



Murmur

J. Niimi

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R.E.M.'s debut album, released in 1983, was so far removed from the prevailing trends of American popular music that it still sounds miraculous and out of time today. J. Niimi tells the story of the album's genesis with fascinating input from Don Dixon and Mitch Easter. He also investigates Michael Stipe's hypnotic, mysterious lyrics, and makes the case for Murmur as a work of Southern Gothic art. EXCEPT: In the course of an interview that took place some twenty years ago, Michael Stipe made passing reference to an essay that had a deep impact on him. It's what came to his mind when, after having been harangued by fans and journalists alike about Murmur's lyrics, already grown weary from having to continually entertain their broad speculations, he finally threw up his hands. Anyone who really wants to figure out the words to our songs should probably read this essay, then go back and listen, Stipe told the interviewer. It talks about how people misinterpret something that's being said, and come up with a little phrase or word that actually defines the essence of what the original was better than the original did. What Stipe was trying to say is that if you want answers to R.E.M., you're not only looking in the wrong place, you're also asking the wrong questions.

Murmur Details

Date : Published May 28th 2005 by Continuum International Publishing Group (first published April 28th 2005)
ISBN : 9780826416728
Author : J. Niimi
Format : Paperback 136 pages
Genre : Music, Nonfiction, Writing, Essays

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From Reader Review *Murmur* for online ebook

Corey Vilhauer says

Excerpt from What I've Been Reading - December 2008

"My attention wasn't what it should have been, maybe. Or perhaps I had soaked in all of the research I could handle and needed a break. Whatever it was, I never finished *Murmur*. I will (after all, I only have 25 pages left). But I didn't.

J. Niimi's *Murmur* wasn't horrible, it just wasn't written for me. It was written for a music geek who thought too long and too deep about his album of choice. *Paul's Boutique* and *Doolittle* didn't try to make the albums more than they were in real life – they just honored them, told the story and let the reader understand the thought process behind it. *Murmur*, on the other hand, from the first pages, took its album topic to another level, placing it high above everything else, as the savior of alternative rock. It outlined every detail of the recording to a level that only the most seasoned audio geeks would understand, and waxed poetic about the often incomprehensible lyrics.

Murmur's not a bad album. But I don't think I like it that much. Which made this book hard to swallow and, unfortunately, boring."

Wade says

This is a really good book about a great album. All of the history about the early 1980's Athens, Georgia music scene is really cool. There is a chunk of this book that is very technical, the guy writing the book is an engineer and producer, so some of the information is very technical – which does bog some of the second chapter down a bit. But, other than that, I loved his analysis of Michael Stipe's lyrics, which was basically to say – if you're trying to dissect lines that Stipe has written and build a thesis for the whole song off that one line you're completely going about it the wrong way. This is a really cool book about one of the most important albums of the 80's, and (in many people's opinion, including my own) the album that started Alternative Music, which led to the whole Indie Music scene.

Patrick McCoy says

After reading J. Niimi's *Murmur* I am starting to appreciate the artistic scope of serious pop music. I guess I've always appreciated pop music, but after reading this which shows the dedication that went into realizing the songs in the studio by adding sounds layering and maintaining themes and motifs holistically throughout the process-which is often reflected in song order and cover art as well. Somehow, I can't say that I would be as impressed with a careful rendering or say, a Brittany Spears recording session, which I guess is a case of disposable pop versus artist who are trying to create art for the ages. I think R.E.M., has succeeded in doing that, they still sound timeless and vibrant today 20 years after they were first conceived. *Murmur* and *Reckoning* were two albums I got into after discovering them during the Life's Rich Pageant in '86'. Niimi starts out discussing the early days of the band and their recordings, of which *The Chronic Town EP* preceded the recording of *Murmur*. This is followed by a discussion of the actual process and the specific

atmosphere of recording *Murmur* with engineer/producers Don Dixon and Mitch Easter. In the next section, Niimi discusses the album track-by-track and note-by-note. Then he goes into detail concerning the themes and motifs, which are present. For example, how southern gothic is expressed through the lyrics, music, and album artwork and graphics. There are more specific discussions about interpretations and linguistic interpretations of the lyrics. I found the book to be informative, thought provoking, and entertaining—a must for any R.E.M. fan.

