**Liner Notes for Rhino reissue of R.E.M.’s *New Adventures in Hi-Fi***

After more than a decade of gradually building an audience, it took only two glorious years to catapult R.E.M. from their position as America’s preeminent rock band to something approaching world domination. *Out of Time* (1991) and Automatic for the People (1992) marked a quintessential merger of craft and commerce. Bill Berry, Peter Buck, Mike Mills, and Michael Stipe sold millions of records – yet did so without a whiff of sellout.

But the band and its public knew something was missing. R.E.M. had built their initial success on a steady diet of frenetic gigging, yet five years and two worldwide hit albums had passed since their last tour, in 1989. Thus, they settled on 1995 as their *Wanderjahr*: 45 weeks of globe-hopping and gigging behind the much-anticipated *Monster*.

The tour was a success, but it also flirted with tragedy and dissent, Its sold-out shows were juxtaposed with bouts of ill health (including Berry's close brush with death) and critical jousting over R.E.M’s new record. In hindsight, *Monster*'s tart lyrics and dirty fuzz rank among the band’s finest moments, but the album itself gleefully confounded the expectations of fans and critics alike.

The next record, 1996’s *New Adventures in Hi-Fi*, was another triumph of that Monster trip R.E.M. crafted *Hi-Fi*’s songs on the fly and recorded most of its 14 compositions at sound checks and gigs. (The band added four new tracks, recorded at Seattle’s Bad Animals studio just after the tour, to round out the disc.) Amazingly, this product of a chaotic whirlwind world tour ranks among the most accomplished and articulate records that R.E.M. has made to date.

The “road” is a rock’n’roll cliché – traveling bands riding steel horses, running on empty, and asking their groupies, “What’s your name?”– but Peter Buck points out that *Hi·Fi* consciously eschews this overused conceit. it is a record made on the road, but not *about* the road. Its universe is desert, water, and stars. Among the in-jokes and out-of-fashion sounds, Maria Callas, Steve McQueen, and *Rolling Stone* political writer William Greider all make cameos – as does a megalomaniacal, evil clown. (“Binky The Doormat” takes its title from a rant delivered by an evil clown in Bobcat Goldthwait's hilarious cult film, *Shakes The Clown*) “It's what every band at our level should do,” says Buck. “No one had ever gone on the road and written a record like that.”

*Hi-Fi*’s unorthodox gestation was a conscious attempt to transmute the restlessness and malaise of touring into something constructive. “I think Bill and I invented the idea,” says Buck. “We were going to be on the road for ten months, and it would be boring if we were playing the same songs, so why don't we write and record the whole record at sound check? It was a totally stupid and crazy idea, but it made sense to us, and we went with it.”

Not only did the gambit work, but it also paid instant dividends. One of the first new songs, “Departure,” showed up on the set list four weeks into the *Monster* tour. “Undertow” joined it in May. “The Wake·Up Bomb” turned up in August – and the band played it at the 1995 MTV Video Music Awards. “I’m proud of that,” Buck says. “I don't think anyone has ever gone on that show and not promoted their record. MTV didn't like it”

Writing *Hi-Fi* on tour energized the band and the crew, “We were writing songs in hotel rooms and on the buses and in bathrooms,” Buck recalls, “It's kind of funny, but the tour almost became kind of secondary to sound check. Usually when you do a tour, the crew gets really bored, the set list is laminated, but we were doing all these new songs.”

The band’s inventiveness increased as the trip progressed. “Zither,” a surf-inflected instrumental, was recorded backstage in Philadelphia. “We had three days there,” recalls Buck, “and I said, ‘Set up in the bathroom of the dressing room.’ Then we had a long sound check, and we got back in there and spent two hours trying to record this thing. We couldn't hear each other, and we'd listen to a take and wonder, ‘Why is the tambourine off?’ So we said, “Let's get in early tomorrow and try to record this song.’”

R.E.M.’s grand experiment was jeopardized less than two months into the tour, when Bill Berry suffered a near-fatal aneurysm during a March 1 concert in Lausanne, Switzerland. “I remember it as well as anything in my life,” Buck recalls. “We're onstage, and Bill stands up behind the drums, kind of shaking, and his face had this weird color to it, then he collapsed in my arms and started convulsing. I know this guy doesn't do drugs, so what the hell is this?’ And we finished the show without him, with Joey [Peters], the drummer from Grant Lee Buffalo.”

