World Leaders Pretend

"REM's *Murmur* was so out of the moment that it simply had to resonate with anyone looking for an alternative." Although this quote, written by Q Magazine journalist Stuart Bailie, was printed regarding REM's 1984 debut album, *Murmur*, it aptly predicts the band's music throughout their career. Since their formation, REM have written rock 'n roll music that is not only "alternative" in a musical sense, but also alternative politically. Paradoxically, this unconventional style has been very successful. By writing musically and politically alternative music that is relevant to liberals in both the'80s and '90s generations, REM have become not only strong musical influences, but also important political figures in the world of alternative rock.

REM, composed of Michael Stipe (vocals), Peter Buck (lead guitar), Mike Mills (bass guitar), and Bill Berry (drums), formed in 1981 in Athens, Georgia. In the band's early stages of musical creation, many of their songs had a political tinge to them, contrasting the flashy, tacky popular music in the 1980s that was generally shallow and devoid of any sort of political message (Szatmary, 259). Traces of political focus in their music were at first very subtle; however the band quickly became comfortable with expressing political themes in their music.

At the band's genesis, the topic of their music was usually politically consistent with the issues most important to their generation. In the early 1980s, the political climate in the country was very conservative; the protracted and repulsive Vietnam War was long over, and the newly appointed President Reagan promised to institute a less progressive, conservative form of government and sustain the stable economy (Szatmary, 259). However, as the decade advanced the economy saw consistent declines, the

national debt increased, and the Reagan administration suffered a barrage of governmental scandals while introducing some parts of the world to cruel imperialism (Szatmary, 260).

The political left in America, including those in their 20's and 30's, became increasingly impatient and disappointed by the country's minimal progress. A 1984 U.S. News and World Report publication expressed their frustration by referring to the late baby boomers as "The disillusioned generation, people in their 20's and 30's who wonder what happened to the American dream" (Szatmary, 259). This generation had developed their social identities during tumultuous, progressive years of the 1960s. This collective identity did not again surface until the 1980s, a time of wide unemployment, scandal, and increased class separation (Redhead, 48).

REM, with its grassroots sound and strong political message, embraced this renewed 60s spirit. The 60's inspired, "cause-oriented rock" created by REM in the 1980s was in stark contrast to the music and political culture of the time (Szatmary, 259). As Andy Gill of Q Magazine said of the music culture in 1984,

> [It was] lost in a cloud of hairspray and mascara, our native pop completely in thrall to those for who musical considerations rated poorly compared to fashion and hairstyling. . . . In this context, though it hardly enslaved the wider world at the time, *Murmur* represented the cavalry coming over the ridge to save rock 'n roll (24).

REM's political rock music expressed the interests and values of an entire generation, or cohort (Redhead, 50). Thus whether or not REM intended to, they bucked the trends of their time, and expressed ideals important to their generation.

Undoubtedly one of the most influential events in the formation of the late baby boomers' political ideals was the Vietnam War. The ugly, protracted war developed a

wariness of war among the young people who lived through it. In the 1980s, the United States once again began a reckless form of imperialism. In moves similar to that of Vietnam, the U.S. belligerently interfered with many poverty-stricken Central American countries including El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua, and attempted to institute governments that were beneficial to U.S. interests. Such efforts angered many Americans, especially those who were young people during the war-torn Vietnam years.

REM addressed this issue in their music. In their 1988 hit song "Orange Crush," the title of which refers to the destructive Agent Orange defoliant used in Vietnam, Stipe includes vivid imagery of the war and features the lyrics "We are agents of the free / I've had my fun and now its time to serve your conscience overseas" (Warner Bros). The lyrics are in reference to Americans' pride in being "agents of the free" and their desire to "serve [their] conscience overseas," regardless of the consequences.

In a 1987 song "Welcome to the Occupation" REM confronts U.S. imperialism in Central America. With the lyrics "Listen to the Congress / where we propagate confusion / primitive and wild / fire on the hemisphere below," Stipe sings about the chaos ("primitive and wild / fire") the U.S. created in its own hemisphere (I.R.S.). Central American oppression is also the topic of the songs "The Flowers of Guatemala" and "Green Grow the Rushes," the latter of which cleverly speaks of American greed in seeking "Amber waves of gain" (Rosen, 53, and I.R.S.). The theme in such music mirrored the generational ideology of the cohort to which REM belonged. As David Szatmary pointed out in his book Rockin' In Time, music like that of REM's "appealed to many baby boomers who had protested the Vietnam War and during the 1960s had hoped for a better world" (264).

