

Athens, Georgia
1979¹

Michael Stipe, a student at the University of Georgia, meets Peter Buck at a record store he frequents in town called Wuxtry Records. Buck worked as a clerk there, and Stipe was a regular customer.² Over the next few months, the two became friends, bonding over their similar tastes in punk rock. Stipe was a singer. Buck...a guitarist. The two decided they wanted to start a band together.

Through a mutual friend, Kathleen O'Brien, Stipe and Buck met two fellow musicians and University of Georgia students: Bill Berry and Mike Mills. Berry played drums primarily, but could also play guitar, bass, and piano. Plus, he could write songs, so he was quite an asset. Mills was quite an asset, too. In addition to playing bass pretty darn well, he could play keys and also sing.

The four weren't necessarily deliberate with starting a band. It kind of just worked out that way. Not only that. There wasn't just one chief songwriter. They all kind of chipped in.³ At the time, Buck lived in a church. Seriously. Well, it used to be a church, anyway. St. Mary's Episcopal Church, to be precise. Now it was a home that Buck shared with several others, and it soon also became the home of where the band would rehearse. At their first rehearsal in February 1980, there was no heat, and Mills later recalled he was so cold that he had to play his bass with gloves on.

The band's first performance was at that church. At Kathleen O'Brien's birthday party actually, on April 5, 1980. Around 300 lucky people witnessed it. Shortly after this, Stipe figured they ought to pick out a band name, and he suggested "R.E.M.," which stands for rapid eye movement, the thing that our eyes do when we dream. Traditionally the story was that Stipe just randomly chose the name after browsing a dictionary, and the rest of the band was like "sure, that name works." However, that story may actually be false. Another source close to the band says R.E.M. actually stood for Ralph Eugene Meatyard, a photographer.⁴ Regardless, soon after that, R.E.M. was quickly getting local gigs. Heck, they even hit the road early on for gigs. At one such performance in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, another record store clerk named Jefferson Holt was in attendance and blown away. He later moved to Athens to begin managing the band.

For the rest of 1980 and into 1981, the band played as many shows as they could, touring throughout the Southern United States. Holt drove them in a crappy old van. Encouraged by more and more people showing up to watch them, Stipe, Berry, and Mills all dropped out of school to focus on the band full-time. Still, the tour was tough for the band. Despite increasingly enthusiastic crowds at every show, they made little money. Before one show in Atlanta, in

¹ <https://www.salon.com/2018/04/28/rem-plays-its-first-ever-show/>

² Blake Gumprecht (Winter 1983). "Interview with R.E.M.". *Alternative America (Fanzine)*.

³ <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-2008-06-03-0806020096-story.html>

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<https://pitchfork.com/thepitch/early-myths-about-rem-debunked-what-we-learned-from-new-biography-beg-in-the-begin/>

February 1981, the band recorded eight songs, but Holt didn't like them, and found a dude named Mitch Easter to re-record them at Drive-In Studio in Winston-Salem, North Carolina on April 15, 1981.⁵ It was there that the band recorded their first single, "Radio Free Europe." Hib-Tone, a new Atlanta-based record label, agreed to release it on July 8, 1981. Today, the song is considered a classic. In fact, 29 years after its release, the United States Library of Congress would add it to its National Recording Register for establishing "the pattern for later indie rock releases by breaking through on college radio in the face of mainstream radio's general indifference."

Indeed, "Radio Free Europe" was hard to categorize. It clearly was influenced by punk, but it was quieter and more melodic and jangly. But you couldn't understand the vocals, which threw a lot of people off. Regardless, the song was a big hit. Hib-Tone initially made 1,000 copies, but those quickly sold out. So it made 6,000 more copies, which apparently still wasn't enough. "Radio Free Europe" even got the attention of the *New York Times*, which listed it as one of the 40 best singles of the year.⁶ Much of the song's success came from being played on college radio stations. In fact, R.E.M. is now credited with helping start "college rock," an early branch of what we today call "alternative rock." Rock music that wasn't conventional enough to fit in with the mainstream, basically.

