

Records

R.E.M. Green (Warner Bros)

Let's start with a history lesson. The first half of the 70s was spent looking for the new Beatles, something coherent to make sense of the fragments that were falling around our pointed little heads. If deliverance came in the shape of the Sex Pistols it was short-lived and the fragments that survived into the 80s adapted their skills to the point of specialisation — Heavy Metal, soul, disco, rap, hip-hop, reggae, guitar bands, country, punk, hardcore — rock 'n' roll is now more amorphous and more varied than it's ever been. Healthy, maybe. Aimless, definitely.

This decade a lot of bands have surfaced on premature critical froth with papers being pressured into predicting or creating the next direction, but few bands have survived wild expectations to provide the 80s with a sense of purpose that we longed for 15 years ago. In the American sphere only Husker Du and REM have had the gas to sustain a leadership initiative and with Mould and Co off the road, REM, with a new shiny record deal, are left to lead the dwindling cause of divinely articulate and accessible rock 'n' roll.

Their last album *Document* broke their pattern not only because it contained their first USA Top 10 single, 'The One I Love' but also because it departed from what was until then branded as an "REM sound." The test of greatness is being used as a reference point and so how often have you heard a band being described as "a bit like REM"? That cliché meant less after the denser textures of *Document*, a sound partly attributable to producer Scott Litt's influence and the band's new songwriting approach of writing on different instruments. The net result on *Green* is that the Byrds' ghost has all but disappeared with Buck's guitar meshing, gnashing and scraping nerve ends exposed by Stipe's personal, but still veiled, confessions.

Impressions of Roger McGuinn or of traditional REM folklore survive in the immediacy of 'Pop Song', the cynical, slow-burning 'I Remember California' and the anti-Agent Orange anger of 'Orange Crush': "I've got my spine, I've got my Orange crush"

But elsewhere this sounds like a different band, not radically but subtly



R.E.M.

as in the drum-less mandolin ballads of 'The Wrong Child', 'Hairshirt' and Stipe's admission of weakness, 'You Are The Everything': "Sometimes I feel that I can't even sing / I'm very scared for this world / I'm very scared for me."

So he's not Superman, not even Clark Kent, just a boy from Athens who's maybe wondering whether religion provides a comfort for fear, a fear of life complicated by the 'dreams of 'Get Up', which scrubs and pierces its way into the soul while 'Stand' is cute and catchy and should be a single.

And all this leaves 'World Leader Pretend', calm introspection amongst chaos; Stipe drawing parallels between creating art and sitting in the White (Heron) House surrounded by a band in monumental form. In a way this song encapsulates what this band has become since they took ten days out of 1983 to record *Murmur* and lead those interested in the welfare of essential rock 'n' roll through the maze of mediocrity and splinters of fashion that have characterised this decade.

Green picks up where *Document* got off but it is less intense in outlook and that possibly makes it a better record. It isn't a return to the basics of *Murmur* nor is it an adaptation because they're on a major label. It's simply the sound of a band six albums old who've got at least another six in the barrel if the progression and splendour of *Green* are anything to go by.

GEORGE KAY

SONIC YOUTH Daydream Nation (Blast First)

The Sonic Youth are one of the few bands around for whom I bother to stop

and ask the "why" questions. Like I don't even feel the urge to wonder about *Rattle And Hum* (maybe it's too obvious, too stupid, too fucking spiritual for me to care about) but I grant this bunch of techno-art critics with enough intelligence to spend time fathoming this *Daydream Nation* double album.

It's a different world to that of *Sister* or even *Evol*, cos for all of *Daydream Nation*'s flirtations with conventional rock, pop and metal, nowhere does it have those trademark Sonic Youth climbin' guitars come crashing down riffs, like 'Catholic Block' or any centrally dominant climactic moment in 'Starpower' vein.

Daydream Nation even lacks the wordiness of previous SY releases, but if anything, the trash-literary aesthetic becomes more pronounced as songs like 'Kissability', 'Teenage Riot' and 'The Sprawl' tune into a sparser wavelength than even the claustrophobic, buried fear of 'Pacific Coast Highway'. Then on 'Cross the Breeze', Kim Gordon's straining "I wanna know / Should I stay or go?" and you realise that instead of looking at everything with their traditionally dislocated narrative voice the Youth wanna be it for once.

