

"People think we're a lot more intellectual in the way we go about making music than we really are. Reviews seem to say we're artists, we have concepts, and the music is made to fit.

"That's not true. We're a rock 'n' roll band and we make music first. It may be slightly more intelligent and aware than other music you hear on the radio, but it's certainly not an artistic endeavour. We have a lot more in common with Chuck Berry than John Cage."

R.E.M. guitarist Peter Buck is keen to set the record straight. Their new (third) album, *Fables of the Reconstruction*, is just a collection of songs from a Georgian rock group, not some elaborately philosophical State of the (Southern) Nation address. The confusion of critics falling over each other's typewriters frantically trying to pin down just where these four lads are coming from is a spectacle the group clearly enjoy.

"Sometimes their interpretations are right, sometimes they're really out to lunch! That's one of the prices you pay for being a little literarily oblique (Common translation: What the hell is singer/chief lyricist Michael Stipe going on about?).

"We don't set out to be obscure and misunderstood, but sometimes when you're writing personal stuff, that's the way it sounds. I find some of the left-field interpretations kind of amusing!"

Let the bores at *Rolling Stone* keep on trying to find the meaning of life in a four-minute R.E.M. song. Those of us just out for something stimulating and enjoyable on both a musical and lyrical level have found in R.E.M. a young American band to get excited about.

And our numbers are growing. Last year's *Reckoning* did much better than 1983's debut LP *Murmur*, which did better than their first EP, *Chronic Town*, a year earlier, while *Fables of the Reconstruction* has already gained more commercial radio play and shipped more copies than the rest put together. R.E.M. aren't exactly yapping at the heels of Madonna or Prince in the charts yet, but steady momentum suits them just fine.

"I've never been too keen on being a big, immediate success," insists Peter Buck. "We've always felt that if you make good music and work hard, eventually you'll be discovered by those who deserve to discover you."

"I'm making a living now and it's getting better. Let it build. Maybe four albums from now we'll sell a million copies. That'd be great!"

These four Athenians are ambitious in their own amiable way, but they see themselves as operating outside the flavour/haircut/video of the month set.

"We have a fun competitiveness with our peers," comments Buck. "When out *Chronic Town*

"Only" Rock 'n' Roll "Art? Who He?" says R.E.M.'s Peter Buck



EP came out, it was the same week as Pylon's 'Crazy' single. I heard it and thought 'hey, they sound much better than us. We better put out something good next or we'll look stupid!'"

"I hear Jason and the Scorchers' record and know it sounds really good and we have to top it. We're all friends. It's all for one and one for all, but you still have to be the biggest kid on the block."

"But we don't think about Wham! or Culture Club at all. That isn't rock 'n' roll. It's Patti Page and Doris Day. It's the work of my peer group that I measure myself against."

That "peer group" is the plethora of roots-oriented American guitar bands that are ushering in a welcome renaissance of star-spangled rock. R.E.M. are often hailed as standard bearers for the so-called movement, but Peter Buck isn't too happy about the hype.

"I tend to look askance (he stops and laughs at his mispronunciation of that word: "there are a couple of words I always really blow!") at movements and trends. To ally oneself with a trend is always a mistake. People seem to use us as representative of what's happening in American music because we got popular before a lot of those other bands. We're friends, but you can't say we have too much in common with bands like Husker Du and Los Lobos other than that we're all working in a non-compromising way within the business."

"I think once the trend is over, there'll be a backlash and people will say 'we're sick and tired of those American guitar bands.' It's a problem you

just have to live with."

And Buck will pass on those psychedelic revivalists making the rounds:

"I think it is a definite dead end for the paisley shirt brigade — those bands who have to act and talk like they're in 1967. That's silly. I don't want to go back in time; the world was in a terrible state in 1967, Vietnam, etc. Those aren't years I exactly care to relive. Some of those things are cute; I tape *The Monkees* TV show every day, but I don't attach any great importance to it."

In Peter Buck's own words: "R.E.M. use the past in a constructive way to affect what we do in the present."

"Most of the rock 'n' roll I like is rooted in either folk, blues or country. No matter how far afield those forms of music went, the people I liked best were in touch with those things."

The *Reconstruction*-era R.E.M. clearly have toes dangling in all those deep and potent pools, and the record's chronic listenability (it's as fresh as a magnolia blossom after 50 spins) can be attributed to its stylistic variety.

From the brassy soul workout of 'Can't Get There From Here' to the country folk feel of 'Driver 8' and 'Wendell Gee', *Fables of the Reconstruction* cuts a broad sonic swath, one kept coherent by Stipe's distinctively drawled vocals and Peter Buck's crisp guitar stylings.

"We never walk into a recording studio with any heavy-duty concepts in mind," stresses Buck. "But when we wrote those songs, they really did seem to run the gamut. A varied amount of influences came to the fore, and we decided to produce each song appropriately. We'd say things like 'this is a soul song, put some horns in', or 'this is a country ballad, put in Nashville strings and a banjo'."

"In the so-called heyday of rock 'n' roll, albums like *Aftermath* by the Stones and the Beatles' *Revolver* had each song sounding different. That makes sense to me; why would you want to make every song sound the same?"

