

Linn Lounge presents ... R.E.M.

Welcome to Linn Lounge presents... R.E.M.

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Inventive and experimental, R.E.M. were the pioneers of a genre – Alternative Rock – creating an original sound and artistic vibe that continues to speak across the generations.

So sit back, relax and immerse yourself in the humble story of a modest band that changed the face of mainstream rock.

“We were a band that had no goals” - modestly explains Michael Stipe, the lead singer of R.E.M.

Yet 15 albums and 31 years later, R.E.M. can humbly accept the title of ‘inventors of Alternative Rock.’

Rummaging in his local record store for hidden gems, Michael Stipe stumbled upon his greatest find: a life long friendship and successful career with student Peter Buck – who was working as a part-time sales assistant to fund his tuition at the University of Georgia in Athens.

As a regular customer Michael Stipe soon formed a special bond with Buck, realising they had similar tastes in music. ‘It turns out that I was buying all the records that [Buck] was saving for himself’ – particularly punk rock and protopunk artists like Patti Smith, Television, and The Velvet Underground.

Soon Stipe and Buck were jamming together alongside Buck’s fellow students, Mike Mills (bass) and Bill Berry (drums) - who’d been playing music together since high school. After just a few months of relaxed band practice, the four lads embarked on their first gig – a friend’s birthday party at the Athens Episcopal Church on April 5th 1980. But it was enough to entice them into a life of music - Buck, Mills and Berry eventually dropped out of school.

R.E.M.’s success was almost immediate in Athens and the surrounding area, and it wasn’t long until their first single ‘Radio Free Europe’ was storming the USA charts. The New York Times even awarded it one of the top 10 singles of 1981.

Play Radio Free Europe (CD quality)

In one year they had released their first single, recorded EP ‘Chronic Town’ via an independent record label and commenced on a busy tour schedule throughout the Southern United States - even supporting headline acts such as The Police. But life wasn’t glamorous. R.E.M. were committed; driving show to show in an old blue van and living off a \$2 a day food allowance.

R.E.M. nationally introduced themselves as the easy-going personas that would later typify their career during their first TV performance on the Late Night with David Letterman show, playing a new nameless track, that would be known as 'So, Central Rain *(I'm) Sorry)'

Play David Letterman clip up to 1:45.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EwxDEdyrYM>

Emerging at the very start of the 80s, R.E.M. opened the world to a genre of jangle pop or college rock. While Wham were breaking hits and Duran Duran were breaking hearts, R.E.M. were reinventing the sounds of 1960s rock with a signature style. Incorporating a punk band energy, with folk-rock instrumentation and often indiscernible lyrics, R.E.M. influenced the greats of 90s grunge such as Nirvana and Sonic Youth as well as newer groups like Beck and The Decembrists.

Kurt Cobain of Nirvana was a vocal fan of R.E.M. Before Cobain's death in 1994, he had even made plans to collaborate on a musical project with lead singer Stipe. Cobain told *Rolling Stone* in an interview earlier that year,

"I don't know how that band does what they do. God, they're the greatest. They've dealt with their success like saints, and they keep delivering great music."

R.E.M.'s early breakthrough success served as an inspiration for an onslaught of alternative bands. Music Magazine Spin congratulated R.E.M. as genre innovators - making a set of guidelines that other underground artists could follow. Spin's Charles Aaron wrote that by 1985,

"They'd shown how far an underground, punk-inspired rock band could go within the industry without whoring out its artistic integrity in any obvious way. They'd figured out how to buy in, not sell out - in other words, they'd achieved the American Bohemian Dream."

Steve Wynn of band Dream Syndicate said, "They invented a whole new ballgame for all of the other bands to follow...Musically, the bands did different things, but R.E.M. was first to show us you can be big and still be cool."

90s indie-rock band Pavement even wrote a tribute song praising R.E.M. with an almost spiritual fanaticism:

Play up to 0:51 of 'Unseen Power of the Picket Fence' 1993 (spotify)

Mitch Easter, who produced the first recording of Radio Free Europe at his underground recording studio 'Drive-In', commented on the uniqueness of R.E.M.'s new sound :

"I was kind of surprised at the music they performed. They had a funny sensibility, because back then many bands were on one side of the punk fence or the other, whereas these guys were in their own sort of category... [Michael Stipe] wanted his own sound"

Michael Stipe himself describes the lyricism on their first album 'Murmur' as 'complete babbling'. Undeveloped thoughts and evocative phrases are the basis of this album. During the recording process Stipe was often put low in the mix – his voice poignantly haunting the background of the songs. For many the beauty of this album actually comes from not being able to easily follow the narrative of the songs.