So with a leanness that you could hardly believe sustainable over the length of a double album (made possible perhaps by the fact that there are a mere 12 songs spread across four sides) Sonic Youth play at rock without trickery. And that's how they can swing from the Buzzcocks' pop of 'Silver Rocket' to the 60s freakout (hear that heavy rock bass sound!) of 'Total Trash' and onto 'Candle's simple beauty without slipping up or mashing unlikely moments up against one another. It's

amazing listening and an impressive achievement.

Starting to listen to this is like scratching the surface of *Daydream Nation*: it starts to reveal itself, its pop, humour, love and hate-songs with time. Its nature is more that of seeking experience than being of it. So yeah, it might well be a "hippy" thing, but in their clever, self-conscious Trash, Sonic Youth show that they know rock. And to try and show that takes a lot more than does covering 'Helter Skelter' or putting 'All Along The Watchtower' on your album. The greatest rock band in the world? Who can tell?

PAUL McKESSAR

JOHN HIATT Slow Turning (A&M)

Last year saw the return and renaissance of Hiatt after a long period on the skids where alcohol problems and a messy personal life culminated in the suicide of his first wife. Up until then Hiatt had enjoyed universal critical slaps on the back but his record sales scarcely paid the bills. *Bring The Family* revitalised his flagging fortunes and even local radio stations were playing 'Memphis in the Meantime' thinking that here was a new talent to boost ad sales and grace the airwaves.

With the roses that were showered on that album it would've been easy for Hiatt to stick that approach and do another four-days-in-the-studio, crank it out via Nick Lowe productions and have us all drooling again about Sun-sessions spontaneity man and this is the basics of rock 'n' roll, honey. But nope, this time he's gone country — probably where his heart's always been — recorded it in Nashville under Glyn Johns and dollar for dollar it could be the best thing he's done since he was spitting tacks on *Slug Line* and *Two Bit Monsters*, and they're so long ago they're no grounds for comparison.

There's no better place to start than with the title track single from *Slow Turning* with Bernie Leadon's cello thing doing a reel as Hiatt words-up worldly wise complaining about the kids in the back seat "bangin' like Charlie Watts" which is nice especially when he rips off Keith on the choppy, gravelly guitar of 'Paper Thin'. Country raunch gets catered for on 'Drive South' and 'Tennessee Plates' leaving the tear jerking to slow burning ballads like 'Icy Blue Heart' and 'Feels Like Rain'. Real nice but the best here have to be the swinging 'Sometime Other Than Now'

and the glorious 'Georgia Rae', a song about Hiatt's new daughter that has the same exuberance and warmth as something like Lennon's 'Oh Yoko.'

Again dedicated to his family, *Slow Turning* shows a soul at peace, a man who has been through some real hard times but who's now settled down raisin' kids and making some mighty fine music.

GEORGE KAY

SKEPTICS Skeptics III (Flying Nun)

D.D'Aths' vocals may occasionally sound like Bauhaus front-poseur Peter Murphy's, but fear not, this record is entirely devoid of black angels, crucifixes and other such wearisome imagery. The Skeptics couldn't be that blatant if they tried. They achieve their often considerable menace in much more interesting ways. They're often compared to the Headless Chickens, but while *Stunt Clown* dealt in pop songs, the Skeptics are more purposeful in articulating their pessimistic vision. Better reference points would be Coil or flourescent beat guru Genesis P.Orridge's pre-Acid House project Throbbing Gristle.

This is no concept album, though. Each of the nine songs (sound sketches? funky grooves?) is self-contained and effective on its own. 'Affco', complete with screamed vocals and demented rock beat, would convince anyone to throw away their Big Mac and eat the gherkin. 'Agitator' casts its oddly-shaped shadow over the whole of side one. It's a good old-fashioned three-part epic; one third mournful piano and voice, one third copybook Skeptics bump and grind and one third quasi-Bowie chorus. It would all be hopelessly bombastic if D'Ath didn't undermine it by crooning "June, July, August!" over the climactic third segment. And just when you thought it was safe to come back into the room, 'Crave', the last song on side two, is possibly the most dangerous of all. "Murder victim! Murder victim!" cackles the sampling machine and then out of nowhere comes a chord change that's positively unearthly.

At last we know where Wreck Small Speakers On Expensive Stereos got the inspiration for their name.

MATTHEW HYLAND

The Decline of Western Civilization Part II



The Decline of Western Civilization Part II the Metal Years

ORIGINAL MOTION PICTURE SOUNDTRACK

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ALICE COOPER

with AXL ROSE, SLASH & IZZY

FASTER PUSSYCAT

SEDUCE

MOTORHEAD

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