R.E.M. followed up "Radio Free Europe" with the *Chronic Town* EP. They recorded it with Easter in October 1981. It was part garage rock and part eerie folk. Yeah you still couldn't understand the lyrics. The band had planned on releasing the EP with a different local label, but by this time the band was getting record deal offers from both I.R.S. Records and RCA Records. Even though RCA gave them a potentially more lucrative deal, the band turned RCA down, instead going with the smaller indie label, I.R.S. It released *Chronic Town* on August 24, 1982. Critics generally praised the EP and college radio stations across the country played it. Within a year it had sold 20,000 copies. *Chronic Town* featured the songs "Gardening at Night" and "Wolves, Lower," a song in which R.E.M. recorded their very first music video for.

In December, the band went to Reflection studio in Charlotte, North Carolina, to record their debut album with producer Stephen Hague, but Hague was too much of a perfectionist, and the band requested to record once again with Easter instead, as well as a dude named Don Dixon. They wrapped up recording in February, and I.R.S. released R.E.M.'s debut studio album, *Murmur*, on April 12, 1983. *Murmur* showcased the R.E.M. sound that most are familiar with today, especially Buck's jangly guitar and Mill's melodic basslines. In addition to the aforementioned "Radio Free Europe," the album featured the standout song "Talk About the Passion." Critics adored *Murmur*, and today it is considered a classic and one of the greatest debut albums of all time. *Rolling Stone* magazine named it the best album of 1983, beating out Michael Jackson's *Thriller*...which is, ya know...the biggest selling album of all time. Despite critical praise of *Murmur*, it only sold around 200,000 copies by the end of the year, which was below I.R.S.'s expectations⁷.

⁵ <https://www.salon.com/2018/04/28/rem-plays-its-first-ever-show/>

⁶ Marcus Gray (1997). *It Crawled from the South: An R.E.M. Companion*. Da Capo. p. 497.

⁷ David Buckley (2002). *R.E.M.: Fiction: An Alternative Biography*. Virgin. p. 95

Still, R.E.M. by now were the darlings of college radio and even were starting to get mainstream appeal. Then again, this mainstream appeal was also starting to turn off the cool kids. On October 6, 1983, the band made their national TV debut by appearing on Late Night with David Letterman. Meanwhile, the band went on its biggest tour yet, playing shows all over the United States and in Canada and Europe for the first time.

They also recorded new songs for what ended up making up their second studio album, *Reckoning*, released by I.R.S. on April 9, 1984. Featuring the singles "So. Central Rain (I'm Sorry)" and "(Don't Go Back To) Rockville," *Reckoning* was more commercially successful than *Murmur*, reaching #27 on the Billboard 200 Albums chart and eventually got certified gold, meaning it sold more than 500,000 copies. Critics also once again praised the new stuff.

R.E.M. went on a world tour to promote *Reckoning* that even included shows in Japan. By this time MTV was also now regularly playing R.E.M. music videos. In fact, Stipe even made a short film that went with *Reckoning* called *Left of Reckoning* and MTV aired some of it.

In February 1985, the band decided it wanted to take their music in a different direction. They got a new producer, the well respected Joe Boyd, and recorded in London. Stipe specifically decided that he wanted to write lyrics that told stories and were more autobiographical. The music was slower and gloomier, perhaps since they recorded it in London in the winter. In fact, as it turns out, they were apparently kind of grumpy recording it, leading to tensions in the band. Regardless, they ended up with another solid record that critics again MOSTLY liked. I.R.S. released *Fables of the Reconstruction*, their third studio album, on June 10, 1985. It was an even bigger hit than *Reckoning*, mostly due to the hit single "Driver 8," which peaked at number 22 on the Billboard Mainstream Rock Tracks chart. Huh. Yep, the mainstream was now fully paying attention to R.E.M. *Fables of the Reconstruction* also featured the singles "Cant Get There from Here" and "Wendell Gee."

R.E.M. toured North America and Europe for much of 1985 promoting the album. That's the tour in which Stipe bleached his hair blond. In the spring of 1986, the band went back to the studio, this time working with producer Don Gehman, who was most known for his work with John Mellencamp. In fact, they recorded at Mellencamp's recording studio in Belmont, Indiana. The new songs they recorded there were more accessible, yet complex and hard-rock influenced, and featured more instruments. They also featured Stipe's vocals more front and center compared to their previous recordings, which worked out since his singing was more confident than ever. The new stuff made up what would become their fourth studio album, *Lifes Rich Pageant*, released by I.R.S. on July 28, 1986. The title was inspired by this. And yeah that's Bill Berry on the cover.

