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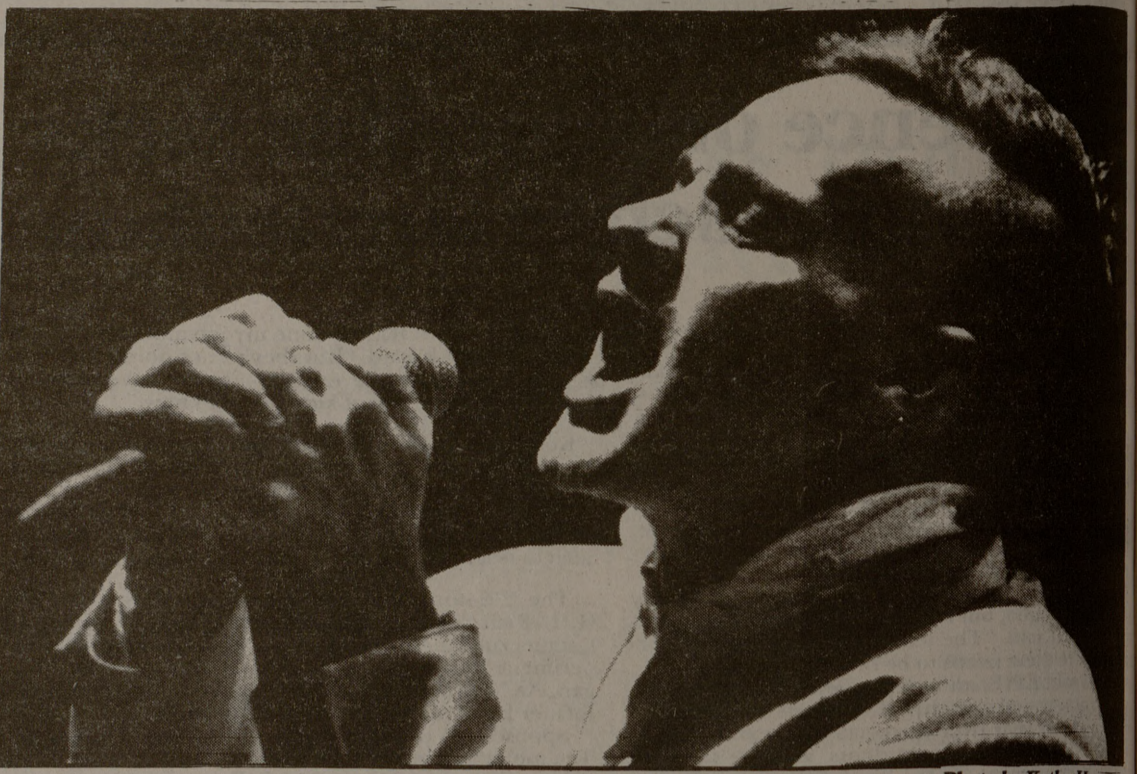
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R.E.M. entertaining with old, new tunes

Lead singer throws barbs at A&M, Bush

By John Righter
Of The Battalion Staff



R.E.M. vocalist Michael Stipe provided an enigmatic, yet entertaining show.

Playing in front of a three-quarters full G. Rollie White Coliseum, "America's Best Band," showed Sunday night that while they may not deserve that title, they certainly are one of the most entertaining and unique stage bands around.

Alternating between rapid-fire mania and slow, whistful harmonies, R.E.M. threw the old, the new, the borrowed and the not-yet-released into a 20-song set that lasted for two hours and 10 minutes. Hitting the stage at 9 p.m., after an incredible set by opening act Pylon, lead singer Michael Stipe and crew immediately got the audience dancing with the Green hit, "Stand," punctuated by Stipe's hokey jumps and arm twirls, reminiscent of the song's dim-witted video.

"The One I Love" followed, riding the band from the burden of carrying the popular but cumbersome singles through their set. With the trash put out, the band focused on a strong, albeit eccentric (sometimes erratic) set that picked well from the past and highlighted a heavy selection from *Life's Rich Pageant*, *Document* and last year's *Green*.

Culling material from their earlier work, the band performed a secure yet strong version of the *Reckoning* single "I'm Sorry (So, Central Rain)," a notable absence from the past two tours. After the song, the group departed, leaving a campy but quite humorous film to welcome the audience and play up all the proverbial, yet inconsequential gimmicks of rock acts ("Are you ready to rock n' roll," "What a big place this is," "It's so good to be back in [fill in your town]").

