R.E.M.'s Monster captures a range of emotions

MONSTER
R.E.M.
Warner Bros.

By John Jacobs

R.E.M.'s new album Monster is a pleasant and surprising departure from their recent work in Automatic For the People and Out of Time. Monster captures a wide range of emotions, without ever resorting to the self-indulgent and depressed mood that so deflated those albums.

For the most part, Monster is fun, forward, and risible. The songs with characteristic serious themes, such as loss of freedom ("King of Comedy") and the confusion of sex ("Strange Currencies," "Crush with Eyeliner"), aren't swept away by pessimism. Even the most serious song on the album, "Let Me In," about Kurt Cobain's suicide, is surrounded by a wistful kind of hope.

Throughout the album, an elusive and reserved character persists, as if the members of R.E.M. weren't quite comfortable with the idea of having a really good time. For example, "What's the Frequency, Kenneth?" and "King of Comedy," about Kurt Cobain's suicide, is surrounded by a wistful kind of hope.

The lyrics are slightly more transparent than on previous albums. This, too, has some R.E.M. fans up in arms, as they're accustomed to vague and mysterious lyrics. Perhaps this is why the vocals are turned down on many songs, making the words slightly less decipherable. This is no substitution for good approach to lyrics.

The vocals are turned down on many songs, making the words slightly less decipherable. Perhaps the band's chenlistry isn't what it used to be. Monster, with its distorted power-chord riffing and feedback noises, has provoked accusations that R.E.M. has hopped on the "grunge" bandwagon. Automatic fans, used to acoustic guitar and violins, are only saying this because they lost the rug beneath them.

There's really nothing to fear, once you realize that these "grunge" conventions are well-suited to the songs on the album. Should R.E.M. have found some other medium? Why reinvent the wheel? They should have reshaped it, though — Monster sounds over-produced. "Grunge" might have carried the album much further if guitarist Peter Buck had absorbed it first.

Montsor is enjoyable and intriguing, even outside of the context of such an interesting band as R.E.M. I rate the album four stars out of five.