One fan explains that he never fully caught the entire chorus to track 'Perfect Circle' but still considered it a perfect ballad:

"I'd spent all these years not quite knowing; I always caught the "shoulder" and the let the rest kind of the words slide around it. And that was okay."

Play Perfect Circle from Murmur (CD quality)

But by the mid 80s Stipe's singing style and pronunciation had become a lot clearer. Guitarist Buck noted in an 1986 interview with newspaper *Chicago Tribune* that the vocals on their latest album 'Life's Rich Pageant' were more definable because Stipe was growing more confident in his abilities.

It was with this album that R.E.M. began to really break the mainstream charts. The single 'Fall on Me' was a huge success with commercial radio. 'Life's Rich Pageant' was also the first album that R.E.M. had started creating music videos for. With the advent of relatively cheap and easy-to-use video recording and editing equipment and the birth of US music video channel, MTV, in 1981, bands were beginning to experiment with this new format. The video for 'Fall on Me' was filmed entirely by Stipe himself, in one shot:

'I shot it at a rock quarry in Indiana,' he says 'There's not a single edit in it. I took a piece of film, turned it backwards, flipped it upside down, and put the words to the song on top of it in red lettering. I was following Andy Warhol's idea of the camera being a passive observer. And MTV played the living shit out of it, which was profoundly shocking.'

Towards the end of the second verse, he misspelled the word 'Foresight'.

Play video for Fall on Me <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lf6vCjtaV1k>

<http://remhq.com/hqtv/videos/music-videos/fall-on-me-1>

While Stipe's vocals became more decipherable, the band's lyrics were taking on stronger statements as well – conveying ideas on a more literal level and addressing social and political concerns. 'Fall on Me' lamented the effects of pollution and commented on the need for humanity to connect as a larger community.

Bassist Mills explained "After you've made three records and you've written several songs and they've gotten better and better lyrically the next step would be to have somebody question you and say, are you saying anything? And Michael had the confidence at that point to say yes . . ."

The band's fifth album Document (1987) featured some of their most openly political subjects. It was largely a reaction to the 1980s Conservative environment under President Ronald Reagan, with songs like 'Exhuming McCarthy' which condemned the mindless growth of American exceptionalism, and 'Welcome to Occupation' – a bleak folk song referring to American intervention in Central and Southern America.

When you listen to 'Welcome To The Occupation' try to imagine it without any drums at all. The character of the song changes considerably, and the underlying theme of the lyrics is revealed more blatantly. The heavy beat adds a generous momentum to a composition that might otherwise feel too still and quiet for its own good.

Play Welcome to Occupation (CD quality)

Stipe notes that the band felt morally compelled to incorporate more politically assertive messages in their work. He stated

"Our political activism and the content of the songs was just a reaction to where we were, and what we were surrounded by, which was just abject horror...in 1987 and '88 there was nothing to do but be active."

R.E.M. chose the American release date of their album 'Green' to coincide with the 1988 presidential election, and used its increased profile during the period to criticise Republican candidate George H. W. Bush while praising Democratic candidate Michael Dukakis. During the 'Green' tour, Stipe took time to inform their audiences about a variety of pressing socio-political issues. They converted many new fans and received a warm critical reaction with this album. Ultimately Green went double-platinum in the U.S. and it was R.E.M.'s first gold album in the UK, making it the quartet's European breakthrough.

By the end of the '80s, Michael Stipe was opening up more in interviews, particularly when talking about the band's political stance. Listening attentively it is clear that "Orange Crush" was about the use of Agent Orange in Vietnam, even if the words remained oblique.

Play Orange Crush (Studio Master)

As their global success grew, R.E.M. continued to promote support for a variety of causes with more ardent enthusiasm. In 1991 Stipe took a provocative stance on national television at the MTV Awards wearing a selection of white t-shirts emblazoned with political statements such as 'rainforest', 'handgun control now' and 'love knows no colours'.

Throughout their career R.E.M. helped raise funds for many environmental, feminist and human rights causes, especially attempting to increase voter registration. And on a smaller scale, the band still stuck to their roots, consistently donating to local charities in hometown Athens, funding the restoration of historic buildings there and promoting local politics.

