

**This interview with
MIKE MILLS of R.E.M.
was conducted by the Library of Congress
on March 23, 2018**



Mike Mills

Library of Congress: Quite famously, there are two versions of “Radio Free Europe”-- one on Hib-Tone and a later one that was done for I.R.S. Records. Listening to them today, do you prefer one version over the other?

Mike Mills: I think everyone in the band has gone on record as saying that they prefer the Hib-Tone version compared to the one on the album. It was rawer, and done with a little more energy and abandon, which often makes for a more exciting recording.

LOC: What was writing “Radio Free Europe” like? All four members of the band are listed as the songwriter on the label.

MM: I wrote the verse and B-section late one night while sitting alone downstairs in an Athens record store while a party was going on upstairs. The store was closed, and I was playing an unamplified electric guitar as I was listening to the party.

[For “Radio Free Europe,”] later, Peter wrote the chorus and bridge, and Michael [Stipe] supplied the melody and lyrics.

Peter [Buck] made the suggestion early on that we share all the writing credits equally, because songwriters get the income from publishing, and unequal income distribution is one of the primary causes of bands breaking up. “So,” Peter said, “let’s just take that out of the equation.”

LOC: At this time, who do you think, musically, were your biggest influences?

MM: My influences came from all over the place. I grew up in the South, so I heard everything that was around me in Georgia—and that included country, blues, and black and white gospel. My dad was a dramatic tenor who loved classical music and jazz, so I heard a lot of that, especially when I was going to bed. But, really, my primary influence was whatever was coming out of my little AM transistor radio. Back in those days you could hear everything on Top 40—Motown, the Beach Boys, the British bands, American rock and roll.

LOC: How did you and the band become affiliated with Hib-Tone?

MM: Hib-Tone was founded by Johnny Hibbert mainly to release that single of ours. He saw us play at a club called 688--that was the street address of the club, so that's where it got its name. He saw us play and offered to put out our single and he created this label to do it. We wanted a record to use as a calling card to send out to clubs and college radio stations, something that said, "This is what we sound like."

LOC: Was he in the music business?

MM: No, Johnny was lawyer! But he liked the band and he wanted to be part of the music business. He had heard our show and at the time two of our best songs were "Radio Free Europe" and "Sitting Still." Both of those songs were a big leap forward for us in our songwriting ability, miles ahead of almost anything we had done up that point.

LOC: How so?

MM: It's hard to put finger on that... I would say that those songs were more complex than most of the songs we had written up to that time.

LOC: What was happening in the band's development at that time that allowed you to make such a quantum leap?

MM: By constantly writing and writing, you begin to broaden and expand your musical palate. You start simple and move into different fingerings. In the case of those two songs, we learned how to incorporate open chords. Playing chords while leaving some strings alone and letting them ring creates beautiful open chords--even if you don't know what you are doing at the time *[laughs]*! It was all about experimentation.

LOC: Here's a very tough question to answer for most songwriters: What is this song "about"?

MM: Well, 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.

Lyricaly, we had grown up hearing commercials for Radio Free Europe. So Peter said to Michael, "Write a song with that as the title."

At that time, Michael's voice acted primarily as an instrument, alongside the bass, guitar, and drums. And the emotion in Michael's voice was enough so that even without linear lyrics, he was able to communicate a great deal of feeling. He was starting to find himself as a lyricist—but, in this song, it's all about the sound of the words, the sound of his voice.

LOC: Why do you think that "Radio Free Europe" caught on as well as it did at that time?

MM: Writing a good song is like catching lightning in a bottle. 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.

LOC: Do you think, in retrospect, that "Radio Free Europe/ Sitting Still," was a good introduction for the band and conveyed what the band was going to be about?

MM: Yes, I do. It was those two songs which represented a breakthrough in songwriting for us, and showed that we were capable of taking our songwriting to the next level.