

# “Radio Free Europe”—REM (1983)

Added to the National Registry: 2009

Essay by Cary O'Dell



*Original sleeve  
for single*



*Original 45*



*REM*

Musical group REM was founded in Athens, Georgia, in 1980. Originally, the band consisted of Michael Stipe (vocals), Peter Buck (guitar), Mike Mills (bass) and Bill Berry (drums). Before their final split in 2011 (Berry had departed earlier in 1997), the group would become heralded as one of the premiere groups of the “alternative” rock movement (while also bowing their knit cap to a punk and hipster/indie aesthetic). For 20 years, they mixed melodic hooks with arty, often political lyrics while also incorporating a strong folk instinct and a determined, rebellious guitar-driven sound. Together, they crafted a series of singles and albums that would prove highly successful both commercially and critically.

After spending several years being lauded as music’s “next big thing,” the band’s first top 10 hit, “The One I Love,” emerged in 1987. They followed it with 1989’s “Stand,” 1991’s “Losing My Religion” (their biggest seller); and “Shiny, Happy People” also in ’91. Later successful releases include “Man on the Moon” (1993) and the generational anthem “Everybody Hurts” (1993).

But for those seeking insight into the band’s philosophy, and early indicators of the artistry to come, one should look to the group’s first and breakthrough single “Radio Free Europe.” Composed by all four members of the group, “Radio” was first recorded in 1981 in a recording studio in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, and was initially released over the small, now defunct Athens-based recording label Hib-Tone. The producers of the recording were Don Dickson and Mitch Easter. It is this version of “Radio Free Europe” that was, in 2009, named to the Library of Congress’s National Recording Registry. Now a collector’s item, this initial version, sold in a distinctive black-and-white blurred photograph sleeve, was released to radio and record stores as a 45rpm record. Upon its release, however, it received, little public attention or radio airplay.

But “Radio Free Europe”—and REM—would prove to have staying power, and an interesting afterlife.

By most accounts, REM were not happy with the first recorded version of “Radio Free Europe.” Though it did lead to them to getting signed to a major record label--IRS Records—and some do appreciate the original version’s slightly murkier sound, when the band came to re-record the song for their 1983 album “Murmur,” this second version, for better or worse, boasted a “cleaner” production and a tighter rhythm.

“Radio Free Europe” 2.0 also contained better enunciation of its lyrics. Lead singer Michael Stipe later admitted that, for the Hib-Tone recording, he purposefully mumbled most of his singing since he had not yet finalized the song’s words.

In either form, “Radio Free Europe” is as opaque in meaning as most other alternative rock lyrics of the era. Even Stipe has called the words to the song “complete babbling.” “Rolling Stone” says that the song is “a vague riff on U.S. cultural imperialism” and this theory seems as good as any. Still, deconstructed, the lyrics do have meaning and weight; consider the song’s opening line of “Resign yourself, that radio’s gonna stay.” (Radio and broadcasting, today still the life blood of rock and roll, would also figure in later REM hits including “Man on the Moon,” which pays tribute to late, controversial comic Andy Kaufman, from 1993, and “What’s the Frequency Kenneth?” from 1994.)

The latter, IRS version of “Radio Free” would also see the group’s first notable trip onto the pop charts. It peaked at number 78 on the “Billboard” pop chart in 1983. The band would also perform it in a memorable performance on David Letterman’s late night show that same year. The renewed, or continued, interest in the song and the band allowed REM to produce a music video for the song, something not possible two years before.

The resulting clip, typical of early music video, is an interesting, if confusing, visualization. It reintroduces some of the blurred black and white effects of the original Hib-Tone’s single’s record sleeve and incorporates some performance footage alongside footage taken in and around the band’s home base of Athens. The video also includes a cameo by Georgia-based “outsider” artist Howard Finster, in whose eclectic, decorative “Paradise Garden” some of the video was shot.

Though the IRS version of “Radio Free Europe,” like its Hib-Tone predecessor, was not a major hit, the album “Murmur” rose to number 36 on the album chart and, thanks to its success, critical acclaim and rising buzz on the alternative circuit and on college radio, REM would be able to continue. The following year, the band released another one-word titled album, “Reckoning.” That album, with its cover art by Howard Finster, rose to number 27 on the US album charts. REM followed it with “Fables of Reconstruction” in 1985; “Lifes Rich Pageant” in 1986; and “Document” in 1987.

“Document” would be the band’s breakthrough disc as it contained the successful singles “It’s the End of the World (As We Know It),” “Finest Worksong,” and the top 10 hit “The One I Love.” Appealing now as much to pop audiences as its original alternative base, REM soon became one of the standard-bearers for intelligent rock. Later albums included: “Green” (1988); “Out of Time” (1991); “Automatic for the People” (1992); “Monster” (1994); and “Up” (1997).

As mentioned, REM officially disbanded in 2011.

Today, “Radio Free Europe,” in either of its two incarnations, remains a compelling, surprisingly bouncy pop track. Listening to it, one hears clearly how it paved the way not only for later REM compositions but also the genre now known as “alternative rock.”

As to which is ultimately better—both versions have their pluses, as well as their minuses. The Hib-Tone era recording might gain some advantage simply for being the first. But the final decision is, of course, as always, up to the ears of the listener.

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