

# FALL GLORY DAYS

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# R.E.M.'s social document

by Nik Rattan

The album *Document* establishes R.E.M. as one of rock's most important social commentators. Unlike many groups with relevant messages to offer, R.E.M. is unpretentious in presenting us with a mature and alarmingly omnipresent critique of society. Musically, *Document* continues with the "nebulous" sound that is characteristic of R.E.M., although last year's *Lifes Rich Pageant* had an uncharacteristi-

cally refined sound. Returning to the murky, shadowy sound of their earlier works, *Document* differs from them in having a harder rock undercurrent. In essence, the listener floats in an aural ocean of pleasing harmonies, lush melodies, and jangling guitar hooks.

The single and video release, "The One I Love", is a melodic, albeit melancholy, calling out to a past love. It is perhaps the only commercial offering on the

album, but the song grasps the listener with its sincerity as lead singer-songwriter Michael Stipe recognizes the song itself to be a "simple prop to occupy my time". This love song proves that R.E.M. can hold their own in the realm of romance without compromising their unique sound and integrity.

The rest of the album is essentially a departure into the mind of Stipe and his omnibus perception of our complex world. The album's title, and especially the cover showing a double image of Stipe filming his surroundings from many vantage points, are indicative of the scope this album is attempting.

"Finest Worksong" offers a glimpse into the creative process involved in writing a song. "Take your instinct by the reins, you're better best to rearrange" is indicative of the necessity of harnessing a creative urge, defining it, and letting it evolve by reworking it. The music is inspired by the song's message, coming across as indulgent and improvisational.

The social documentary continues with "Exhuming McCarthy", an apt reflection on the right-wing conservatism and capitalism prevalent in North American society. The song's title shows society's reversion to McCarthyism, the reckless accusation of the so-called subversive element. Stipe's cynicism is apparent throughout, as his denouncing of capitalism indicates "Sharpening stones, walking on coals to improve your business acumen . . . By jingo — Buy America." "It's a sign of the times" to be "loyal to the bank of America" continues in this cynical vein. An actual excerpt from a speech by McCarthy illustrates the present ludicrous situation — "Have you left no sense of decency" — proving once again the social climate is "Enemy sided-enemy met".

The haunting melody "Oddfellow Local" is a bleak look at the subculture of the desolate and the homeless, but is also saying certain of these individuals have something important to say. "Where he sits upon the wall to preach . . . pearls of wisdom fell from his mouth . . . wash off the blood, wash off the rum."

*Document's* serious stance takes a breather with "Strange", a personal reflection on live performance and how the artists' anticipation of an imminent concert adds to the uniqueness of its presentation. "There's something strange going on tonight . . . Michael's nervous and the lights are bright . . . there's something going on that wasn't here before."

The intellectual clout and musical originality of R.E.M. puts to shame most of the m.o.r.-oriented music groups. Get a copy of *Document* and let the real world unfold before your ears.

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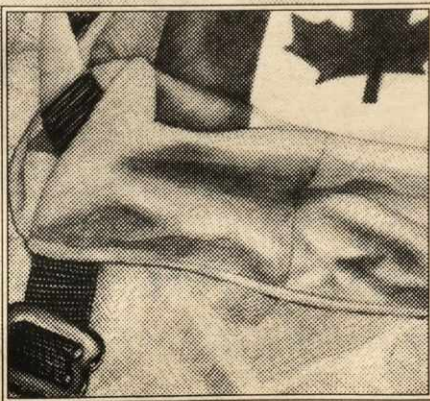
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