

# What happens to an alternative icon when it becomes mainstream? • After a publicity binge for *Out of Time*, R.E.M. broods back to its roots with what could be the sister to *Document*. Peter Buck talks about making it big the hard way with clowns and Dutch television. Can the boys from Georgia manage to stay on top — whether they like it or not?

BY GEOFFREY KULA, DAILY FREE PRESS, BOSTON U.



When R.E.M. fans glanced at the Billboard Charts last year, what they found there was a bit disturbing. Perched on top of the world, sharing the lofty commercial heavens with the likes of Michael Bolton, Paula Abdul and Another Bad Creation, was their band, R.E.M. — the greatest college group ever — was no longer alternative. They were huge. To longtime disciples, it may have seemed like the end of the world as they knew it.

But they also knew The Southern Band with The Three-Letter Name from Athens, Ga., hadn't sold out to get there. Their band had just kept on being R.E.M. until everyone else caught on.

And someday, for sure, R.E.M. would return to the dark, brooding sounds of their past. They would produce a commercially unmarketable album that would alienate the MTV-heads — something with lots of strings and lethargic bass lines and introspective lyrics. Something like the band's latest release, *Automatic For The People*.

"Shiny Happy People" it is not. And that's just fine with Peter Buck, band guitarist and torch-bearer of the R.E.M. sound.

Buck, who lounged comfortably in a plush office on the 20th floor of Time Warner's New York building in late August, does not look like a typical Top 40 band member; nor does he like to think of himself as one. Lazily clad in jeans, a black T-shirt and a jean jacket, Buck stretched out, his mop of unkempt black hair hanging from his head like kelp trying to keep its grasp on a rock.

He insists R.E.M.'s sudden superstardom has not tarnished the true mettle of its members. Bill Berry (drums), Mike Mills (bass), Michael Stipe (vocals) and Buck still are the same they were before *Time* sold 9 million copies.

But while fingercombing his tangled tresses, he contemplated the difference between R.E.M. and their chartmates.

"I like to think our fans tend to put a little bit more of themselves into our music than say, your fan of Paula Abdul or something," Buck says. "[Top 40 acts] are kind of like entertainment where what's on the surface is exactly what they are — catchy little dance tunes. People don't want ambiguity in lyrics, and in terms of rock 'n' roll, [R.E.M.] is very difficult."

Take *Out of Time*, for instance.

"I mean, it's a good record, but I don't know if any album deserves to sell 9 or 10 million. From a crass marketing level, there hadn't been a good rock 'n' roll album in years. Every record that was a hit, for years, was dance stuff. Part of it was timing. I mean, we got everybody."

"Everybody" included not only R.E.M.'s American fans but also overseas R.E.Maniacs (one of the bonuses from the band's recent switch to Warner Bros. was better overseas distribution).

And when Buck, Stipe, Berry and Mills decided not to tour and instead to launch a massive six-month media blitzkrieg, they found themselves on the cover of *Rolling Stone*, *Unplugged* on MTV and on numerous European "weird oddball little Ed Sullivan-type shows or teen-age dance, party-type shows," where the band, on one occasion, shared a stage with a clown.

"We'd get on the show, and there'd be this 16-year-old kid lip-synching to his latest disco ballad, and then we'd come on and play and then they'd have some rap group come on and lip-synch and they'd have two girls dancing in a

dance contest — all in Dutch," Buck recalls. "We were just sitting at these shows thinking, 'God, this is weird.'"

But worse things have happened to R.E.M. than being on a Dutch TV show with a clown. In 1985, the group almost disbanded.

On the road nine months of a year, R.E.M. took two weeks off at Christmas, then rehearsed for two months, immediately making a new album. The band

was seeing just a little

"We were just never out of each other's company," he recalls, "and at that point we were trying to decide 'Well, do we want to do this or not do it?' 'ah, this is worth pursuing. We're good at this and we like doing it.'"

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so much of each other, Buck says.

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problems, the band works together intensely for three

meeting. "There's always new places to go," he insists. "We're kind of like on a road without a map and we're just going and wherever we end up is where we end up, and each record is like the motel for the night."

or four months, then takes a month off before returning to the studio, an arrangement that seems to work.

In fact, it's been working so well that R.E.M. is fast becoming the Steely Dan of the '90s — hoing itself up like rabbits in the studio without even emerging to tour. Buck, who dislikes long tours, says he would like to turn out an album every 12 or 16 months. Great news for CD collectors. Bad news for concertgoers.

But no one can complain about more music. And *Automatic* is by no means the automatic follow-up to *Time*.

Due out Oct. 6, *Automatic* is a "dark sounding, discordant record" that features the Atlanta Symphony on strings and Knox Chandler (of the Psychedelic Furs) on cello on several tracks. Although the album carries some true rock 'n' roll numbers, most of it harkens back to *Time*'s "Low" and even further back to *Document*.

*Automatic* is an album stalwart R.E.M. fans will appreciate and those lured to *Green* and *Time* by their pop characteristics might not. But isn't changing your sound drastically after your most successful album biting the hand that feeds you?

Buck doesn't seem to think so. "We're just trying to push whatever R.E.M. is as far as it can go," Buck says. "I don't expect the next record to sell as many copies as *Time*, but it is a strong record songwise. If it doesn't sell as many copies, that's fine. I mean, musical careers have ups and downs, and so far ours have all been up."

But the band is in no hurry, really, to take *Automatic* on the road. "We want to wait until we really want to tour [before we do]," Buck says. "Everyone keeps talking about how much money we could be making, but I don't want to go out and just milk the audience for money just to do it. When we tour again, it'll be because we really want to and we'll be excited about it. I can't think of anything more boring than going out and playing if everyone's not really ready to."

First and foremost, Buck says, it's crucial for the band to love its art.

"I just never want to get to the point where I'm just going through the motions," he says. "This started out being what we loved doing. We do it for fun and if it's not something you want to do, I can't imagine how it would come across. There's a lot of difference between what you put your heart and soul into and the stuff you just do."

Buck says the group may wait to finish yet another album (which he predicts will be "noisy rock 'n' roll") before touring, so they can have three records worth of material not played live, hitting the road with something new.

"Keeping the band fresh is still the main challenge," he says. But a challenge, nonetheless, the band looks more than capable of meeting.

"There's always new places to go," he insists. "We're kind of like on a road without a map and we're just going and wherever we end up is where we end up, and each record is like the motel for the night."

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