Matt Harris says

A lovely and well paced look at a little gold nugget of an album, from a fan who discovered it on tape, in a time of Howard Jones and Thompson Twins neon spiky haired 80's pop.

Of course *Murmur* sounded nothing like those guys, and contained absolute canyons of depth and emotion, but obscured by many things, including reverb, wilfully odd Michael Stipe and his lyrics with no obvious nouns or verbs, or protagonists or plots, just hints which seem to click into your memory.

You can tell I have a soft spot for this record and this book, and it's a hard act to follow in the 33 1/3 series. In fact it was followed for me by the Stone Roses book, and that was a completely different beast.

Justin Niimi is a member of Ashtray Boy, who are an absolutely criminally overlooked band, and if you ever see a copy of their record *The Honeymoon Suite*, GRAB IT. In fact any of their stuff. *Everyman's Fourth Dimension*, they're all good.

Maurice Funken says

In 1983 R.E.M.'s first album *Murmur* was released, now Justin Niimi's book from the 33-1/3 series tells the origination of the record. There some insight in the band's history, which has been retold numerous times, so Niimi quickly skips this part. Up next is some way too technical look into each and every song on the record. Now I now which microphones were used on which song, great. Even worse, the author tries to find a way to make *Murmur* a work of Southern Gothic art in the next section, basically by just looking at the cover. As R.E.M. didn't give any lyrics to go along with their albums for quite a few years, Niimi tries to decipher Stipe's way of writing in the most theoretically cluttered way possible. This scholarly approach doesn't do any good as well and so the book leaves the reader lost and confused...

Eric says

Some questions: Will even the best pop music be remembered and written about in the same way, say, the works of Shakespeare are? Doesn't it seem almost antithetical to write theory about pop music? Even the great stuff? I say this because after reading a book about an album that is very near and dear to me, I have my doubts that any sort of academic criticism can capture the essence of why we listen to and cherish such music, the love of which is a *mélange* of joyful in-the-moment exhilaration and eventually comforting nostalgia. Music is often the glue that connects us to friends and provides signposts to retrace our steps on the one-way road of life. The fizzy writing of Chuck Klosterman seems most appropriate to this subject matter as it frames arguments around compelling anecdotes from his life that feel accessible and heartfelt,

not coated in pretentious theory.

This book on R.E.M.'s 1983 LP, "Murmur," can't make up its mind what kind of analysis it wants to focus on (as the author readily admits in the beginning), so it feels disjointed and incomplete, and doesn't include nearly enough of the emotional weight that I'm sure the album holds for the author and countless others. It's as if the prestige of writing a book about "Murmur" demands high theory to justify its existence. To be fair, I found the theory fascinating and coupled with a very detailed retelling of how each song on "Murmur" was recorded it makes for an interesting academic analysis. But the author is too quick to divorce himself from the irrational emotions that surely inform his love for the LP, and I would have loved to have read more about the context of HIS discovery of "Murmur" and eventual love of the music. Instead, this book reads too often like a PhD dissertation, and that's too bad. Having just seen R.E.M. in concert, I know that there is something much more base and moving to being a fan of the band and this particular album.

Tiffany says

Thoughts as I read --

1. It takes some serious chutzpah to think you can make out Michael Stipe's lyrics, especially the early ones, on your own.
- 1b. And then to analyze them?! Based on what *you* think they are?!? Dang. Chutzpah.
2. I always hate when someone (of "authority," like an author, and not just some guy on the street) analyzes a record and calls my favorite songs the weakest on the album, the throwaway songs. But I like them! I guess that means I just like "stupid pop songs." :(
3. You can't read books like this, where a record is analyzed song by song, and not either have the record playing simultaneously, or go back and re-read while listening to the album. I made the mistake of reading this on the bus yesterday, with no access to the album (no iPod with me, and no headphones to listen to the songs online), so I had to make it a priority to listen to the album today, while reading the section of the book about the songs, so that I could say, "Ohhh... *that's* what he's talking about," or "Oh, yeah, I hear that now." You MUST listen to the songs when you read books that break them down.
4. It's a good feeling when you've read all of the books in an author's Suggested Reading section.

The book is hit-and-miss for me, and I don't know if that's because the book is hit-and-miss or because I took a huge break while reading other books. All I know is that the third and fourth sections, where the author spends less time discussing the album and lyrics specifically, lost my interest. I read the sections, but spent a lot of time thinking, "So?"