Lifes Rich Pageant generally got better reviews and did even better commercially than *Fables of the Reconstruction*. The album featured the single "Fall on Me," which actually got a bit of commercial radio airplay, even peaking at number 94 on the Billboard Hot 100. Still, most of

R.E.M.'s support came from college radio stations. However, that would dramatically change over the next few years.

For the rest of 1986, the band toured North America to increasingly bigger and bigger audiences. On April 27, 1987, I.R.S. released *Dead Letter Office*, a compilation of stuff the band had recorded over the years but not properly released. For most of the year, though, they took a break.

When they did meet up, they often met up at the Sound Emporium in Nashville, Tennessee, to record what would become their fifth studio album, *Document*, released by I.R.S. on August 31, 1987. Scott Litt, who'd go on to work with the band over the next few albums, produced. *Document* was their catchiest album yet and ultimately was a huge commercial success, their first certified platinum record, meaning they sold more than a million copies of it. In fact, it eventually sold more than FOUR million copies. *Document* also featured their biggest hit song yet- "The One I Love," which peaked at number nine on the Billboard Hot 100. It's also the album with the hit songs "Finest Worksong" and "It's the End of the World as We Know It (And I Feel Fine)," which is now arguably one of their most recognizable and unique songs. You know, the one where Stipe just rambles on about random stuff in the verses, shouting out three people with the initials of "L.B." "Finest Worksong," at the time, was the band's highest-charting single yet in the United Kingdom.

R.E.M. didn't tour as much to promote their new songs this time. They didn't have to, really, because they were quickly becoming one of the biggest bands in the country. ~~In fact, in December 1987, *Rolling Stone* magazine officially declared that R.E.M. was "America's Best Rock and Roll Band."~~⁸ They probably WOULD have been one of the biggest bands around the world, too, but I.R.S. apparently wasn't doing much distribution and promotion internationally, and so the band decided to sign with Warner Brothers. Naturally, many fans said they sold out by doing this.

Before Warner Brothers took over, I.R.S. released the band's first greatest hits album, *Eponymous*, on October 17, 1988. Meanwhile, R.E.M. spent much of that year recording new songs with Scott Litt. They tried really hard to be experimental with this new stuff. Supposedly Stipe even told his bandmates to "not write any more R.E.M.-type songs."⁹ Due to this, the new stuff seemed more eclectic than their previous recordings.

Warner Brothers released their sixth studio album, *Green*, on November 7, 1988, which was the day before a presidential election. Stipe by this time had been quite vocal about his politics...which were quite left-leaning...and actually the whole band expressed support for presidential candidate Michael Dukakis. Well, Dukakis lost the election, but uh...R.E.M. won as *Green* was another critical and commercial success for the band. It peaked at number 12 on the Billboard 200 Albums chart and eventually sold nearly five million copies worldwide. It also had four hit singles: "Orange Crush," "Pop Song 89," which had this controversial music video by the

⁸ David Buckley (2002). *R.E.M.: Fiction: An Alternative Biography*. Virgin. p. 163.

⁹ <https://www.udiscovermusic.com/behind-the-albums/r-e-m-green/>

way, "Get Up," and "Stand," which peaked at number one on both Billboard's Mainstream Rock Tracks chart and Modern Rock Tracks chart. Speaking of the Modern Rock Tracks chart...uh...THAT was new...a chart to keep track of alternative rock songs...and you wanna know a big reason why that chart even existed in the first place? R.E. freaking M. Anyway, "Stand" also got played a lot on pop radio, peaking at number six on the Billboard Hot 100. "Weird Al" Yankovic even parodied it. Critics also mostly praised *Green*.

