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ARTS

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Full circle, but still out of the loop

R.E.M.'s new album shows they're happy just making music for themselves

By GARY GRAFF

Sometimes appearances can truly be deceiving. Ask the members of R.E.M.

Last year, when the band hit the road for tours of Europe and North America, the long-lived alternative-rock favorites were in the midst of working on their 13th studio album. At the time the musicians spoke of a harder-rocking effort comprised of punchy, sparsely arranged songs. Now they admit to being as surprised as their fans have been by the lush and textured *Around the Sun*.

"When we went on the road, it felt at the time that it was going to be a record that was more stripped-down, which was kind of my goal," guitarist Peter Buck says. "And when we started recording again in January, we recut a lot of stuff, and there were new songs to do. As we started listening to all the things we had, it seemed like the record wasn't going to be as chaotic as I thought it was at the beginning.

"A lot of the rock things got left off because they didn't fit in with what we were doing," Buck says. "The record just became what it is. It wasn't something that we planned."

Bassist/keyboardist Mike Mills adds, however, that he sees absolutely nothing wrong with what *Around the Sun* became.

"You just take the best songs and try to make them as fully realized as possible," Mills says. "We were actually trying to make it less lush, but I do think we are sort of exploring the beauty you can find in music. I really enjoy things in layers that reveal themselves with repeated listenings."

More than many other bands, R.E.M. understands that sometimes it takes patience and time for things to click.

When it formed in 1980 in Athens, Ga., R.E.M. was unlike anything in rock's mainstream. It wasn't a glitzy New Wave group or an angry punk outfit. Instead it drew from classic rock — the jangling guitar sound of the Byrds — and underground heroes such as the Velvet Underground and Television, while frontman Michael Stipe's poetic lyrics drew inspiration from Patti Smith.

R.E.M. quickly became popular with critics, but it didn't score a bona-fide hit single until *Stand* (1988)



R.E.M. vocalist Michael Stipe (left), guitarist Peter Buck (centre) and bassist/keyboardist Mike Mills are back on the road again with their new album *Around the Sun*.

reached the Top 10, preceding the chart-topping *Out of Time* (1991), an album which launched hits such as *Losing My Religion* and *Man on the Moon*. It became the first of three consecutive quadruple-platinum releases for the band.

Recent years have been lean for R.E.M., however, at least in their native land. The 1997 departure of drummer Bill Berry, who had suffered a double brain aneurysm on stage two years earlier, threw the group off its stride. Subsequent albums such as *Up* (1998) and *Reveal* (2001) went only gold, as radio play likewise dried up.

"In America particularly we haven't

sold a lot of records in a while," the 37-year-old Buck acknowledges. "That, I assume, is because we're not on the radio and we're not on MTV, and I understand that completely. We've been around a long time. Bob Dylan isn't on MTV or on the radio — if they're not going to play Bob Dylan, I can understand why they're not going to play us."

The same doesn't hold for foreign countries, however.

"Outside of America we're more popular than we've ever been," Buck says. "It's like being the Beatles in Italy or Ireland or England, and it's really intense and really fun and really cool."

Around the Sun was therefore not

necessarily designed to win back the band's audience at home, but rather to make a set of music that Buck, Mills and Stipe would be happy with. They started work on the album in December 2002 in Vancouver, accompanied by longtime co-producer Pat McCarthy and touring-band members Scott McCaughey, Bill Rieflin and Ken Stringfellow.

Interestingly, the album's leadoff track and first single, *Leaving New York*, was both one of the first the group worked on and one of the last.

"I think it was possibly either the very first or the very second thing we demoed," Buck says. "Then we didn't

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MIKE MILLS

R.E.M. BASSIST/KEYBOARDIST

really do anything for a whole year. At the end of the process, Michael said, 'You know, I've got vocals for that. Why don't we edit it up a little bit and play it?' So it's been sitting around for a long time, and in a lot of ways it's the freshest thing on the album."

There's a strong political tone to some of the songs on *Around the Sun*. The group even posted one highly political tune, *Final Straw*, on its website in summer 2003.

"We're very concerned about the political situation in America," says Mills, who joined in the issues-oriented *Tell Us the Truth* tour in fall 2003. R.E.M. also was part of the recent anti-Bush *Vote for Change* tour, joining a coalition of artists and playing on the same bill as Bruce Springsteen & the E Street Band, with whom R.E.M. got to play in an experience that the 35-year-old Mills calls "ridiculously awesome."

"It seemed like, if we were going to put our politics on record, this was the one to do it," Mills says, although he adds that Stipe, as the band's lyricist, was careful to write songs that would not be too tied to the specific time in which they were written.

"That's one of his gifts," Mills says. "Michael can write about topical things, and yet they don't sound dated. He can make fairly specific statements, and they'll still sound relevant in five years."

R.E.M. intends to maintain its relevance, too, regardless of *Around the Sun*'s commercial performance.

"The only thing that'll make a difference in the United States is if we ever have a hit single," Mills says, "and I've pretty much given up on that ever happening again."

"And it doesn't matter. We'll play to the people that want to see us, and we'll sell whatever it is we sell. That's kind of the way it goes."