In 2004, the band participated in the Vote For Change tour – hoping to mobilize American voters to support the Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry. When President George W. Bush was re-elected, R.E.M. were bitterly disappointed. The day after the re-election, they played Madison Square Garden, opening with 'It's the End of the World As We Know It'

Play It's The End Of The World As We Know It (CD quality)

But R.E.M.'s political stance was not always highly regarded. Protesting modern issues as a wealthy rock band - under contract to a label owned by a multinational corporation - led to criticism by some sceptics. Former editor of Q magazine, Paul Du Noyer condemned the band's "celebrity liberalism", saying,

"It's an entirely pain-free form of rebellion that they're adopting. There's no risk involved in it whatsoever, but quite a bit of shoring up of customer loyalty."

Yet their political involvement was not a publicity stunt. R.E.M. had a genuine concern for humanity and believed it was important to portray their personal and moral values in every action. They had always favoured inventiveness over commercial success.

Although the band had already achieved a lot of mainstream attention, they decided to move away from their comfort zone with the release of their seventh album 'Out of Time' in 1991- experimenting with new instruments including the mandolin and organ. Dorian Lynskey from the UK's Guardian explains that the band was unafraid to take risks, even when it wasn't in their best interest;

"Look at "Losing My Religion," released at a key point in R.E.M.'s ascent. "If you're a rising rock band looking for a breakthrough hit, you don't immediately pick up a mandolin."

The album's lead single "Losing My Religion" quickly became a worldwide hit. It was heavily played on the radio, won two Grammy's and stayed in the US top 40 for 21 weeks. The music video was continuously played on MTV.

'Losing My Religion' originated out of Buck's efforts to learn the Mandolin. He created a riff on the mandolin using familiar chords E minor, A Minor, D and G and thought it might make a good basis for a song. Buck tells us that;

"I'm proud to say every bit of the mandolin on the record was recorded live – I did no overdubbing. If you listen closely, on one of the verses there's a place where I muffled it, and I thought, well, I can't go back and punch it up, because it's supposed to be a live track."

Play Losing My Religion Video <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=if-UzXIQ5vw>

Or Play Losing My Religion in Studio Master

R.E.M. did not tour to promote 'Out of time'; instead the group played a series of one-off shows and released music videos for each song on the video album 'This Film Is On'. It was R.E.M.'s artistic influence that increased the desire for accompanying music videos by all mainstream acts from here on.

Growing from strength to strength, R.E.M.'s next album 'Automatic For The People' reached numbers one and two on UK and US charts retrospectively. The album dealt with themes of loss and mourning inspired by "that sense of ... turning thirty", according to Buck. Several songs featured string arrangements by former Led Zeppelin bassist John Paul Jones. Again, to the disappointment of fans, R.E.M. decided to forego a tour for this album. The lack of tour, combined with Stipe's malnourished physical appearance, led to unfounded rumours that Stipe must be HIV positive or dying. The slower, more melancholy pace of the album only helped to entice gossip with songs like Everybody Hurts.

Play Everybody Hurts (Studio Master)

It wasn't until January 1995 - 6 years later - that R.E.M began touring again after the release of a more rock-orientated album 'Monster'. The tour was a huge success commercially but the band suffered from severe health difficulties. In March Berry collapsed on stage in Switzerland, having suffered a brain aneurysm. In July Mills had surgery to remove an intestinal adhesion and just a month later Stipe underwent emergency surgery to repair a hernia. Despite all these problems the band still managed to record the majority of their new album (New Adventures in HiFi) while on tour – using audio recordings from stage performances as the basis.

Although Berry recovered to full health after his brain aneurism, his heart was no longer committed to the music. Late in 1997, Berry announced his departure from the group but adamantly stated that he would not quit if the band were to break up as a result. Stipe, Mills and Buck agreed to carry on as a three piece. Berry told the press;

"I'm just not as enthusiastic as I have been in the past about doing this anymore . . . I have the best job in the world. But I'm kind of ready to sit back and reflect and maybe not be a pop star anymore."

While Berry sought a quieter life as a farmer, the remaining members of the band resumed work on a new album, drafting in artist Beck's touring drummer ,Joey Waronker, and Screaming Trees member Barrett Martin to fill Bills shoes.

However the recording process was plagued with teething problems, as R.E.M. got to grips with its new arrangement. The group came close to disbanding but after long discussions and hard work, they managed to produce the album 'Up' in 1998. Although the lead single 'Daysleeper' reached top 10 in UK and US, sales in US were declining and the group's commercial interests shifted predominantly to the UK.

