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CRITICAL MASS : In retrospect: R.E.M.'s Murmur

PHILIP MARTIN

A week ago, I. R. S. Records, A&M, and Universal Music released a 25th anniversary two disc reissue of R. E. M.'s first album, Murmur.

The first disc consists of the standard 12-track album, digitally remastered, while the second disc contains a live performance recorded in Toronto a few months after the album was released. It also has brief liner notes from producers Mitch Easter and Don Dixon as well as some former I. R. S. executives. Its priced at \$ 29. 98; you can download a digital copy for about half that.

I don't expect anyone who's unfamiliar with the album to buy a copy, although I don't know much about how music is marketed these days.

Albums seem quaintly anachronistic as they've been atomized by technology and unstuck in time. The chief unit of pop may not even be the single anymore; it might be a bass line or a beat, a shudder step or a hiccupped whoop. Pop is a kit of combinable components, kicks and snares and three-note bursts. Its a producers game where performance is reduced to a series of keystrokes and talent whatever that is can be brewed up in a lab.

Im not saying its worse now, only that its different, and that some sounds have become antique and worth preserving for the same reason we need to fit together mastodon bones to prove there were giants in those days.

These things always devolve into autobiography; I cant write about Murmur 25 years and eight months later without remembering how it was when the album came out and what it seemed to mean.

I know I reviewed the album when it was released, for I remember I misidentified the groups lead singer as Michael Stripe, although Ive forgotten whether that was a typo or a mistake. I also remember that someone wrote a letter to the editor of the Shreveport Journal that unfavorably compared my review with the one that ran in Rolling Stone.

I can't remember or retrieve what my review said, for I threw out those files years ago, and there's no easily accessible archive of that dead newspaper. So I am free to suggest that I understood the album as a great one.

In those days I still played music, casually but as well and hard as my limited ability would allow. I was in a couple of bands and wrote songs and listened to everything from Robert Johnson and Charlie Christian to Kraftwerk and The Human League with a critical ear. I considered newspaper work my day job. Though I entertained no illusions of making it in rock n roll, music was what was genuinely important to me.

There wasn't much good on the radio then Michael Jackson's Thriller, which came out in November 1982, was an exception to the lumbering corporate acts and skinny-tied New Wavers that held sway in the early 1980 s. My cohort had already retreated from MTV and the Top 40; we'd scrounge through the bins in Steve Timmons SOOTO Records looking for albums we'd read about in hip music magazines.

Because I sometimes reviewed records for the Journal and other publications, I found myself in a position of privilege. Record company publicists sent me maybe a dozen records a week and I'm sure this is how I got my first copy of Murmur the album cover had a hole drilled in the lower left corner to indicate it was a promo copy.

I might not have known the singer's name, but I was familiar with R. E. M. when their first album showed up. I know I'd heard and probably owned a copy of their Chronic Town EP, which had been released the year before with the single Radio Free Europe, which had been re-recorded for Murmur.

WE WALK Listening to Murmur 25 years later, the first thing that comes to mind is how timeless it sounds, how free of early 1980 s signifiers it seems, more organic and acoustic than rock n roll. I still like the way Stipes vocals are embedded in the current of the mix; they don't pop out in 3-D but ride between Peter Buck's flashing jewel-tipped jangle and Mike Mills' rumbling melody-toting bass. Murmur sounds like a glimpse of gold at the bottom of a burbling tea-colored creek gothic and spooky, a shadow band heard but not glimpsed through the woods at dusk.

You smell woodsmoke, you taste a little blood in your mouth, you hear what Buck once called the hillbilly art people going at it with vibrating strings and

animal skins. Murmur is the sound of a certain kind of South, a wisened-up suspicious South patrolled by long-haired haints and fluttering psychedelic bats.

Murmur is minor chords and cast-off lyrics with words that matter less than the cadence that controls them. I don't believe all the myths that surround the record Stipe was in a punk band in high school; there's no way he was so naive he didn't know the bass was responsible for the low notes until after Murmur was recorded but I'll accept that the album is more a product of instinct than cynical design. The band could play, though maybe they learned by doing. They'd been together nearly three years before they went into that gospel studio Reflection Studios, in Charlotte, N. C., where Tammy Faye Bakker cut her tracks with Easter and Dixon and came out with a document that re-invented alternative rock.

To this day, it's hard for me to think of Murmur as a collection of songs that can be separated from one another. I think of Murmur as a piece; I'm not sure I would recognize most of them out of context. And aside from Radio Free Europe it's difficult to recall more than a few individual song titles (Talk About the Passion, West of the Fields, Catapult, Moral Kiosk, Pilgrimage) without glancing at the album jacket. Murmur is a strong argument for the album as a coherent work, although you'd be hard pressed to find (or decipher) any common thread running through Stipe's opaque lyrics.

Murmur moved me toward a better understanding of the possibilities of pop music. Before Murmur I admired singer-songwriters who married melody and literate lyrics (Paul Simon, Joni Mitchell, Bob Dylan, Van Morrison, Jackson Browne) above other forms.

While I still love those artists, Murmur demonstrates the mysterious, ineffable power of allusive, cryptic, imagistic songwriting the kind that makes the listener a collaborator. Whatever Stipe is trying to say is less important than the emotive flow of his alternately snarling, slurring instrument.

TALK ABOUT THE PASSION I'm like any guy my age I have prejudices and conceits. I've written about a lot of albums, and most of them I hardly ever listen to anymore. When I get home at the end of the day I'm likely to click the Genius tool on iTunes and let the computer brew up a playlist. But I still listen to Murmur regularly; I play it more than Dylan's Blood on the Tracks or Simon's Hearts and Bones or Elvis Costello's This Years Model or Bruce Springsteen's Tunnel of

Love. I cant say that I love it more than those old albums (all of which I still play), but I play Murmur more. I come back to it and discover new things about it. Not revelations, but little quirks and bonuses. Some days all it takes is the punch of Rickenbacker bass to make me smile.

Murmur is not even my favorite R. E. M. album I'd opt for 1996 s New Adventures in Hi-Fi but it is a watershed album, one that opens up new territories. In retrospect, the one-two punch of Murmur and the Replacements Let It Be (which came out in October 1984) pretty much ended my musical career.

I was in a band when Murmur came out and the album made me wish to be in a different kind of band, one that could do more than bash out garage noise and butcher the blues. It made me want to do something fine, something I simply couldn't do with a guitar.

Maybe that is the highest and best use of artists: They make us aware of the potential of the human animal, how good we can be. Its corny what the kids call cheesy to say its inspirational, but thats how it feels to me. E-mail: pmartin@arkansasonline.com