

Registered Mail

REM
Dead Letter Office
REM
Document
IRS

More than any other American band this decade REM have tried to reconcile an American past and present without relying on the old mythologies and easy-ways-out of gun-slingers, hard-truckin' rugged individualism and Confederate clichés that have gained so many easy patriotic points for so many bands.

Through four albums REM have left traces, trails by way of Stipe's lyrics, that lead to reference points of personal response to living in the USA. And musically Berry, Buck and Mills have inherited and borrowed from a tradition as varied as Roger Miller, the Byrds, Lou Reed and their own neighbours, Pylon.

Dead Letter Office does nothing if expose these roots. These outtakes and other odds'n'sods have been

given the band's seal of approval and given Peter Buck the licence to condemn 45s as essentially "crap usually purchased by teenagers." Sour grapes from someone who should have the dignity to ignore life's little failures especially considering the (s)crappy run-down of *Dead Letter Office*.

Genuine quality outtakes like 'Burning Down,' 'Windout' and the typical REM pace and grace of 'Ages of You' are scattered amongst interesting but ultimately wane covers of 'Pale Blue Eyes,' 'There She Goes Again' and 'Femme Fatale' and throwaway fillers like Miller's 'King of the Road.' Which leaves their envious version of Pylon's 'Crazy' and Aerosmith's 'Toys in the Attic' as telltale admissions of neighbourhood rivalry and teenage tastes.

Like most compilations this is one for the converted, for the unbelievers there's an EP of indisputable value here and that's not enough.

But this brings us to the serious stuff of *Document*—fables of construction and destruction. If anything coherent can be gleaned from Stipe's cryptic, selectively photographic images, *Lifes Rich Pageant* was a saga of disappearing youth and of the old western identities.

Document takes us workside from a confusion of "What we want and



REM (L-R): Mike Mills, Bill Berry, Peter Buck, Michael Stipe

Cabaret Voltaire Code Parlophone

Some people are muttering that maybe this will be the big commercial success for the Cabs but they've said that of their last three albums. Sheffield duo Kirk and Mallinder were at their most bankable when they released *Crackdown* and its subsequent singles. Around that time they also remixed 2 x 45's 'Yashar' into a revealingly pert and tuneful single. They were obviously going for a Top 10 hit and, by a process of natural evolution, it was within their grasp.

Now, by that same process of evolution, the Cabs have moved away from the charts again. Musically they're doomed (or blessed) to advance only by re-hashing their past again and again, plundering your favourite tracks from the last album in search of riffs and basslines. *Code* begins with the traditional Mallinder snarl of 'Don't Argue' (with Vietnam voiceover) and 'Sex-Money-Freaks.' 'Thank You America' could likewise be lifted straight off *The Covenant, Sword and the Arm of the Lord*. All musicians do it, but when, like the Cabs, you're working with a small, idiosyncratic sound, the recycling becomes a distraction, and the new influences—however small—stick out a mile.

Side two's signpost-titled 'Here to Go,' for instance, finds Kirk and Mallinder doing Sly and Robbie, with beat-box rhythm breaks. 'Code' and 'Trouble Won't Stop' also betray a strangely-warped dub influence. There are some light (very light) touches of 70s funk in the guitar work—blink and you'll miss it. And there are subtle tilts towards the acoustic "third world" sounds recently re-imported by musicians like Jon Hassell, Peter Gabriel and David Sylvian, (although the closest any of them have come to the third world is Attenborough's *Gandhi* on the VHS).

'Life Slips By' is the newest-sounding song on the album, almost begrudging us a chorus-tune. It would make a nice single. The title track is also pretty good, leaning into Funkadelic land.

Code is a typical Cabaret Voltaire album. It's more economical than its predecessor, and not as poppy as *Crackdown*. It's meaner and bolder because it's a retreat into ground they've already covered extensively, and that's not necessarily a bad thing. The reggae and third world touches are interesting; maybe that's where they'll head next. Or maybe they'll just head back to Sheffield for another Cabaret Voltaire album.

"Satisfactory," as K-9 would say.
Chad Taylor

what we need" in the churning guts of 'Finest Worksong' to the post-apocalypse "firehouse" of 'Oddfellows Local 151.' And because Stipe isn't walking over the old prairies this time, Berry, Mills and Buck only ever cover what is typically REM crystalline guitar fare on the glorious 'Welcome to the Occupation' ("listen to the congress where we propagate confusion") and 'The One I Love.'

Elsewhere there's a feeling of unease summed up in the selection of Wire's 'Strange' from *Pink Flag*—"there's something going on that's not quite right"; and even though the stream-of-consciousness check list 'It's the End of the World as We Know It (And I Feel Fine)' fairly burns off the vinyl, you get the feeling that it's the last gasp of rock'n'roll before the doomsday stuff on the leaf side.

In four albums REM have articulated and integrated the spirit of American rock'n'roll better than any band since the Band or the Byrds. But on *Document* there's a change of mood and the densities of songs like 'Fireplace,' 'Lightnin' Hopkins' and 'Oddfellows' could mean they're heading for darker territories. That remains to be seen, suffice to say it's a damn fine album—particularly the first page—but for the ideal introduction to REM stick to *Murmur* or *Lifes Rich Pageant*.
George Kay

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