Which really isn't so different from the band's original philosophy nearly 25 years ago.

"That's the funny thing," Mills says. "When we first started we were out of the mainstream, and now we're out of the mainstream again."

"It's not an uncomfortable place to be at all."

• *New York Times News Service*



ASSOCIATED PRESS

German romance singer Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau

Germany's Fischer-Dieskau wins Polar prize

STOCKHOLM, SWEDEN

Brazilian singer Gilberto Gil and German romance singer Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau were named the 2005 winners of the Polar Music Prize for their contributions to music.

The award was founded in 1989 by Stig Anderson, manager of Swedish pop group ABBA, through a donation to The Royal Swedish Academy of Music. The winners were announced yesterday.

Gil, who is also Brazil's culture minister, and Fischer-Dieskau will each receive \$137,043 US. They are expected to travel to Sweden to collect the award on May 23 from King Carl XVI Gustaf.

Fischer-Dieskau is the father of former KW Symphony conductor Martin Fischer-Dieskau.

Fischer-Dieskau, 79, is considered the premiere master of German lieder, or arts song, and his opera singing is regarded as some of the best worldwide. He was cited for "his unique artistry in every area of classical singing and for his unparalleled achievements as a penetrating and innovative interpreter of art songs in the German language."

The prize is typically split between pop artists and classical musicians. Previous winners include Paul McCartney, Isaac Stern, Bruce Springsteen, Pierre Boulez and Quincy Jones.

• *Associated Press*

LeBlanc is king of Elvis knock-offs

By COLIN HUNTER
RECORD STAFF

KITCHENER

Perhaps the supermarket tabloids are onto something. Maybe Elvis is still alive.

It seems a ridiculous notion until one catches a glimpse of Roy LeBlanc, who looks, acts and sounds eerily similar to the King.

The sneering, hip-swiveling, southern-drawling LeBlanc drew plenty of incredulous double-takes during a recent jaunt to Waterloo Region to promote a charity concert this Friday and Saturday at Bingemans.

There are an estimated 35,000 Elvis impersonators in the world.

At an international competition in Las Vegas last year, LeBlanc was crowned the best of them all, earning the title of World's Finest Elvis.

Not bad for a car factory worker from St. Thomas who grew up listening to Led Zeppelin and sang his first Elvis ditty on a dare at a karaoke bar a few years back.

"I got into it by chance, really," said LeBlanc, his jet-black pompadour wiggling as he spoke.

"I was so good doing the karaoke song that people accused me of lip-synching. They thought someone had just thrown an Elvis CD on."

At 32, LeBlanc looks disarmingly similar to the Elvis of the late 1950s — the pre-drugs, pre-chubby, pre-sequined-jumpsuit Elvis. He's naturally blond, but has taken care of that little glitch with a healthy helping of black dye.

His reputation as the World's Finest Elvis has landed him gigs around the world. This weekend at Bingemans, he'll strut his kingly stuff along with tribute acts to Roy Orbison, Buddy Holly, and a performance by the band Swing Riot.

The concert is a fundraiser for the

Cardiac Fitness Association, a Breslau-based charity operated by Dr. John Schaman that offers rehabilitation programs to heart patients.

It's a charity close to LeBlanc's heart, so to speak, since his manager, Jimmy Provost, has used its services for more than 20 years.

LeBlanc never would have guessed he'd become a professional Elvis impersonator. In fact, he's always found the impersonation phenomenon "a little strange."

But someone who heard him croon karaoke that first time asked him to sing at her wedding. After that, wedding guests started calling about other engagements. And so it began.

A few years ago he entered the annual Elvis competition in Collingwood, and stole the show.

That success led him to the international competition in Las Vegas last year, where the finalists sang with Elvis' original backup group, the Jordanaires.

"I just thought it would look good on a resume, that I sang with the Jordanaires," LeBlanc said.

Not only did LeBlanc win the whole shebang, he was so convincing that one of the Jordanaires admitted that playing backup for him felt just like accompanying Elvis himself.

LeBlanc's impersonation is so dead-on that the Learning Channel recently recruited him to play Elvis in a documentary about the King's life and times.

So the gigs keep coming, and the humble LeBlanc continues to be amazed that he's carved a successful niche in the strange and overpopulated world of Elvis impersonators.

To the people who have come to his concerts and made him truly feel like a King, he says in true Elvis fashion: "Thankyouverymuch."

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DAVID BEBEE, RECORD STAFF

Roy LeBlanc (left), the World's Finest Elvis title holder, poses with Dr. John Schaman, organizer of the second Dr. Goodheart travelling Medicine Show. The Learning Channel has recruited LeBlanc to play Elvis in a documentary.

CONCERT

Who: **The Dr. Goodheart Traveling Medicine Show, with musical tributes to Elvis Presley, Roy Orbison, Buddy Holly and more**
Where: **Marshall Hall, Bingeman Park, Kitchener**
Day: **Saturday, 8 p.m. (sold out), and Sunday, 1 p.m.**
Cost: **\$30; Phone: 648-2252**
Tickets: **Bingeman's, The River Run Centre Box Office in Guelph, Ontario Aerobics Centre Cardiac Clinic in Breslau**