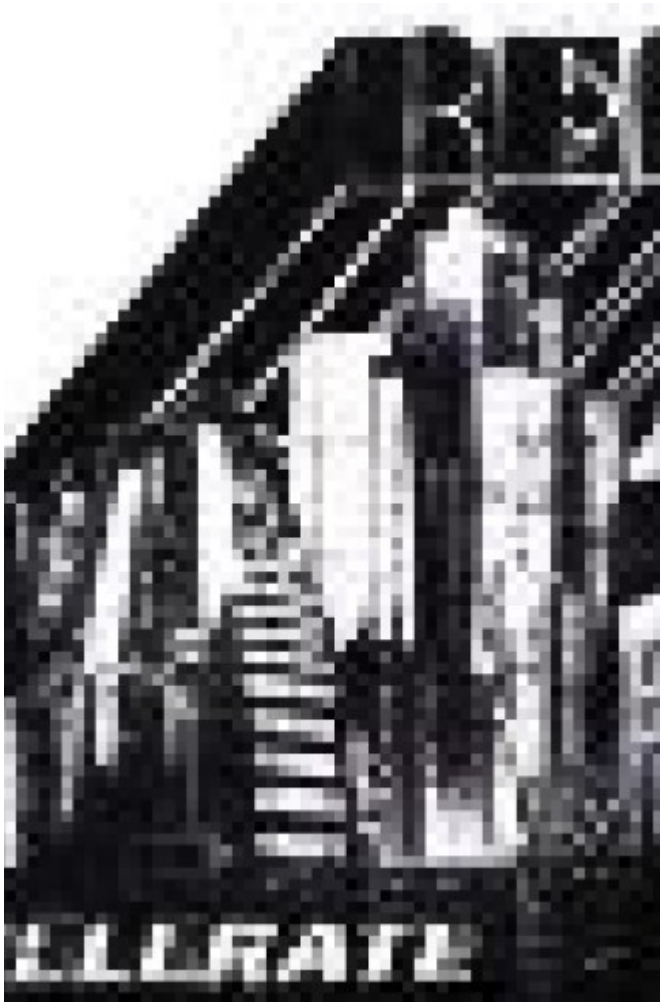


On Music

By [Louis R. Carlozo](#) in the [July 1, 2008](#) issue

In Review



Accelerate

R.E.M.

Warner Bros.



This I Know: Ageless Hymns of Faith

Jeff Bjorck

Pure Piano



Liverpool 8

Ringo Starr

Capitol



He Is Risen! Favorite Hymns of the Easter Season

William Neil

MSR Classics



It's Not Easy

Joanie Pallatto
Southport



No Ceiling

Haale
Channel A

The band R.E.M. is easy to love—and hate. In the 1980s the group from Athens, Georgia, defined college and indie rock. It grafted locomotive Rickenbacker guitar and bass onto the no-nonsense beats of Bill Berry and the barely audible but alluring vocals of Michael Stipe. *Automatic for the People* (1992) ranks as one of the most beautiful, plaintive pop albums of its time. *Document* (1987) remains a quirky gem. Yet there is also *Monster* (1994), an embarrassing exhibit of a group trying to sound younger and hipper than it is, as well as Stipe's barely forgivable slam of the Beatles as "elevator music." (To which the witty Ringo Starr replied: "If it weren't for the Beatles, Michael Stipe would still be taking the stairs.")

With the band's latest album, *Accelerate* (Warner Bros.), the three remaining core members—Stipe, guitarist Peter Buck and bassist Mike Mills—seem poised to grab the spotlight again. And Stipe isn't shy about trumpeting the new CD's religious and spiritual themes. Stipe told NPR that he comes from a long line of Methodist ministers. But can Stipe and company sing of such matters without sounding like they've raided a movie studio in search of new props?

R.E.M.'s sound is hard, clean and compact, thanks to producer and former punk musician Jacknife Lee (whose credits include the excellent *Black and White Album* by Swedish popsters the Hives). Buck's guitar dominates the mixes, with pleasing results. R.E.M. makes powerful use of its righteous indignation to slam Christians whom Stipe sees as taking God's name in vain, as in "Man-Sized Wreath," in which he sings: "I am not deceived by pomp and odious conceit / but a tearful hymn to tug the heart / and a man-sized wreath, oww." Stipe cites 17th-century English poet and priest George Herbert in "Living Well Is the Best Revenge" and puts himself in the shoes of a Hurricane Katrina survivor in "If the Storm Doesn't Kill Me, the Government Will": "Belief has not failed me / and so I am put to the test."

"Until the Day Is Done" features an opening-line salvo aimed at the Iraq war: "The battle's been lost, the war is not won." When Stipe sings "the country's in ruins," it's impossible to say which nation he means. And "providence blinked, facing the son" could refer to a broken savior or a certain failed president.

Accelerate might not equal the very best of R.E.M.'s catalog, but its mix of memorable melodies, smart arrangements and evocative lyrics marks an assured comeback for the band.

Other CDs to note:

The dancing, Vince Guaraldi-like stride that Jeff Bjorck gently grafts onto "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing" evokes sunrise in a dew-laden meadow. The rest of this CD—the latest in his "Pure Piano" series—displays a similar spirit of artistry and reverence. "It Is Well with My Soul" begins with the brushstrokes of single piano keys. If you're looking for a lullaby, "Jesus Loves Me" finds salve in the instrument's upper register, its 88 seconds enveloping the listener in swaddling cloth.

Many Beatles fans didn't give Ringo Starr much of a chance to succeed when the Beatles split in 1970, but he is still making records at 67. Here he employs Eurythmics cofounder Dave Stewart as producer, and the results, if not spectacular,

are at least true to his pop-loving heart. On the title track, framed by strings and acoustic guitar, Ringo sings an autobiographical tale of rising from the slums: "I always followed my heart / And I never missed a beat." The jazzy, brush-beat shuffle "Harry's Song" tips its hat to Beatle buddy Harry Nilsson, and "Give It a Try" implores listeners to keep a chin up in the best Ringo style.

This hour-long album recorded at the National Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C., brings back vigorous memories of Sunday morning worship in high-church style. Crisply produced by Gregory K. Squires, it shows William Neil utilizing standard and antiphonal pipes on the opening "Hosanna, Loud Hosanna." "O Sacred Head, Now Wounded" (part of a "Holy Week" suite) creeps up on the listener as if spied from a shady corner of Gethsemane. And with sure cadence and a zest recalling E. Power Biggs, Neil records a grand "Jesus Christ Is Risen Today."

A fixture on Chicago's jazz scene, Joanie Pallatto brings soul-pop stylings to languid, mid-tempo grooves. She creates a tropical feel on "Violets Are Blue," which drizzles classical guitar atop chimes and swelling electric piano. The bossa nova title track features jazz guitar standout Fareed Haque, as Pallatto salutes exotic locales from Corcovado to Barcelona. It's a sharp contrast to the primal drums, piano bass and scraped strings that frame the fierce, defiant "Get to Heaven": "I'm going to wrack my brain to get to heaven/ I'll say to God, 'I'll bet you don't know who I am.'"

Haale (pronounced HALL-ay) is a Bronx-born singer of Iranian descent who's garnered praise from the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. She twists exotic, distorted rock guitar and dusky vocals to suggest a Middle Eastern version of Celtic songstress Loreena McKennitt. The hand-drum-driven "Middle of Fire" and the title track demand attention. Heavy as these tracks get, Haale sings as if suspended in predawn mist. For a real taste of the far away, try "Ay Dar Shekasteh," sung in Persian and celebrating divine-human love.