Van Edwards says

J. Niimi's book on R.E.M.'s Murmur came very close to making me like it less. The chapters about the band's

history leading up to this album, the recording sessions and the technical notes on each song are expected and were written well enough, but the rest of the book...

Niimi gives an overly-deep analysis of why Stipe's singing is not so much words with meaning, but another texture to the music and what he's singing isn't really important. But then goes on to try to decipher some of the meaning and goes so far as to include 'suggested lyrics' as an appendix. What about Buck's guitar style? There are three other guys who made this album and their music what it was. To me, this album is as thick, mysterious, dense and Southern as the kudzu on the front album cover. The book's not terrible, but pretty close to mind-numbing. I'm going to have to listen to the album several times through to get this taste out of my mouth.

Bryan Hall says

I love the 33 1/3 book series, but because the authors have the freedom to analyze an album in any way they choose, the books are of widely varying quality. In this edition, the author is kind enough to signpost his approach: a brief history of the band leading up to this, their first full-length effort; historical and artistic context; and analysis of language.

The first two sections are great -- having read at least one full biography of R.E.M., I was afraid I would have to sit through a rehash of that information, but the author acknowledges that this book didn't need all that. So the telling of the formation of the band and their writing, touring, and recording experiences pre-Murmur are limited to what is necessary to put the album in context, and does a good job of it.

The second section was most interesting to me, as it talked about the recording process, producers, equipment used, and technical aspects of the music. Very illuminating.

After that -- for me, at least -- it went downhill. The author delves into the Gothic then Southern Gothic styles and places the album into these contexts, which worked fine. But then comes a deep analysis of the lyrics, such as they are, which I suppose is an exercise worth doing but is fraught with problems. The author acknowledges that the band never released official lyrics, then proceeds to analyze *his* interpretation of what Stipe might be saying. A long examination of the use of language in general in the album follows, which is only occasionally truly interesting (a dedicated primer on post-modernism and the signifier might be a better use of your time), and comes with the gigantic caveat that Stipe was probably just mumbling words that sounded good. Most of this last half of the book really hinges on how many of the actual words are supposed to mean anything. Again, the author acknowledges this, even pointing out other writings about the band and how problematic they are, then ignores it. (Granted, there is some value in a listener interpreting their own experience, but I didn't get that angle out of most of it.)

In all, is this book reading? Well, at 127 small-ish pages it's not much of a time commitment. If you're an

R.E.M. fan, there's enough that should interest you, and feel free to skim the second half if it's heavier than you care about. If you're just a music fan in general, try Colin Meloy's book on The Replacements' Let It Be or the entry on In The Aeroplane Over The Sea. And if you're crazy about semiotics, then go nuts.

Dave says

A deeply philosophical take and parsing of language and methods of language. Good for a thorough song by song. Too assumptive on such a subjective topic and hence my lower rating.

Chris says

four shaggy college dropouts from Georgia load up a blue two-seat van & drive up the coast to South Carolina, touring dive-bars & abandoned churches on their way to cut an album of "music that didn't suck"... and end up giving birth to alternative rock.

R.emember E.very M.oment
(you will be missed)

Garrett Peace says

Actual rating: 3.5

A fascinating examination of a mostly inscrutable record that's brought down by a little too pretentious and sneering tone, particularly in the back half of the book. The approach to Murmur that's taken here is, for the most part, quite interesting, and both the more philosophical analysis of the album as a whole and the detailed analyses of each song made me notice and think about some parts of the album that I hadn't noticed/thought about before. However, the book as a whole could have benefitted from a more personal approach and better pacing. Re: the former, Murmur is the type of album that can provoke a deeply personal reaction (Niimi hits the nail on the head when he places it in the context of Romanticism and the individual's reaction to the Sublime); it would have benefitted the book to have more about Niimi's relationship to the album in less abstract terms. In the Internet Age, it's hard to imagine just what being an R.E.M. fan was like during the IRS years (and after). It's those experiences that I personally find most interesting and would love to hear more about. Still, I respect Niimi's approach to the material, and it does seem like the most prudent way to talk about the album, pretentious tone or no. While it could be better, I still found this an enjoyable and educational read that made me revisit and fall in love with Murmur all over again (as if I fell out of love with it - which isn't possible but you know what I mean), which is ultimately the best thing a book like this can do, I think.

