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A Meditation on R.E.M., the Soundtrack of My Youth

By David James Poissant
UCF Forum columnist
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The band's music often left me nostalgic for a feeling I'd never had.



(Photo by R.E.M.)

To understand my love of the band R.E.M., you have to understand what it meant to grow up in the shadow of Stone Mountain, Georgia, equidistance from Atlanta and Athens, in the 1980s and 90s. Outside of Seattle, no city did more for American music in the 1990s than those twin cities. Had Atlanta and Athens not given us Elton John, OutKast, Widespread Panic, Indigo Girls, Matthew Sweet, the B-52s, Gladys Knight,

TLC, John Mayer, Drive-By Truckers, Ludacris, The Black Crowes, Usher, and Sugarland, R.E.M. alone would have been enough.

From their early Velvet Underground sound (1987's *Dead Letter Office* boasts three covers alone) to their eventual synthesis of post-punk, folk, and garage rock, R.E.M.—a band that picked its name out of a dictionary (the term stands for rapid eye movement, a state accompanying the dream stage of sleep)—helped define the sound that America would come to call *alternative*.

This was no small feat. Not only was R.E.M. fighting for attention in a crowded Southern music scene, they were fighting an industry and a listenership that, initially, didn't want what R.E.M. had to offer. Still, throughout the 80s, R.E.M.'s jangly guitars and anti-pop ballads continued to sidestep the slick melodies of Madonna, Paula Abdul, and New Kids on the Block, a choice that culminated in *Rolling Stone's* December 1987 issue crowning R.E.M. "America's Best Rock and Roll Band," despite lead singer and lyricist Michael Stipe's assertion, years later, that "We always wanted to make a rock record. I'm not sure we ever quite achieved that."

The sound R.E.M. achieved is more elusive and unquantifiable than rock.

No, the sound R.E.M. achieved is more elusive and unquantifiable than rock. Trying to define that sound, though, that's the hard part.

So, what does R.E.M. sound like? After listening, again, to all of their albums, my advice to the casual listener is to seek out the band's best stretch, those records that came along when R.E.M. toned down the feedback-heavy screech of their early albums and before they traded their unpredictable chord progressions for the electronic lull of a late-90s-infused Radiohead influence (Radiohead opened 24 of R.E.M.'s 1995 *Monster* tour shows, so maybe something rubbed off). I'm speaking of that revered trinity: *Out of Time* (1991), *Automatic for the People* (1992), and *Monster* (1994).

Out of Time is an unaccountably weird album, its opening track, "Radio Song," a fun, funky masterpiece. Stipe sings. Hip-hop artist KRS-One raps. For some reason, there is a string and horn section arranged by New Orleans musician and producer Mark Bingham. This is not music-by-committee or some overproduced, studio-squeezed sound. This is collaboration at its finest. Three songs on *Out of Time* feature Kate Pierson of The B-52s. Peter Holsapple, of the band the dB's, appears on several tracks too, including "Losing My Religion," the band's highest-charting single.

R.E.M.'s next offering, *Automatic for the People*, is an album drenched in grief. These aren't the anger-infused tracks of 1987's *Document* or 1988's *Green*. *Automatic for the People* is simply the stuff of raw, unrelenting mourning. There's "Everybody Hurts," a paean to sorrow; "Man on the Moon," a haunting tribute to the late Andy Kaufman; and "Nightswimming," R.E.M.'s best song (yeah, I said it), a melancholy lament translating the risky, youthful exuberance of skinny-dipping into a meditative, quasi-religious act.

As Stipe sings: "Nightswimming deserves a quiet night / I'm not sure all these people understand / It's not like years ago / The fear of getting caught / Of recklessness and

water / They cannot see me naked / These things, they go away / Replaced by everyday.” Sung, that final lyric suggests both the adjective “everyday,” signaling the mundane, and “every day,” signifying the banality of the daily trudge, each its own brand of bleak. Even at the age of 13, both interpretations broke my heart.

A good song lets you live a life you’ve yet to live.

Listening to “Nightswimming” in 1992 left me nostalgic for a feeling I’d never had, before I knew what nostalgia was, about an act I had yet to commit, and *that* is what good music does. A good song lets you live a life you’ve yet to live.

1994’s *Monster* was not destined to be another album obsessed with death, though the band dedicated the disc to the late River Phoenix (his sister, Rain Phoenix, sings on track eight, “Bang and Blame”). But both “Bang and Blame” and “Let Me In,” written for the late Kurt Cobain were relegated to B-side status at a time when B-sides existed and very much impacted which songs listeners listened to.

No, on *Monster*, the mourning is over, the anger is back, and the acoustic sound is out the window. Everything’s electric, grunge meets glam rock meets punk.

Monster’s opening track “What’s the Frequency, Kenneth?” takes its title from the taunts shouted at Dan Rather during a real-life 1986 beating. The guitar-heavy track kicks your teeth in, and from there, the record is Stipe, in character, embodying a new persona for every song. These are songs of monstrous, sex- and fame-obsessed men, something akin to David Foster Wallace’s *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*.

While each of these albums boasts its own style and theme, there are precursors and holdovers, a connective tissue that links all three. *Out of Time*’s “Losing My Religion” and *Monster*’s “Strange Currencies” might be more at home on *Automatic for the People*, while *Automatic*’s “Ignoreland” and “The Sidewinder Sleeps Tonite” belong unquestionably to *Out of Time*.

Taken together, these aren’t three albums so much as one masterwork, a musical trilogy, the sound mature, the lyrics intelligible, the music accessible but never simple, nuanced but rarely cryptic.

In total, R.E.M. released 15 studio albums. The six records that came before the big three are imperfect. The band is shedding influences, searching for a sound they’re about to embrace. The six records that follow the big three are imperfect, the band searching for a sound they’re losing along the way.

But, for three albums, R.E.M. never sounded like anyone so much as themselves. They became the proprietors of what I’d call the R.E.M. sound.

But they were more than that. They were the soundtrack of a decade.

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