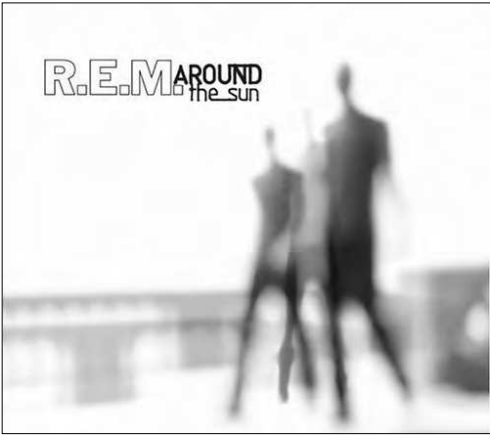


R.E.M., *Around the Sun*, 2004 WARNER BROTHERS RECORDS By Kris Bluth



When you love a band as much as I love R.E.M., you get used to defending albums that others dismiss. Some people hated *Fables Of The Reconstruction*, but "Good Advices" might be my Favorite R.E.M. Song. *Monster* is an underrated gem, and *Reveal* can stand alongside their best work.

And *Around The Sun* is their worst album. Some "fans" still want them to keep remaking *Murmur*, but R.E.M. has built a career out of growth and evolution. I wasn't crazy about *Up and New Adventures In Hi-Fi*, but the band got to stretch itself out, and R.E.M. was never boring ...

... until now.

Around The Sun occasionally perks up

("Leaving New York" and "Wanderlust"), but the rest is just one mid-tempo dirge after another. This album isn't bad, it's worse than bad. It's inert.

I wouldn't be surprised if someone from Warner Brothers went to Stipe's house and pounded on the door.

"Hey! Open up! It's been three years! Time for a new album!"

The mailslot flips open and a voice creaks out. "Only if I get to namecheck Kyoto in the lyrics."

Done, and done.

Adem, *Homesongs*, DOMINO RECORDS By Tynan DeLong

On Adem's debut, *Homesongs*, the latest release from the seemingly unstoppable Domino record label, this Fridge instrumentalist finds himself donning the mask of an earnest troubadour. Building off the same gorgeously hushed ambience that made Fridge's *Happiness* such a headphone treat, Adem spends most of the album hunched over a guitar, sorting the pieces of a failed relationship.

Nowhere is this more evident than on "Gone Away," the album's centerpiece. Plaintive accordion drones and whispering xylophones carry Adem's soft lament to its stirring middle section, where he assures himself, "It's alright/there's plenty more left for me." And the grand strings of the album's closer, "There Will Always Be," provide a touching backdrop for an understated sing-a-long. It's a lullaby for a campfire on a cloud. Call it Damien Rice, sans the syrup.

Yet *Homesongs* never sounds rueful or depressed. Quiet, melancholy even, but not once do you get the feeling Adem's going to pull a Richie Tenenbaum behind the bathroom door. Rather, the album's a sweet send-off for a lost love. Our hero has the good sense to have a little laugh, make some fine tunes and move on. Desertion has never sounded so self-assured.

Tom Waits, *Real Gone*, 2004 EPITAPH RECORDS By Johnny Millionaire

Listening to Tom Waits' twentieth album, *Real Gone*, is like being transported to an archaic circus fun-house on Halloween night with a full moon, and a Chupacabra as your date: Intriguing, beautiful, and scary as hell.

Waits' voice is raw and refined, like railroad spikes sprouting into rose buds. The lyrics on *Real Gone* are haunted as a saloon in Mushroomcrow, Wash.: crooked, dark, aged; Whittled with betrayal, love lost, romanticism of the damned.

This is the album of the year for freaks, desperados, outlaws, individuals, and the un-abashed un-brainwashed, who love true Americana.



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