Paul Bryant says

Even my friend Gig, a man who knows more about music than several other men, has forgotten how great REM were on Chronic Town, Murmur, Reckoning, Fables of the Reconstruction and Life's Rich Pageant. It's

like trying to tell someone about the ripsnorting rock and roll on the Rolling Stones' first two albums, you're going to get funny looks. Huh? REM? Those wankers? Yes, them! Very early REM was an irreducible thing of beauty, you couldn't tell people about the great guitarist because Peter Buck was not one, he didn't play solos, you couldn't tell anyone about their deep and meaningful lyrics because what Michael Stipe was singing was barely English, it didn't exist, and you couldn't rave about their unusual instrumentation or song structures or great use of dynamics because prog this was not, every song was 3 minutes 10 seconds, there were fast ones and slightly less fast ones and a bit slow ones but who the hell knew what they were about anyway, it was ecstatic noise, it was gesture, it was what pop music was when you burned everything else away.

So here's a little book about Murmur in the wayward all-over-the-map 33 1/3 series (still, every home should have several) written in the most extraordinary manner - example :

To try to tease out across-the-board meaning from Stipe's lyrics, or to presume to unveil what those symbols meant to Stipe when he composed them in the tense pragmatic waking dream of the stage/studio, is to revert to the pre-Freudian mythology of antiquity, which asserts that dreams of fire or animals or the color red always mean the same thing to every dreamer, regardless of cultural context or psychological history. Or, in an equivalent but equally absurd proposition, that they are portents of events to come. Either case is a romantic resurrection of dead ideas and dead books and the long-evaporated sweat of invention of which we think we can still catch a whiff, because, after all, Murmur speaks to us. But if Freud placed the divination of the dream outside the realm of civic conjecture, he also made it sacrosanct. The same holds true for Murmur's lyrics: anyone's guess is truly as good as anyone else's. While fandom's sincerity is beyond reproach, occult technique has no place in this parlor.

Hah, take that Greil Marcus!

When you can discern the odd few words

*Gentlemen, don't get caught
Cages under cage
Gentlemen don't get caught
Boxcars are turning out of town*

they resonate like a shout in a cavern.

Stipe explained once that they chose the title Murmur because it's the easiest word to say in the English language, which proves he isn't so smart, because what about myrrh? Gotcha.

This book is the best of the 33 1/3 books I've read (about 12), it's a model, bursting with background and facts but also with opinion, theory, sociology, poetry and allround geekery.

Kaoru says

"Murmur" is the brilliant debut album by R.E.M. that has never really been discovered in Europe (yet), since they never had any significant success here until "Losing My Religion" was released. So contrary to the likes of "Automatic For The People" or "New Adventures in Hi-Fi" it never got as far to become part of local pop-culture lore, and you never get to hear [i]that much[/i] said about it. "At least there's a book about it in the 33

1/3!" I thought and expected a lot learn about "Murmur"'s backstory and impact. Well, I got that at least in the first half, even if it got a bit too dry and technical for me in parts. (I'm [i]interested[/i] in music, but I'm [i]not[/i] a musician, so all this talk about arpeggios and things got lost on me.) What I forgot, though, was that the book in this series tend to be very hit and miss. Some are very insightful and shoot more trivia at you than you could ever hope for, others are just full with indulgent waffling by people who are a bit full of themselves. And boy, does this book waffle in its second half. At first I kind of enjoyed the author's recollections of music stores in the early 80s, but then it goes from tangent to tangent to tangent... and when you end up being thoroughly informed about the release date of the very first english gothic novel you wonder: "How did we get here? [i]Why[/i] did we get here? What has this got to with the album? Or [i]anything[/i] for that matter?" So, here's my advice: Read the first half only, skip the second. (And then listen to the actual album again. If you like.)

Andrew says

This wasn't as bad as the author warned it would be at the beginning. I was concerned about this book when I started reading it, and the author was suggesting other book titles that covered the subject matter in this book better than he was going to do. What concerned me more was that he was suggesting that you skip sections of the book that are not of interest to you. It's written as his interpretation of the album. Some of the other 33 1/3 books are written this way as well, and a lot of the time they drift into a state of ranting boredom. However, the writing in this one manages to keep it interesting almost all the way through.
