course knew it well, and it had everything he needed, so if the producer's comfortable, that helps a lot. We managed to get a lot of good sounds out of there." One such sound was that of an old pump-organ retrieved from a nearby barn — one of several organic touches added to an album dominated by dynamic guitar textures, an amplified drum presence, and the most surprising new phenomenon of all: relatively intelligible vocals from lead singer Stipe.

"Don really pushed Michael very hard lyrically," recalls Mills. "He challenged Michael to sing a little more clearly, because he said, 'I'm going to turn you up louder, you're going to be up more in the mix. If you have things to say, now's the time to say them.'"

What did Mellencamp think of the band? Mills, who is friends with Mellencamp today, says R.E.M. did not encounter him much during their stay, although he was in town to play a concert at IU's Memorial Stadium for Little 500 weekend. "It was good of him to let some wonky band he probably didn't know about come in and use his studio," Mills says.

Hanging out in town

As work on *Lifes Rich Pageant* progressed, band members became a highly visible presence around town, often eating breakfast at the Runcible Spoon before heading out to work at Belmont and hitting the downtown bars at night. On Sunday, April 20, the inaugural Culture Shock, a sort of campus-alternative-Woodstock event, took place in Dunn Meadow, and Stipe showed up. He wandered among the tie-dyed hippies and goth-black punks wearing a brown wool suit and cap, looking unseasonably dressed and older than his 26 years. People besieged

By the time R.E.M. announced its amicable dissolution in 2011, Berry, the drummer, had already departed for medical reasons, leaving core members, (l-r) Buck, Stipe, and Mills. *Courtesy photo (inset) An advertisement in the Indiana Daily Student promoting R.E.M.'s IU Auditorium show on the 1986 tour supporting *Lifes Rich Pageant*. Courtesy of the Indiana University Archives*



'Bloomington was a really cool town at the time; still is.'

—R.E.M. bass player
Mike Mills

used to go around and catch all the bands we could. There were a lot of people doing cover songs. We saw three different bands in one night do 'Jungle Love' by the Steve Miller Band, and at least two of them were wearing pith helmets at the time. We were kind of impressed with that."

Adieu to Bloomington

Bloomington's lovely springtime weather also figures in Mills' memory of the band's stay — a dramatic contrast to the cold, wet conditions they had experienced in London. "We were comfortable in our surroundings; that leads to making a better record. Bloomington was a really cool town at the time; still is." (Mills was recently passing through town and dropped in to hear a Bloomington friend's band play at Serendipity Martini Bar and Restaurant, and expressed pleasant surprise when he learned that it was the same space — the former Second Story — where R.E.M. made its Bloomington debut in 1982.)

Lifes Rich Pageant came out near the end of the summer, its title taken from *A Shot in the Dark*, a 1964 Pink Panther movie that the band had rented from the Top Ten Video store on South Walnut. The citation?

Inspector Clouseau opens car door and falls into a fountain.

Maria: 'You should get out of these clothes immediately. You'll catch your death of pneumonia, you will.'

Clouseau: 'Yes, I probably will. But it's all part of life's rich pageant, you know?'

The album received what was by now the usual round of positive R.E.M. reviews. Anthony DeCurtis, writing in *Rolling Stone*, proclaimed that, "For R.E.M., the underground ends here."

He continued, "Suffused with a love of nature and a desire for mankind's survival, the LP paints a swirling, impressionistic portrait of a country at the moral crossroads, at once imperiled by its own self-destructive impulses and poised for a hopeful new beginning."

The album featured moving, subtle protest songs like "The Flowers of Guatemala" and "Fall On Me" as well as charging, more overt anthems such as the melodic squall of "Begin the Begin" and "These Days." "I Believe" was a spirited romp of free-associative optimism, while "Swan Swan H" imparted the mood of a Civil War folk dirge. "Cuyahoga," was a song about the polluted river in Ohio that has caught fire more than a dozen times.

R.E.M. played again at the IU Auditorium that September 1986, and Stipe's sole stage allusion to his time in Bloomington was, well, Stipean: He took a drink from his glass of water and said simply, "PCBs" [polychlorinated biphenyls, a toxic environmental contaminant].

"Fall On Me" was released as a single and managed to nose into the bottom ranks of the *Billboard* Hot 100, with an accompanying video that Stipe had shot at a Bloomington quarry. The

album rose to number 21 on *Billboard's* album charts and became the band's first gold record, taking them one step further towards mass popularity.

Heartened by the album's aesthetic and relative commercial success, the band very nearly came back to Bloomington the next year to record its follow up, *Document*, hoping to work once more with Gehman at Belmont. "The Bloomington session had gone so well," says Mills today, "but, in fact, Don didn't see us as wanting to have hit records. We were more interested in making good records, good LPs. He wanted a band that was really ambitious, a band that wanted to be on the Top 40. That was not us, so he moved on to something else."

