

Automatic for the People by R.E.M.

A grim irony lies with the public veneration afforded the Georgian quartet's most off-kilter recordings (1991's *Losing My Religion*, for instance, or as featured on the subject of this review, *Everybody Hurts*-lengthy, mandolin-led excursions through the hinterlands of alternative American country, signposted by the Byrds and Gram Parsons, and only mildly embellished with tick-tock percussion and terse strings), especially when compared with the widespread indifference with which, say, *Imitation of Life* was greeted. Perhaps it was just that their audience viewed U2 as purveyors of uplifting stadium-rock, and preferred to view their in-genre siblings as a more nocturnal, subtler alternative. Certainly, that perspective would go some considerable way to explaining the enduring popularity of *Automatic for the People*, by some distance the group's darkest, most challenging album. As a two-fingered riposte to the globe-masticating success of its predecessor, the nauseatingly cheery and insincere *Shiny Happy People*, the dirge-like and funereal *Drive* was selected as the flagship single for their new opus. Peculiarly, it would immediately gatecrash the US top thirty although, less surprisingly, it was also omitted from the subsequent *In Time* compilation, a Stalinist exercise in revisionism if ever there was one. Nevertheless, *Drive* remains a starkly compelling rejection of a society in moral stasis, quite literally "bushwhacked" by the arrival of a neo-conservative President and his oppressive regime. *Try Not to Breathe* is similar in texture and pessimistic outlook, as ever propelled by the egoless instrumentation of Messrs. Berry, Buck and Mills, a rarely spectacular unit, constantly cohesive and never jarring. If *The Sidewinder Sleeps Tonite* proffers a rare moment of ebullience, it's quickly debunked by the anti-suicide lament *Everybody Hurts*, on which Peter Buck's opening pair of chords echo spiritual mentor Dylan's *Every Grain of Sand* before Bill Berry's ineffably gentle taps usher in a soaring vocal. Endlessly repeated exposure on late night radio does nothing to diminish Michael Stipe's tender performance here; given a less pure, mawkish delivery, atypical morsels of advice like "take comfort in a friend" and "don't let yourself go" would quickly will gallons of vomit up through any sentient listener's oesophagus, but his presence convinces enough to shun those sentimental pitfalls. Thankfully, the lullaby-like *New Orleans Instrumental No. 1* brings with it brief emotional respite, behaving as a kind of soothing balm on bruises. Thereafter follows a curt mid-album lull, stretching from the unremarkable *Sweetness Follows* to *Ignoreland*, which is equally unworthy of critical comment, suffice to say a worryingly Van Halen-esque synth squall takes centre stage. *Star Me Kitten*, however, is a revelation; as on the aforementioned *Everybody Hurts*, guitar and voice blend seamlessly, if admittedly the emphasis this time is on entirely more lascivious concerns. Yet another unconscious nod to Dylan emerges on the following *Man on the Moon*, wherein Stipe pays homage to the deceased cult comedian Andy Kaufman (the former Robert Zimmerman, of course, having saluted the notoriously vulgar and ground-breaking Lenny Bruce in song some eleven years previously), an infamous raconteur not unknown to wrestle female opponents for fun. Again, the tone briefly turns celebratory, as befits its eccentric subject. It is left to *Nightswimming* and *Find the River*, respectively, to dim the lights and shut the auditorium. The latter is a piano-dominated ode to the joys of skinny-dipping in Atlanta, and to paraphrase a friend of this reviewer's, possibly the finest ode to the joys of skinny-dipping in Atlanta, albeit the only one in recorded existence. *Find the River*, then, is a rousing postscript, uncompromising as its predecessors and as such, was obviously an utter failure upon its release as a single. No matter. That *Automatic for the People* sold (and indeed continues to sell) enough copies to fund a South American banana republic cocaine oligarchy for several decades to come is more than likely comfort enough for its creators. The rest of us proletariats have this uncommonly brave, strange lp to savour.

About the Author

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