

## music

## Fundamentally Fine

Dance pop and indie pioneers unwrap new and old material for the holiday season

by Jim Thompson

## Fundamental

Pet Shop Boys • Rhino

Does anybody remember Timbuk 3 or Boys Don't Cry? When the Pet Shop Boys sprang onto the pop charts in 1986 with "West End Girls," it would have been easy to dismiss them as probable one-hit wonders like the aforementioned bands (known for "The Future's So Bright, I Gotta Wear Shades" and "I Wanna Be a Cowboy," respectively). Twenty years later, with numerous hit singles and records to their credit, Neil Tennant and Chris Lowe, the elder statesmen of gay pop, offer *Fundamental*, their ninth studio record, as proof of their continued vitality.

The static and pulsing beat that introduces the vaguely creepy "Psychological" gives notice that PSB are back to stake their claim as heavyweight contenders for the Eurodisco crown after 2002's *Release*, a satisfying but atypically gentler, more acoustic outing. They are aided to this end by Grammy-winning producer Trevor Horn (Seal, ABC, Frankie Goes to Hollywood), who gives the proceedings a super-slick surface.

PSB make spelling fun again with the irrepressibly hummable "Minimal," whose title is actually an accurate description of *Fundamental* itself. Tennant and Lowe have stripped away all unnecessary excesses and focused on what they do best: upbeat electro-pop and grandiose balladry, alternating predictably between these two styles with uniformly great results.

PSB are so cocksure that they save some of the best material for the second half of *Fundamental*. The fabulously bitchy first single, "I'm with Stupid," is a subtle tongue-in-cheek (and name-free) take on the lopsided professional relationship shared by George W. Bush and Tony Blair. "Indefinite Leave to Remain" is musically one of the most gorgeous works PSB have unleashed since 1990's

"Jealousy," and lyrically it tugs on the heartstrings as well: "Seeing you here, you're my nation, this is my application, give me hope, keep me sane, give me indefinite leave to remain."

The real keeper, though, is the album closer, "Integral," which finds PSB scaling exciting high-energy heights not traversed so effortlessly since 1987's "It's a Sin." The real sin, however, would be to overlook *Fundamental* or the Pet Shop Boys.



Like a perfectly paced concert, *And I Feel Fine...* hits all the high points in the early years of R.E.M.

### And I Feel Fine... The Best of the I.R.S. Years 1982-1987

R.E.M. • Capitol

I traded a Led Zeppelin tie-dye for a dubbed copy of R.E.M.'s first album, the magically mysterious *Murmur*, at summer camp in 1986 and soon after figured out that I got the better end of that deal. Before R.E.M. conquered the charts singing about standing in the place where you live, shiny happy people and a man on the moon, they were only the second-most-popular band from Athens, Ga., after The B-52's, but that was hardly a knock against them. Those halcyon days are captured on *And I Feel Fine... The Best of the I.R.S. Years 1982-1987*.

This nonchronological, band-selected and -sequenced collection starts, appropriately enough, with the fiercely hopeful "Begin the Begin" and concludes with the rapid-fire pop culture nugget "It's the End of the World as We Know It (And I Feel Fine)." Like a perfectly paced concert, it hits

all the high points in between, from the plaintive heartbreaker "So. Central Rain (I'm Sorry)" to the environmentally conscious anthem "Fall on Me" to "The One I Love," easily the meanest and most misunderstood song in R.E.M.'s catalog. "This one goes out to the one I love, this one goes out to the one I've left behind, a simple prop to occupy my time." Ouch.

R.E.M. would go on to sell millions of records in the late '80s and early '90s, and willfully weird lead singer Michael Stipe would later shave his head and admit that he enjoyed sleeping with both men and women equally, but those early years are, to quote Beck, where it's at. Ignore woefully underthought new career-spanning best-ofs by Depeche Mode and U2 and delve into *And I Feel Fine*. Obsessive completists might want to acquire the two-disc version, which contains some deeper album cuts, alternate versions, live tracks and studio outtakes, some of which have never been released. Those craving visual stimuli should seek out *When the Light Is Mine*, a satisfying two-hour shuffle through videos, live performances and interviews, during an era when paisley seemed like a good idea and almost every day was a bad hair day for Stipe. 10

Albany freelance writer JIM THOMPSON hates the heightened expectations of the holidays but loves gifts, at least the ones he's expecting. This year he wants a new lunch bag, a foot spa, the Robert Plant box set and, of course, world peace.



Chris Lowe (left) and Neil Tennant solidify their status as the elder statesmen of gay pop with *Fundamental*.

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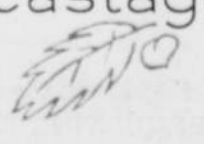
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