A year after 'Up' was released, R.E.M. wrote the instrumental score to the Andy Kaufman biographical film 'Man on the Moon'. This took its title from a track from R.E.M.'s 'Automatic for the People' album. The song 'The Great Beyond' was released as a single from the film's soundtrack and marked a definitive move in the band's geographical fan base. Having always achieved greater accolades in the US market, 'The Great Beyond' only reached number 57 on the American pop charts, but was the band's highest-charting single ever in the UK, reaching number three in 2000. This song is about achieving the impossible, which R.E.M. felt Andy Kaufman had done his entire career. Kaufman allowed comedians and entertainers to be themselves – you could do anything you want and be entertaining – this had never been openly done before. The lyrics to 'The Great Beyond' portray this spirit.

Play The Great Beyond (Studio Master)

By the time R.E.M. released 'Reveal' in 2001 they had got back on their feet. Global sales were double their previous release and critics held high esteem for the sound they were producing. Rolling Stone magazine called *Reveal* "a spiritual renewal rooted in a musical one" and praised its "ceaselessly astonishing beauty." The album's single Imitation For Life reached no. 6 in the UK. Despite being a rather negative commentary on the illusions of Hollywood, this was actually one of R.E.M.'s more upbeat songs. They were originally going to keep it off the album but their friends persuaded them it was too great to be discarded. By this time Stipe was well known for his dancing and in the video we can see Stipe's distinctive moves – both

wild and controlled, characterised by an energetic flailing. It's difficult not to tap along to this song.

Play Imitation of Life video <http://remhq.com/hqtv/videos/music-videos/imitation-of-life>

In keeping with their history, R.E.M. felt the desire to move into another new soundscape with their 2004 release 'Around the Sun'. Although distinctive characteristics of the band were still evident, Stipe noted during recording that '[The album] sounds like it's taking off from the last couple of records into uncharted R.E.M. territory. Kind of primitive and howling'.

In October 2006 R.E.M.'s substantial legacy was recognized by their acceptance in to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. It had been 25 years since the release of their first single meaning it was the first year they were eligible for this accolade – making it all the more impressive. During the induction ceremony they played four songs in which drummer Bill Berry returned for an honorary performance.

Many critics and fans had been dubious about R.E.M.'s post-Berry releases but when 'Accelerate' was released in 2008 it reached no. 2 in the US Billboard charts and became the band's 8th album to top the British album charts. Rolling Stone magazine even reviewed 'Accelerate' as "one of the best records R.E.M. have ever made." Their 15th album 'Collapse into Now' followed its predecessor's success across the US and UK. And so when R.E.M. officially announced they were 'calling it a day' on 21st September 2011 it came as a bitter disappointment to many.

"A wise man once said, 'The skill in attending a party is knowing when it's time to leave,'" explained Stipe "We built something extraordinary together. We did this thing. And now we're going to walk away from it. I hope our fans realize it wasn't an easy decision, but all things must end."

The band members finished their 31 years together by assembling the compilation album 'Part Lies, Part Heart, Part Truth, Part Garbage 1982 – 2011' and in November, Mills and Stipe did a brief span of promotional appearances across the British media, ruling out the option of the group ever reuniting.

As a band that set out with no discernable goals, R.E.M. achieved a legacy that will withstand the test of time. Artistic, intellectual and seemingly uncommercial, the band reached fame entirely on its own terms, while still creating catchy tracks that speak to music lovers across the generations. Their genuine concern for humanity and

ability to spread knowledge through the medium of music not only influenced musicians but touched the hearts of fans across the world.

Starting out as band who were truly committed to producing their own great music, Stipe noted in a final interview that the song he would miss performing the most was 'Man on the Moon' – he said he would miss “watching the effect of that opening bass line on a sea of people at the end of a show’

Play Man on the Moon (Studio Master)

Thank you for coming along tonight.

If you enjoyed this then you can follow Linn on Facebook or Twitter and be the first to hear about future 'Linn Lounge presents' evenings or if you want to join our mailing list then we'll keep you posted on upcoming Linn events in your area. We've got some exciting artists coming up including The Beatles, Led Zeppelin, The Eagles and Ray Charles.

Now it's your turn to be the DJ - we've got a range of Linn systems set up around the shop for you to try.

So grab a bite to eat, fill your glass and listen to some of your favourite songs. Whether it's the latest Studio Master download, a playlist on Spotify or even a movie, Linn systems are designed to get the very best sound from everything you listen to at home.

We've got staff on hand so feel free to ask any questions.