IT WAS THE BEGINNING OF THE WORLD AS THEY'D KNOW IT

By Charles Apple | THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

The rock band R.E.M. played its first gig on April 5, 1980 — 45 years ago. It was a birthday party for a friend, held at the former St. Mary's Episcopal Church in the college town of Athens, Georgia. The band lived and rehearsed in the former church.



Bill Berry DRUMS | **Mike Mills** BASS | **Peter Buck** GUITAR | **Michael Stipe** VOCALS

A BAND FROM A COLLEGE TOWN

Like many college towns, Athens, Georgia, had a number of local bands composed of students and local kids. Athens was a little different, however, because one of those bands — the retro-1950s/new wave band The B-52's — had scored a major hit in 1978 with a single called "Rock Lobster."

As bands proliferated and local joints opened to give them a place to do their thing, Athens suddenly found itself a birthing ground for new music.

It was in this environment that University of Georgia art student Michael Stipe walked into a record store near campus one day and struck up a conversation with the assistant manager there, Peter Buck. Both longed to be a bigger part of what was happening in Athens. They began writing songs together, moved in together and used their pad — a former church, no less — to host rehearsals for local bands.

Before long, the pair had met up with drummer Bill Berry and bassist Mike Mills and formed a band they called Twisted Kites. They played the local scene, gained in proficiency, continued to write new material, gained a following and eventually came up with a better name.

They performed for the first time under the name R.E.M. on April 5, 1980, at a birthday party for a friend in the former church where they lived.

An experimental single recorded in April 1981 led to an EP that led to an even larger cult following. Which led to a record contract with I.R.S. records, which specialized in smaller, new wave and alternative bands. R.E.M.'s first album, 1982's "Murmur," would be highly praised by critics.

Stipe once explained: "There was never any grand plan behind any of it." R.E.M. was into making it all up as they went along. An example: When the band first played "Late Night with David Letterman" in October 1983, it performed a song that was so new it hadn't yet been named. "So. Central Rain (I'm Sorry)" would become the lead single from the band's second album.

R.E.M. would continue to refine its sound over the 1980s. By late 1987, it had scored its first Top 20 single and was labeled "America's Best Rock & Roll Band" on the cover of Rolling Stone.

"We're not a party band from Athens," Stipe told Rolling Stone in 1983. "We don't play New Wave music, and musically, we don't have **** to do with the B-52's or any other band from this town. We just happen to live here."

'LOSING MY RELIGION' AND 'OUT OF TIME'

"There've been very few life-changing events in our career because our career has been so gradual," Mills once told an interviewer. "If you want to talk about life changing, I think 'Losing My Religion' is the closest it gets."



Buck was trying to learn to play a mandolin he had bought. One of the riffs he stumbled across caught his ear, so he expanded it into what became the lead single from the band's 1991 album, "Out of Time." "Losing My Religion" peaked at No. 4 on the Billboard Hot 100 singles chart and won R.E.M. a Grammy for Best Pop Performance by a Duo or Group With Vocal.

Sales of the single were helped by a wildly popular video that cast the band in what for them was an entirely new light. Director Tarsem Singh created a dreamlike film that combined lead singer Stipe's singing with imagery inspired by classical painter Caravaggio's "The Martyrdom of Saint Matthew."

The video was nominated in no fewer than nine categories in the 1991 MTV Music Video Awards. It won six, including Video of the Year, Best Group Video, Best Art Direction, Best Direction and Best Editing. It also won a Grammy for Best Short Form Music Video.

A QUIET RETIREMENT

In March 1995, Berry collapsed on stage during a show in Switzerland after suffering a brain aneurysm. He recovered but quit the band in 1997.

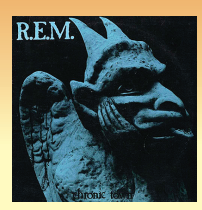
R.E.M. put out another five albums as a trio before retiring in 2011. "All things must end," Stipe wrote on the band's website, "and we wanted to do it right, to do it our way."

Since then, the members of R.E.M. have lived fairly low-profile lives in Athens, occasionally authorizing a new release of live material or studio outtakes. In February, R.E.M. made headlines by reuniting on stage at an Athens club — for one whole song.