In the 1980's REM sensed a resurgence of so-called "McCarthyism." The Reagan administration encouraged feelings of unreserved patriotism among the American public (Rosen, 81); such feelings were reminiscent of the late 1950s, when U.S. Senator Joseph McCarthy became intent on destroying the communist "Red Menace" in American society, and deported hundreds of Americans that the government suspected of spreading communist influence. Many baby boomers feared the rebirth of a similar political climate in the 1980s. In the 1987 REM song "Exhuming McCarthy" the band expresses the fear of many in their generation. On the topic of McCarthysim, the lyrics "Look who bought the myth / It's a sign of the times" are presented, and the song concludes with the cynical phrase, "Meet me at the book burning" (I.R.S.).

Beyond exhibiting fear regarding the U.S. political climate, REM also conveyed a genuine concern for homelessness and poverty in the U.S. Poverty grew progressively worse during the time when Reagan was in office, and sparked intense concern from young liberals. REM guitarist Peter Buck was no exception. "Just because these [social ills] don't touch us personally doesn't mean we aren't affected by them. You've got to believe that what's happening to the lower man is an indignity to all men," he said (Szatmary, 271). Signs of the dire situation were evident to the band as they promoted their music in Hollywood, California in 1986. Speaking of the people around a Hollywood hotel where the band lodged, Buck said, "There were three winos that looked like they were dead. That really shows society is falling apart, when people look like they are dead on the street and people walk right by them… You see winos on the street and look what our government is doing" (Rosen, 77).

The closing song on the 1987 album *Document,* entitled "Oddfellows Local 151," directly confronts the issue of homelessness in the band's hometown of Athens, Georgia. According to Buck, the song is about the homeless as a sign of downswing in America's society. "Not because [the homeless] are bad, but because it represents the fact that people aren't taking care of their duties to take care of them," he clarified (Rosen, 89). The song tells the sad story of a local alcoholic vagrant "Peewee" who "Gathered up his proof / Reached up and scratched his head / Fell down and hit the ground again" (I.R.S.). Here "proof" likely has a dual meaning, referring not only to the alcoholic content (151 proof) of the man's rum, but also to evidence of the man's mistreatment by society.

The members of REM and their generation were accustomed to freedom of speech, free will, and equality, issues brought to forefront during their younger years. However, as the country progressed into the '80s the band asserted that civil liberties were consistently diminished by the Reagan administration. Peter Buck was quoted as saying, "None of us are really too pleased who's running the country, where our money's going, and the straightforward tendency to dissolve any idea of civil liberties by 'our man in charge,'" in referring to President Reagan (Rosen, 43). His antipathy lay mainly in many Americans' blind patriotism. "That's so disgusting to see a crowd of people waving flags and think your country is great when in fact we're going through a dangerous period" (Rosen, 81).

The band confronts the issue of blind patriotism in many of their songs, including the 1987 song "Disturbance at the Heron House" and 1984's "Little America." In particular "Disturbance" is in regard to a dire outlook on free will, and refers to Americans as "followers of chaos out of control" (I.R.S.). "Little America," according to

Buck, is about his contempt toward patriotism, and his dislike of Reagan. About Reagan, he said, "He's not a very intelligent man, and basically, the whole unseen premise of his presidency is that if you are not a white American, you are not an American at all" (Rosen, 43). The song satirically urges Americans to "Rally round your leaders / it's the mediator season," and ends with the hopeless cry "Jefferson, I think we're lost," most likely referring to Thomas Jefferson (I.R.S.).

Despite their numerous complaints about White House leadership, REM's view of the world was not entirely pessimistic. In the 1986 song about uprising entitled "These Days," REM offers the following line,

> Fly to carry each his burden
> We are young despite the years, we are concern
> We are hope despite the times
> All of the sudden, these days
> Take this joy wherever you go (I.R.S.)

In songs such as this one, the message was empowerment and hope; optimism was direly needed by those aggravated by the Reagan administration's policies.

In one REM song, "Nightswimming," the band uncovers a dissonance between REM's generation and the modern generation, while showing nostalgic feelings for their own cohort (Warner Bros). Released in 1992, the beautifully crafted song consisting of piano, strings, and vocals describes times in the past when band members and friends would all participate in mass skinny-dipping sessions at a local pond (Rosen, 133). Mike Mills claims the song is very evocative for the band, because such events would no longer happen. Young people in today's generations have to deal with sexually transmitted diseases, among other problems (Bowler and Dray, 172).