Instead, R.E.M. decamped to Nashville, Tenn., with producer Scott Litt, and the resulting album generated the very success Gehman thought the band was unlikely to create — a hit single, "The One I Love," which landed in *Billboard's* Top 10. *Document* became R.E.M.'s first platinum album and landed them on the cover of *Rolling Stone*. The headline read "R.E.M.: America's Best Rock & Roll Band." ✨

see them play at Second Story, and Buck sat in on a recording session with them.

"I always felt we kind of learned the secret of their success when they came and spent time in Bloomington," says Combs, now a composer and musician in Los Angeles. "They went everywhere, they saw every band, and most of the time said something nice about your performance; they hung out with everyone. They could have just stayed holed up out in the studio, but they were curious and friendly and engaged with our town — and really nice people, too — smart and down to earth. They seemed to like Bloomington, and Bloomington loved them in return."

Fellow Figments member Wells, now an artist living in the Czech Republic, got to spend some time with Stipe. "I was walking down the street with my friend Karen when Stipe drove by in his taxi [a black Checker cab that he bought here] and stopped because he knew Karen," Wells remembers. "He invited us to their condo to watch a video. Karen declined but I jumped into the back of the cab. So I hung out there with R.E.M., tried on Stipe's glasses in the bathroom, and that inspired me to write this song 'Wearing Your Glasses' for the Figments. Basically I was thinking the whole time what it must be like to be Michael Stipe; his job seemed to be being an interesting personality. He was my hero because he was a rock star and an artist."

Assessing their impact, Wells says, "In Reagan's America, R.E.M. was alternative before alternative was born, and for closeted art

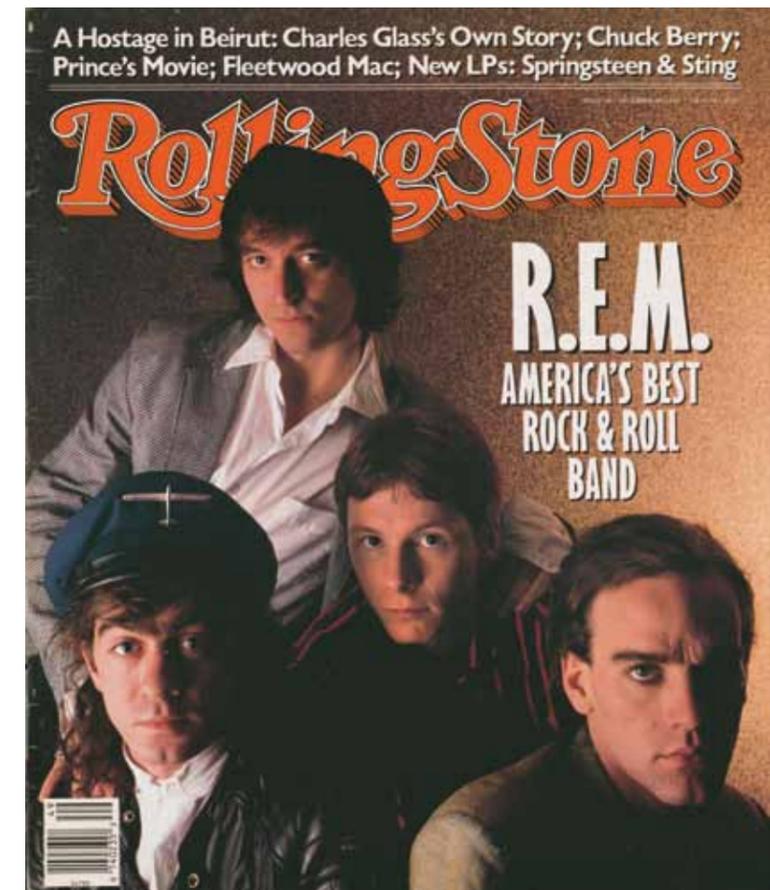
students, anti-jocks, upper-middle-class white kids who couldn't get into metal because it was too low class and lowbrow, and other outsiders, R.E.M. somehow seemed to open a door to a new way to be."

A small circle of young Bloomingtonians kept more constant company with the band, hanging out at the Daily Grind coffeehouse in Dunkirk Square and going out to the quarries. McDaniel-Douglas remembers "the tribe," as she calls this group, helping to write lyrics on these occasions. One companion of Stipe's recalled singing songs from the album-in-progress with him while they drove around Bloomington in Stipe's funky black taxi. After R.E.M. left Bloomington, Stipe called his friend to tell him that the cab had been struck by lightning as he drove it in the Georgia countryside.

Hitting the bars at night

There was one uncomfortable moment for the enigmatic Stipe when he went to see blues legends Buddy Guy and Junior Wells perform at Jake's. "Buddy had probably had a little too much to drink, and he started this rant about white blues guitarists taking all the licks from black guitarists," remembers Lee Williams, who was sitting with Stipe. "It was pretty harsh to listen to. And so Michael at some point said, 'This is too much, I'm out of here,' and just walked away. That was the last time I saw Michael Stipe."

R.E.M. bassist Mills recalls a more amusing Bloomington bar-going experience: "Peter and I



By Dec. 3, 1987, *Rolling Stone* concluded that R.E.M. was America's Best Rock & Roll Band. Copyright © Rolling Stone LLC 1987. All rights reserved.