The band promoted the album with its biggest tour yet. This was the first tour they played STADIUMS, where they often played art films playing behind them on stage. The last show of the tour was one of their most memorable shows ever. On November 13, 1989 at the Fox Theater in Atlanta, they played their first album, *Murmur*, in order, from start to finish, followed by *Green*, in order, from start to finish. Epic. The show must have taken a lot of them, though, because they wouldn't play live again for five years.

After taking a break for much of 1990, R.E.M. returned to the studio...well several studios...to record new stuff beginning in September. This time, they wrote the songs on mandolin, organ, and acoustic guitar, leading to the songs having a more folksy and even country sound. What resulted from these recordings was their biggest album ever, *Out of Time*, released by Warner Brothers on March 12, 1991. It was their seventh studio album, and it featured their most successful song of all-time...an unlikely hit really....called "Losing My Religion." It got up to number four on the Billboard Hot 100 and remains their most streamed song to this day, despite the mandolin doing the heavy lifting on it. No disrespect to the mandolin. It's a great instrument. Just not usually known for being in pop songs. Anyway, "Losing My Religion" earned the band two Grammy Awards. *Out of Time* also featured the singles "Radio Song," "Shiny Happy People," and "Near Wild Heaven," which was R.E.M.'s first hit single primarily sung by Mike Mills.

Critics once again mostly praised *Out of Time*, and today it's considered one of the greatest rock albums of all time. It was R.E.M.'s only album to win a Grammy, and it's also their best-selling album. It's sold more than 18 million copies worldwide. It topped both the U.S. and U.K. album charts, spending 109 weeks on the U.S. chart and 183 weeks on the U.K. chart. Dang.

Out of Time completed R.E.M.'s transition from a cult band to one of the biggest bands in the world. As I mentioned before, despite being bigger than ever, the band didn't tour to support this album, nor the next, which they began recording in the summer of 1991. During the songwriting process, Buck, Mills, and Berry would often trade instruments and met regularly without Stipe. Soon they had recorded 30 songs without him to add lyrics to.

Several of these songs ended up making up what became their eighth studio album, *Automatic for the People*, released by Warner Brothers on October 5, 1992. It was another classic that critics adored. In fact, today most journalists argue *Automatic for the People* is their very best album. It featured six singles, and yeah pretty much all six of them are classics, too: "Drive," "Man on the Moon," "The Sidewinder Sleeps Tonite," "Everybody Hurts," "Nightswimming" and "Find the River." Yep, all of them are on THE SAME ALBUM. All of them, well...except "Find the

River,” were pretty big radio hits. “Everybody Hurts” stood out as a particularly beautiful and resonating song with this memorable music video. It’s the kind of song and video that’s an automatic TEARJERKER for the people, if ya know what I mean. “Everybody Hurts” peaked at number 29 on the Billboard Hot 100. “Drive” peaked at number 28 and “Man on the Moon” peaked at number 30.

Automatic for the People also eventually sold more than 18 million copies worldwide. In a span of just a year and a half, R.E.M. had released their two most successful albums, the only two they released that eventually were certified diamond, meaning they each sold 10 million copies, but in reality both sold more than 36 million copies combined. And yet, they still didn’t tour. Sure, they did occasional TV performances and interviews, but they spent much of that free time just working on side projects.

In 1993, R.E.M. seemed rejuvenated by the rise of grunge, and wanted to release new stuff that was heavier and quicker. They also got the urge to tour again. No, not the band The Urge. R.E.M. got the DESIRE to tour again. Throughout the year, Buck wrote around 45 acoustic songs, but when the band returned to the studio in the fall, they turned the distortion up, baby. However, there were several delays completing what would become their ninth studio album, *Monster*. Warner Brothers wouldn’t release it until September 27, 1994.

Monster debuted at number one on both the Billboard and UK Albums charts, and yet again was mostly praised by critics. It remains their third-best selling album of all time, eventually selling more than nine million copies. The album featured five singles: “What’s the Frequency, Kenneth?” “Bang and Blame,” “Crush with Eyeliner,” “Strange Currencies,” and “Tongue.” The harder sound on *Monster* actually grew their appeal with a younger audience, and alternative rock radio stations in particular played the heck out of it. And yep, R.E.M. finally went back on tour after its release, with plans to tour the world, starting in Australia and Asia. The Monster Tour was their most successful yet.

