

“Radio Free Europe”—R.E.M. (1981)

Added to the National Registry: 2009

Essay by Lori Majewski (guest post)*



R.E.M.

When R.E.M. released their inaugural single, “Radio Free Europe,” in July 1981, via the small independent record label Hib-Tone, the American musical landscape was ripe for change. While Britain and Europe were racing toward the future, propelled by an exciting new generation of acts born out of the chaos and combustible energy of UK punk--The Cure! Adam and the Ants! U2!--rock radio in the US clung to its seventies soundtrack of Foreigner and Foghat, lengthy guitar solos, and near-hourly spins of “Stairway to Heaven.”

The doors of Album-Oriented Rock (or AOR) radio were practically bolted shut to R.E.M., a band whose heroes included under-sung creative forces like the Velvet Underground, Patti Smith, and Big Star. And the Athens, Georgia, foursome might have remained as commercially underappreciated as their influences had it not been for the alternative-music revolution that was on the horizon.

“This amazing phenomenon started about the same time we did: college radio,” says Mike Mills, R.E.M.’s cofounder and bassist. The format had already existed, but while the band was in its infancy, college radio underwent a transition from “being the place where deejays would play 30-minute proggy cuts [to] this outlet for all these American bands that were playing music with an utter rejection of the commercial stuff.” Adds Mills: “I love Led Zeppelin, and I like Foreigner, [but] I’d had about enough of them, and so had everybody else.”

Enter “Radio Free Europe.” Wait.... Radio Free *what?* Turns out, R.E.M.’s breakout single is named for a US-funded organization that disseminates uncensored news, responsible discussion, and open debate in countries around the world where, in its own words, “a free press is banned by the government or not fully established.” How ironic, then, that “Radio Free Europe” liberated rock fans in their own country, gifting music fans with a song that signaled the end of the world as rock fans knew it while heralding the arrival of a thrilling new one. Simultaneously, it rocket-launched the career of Mills and his fellow band members, lead singer Michael Stipe, guitarist Peter Buck, and drummer Bill Berry.

“We had grown up hearing commercials for Radio Free Europe,” Mills says, “so Peter said to Michael, ‘Write a song with that as the title.’”

Stipe did as he was asked--or, at least, he gave it his best shot. “I’m always amazed by bands that emerge into the world intact and complete, and I always use the Ramones as the example for that,” the singer says.

He says:

They had the look, they had the sound, they had the names, they had *everything*. R.E.M. were the exact opposite. We didn't know how to play our instruments; I had never written a lyric before. The first twenty or so songs we wrote were pretty rudimentary, like a 101, A-B-C, "How To Write A Pop Song." It was around the time of "Gardening at Night" [a track that ended up on the band's 1982 debut EP, "Chronic Town"] that I felt we had written our first real song; shortly after that, "Radio Free Europe" and [that song's b-side] "Sitting Still" came along.

Early on, Stipe's voice acted primarily as an instrument. It was so emotionally resonant, capable of communicating eloquently even without linear lyrics. "I'm not musically very adept," he explains. "I'm more of an intuitive or instinctive writer. But I did something with my voice that was very, very unexpected, and that's part of what made 'Radio Free Europe' the success it is."

The title said everything Stipe's lyrics didn't. When taken in context, in the summer of 1981, a month before the arrival of MTV and a decade before the fall of the Berlin Wall, the phrase "Radio Free Europe" suggested a creative ethic where risk-taking was encouraged and embraced. While the song didn't introduce modern rock music to US audiences--punk-influenced American acts like Talking Heads and Blondie beat R.E.M. to it--"Radio Free Europe" helped to fine-tune it. And although the band wouldn't enjoy Zeppelin-level success until the 1990s (six years in, they'd sign an \$80 million Warner Brothers record contract, the largest ever recorded at the time), the quartet spent the rest of the eighties spearheading a movement that made US radio fertile ground not only for college rock but, later, for grunge.

"The melodic side of post-punk American garage rock really started with that song," says Larry the Duck, a longtime host and music director on Sirius XM's First Wave who fondly recalls championing R.E.M. and "Radio Free Europe" as a deejay on the iconoclastic Long Island, NY, station WLIR. "The simple fact is that this guitar-bass-drums-vocals track ignited WLIR, KROQ, WHFS, WFNX, WXRT, 91X, and Live 105--the so-called Magnificent 7 of alternative radio--along with countless college radio stations. It's the catalyst for an exciting musical environment that allowed bands like The Replacements, Violent Femmes, 10,000 Maniacs, The Smithereens, Let's Active, The Bongos, Translator, The dB's, and Hüsker Dü to thrive."

In the decade following the release of "Radio Free Europe" (which reappeared two years later, in a re-recorded version, on their 1983 debut album, "Murmur"), R.E.M. became America's premiere alternative rock band. They were to the US what U2 was to everywhere else. The group began to transition into a more mainstream-friendly band with the 1987 release of "Document," R.E.M.'s fifth album and their final one on I.R.S Records, before entering the major leagues with their 1988 Warner Bros. release "Green."

A string of hit singles and platinum albums followed, and in 2010, another accolade led R.E.M. right back to where they started. That year, the Library of Congress added "Radio Free Europe" to its National Recording Registry, in part because the song set "the pattern for later indie rock releases by breaking through on college radio in the face of mainstream radio's general indifference."

Nearly four decades on, Mills smiles while recalling early rehearsals of "Radio Free Europe." "I ran around like a madman--I was literally bouncing off the walls of the rehearsal space because I was so excited to play [it]," he says. "To me, it's about the joy of discovery, how much fun you can have writing and performing music. That's what I think of when I think about it or hear it."

“Writing a good song is like catching lightning in a bottle,” he continues. “It was the open, ringing chords that helped define this song musically, but the listeners could also sense the joy and enthusiasm we felt writing and playing it.”

Lori Majewski in an on-air host of the Sirius XM music shows Feedback, Fierce: Women In Music (both on the Volume channel) and Lust For Lists (First Wave). A veteran entertainment journalist and writer, she was a founder and managing editor of “Teen People,” as well as an executive editor of “Entertainment Weekly,” “Us Weekly” and “YM,” before writing the best-selling book “Mad World: An Oral History Of New Wave Artists And Songs That Defined The 1980s.”

* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.