Although the band conveys disconnectedness with recent generations in "Nightswimming," they were anything but irrelevant to the '90s generation. The lyrics in their early work represent well the feelings on their own generation, but REM connected with later generations as well further into their career. After an apparent hiatus in politically stimulating music in the early 1990s, the band returned with edgy opinionated lyrics late in the 1990s. The band once again offered alternative opinions to that of politically conservative leadership.

The band revisited its vocal concern for homelessness and increased class separation in the 21st century. This concern coincides with that of many young liberals, who are concerned about the Bush Administration's defense spending eclipsing that of social programs. The band wrote the song "Talk About the Passion" while "thinking about all the hunger in the world" (Rosen, 26). The music video for the song features images of homeless people adjacent to an American warship. At the video's conclusion, the message "The cost of one destroyer-class warship was 910 million dollars" appears boldly on the screen (Rosen, 26 and Warner Bros).

In the 1996 song "Revolution," Stipe's lyrics recount a whole number of political atrocities during his lifetime. By conveying lyrics this in this manner, he seems to be displaying a general uneasiness with the state of the world:

> Oliver north is running for senate
> bomb the abortion clinic
> Reagan's defense is the deficit
> the virus was invented
> black man can't get acquitted
> of the crimes that we committed . . . .
> I don't know why I'm feeling bad, yeah
> but a scum is rising (Warner Bros.)

This stream-of-consciousness style of listing of events over atypically loud and chaotic percussion is perhaps Stipe's way of portraying the confusion in the world at the time. His claim that "I don't know why I'm feeling bad, yeah / but a scum is rising" seems almost sarcastic subsequent to his listing of depressing events and issues.

In the 2003 REM hit "Bad Day," the band tackles the sticky subject of media coverage of politics. In 2003 promotional tours for their Greatest Hits album, the band made it clear they felt that the Bush administration has been dishonest with the American public, and that the media has done little to uncover the truth. The song, therefore, is a potent stab at Bush's dishonesty and the media's fear to speak out against the ruling regime. Presumably speaking of George Bush, he offers the creative lyrics,

> Well, look behind the eyes, it's a hallowed, hollow anesthetized,
> "save my own ass, screw these guys" smoke and mirror lock down
> Broadcast me a joyful noise into the times, Lord,
> count your blessings,
> The papers wouldn't lie!
> I sigh. Not one more (Warner Bros).

The first two lines refer to Bush's deceitful ("smoke and mirror") and "hollow" reasons for going to war against Iraq. Ironically, in spite of its indictment of the media REM promoted the song with a variety of appearances on popular TV news stations like CNN and PBS.

REM's frustration with the Bush administration culminates in the anti-war song "The Final Straw," released in 2003. The song, clearly attacking President Bush's policies, laments the post 9-11 American mentality of disregard for other countries' sovereignty, and lambastes the U.S.'s revenge-driven attacks on Afghanistan and Iraq. The song begins:

> As I raise my head to broadcast my objection
> As your latest triumph draws the final straw
> Who died and lifted you up to perfection?
> And what silenced me is written into law (Warner Bros.)

The last line likely refers to the Patriot Act, an act that restricts the American constitutional right of due process to those whose criminal accusations are related to terrorism. The song goes on to express many liberals' beliefs with the lyrics "Now I don't believe and I never did / That two wrong makes a right," referring to America's post 9-11 retaliatory attacks on Afghanistan and Iraq. Stipe's lyrics express concern that "forgiveness takes a back seat to revenge," yet offers hopes that "I do not believe that I am alone." Finally at the song's conclusion he offers a challenge to Bush with the lyrics "Look me in the eye / Tell me why."

REM wrote strongly political music through the majority of their career, but the influence their music carried changed as the band's role in both alternative music and American politics transformed. By the time the band reached the end of the 1980s, they were arguably the charismatic leaders of the alternative rock movement.

In his book Economy and Society, a book describing types of leadership, Max Weber describes a charismatic leader as one who is given devotion "arising out of enthusiasm, or of despair and hope" (242). There is little doubt REM fans in the 1980s were enthusiastic about the music, which was both political and hopeful. In an encouraging 1988 song entitled "World Leader Pretend," the following lyrics are offered:

> I sit at my table and wage war on myself
> It seems like it's all...it's all for nothing
> . . .This is my mistake. Let me make it good
> I raised the wall, and I will be the one to knock it down
> This is my world
> And I am world leader pretend
> This is my life

> And this is my time
> I have been given the freedom
> To do as I see fit
> It's high time I've razed the walls
> That I've constructed (Warner Bros.)