The film strip was actually quite representative of the whole show. A year and a half on the road has transfixed R.E.M. into a tight, meticulous outfit that somehow still manages to come off as overwhelmingly wacky and spontaneous. But don't be fooled, the spontaneity and wackiness are as much a planned part of their show as fire spitting and blood drooling were in the old KISS performances.

Stipe is especially well choreographed. More precise and visible than during the *Work Tour*, he has developed from a queer stage

enigma to a top notch, crowd-collaring frontman. Sporting a new look — mohawk-style hair with a long ponytail in back, and a sharp pastel suit with baseball cap and heavy eyeliner — Stipe successfully alternated from emotionless and removed to adamant and spastic, constantly confusing the audience while still captivating them. One minute it's Menacing Mike, cold, stark and machine-like. The next minute it's Howdy Doody Mike, a campy, adorable, yet quite queer version of Stipe

While endorsing a student referendum involving the MSC expansion, Stipe remarked, "You get shot for walking on the grass here, you should be able to save a couple of trees."

Dedicating the song to Exxon Corporation, R.E.M. performed a much angrier version of "Inside/Out," heightened by Stipe's use of a bullhorn and his cold, tight-fisted delivery, which had a peculiarly fascist effect. (I could not stop thinking of the "In the Flesh" scene

anything to their songs, selectively mixed in unintroduced, new material in the early portion of the set, then threw in interesting covers in the second half, mostly during the eight-song, 40-minute encore. Television's "See No Evil," Syd Barrett's "Dark Globe," and the Velvet Underground classic "After Hours," which closed the set, followed in the R.E.M. tradition of performing obscure, usually paeanic tributes to the band's numerous influences. The Barrett number was especially good, featuring bassist Mike Mills and Stipe alone, performing a most a capella version that was remarkably faithful to the original.

A stripped-down version of "These Days" (a social and political song "written just for you," the haunting "King of Birds" and "Good Advice," from the album *Fables* were other standouts that chronicled the growth in R.E.M.'s material.

"You get shot for walking on the grass here, you should be able to save a couple of trees."

— Michael Stipe, on the MSC expansion plan

that gets the high school girls all hot and steamy.

Stipe, after verbally ignoring the audience to this point, began an environmental and social tirade on less conscientious entities, fragmenting attacks on Exxon (twice), President Bush and A&M throughout the set. An appeal toward support for Greenpeace and the Environmental Defense Fund was also made, as was a condemnation of the Texas A&M Board of Regents for not allowing more student involvement in the MSC expansion controversy.

from Pink Floyd's *The Wall*.)

A few songs later, Stipe introduced "Orange Crush," the first single off of *Green* by singing "Be all that you can be... in the army," and danced in military fashion through the satirical "Exhuming McCarthy." Unlike R.E.M.'s previous appearance, though, Stipe was unharassed for his critical views, which was good since the only time he is understandable is when he's making a social statement.

The band, backed by a large screen that usually added little, if

The group appeared much more relaxed than on the *Work Tour* their first tour headlining major venues. Guitarist Peter Buck is as consistent as ever, using his patented stoops and leg kicks throughout the set, and Mills and drummer Bill Berry provide strong support that still allows Stipe to remain the band's focal point. A fifth band member, Michael Wholsapple, previously of the group DB's, helped out on guitars, bass and keyboards.



R.E.M. From left: Mike Mills, Bill Berry, Peter Buck and Michael Stipe

By combining the craziness of earlier tours with an increasing emphasis on social responsibility and large-scale production, the band has succeeded in hurdling their one major criticism — a weak live image. Stipe has dropped his dogmas and turned into a first rate entertainer who continually steals the show. He is as unpredictable as any performer today, and the band is smart enough to leave him to his own devices. No, to say the others can't have fun (for instance, Berry had a quite amusing moment with the bullhorn), but it would be hard to upstage the irrepressible Stipe.

The unfortunate part of the night was the poor turnout that only reinforced the notion that A&M can't support a major rock act. Because of this, the support stigma will only grow, which means A&M should be prepared for more country and less, if any, rock shows in the future.

In addition, hopefully the University will work on the supports of G. Rollie White so that the crews can hang the sound equipment up on the rafters instead of stacking them on the floor. As it is, if you're not on the floor then you're receiving a muted, quite distorted sound that really sucks.

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