Berry's illness threw the tour – and R.E.M.’s existence – into doubt. But after a successful two· month convalescence, R.E.M.’s drummer returned. The *Monster* tour and the new record were back on track.

“We spent six weeks in Switzerland,” Buck says. “It looked as if the band was over, definitely the tour was over, and Bill's theory was, ‘We’re gonna come right back and do this,’ And with the first show [after Bill’s return], we sound-checked for an hour, doing new songs. It was complete insanity. Just a single-mindedness that I can't imagine ever occurring. Bill’s illness touched everything about the tour. On the other hand, he didn’t want to talk about it. He just wanted to get on with the job.”

Buck looks back fondly on *Hi-Fi*’s immediacy: “Over the years and continuing until today, it gets longer and longer to finish the records, things get changed around. l really like first takes …. except for the two or three that we did in Seattle, everything was recorded at sound check or during shows, and it feels like it. I think to this day it’s still Michael's favorite record.”

*"Distance is my tendency.”*– “Binky the Doormat”

R.E.M. didn’t make the dreaded “road” album, but *New Adventures in Hi-Fi* does bear the marks of its birth in a blur of arenas and hotel rooms. Motion is scorched into the swaggering riffs of “Departure” and “The Wake-Up Bomb”– and into the insistent siren call of “Leave” and the delirious organ swell of “So Fast, So Numb” as well. Strong currents tug even the most pensive songs (“New Test Leper” and “Be Mine”) to their destinations. Mike Mills’ loping bass lines and harmonies dive and swoop on “Undertow” and “Bittersweet Me.”

*New Adventures in Hi-Fi* never settles on one landscape, but it often wanders into poisonous and fatal deserts, on “How the West Was Won and Where It Got Us,” Stipe sketches a “godless and dry” place where the “blessed and alkaline” collide. Behind him the band rattles a dusty backdrop drawn straight from Ennio Morricone’s Spaghetti West. “Low Desert” coils through “ashtray cities” and “broken casinos.”

This naked aridity is underscored by *Hi-Fi*’s art. *Monster*’s colorful graphic nods to Migraine Boy and toy balloons evaporate into desolate black-and-white postcards. It’s no accident that Stipe’s provocative photo of Marcel Duchamp’s “The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even”– housed in the Philadelphia Museum of Art – lingers among them. Duchamp’s enigmatic masterpiece counts “dust” and “glass” (heat and sand) among its materials.

*Hi-Fi* also possesses deep waters and glimmering constellations. But many of the distances summoned by Stipe’s lyrics cannot be traced on maps, for they are distances carved by betrayal and rejection, or vast gaps between aspiration and attainment. The lovers of *Hi-Fi* have needs that lay beyond desire – and rituals rigged by Seconal and Astroglide, absinthe and Spanish fly.

*Hi-Fi*’s emotional centerpieces – “New Test Leper” and “E-Bow the Letter” ­ further complicate and embroider its themes. “Leper” deftly telescopes the distance between the New Testament and the test pattern with a deft conceit, an internal monologue by a guest on a degrading TV talk show. It's a powerful song that ranks among the band's best compositions. “Michael never watches TV,” Buck recalls. “But he saw an episode of *Jerry Springer*. “l think the title of the show was ‘I Am Not an Animal.’ He was so shocked by the show that he had the office call and get a copy – and then he watched it over and over.”

“E-Bow the Letter” marries the titular 1970s effects device (which heightens a guitar note's sustain) and a ghostly cameo by Patti Smith to an unsent letter written by Stipe. “This fame thing, I don’t get it.” sings Stipe. “l wrap my hand in plastic to look through it.” Celebrity and isolation are relentless and inescapable here – a sentiment underscored by Smith’s siren call of total possession.

*New Adventures in Hi-Fi* ends with “Electrolite,” the band’s gently rollicking ode to the century's end. Looking back, Stipe 's quiet grace note to the song and the album – “I’m outta here” – also mark the end of an era in R.E.M.’s distinguished career. A year later Berry would leave the band, making *Hi-Fi* the last record recorded by all four original members.

As he retraces *Hi-Fi*’s highlights, Buck fastens on the band’s feeling as it played the anthemic “Leave" before its shows as among his most memorable moments:

“[‘Leave’] was 11 minutes long when we did it at sound check,” recalls Buck. “It was always the last song we'd do. And just felt like, *Smash our equipment and walk off right now and go back to the hotel*. *‘Cause we're done*. I'm not sure the record does it justice, but when we did it onstage at sound checks, it was mind-boggling.”

*– Richard Byrne*