That is, until March 1, 1995, when tragedy struck. During a concert in Lausanne, Switzerland, Bill Berry collapsed on stage after suffering a brain aneurysm. After having life saving surgery, he fortunately fully recovered a month later. The band resumed the tour in May, but Mills had to have abdominal surgery in July. In August, Stipe had an emergency surgery to repair a hernia. Amazingly, despite all the surgeries, the band managed to record an entire new album while on the road. Before finishing it, they re-signed a new deal with Warner Brothers, rumored to be the biggest recording contract in history up to that point.

R.E.M. wrapped up the recording of new stuff in the summer of 1996. Around that time, Jefferson Holt stopped being the band’s manager after he faced several allegations of sexual harassment. The band’s lawyer, Bertis Downs, took his place.

Warner Brothers released *New Adventures in Hi-Fi*, their tenth studio album, on September 9, 1996. Wouldn’t ya know it, critics adored this one as well. That’s ten critically acclaimed albums in a row. I hope I don’t jinx this. *New Adventures in Hi-Fi* also was a commercial hit, eventually

selling more than seven million copies worldwide. One of Stipe and Buck's heroes, Patti Smith, sang on the album's first hit single, "E-Bow the Letter." Other singles on the album were "Bittersweet Me," "Electrolite," and "How the West Was Won and Where It Got Us." Many magazines ranked *New Adventures in Hi-Fi* as one of the best albums of the year, and in recent years it has gained a bit of a cult status.

R.E.M. did not tour to support *New Adventures in Hi-Fi*, and 1997 saw the band finally losing momentum, especially after Bill Berry decided he didn't want to be in the band anymore. Ever since the brain aneurysm, Berry had had second thoughts about continuing with the band, and he decided that he would be happier as a...farmer instead. Yep, he moved just outside Athens and started farming, rarely returning to music ever since.

While news of Berry's departure shocked R.E.M. fans everywhere, perhaps what shocked them more is that they attempted to carry on without him. Yep, they didn't replace him. Well, they did get help on drums when they returned to the studio in February 1998. Barrett Martin, who played with the band Screaming Trees and toured with Beck, recorded with the band, and so did Joey Waronker. Oh, and they also began working with a new producer, Pat McCarthy. For this new stuff, the band experimented a bit with electronic elements.

The new songs made up what would become their eleventh studio album, *Up*, released by Warner Brothers on October 26, 1998. Well, *Up* was a commercial flop compared to their past few releases, their worst selling album going back all the way to *Lifes Rich Pageant*. That said, to date it's still sold more than two million copies, and it had a fairly big radio hit on it: "Daysleeper." Other singles on *Up* were "Lotus," "At My Most Beautiful," and "Suspicion." Critics were also less praiseworthy of *Up*, and today it's considered one of R.E.M.'s weakest albums.

The band played a few shows in North America and Europe for the rest of the year and into 1999. In May, they recorded the soundtrack for the film *Man on the Moon*. Warner Brothers released it on November 23, 1999, and it featured the hit "The Great Beyond." Believe it or not, "The Great Beyond" was the band's highest charting single ever in the U.K.

Throughout 2000, R.E.M. recorded a bunch of new stuff in both Canada and Ireland. This stuff was much more like their older stuff- a return to form of sorts. Warner Brothers released their twelfth studio album, *Reveal*, on May 14, 2001. It featured the hit song "Imitation of Life," as well as the singles "All the Way to Reno (You're Gonna Be a Star)," and "I'll Take the Rain." With *Reveal*, the critics once again mostly showered praise for the band, even the ones who talked trash about *Up*. *Reveal* also eventually sold more than two million copies worldwide.

Over the next few years, the band met up less and less, and played fewer and fewer shows. Beginning in 2003, Bill Rieflin began playing drums for R.E.M. at live shows, anyway. He'd remain with the band for the next eight years. That said, on October 10, 2003, at a show in Raleigh, North Carolina, Bill Berry took Rieflin's place to reunite with the band for a couple songs.¹⁰ He has randomly reunited with them a few more times ever since.