Stipe makes it clear that "I" does not refer to himself, but instead to the listener of the song. Beyond this he uses a clever dichotomy with his use of the word "razed"; upon listening to the song, many listeners hear the word as "raised," in which case the song lyric would be pessimistic. However the word "raze" means to destroy or take down. Thus the lyrics offer a strong sense of hope, that each and every person has the freedom and ability to "take down walls" and change the world. The hope that REM songs such as "World Leader Pretend" granted to listeners helped to characterize the band as charismatic leaders.

REM's 1980s songs also carried a rebellious, revolutionary tone; thus REM's music was attractive to those who held rebellious feelings. Max Weber defined a charismatic leader as one who carries a revolutionary messenger and has a connected, devoted group of followers, among other things (241-244). The radical revolutionary character of the band's message supports REM's characterization as charismatic leaders.

REM's political opinions typically fall very far left of center on the political scale, and in the 1980s their musical style remained consistently unconventional compared to that of popular music. As a result, a relatively small minority of young people identified with the band's musical creativity and left-wing politics, and the band was unlikely to attract casual followers unaware of the deeper meaning of the music. Past research has shown that young people choose to listen to music they feel politically connected to (Christenson and Roberts, 101). The consequence of REM's type of music was a small

fan base of devoted fans, which on some level felt connected not only to the band, but also to each other. Thus the band attracted fans that were politically homogeneous.

According to Redhead, protest music like that of REM's has the power to bring a community together, and to unite them for change (55). REM's small fan base felt a connectedness, which in turn intensified their support of the band's music and message (Bennett et. al., 260). Weber points out that charismatic leaders guide a so-called "charismatic community," a group that feels emotionally connected in some sense, and forms a "communal relationship" (243). The more REM opposed conservative leadership, the more tight-knit their followers became (Bailie, 56).

In fact, an argument can be made that REM's success as charismatic leaders and political rockers has depended largely on the alternative nature of their political views in relation to the political views of those in power. The three ideas are interconnected: the traditionalist views of the those in power resulted in REM writing very liberal-minded songs in protest; in turn they primarily attracted a cult following of politically similar college age students. This, combined with the rarity of rock 'n roll bands that were alternative musically and politically, established REM as charismatic leaders of the alternative genre.

As the band continued making music through the '80s, popular music slowly began to change, each year coinciding more with REM's music. As a result, REM's fan base grew progressively larger. Tellingly, the sales of each record grew consecutively greater, culminating with REM's 1998 album *Green* breaking the one million units sales mark (Rosen, 91).

By the time the band released their three early 1990s albums, much had changed both musically and politically. REM's musical style was now decidedly less dissimilar with that of popular music; essentially alternative music had become the mainstream genre, largely thanks to bands like REM (Holm-Hudson, 215). At the same time, and perhaps helping the alternative music boom, the political climate of the U.S. had changed. Liberal thinking became more prevalent, largely as the result of Democrat Bill Clinton's election into Presidential office in 1992.

REM themselves attempted to play an important part in bringing about this change. In 1992 they participated in MTV's "Rock the Vote" promotion that encouraged young people to get involved in American politics (Bailie, 57). In the 1991 MTV Video Music Awards, REM received numerous awards; Stipe used the platform as an opportunity to promote his political views. Each time the band was invited on stage to collect an award, Stipe wore a different shirt containing a political phrase, ranging from "Wear a condom," and "White House: stop AIDS," to "Alternative energy now," and "Handgun control" (Rosen, 119). As a result of these and other influences the 1992 election saw a record number of young people coming out to vote, most of them in support of Bill Clinton. In recognition of their public support of liberal viewpoints, the band was invited to perform in Clinton's 1993 Inaugural Ball (Bailie, 57).

Not surprisingly, REM's lyrics became less political in nature with Clinton in office; the country's leadership was less of a threat to the band members. As a result the band had less motivation to express political dissatisfaction, and their songs lacked the political fervor they previously exhibited.

Ironically, this period of political indifference for the band was the time when they enjoyed the greatest amount of success. Instead of selling hundreds of thousands of records, REM suddenly sold millions, with *Out of Time* (1991), *Automatic for the People* (1992) and *Monster* (1994) each selling near or above 10 millions copies worldwide. REM made the transformation from playing cozy theaters or bars to cavernous sold-out arenas.