This time out, long-term R.E.M. producers Mitch Easter and Don Dixon were replaced by veteran Joe Boyd, whose fascinating credit list reads like a Who's Who of English folk-rock: Nick Drake, Fairport Convention, Incredible String Band, Richard Thompson, John Martyn.

"Joe doesn't have a production style as such, but I don't think I've heard a record he's produced that's been inappropriate to that artist," Buck explains. "It was basically his job to get a good take from us, something real good rhythmically."

These *Fables* were reconstructed in London, and England is rapidly becoming a second home for R.E.M. A recent trip around the major European festival circuit with U2 will further increase

their profile there.

Buck acknowledges the irony of the success of young US bands there while North America is still besotted with the Anglo poppers: "It seems like we buy their worst exports. All the stuff on the charts now — Wham! They sound like Air Supply!"

"When we first went to England, we expected to get pelted and forced off stage, but instead they praised us to the roof. It was disconcerting!"

No 'Yankee Go Home' yells?

"No, but I can understand being against America politically. We've been the bully on the block for the last few decades, which isn't something I'm especially proud of. It's one of those things you try to change and have to live with, but can't."

Similarly, R.E.M. don't go around waving Confederate flags the way their boogie brethren of a decade ago did.

"The South has influenced us, but it's a very subtle thing. We don't sound 'Pride of the South' Southern. It's more to do with attitude and the way we go about things, creatively and in the business."

What about the title then — the Reconstruction being the post-Civil War period in the South?

"The name just came up. It seemed like a fable record, one with a sense of place and time, so the title fits without pin-pointing anything too much."

Don't read too much into R.E.M.'s continued use of exotic, bizarre graphics and artwork either.

"We just thought we'd do something pretty and interesting. There are so many neat forms of lettering, why use only two? We don't have to follow any rock 'n' roll rulebook."

Let it be noted that R.E.M. out-hipped Talking Heads (with whom they're being increasingly compared) by using Southern folk artist Rev. Howard Finster for an LP cover a year before Byrne's bunch. Credit Michael Stipe's art school background for much of their innovative approach to visuals. He's the one who'll be out exploring museums and art galleries while the R.E.M. member of the band may still be crashed out in their hotel.

"Secrets of the band," Buck laughs. "Michael doesn't drink very much, so he doesn't have the morning hangover feel of the rest of us. Not that we're wild drunks, but we'll have a few beers after the show and sit around talking and playing guitars until 4am. After that, you don't want to get up at eight to go out sightseeing!"

R.E.M. spend their increasingly limited leisure time back in Athens, Georgia, in various ways — playing golf (drummer Bill Berry's passion), working on art shows, seeing and occasionally producing local bands, drinking beer and record hunting.

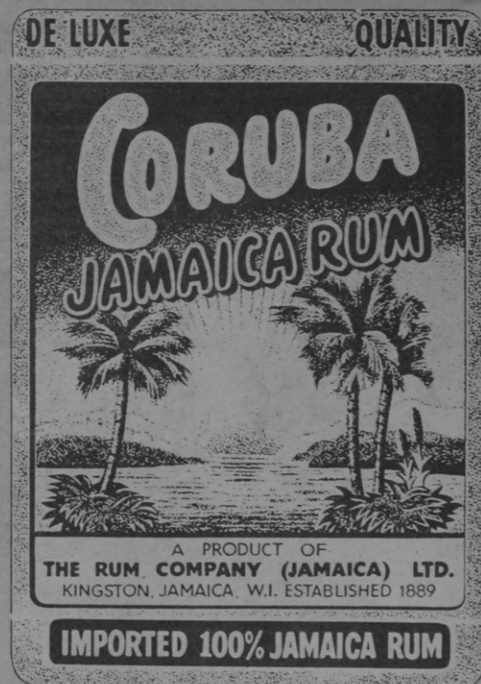
"Back from 1979 to 1981 (R.E.M. formed in 1980), I managed a record store (which is where Buck and Stipe met), and I was pretty good at it," recalls a proud Peter Buck.

"I just talked to my old boss, and he said I'm welcome back, still on \$3.50 an hour. Maybe I'll give him a call soon!"

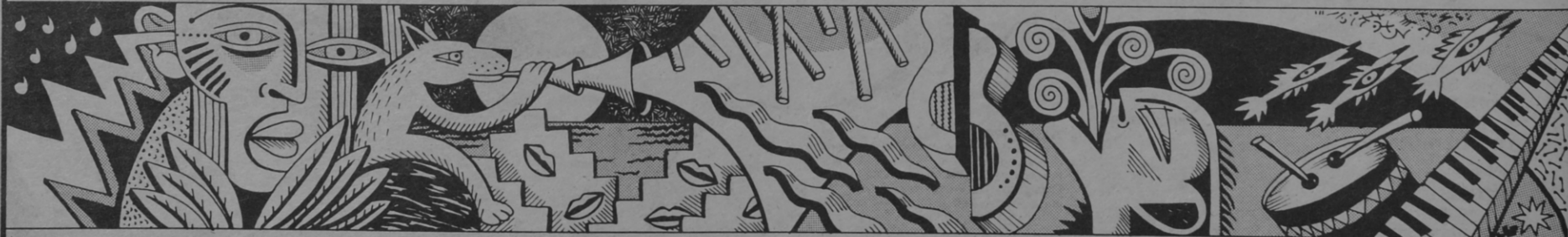
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