¹⁰ <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/berry-drops-in-on-r-e-m-189884/>

Around this time, R.E.M. returned to the studio to work on their thirteenth studio album, *Around the Sun*. Rieflin recorded with the band for the first time on it. Warner Brothers released the album on October 5, 2004. *Around the Sun* was a flop both commercially and critically. Keep in mind, this was a big deal for R.E.M., a band who rarely got criticism nor disappointment from fans throughout its career. While *Around the Sun* featured four singles- "Leaving New York," "Aftermath," "Electron Blue," and "Wanderlust"-none of them got much radio airplay...well except in the U.K. Still, the worldwide tour for *Around the Sun* was quite successful. Footage from the final shows of it were later featured on a live album called...um...*R.E.M. Live*, released by Warner Brothers on October 15, 2007.

Speaking of 2007, that was their first year of eligibility for the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. And yeah, that year R.E.M. was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. ~~They even performed at the ceremony, and Berry joined them again on drums and Eddie Vedder of Pearl Jam joined in on vocals.~~

Around that time, R.E.M. wrapped up recording what would become their fourteenth studio album, *Accelerate*, released by Warner Brothers on March 31, 2008. This time they worked with producer Jacknife Lee. On *Accelerate*, the band returned to a heavier and faster sound, which fans and critics alike eagerly welcomed. Indeed, with this release, the band seemed to have come back to life. Despite the hype, the album didn't even end up selling more than *Around the Sun*. That said, "Supernatural Superserious," the lead single off the album, did quite well, getting all the way up to 21 on the Modern Rock Tracks and number 85 on the Billboard Hot 100. *Accelerate* featured three other singles: "Hollow Man," "Man-Sized Wreath," and "Until the Day Is Done."

R.E.M.'s final tour was the one that promoted *Accelerate*. They even played 10 shows in South America. Perhaps they didn't realize it at the time, but their final show was on November 18, 2008 at one of the coolest venues in the world- the National Auditorium in Mexico City. Around 10,000 lucky people got to see it.

After taking some time off, the band all collectively realized they probably should, rather than cling to nostalgia like so many bands do, call it quits. However, they decided to make one final album first. They worked once again with Jacknife Lee to record new songs, ultimately recording all over the world with him. Here is the room where they recorded several songs in Berlin. It would be the last place R.E.M. ever performed together.

Warner Brothers released *Collapse into Now*, R.E.M.'s fifteenth and final studio album, on March 7, 2011. Critics once again mostly praised it, but to date it's their least successful album. Then again, by then not nearly as many people even bought albums anymore...so. Standout tracks on *Collapse into Now* were "It Happened Today," "Mine Smell Like Honey," and "Oh My Heart," which the University of Georgia featured in several public service announcements.

On September 21, 2011, R.E.M. announced on its website that it was “calling it a day as a band,” adding “To anyone who ever felt touched by our music, our deepest thanks for listening.”¹¹ They were together for 31 years. On November 11, Warner Brothers released an epic greatest hits album, *Part Lies, Part Heart, Part Truth, Part Garbage 1982-2011*. In the years since their breakup, Michael Stipe, Peter Dinklage, Peter Buck, Mike Mills, and even Bill Berry have all been involved with creative side projects. All of them independently have expressed that the band will likely never reunite.

Today, R.E.M. remains one of the most influential and successful bands of all time. Before they were in the mainstream, they influenced the mainstream. When they finally entered the mainstream, they permanently changed it. R.E.M. is also one of the few bands to be both critically acclaimed yet extremely popular. And when I say “critically acclaimed,” I mean they are undeniably one of the most critically acclaimed bands of all time. I know, I know, critics are overrated, right? Well, they also have sold more than 90 million records worldwide. R.E.M. was a HUGE reason why “college rock” and “alternative rock” even exist in the first place. Look, when a band literally CREATES new genres of music, they’re kind of a big freaking deal.

So what’s your favorite R.E.M. song and album? My favorite song by them is “Shiny Happy People,” but any time I sing karaoke my first go-to pick is often “It’s the End of the World as We Know It.” My favorite album? That’s a tough one, but yeah I’ll probably go with *Automatic for the People* to avoid scrutiny down there. Anyway, let me know yours below. Thanks for watching!

Sources/further reading and watching:

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