As a result of the changes surrounding REM and their music, their leadership status dramatically changed. No longer were they charismatic leaders with an alternative political message and small fan base; REM's new fan base was in the millions, and their fans had little in common and likely felt a modest or nonexistent sense of community. In addition REM's music lacked the revolutionary message it once carried. In a sense, REM became the traditional leaders of the rock 'n roll world. Max Weber defined a political leader as one who is owed obedience, because his/her status has descended from the past (215). It seemed that many fans now respected REM because of their status as forefathers of alternative rock; admirers bought their albums because of the excellent reputation of their past alternative music.

As REM's career extended into the late '90s, their previously bloated fan base declined into a once again smaller, more devoted fan base, although one that was larger than in the '80s. In 1998 their drummer Bill Berry retired, and not surprisingly the band's musical style drastically changed. They released music less often and with a drastically different style. At the same time their music regained the strong political messages it carried at the start of their musical careers. Once again, the strength of political ideas expressed in their music was proportional to the conservativeness of the

country's leadership (this time President George W. Bush, elected in 2000). Furthermore, the decreased size and reestablished homogeneity of their fan base allowed them to resume an increasingly charismatic leadership position.

REM have shown the ability to make themselves and their music relevant to generations past and present. As REM's career carries on, they will no doubt remain politically and musically relevant for however long they continue to write music. They have become the leaders of the alternative rock genre; it's a position they will likely not relinquish, as they show no sign of succumbing to shallow radio-friendly rock. As Rob Sheffield of Rolling Stone magazine wrote of the band in 2001,

> It must be strange for R.E.M., as it is for the rest of us, that the rock world of 2001 looks so much like the one that they were rebelling against twenty years ago; once again, the radio is full of interchangeable metal gomers who never met a rule they didn't obey, and once again R.E.M. are totally out of step with the times. And . . . that's exactly where they want to be (Sheffield).

Works Cited

Bailie, Stuart. "The Insurgency Begins." Q R.E.M.: A Special Edition 2001: 52-57.

Bennett, Tony et. al., eds. Rock and Popular Music: Politics, Policies, Institutions. Routledge, London and New York, 1993.

Bowler, David, and Bryan Dray. R.E.M.: From "Chronic Town" to "Monster." Carol Publishing Group, 1995.

Christenson, Peter G., and Donald F. Roberts. It's Not Only Rock & Roll: Popular Music in the Lives of Adolescents. Hampton Press: Cresskill, NJ, 1998.

Dettmar, Kevin, and William Richey, eds. Reading Rock and Roll: Authenticity, Appropriation, Aesthetics. Columbia University Press: New York, 1999.

Gill, Andy. "Absolute Beginners." Q R.E.M.: A Special Edition 2001: 24.

Holm-Hudson, Kevin, ed. Progressive Rock Reconsidered. Routledge: New York and London, 2002.

R.E.M. "Bad Day." In Time: The Best of R.E.M. 1988-2003. Warner Bros., 2003.
--- "Disturbance at the Heron House." Document. I.R.S., 1987.
--- "Exhuming McCarthy." Document. I.R.S., 1987.
--- "Final Straw, The." Warner Bros., 2003.
--- "Flowers of Guatemala, The." Lifes Rich Pageant. I.R.S., 1986.
--- "Green Grow the Rushes." Fables of the Reconstruction. I.R.S., 1985.
--- "Little America." Reckoning. I.R.S., 1984.
--- "Nightswimming." Automatic for the People. Warner Bros., 1992.
--- "Oddfellows Local 151." Document. I.R.S., 1987.
--- "Orange Crush." Green. Warner Bros., 1988.
--- "Revolution." In Time: The Best of R.E.M. 1988-2003. Warner Bros., 1996.
--- "Talk About the Passion." Murmur. I.R.S., 1984.
--- "These Days." Lifes Rich Pageant. I.R.S., 1986.
--- "Welcome to the Occupation." Document. I.R.S., 1987.
--- "World Leader Pretend." Green. Warner Bros., 1988.

Redhead, Steve. The End-of-the-Century Party: Youth and Pop Towards 2000. Manchester University Press: Manchester and New York, 1990.

Rosen, Craig. R.E.M.: Inside Out. Thunder Mouth Press: New York, 1997.

Sheffield, Rob. "R.E.M. Reveal: The Rolling Stone Review." Rolling Stone 24 May 2001.

Szatmary, David P. Rockin' In Time: A Social History of Rock-and-Roll. Prentice Hall: Upper Saddle River, NJ, 1996.

Weber, Max. Economy and Society. University of California Press: Berkeley, 1987. 212-264.