R.E.M.'S ALBUM SALES AND CHART HISTORY

KEY: ■ = 100,000 copies sold

Chronic Town (EP)
RELEASED: Aug. 24, 1982
HIGHLIGHTS: "Gardening at Night," "Carnival of Sorts (Box Cars)," "1,000,000"



SALES: **900,000**
GOLD
HIGHEST CHART POSITION: #36

Murmur
RELEASED: April 12, 1983
HIGHLIGHTS: "Radio Free Europe," "Talk About the Passion"



SALES: **900,000**
GOLD
HIGHEST CHART POSITION: #27

Reckoning
RELEASED: April 9, 1984
HIGHLIGHTS: "So. Central Rain (I'm Sorry)," "(Don't Go Back to) Rockville"



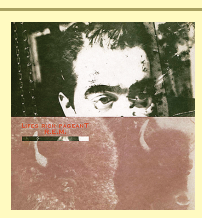
SALES: **1.1 million**
GOLD
HIGHEST CHART POSITION: #28

Fables of the Reconstruction
RELEASED: June 10, 1985
HIGHLIGHTS: "Can't Get There From Here," "Driver 8," "Wendell Gee"



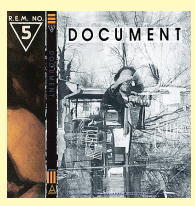
SALES: **1.4 million**
GOLD
HIGHEST CHART POSITION: #21

Lifes Rich Pageant
RELEASED: July 28, 1986
HIGHLIGHTS: "Fall on Me," "Superman"



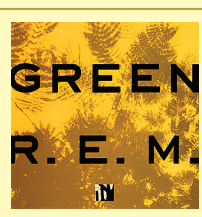
SALES: **2.3 million**
2x PLATINUM
HIGHEST CHART POSITION: #10

Document
RELEASED: Sept. 1, 1987
HIGHLIGHTS: "The One I Love," "It's the End of the World as We Know It (And I Feel Fine)"



SALES: **2.55 million**
2x PLATINUM
HIGHEST CHART POSITION: #12

Green
RELEASED: Nov. 8, 1988
HIGHLIGHTS: "Orange Crush," "Stand," "Pop Song 89," "Get Up"



SALES: **5.7 million**
4x PLATINUM
HIGHEST CHART POSITION: #1

Out of Time
RELEASED: March 12, 1991
HIGHLIGHTS: "Losing My Religion," "Shiny Happy People," "Near Wild Heaven"



SALES: **5.3 million**
4x PLATINUM
HIGHEST CHART POSITION: #2

Automatic for the People
RELEASED: Oct. 6, 1992
HIGHLIGHTS: "Drive," "Man on the Moon," "Everybody Hurts," "The Sidewinder Sleeps Tonite"



SALES: **4.3 million**
4x PLATINUM
HIGHEST CHART POSITION: #1

Monster
RELEASED: Sept. 27, 1994
HIGHLIGHTS: "What's the Frequency, Kenneth?," "Bang and Blame"



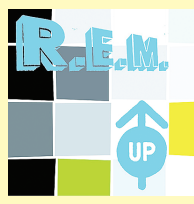
SALES: **1.35 million**
2x PLATINUM
HIGHEST CHART POSITION: #2

New Adventures in Hi-Fi
RELEASED: Sept. 10, 1996
HIGHLIGHTS: "E-Bow the Letter," "Bittersweet Me," "Electrolite"



SALES: **800,000**
GOLD
HIGHEST CHART POSITION: #3

Up
RELEASED: Oct. 27, 1998
HIGHLIGHTS: "Daysleeper," "Lotus," "At My Most Beautiful," "Suspicion"



SALES: **500,000**
HIGHEST CHART POSITION: #6

Reveal
RELEASED: May 15, 2001
HIGHLIGHTS: "Imitation of Life," "All the Way to Reno (You're Gonna Be a Star)"



SALES: **275,000**
HIGHEST CHART POSITION: #13

Around the Sun
RELEASED: Oct. 5, 2004
HIGHLIGHTS: "Leaving New York," "Aftermath," "Electron Blue," "Wanderlust"



SALES: **385,000**
HIGHEST CHART POSITION: #2

Accelerate
RELEASED: April 1, 2008
HIGHLIGHTS: "Supernatural Superserious," "Hollow Man," "Man-Sized Wreath"



SALES: **175,000**
HIGHEST CHART POSITION: #5

Collapse into Now
RELEASED: Sept. 1, 1987
HIGHLIGHTS: "Mine Smell Like Honey," "Überlin," "Oh My Heart," "Discoverer"



Sources: "Remarks: The Story of R.E.M." by Tony Fletcher, "R.E.M.: The Rolling Stone Files" by Anthony DeCurtis, "R.E.M." Inside Out" by Craig Rosen, "The Ultimate Music Guide: R.E.M." from the makers of Uncut, "R.E.M." by David Harrington, Billboard, Slate, Spin, REMhq.com, UpRoxx, Soundscan, On A&M Records, Ultimate-Guitar.com

PHOTO OF BAND FROM I.R.S. RECORDS. PHOTO FROM "LOSING MY RELIGION" VIDEO FROM WARNER BROS. ALBUM COVERS FROM I.R.S. RECORDS AND WARNER BROS.