chronic contenders

Chronic Town, R.E.M. on IRS Records

At last, a band from Athens, Georgia, that doesn't sound like the B-52's! R.E.M. have escaped the twangy surf guitar and cheesy electric organ sounds of their neighbors by utilizing three-part harmonies and cross-picked twelve-string guitar figures, producing music reminiscent of a bizarre hybrid of the Byrds and New Order.

R.E.M. announced their presence with the release of their 1981 single "Radio Free Europe"/"Sitting Still," which introduced the band's formula — Michael Stipe's sharp, yearning vocals cutting through Peter Buck's ringing guitar chords; all backed by the rhythmic punch of drummer Bill Berry and bassist Mike Mills. Unfortunately, the single has proven to be the band's peak because their new EP, Chronic Town (recorded ten months ago), presents little more than a set of variations on a theme from "Radio Free Europe." Only two cuts capture the energy of the single. "A Carnival of Sorts (Boxsters)" builds from choppy bass-guitar interplay into a "Radio"-esque climax, while "Gardening at Night" pushes Stipe's voice into its top octave; the sitar that is added in the bridge provides the perfect (if not Beatles-derived) spacey coloration.

The remaining tunes don't fare nearly as well, although an honorable mention should go to "Wolves, Lower," which attempts to break formula with some pretty harmonies and a wonderful guitar/voice solo. Both of the remaining, "Stumble" and "1,000,000" (mercifully placed on the same side), lack enough ideas to sustain their length, despite Pete Buck's attempts to provide lots of new guitar fills.

Despite R.E.M.'s failure to meet its early promise, a reprieve is in order instead of a death sentence. At their recent Metro appearance they played with a vengence, filling the old tunes with new life and springing a completely new set on the eager audience.

The remedy for R.E.M.'s musical somnambulism on record seems to be getting them into the studio while the muse is still hot — they deserve a better classification than "a band that never made a good record." R.E.M. may be a sleeper, but they're perfectly capable of jarring you wide awake — I hope they get the chance.

David Shaw

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The Bread and Puppet Theater will perform The Thunderstorm of the Youngest Child at 8:30pm tonight, Saturday, and Sunday at the Longwood Theater. Tickets are available at the door for $5. On Saturday and Sunday there will also be a matinee at 3:30pm. There will be three more performances next week as well.

The Student Center Cinema presents The Goodbye Girl, Sunday, 6:30 & 9, 26-100.

This weekend, LSC presents:

Breaking Away, Friday, 7 & 9:30, 26-100.

Videodrome (Classic), Friday, 7:30, 10-250.

Atlantic City, Saturday, 7 & 9:30, 26-100.

The Goodbye Girl, Sunday, 6:30 & 9, 26-100.

The Boston Conservatory Theatre Company presents Tennessee Williams' Camino Real tonight and tomorrow night at 8pm. The theater is at 31 Hemetway Street. Admission is $5.50.

Off the Wall Cinema presents King of Cartoons: Tex Avery at various times throughout the weekend. Located at 13 Pearl Street in Cambridge, the Cinema has more information available at 358-5678.

The Student Center Cinema's Midnite Movie: The Turning Point, Saturday night at midnight on the second floor of the Student Center.