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Little America: R.E.M., Howard Finster, and the Southern "Outsider Art" Aesthetic

The critical and popular ascent of the Athens, Georgia-based rock band R.E.M. during the 1980s is remarkable not only for its pioneering use of alternative media such as college radio and fanzines but also because of (or despite) the band's early allegiance to subaltern Southern culture. From 1982 to1986, R.E.M. developed their unique visual presentation in collaboration with several self-taught and "visionary" artists, most prominently Reverend Howard Finster of Summerville, Georgia. The result was an aesthetic that subverted prevailing music and image trends in the Eighties as well as the Old South iconography associated with the previous generation of Southern rock. The use of perceived "outsider art" from the South helped shape R.E.M.'s image through album covers, videos and promotional materials, as a created notion of outsider authenticity fostered the twinned rise of the band and Southern art in the popular consciousness.

R.E.M. was formed in 1980 while all four members were attending the University of Georgia in Athens, a school better known for Southeastern Conference football than as a haven for artists. Significantly, all four members of the band – singer Michael Stipe, guitarist Peter Buck, bassist Mike Mills and drummer Bill Berry – were born outside of Georgia and moved to the state when their families were relocated by the military or industry, a result of the inroads business and education had made in the Sun Belt in the 1970s. Attending high school in Macon, Georgia, Mills and Berry had played in bands that parlayed versions of Top Forty hits as well as self-identified "Southern rock," the solo-driven, bluesy hard rock epitomized by

the Allman Brothers Band, Lynyrd Skynyrd, and Black Oak Arkansas. Buck and art-student Stipe were relatively inexperienced musicians, more inspired by the "do-it-yourself" credo of punk rock than the technical flash and pomposity of self-styled rock virtuosos. Continuing the example of bands like The Clash and Talking Heads, whose lineups mixed adept musicians with raw beginners who crossed over from a visual-art background, R.E.M.'s supple rhythm section anchored the exuberant, untutored approach of its guitarist and singer.

As bootlegs of early live performances attest, R.E.M. developed quickly from an energetic, though sometimes retro-leaning, bar band to creators of a singular, compelling sound. Much of this had to do with their adaptation of rock's tonal tradition. Michael Stipe's vocals were often indecipherable, at times seeming wordless or blending into the instrumental mix. Peter Buck's trebly guitar regularly ceded the role of lead instrument to the voice or the bass and abandoned standard rock "power chords" for deftly picked arpeggios that created a second, fragmented melody line (much as the banjo operates in bluegrass). The result was a striking and, given the industry standard of sterile production values and simplistic pop "hooks," unclassifiable sound. For many listeners, the nearest point of reference was the 1960s folk-rock of The Byrds and Fairport Convention. In fact, Michael Stipe, who represented himself early on in R.E.M.'s career as a naïve outsider to popular culture and rock music in particular, for a brief time described the band's sound as "folk," less as a throwback to the 1960s and more as a declaration of artistic integrity (Gray 441). If R.E.M. did not perform traditional folk-rock, they did parlay a style that insisted on being defined outside the parameters of mainstream rock; they are more responsible than anyone for the emergence of "alternative" as both a descriptive category and a catch-all marketing term.

R.E.M.'s rise depended on a developing alternative-music infrastructure centered in college towns. Formerly, most college-radio stations were low-wattage with no set format; increased funding and professional training in communications departments meant better equipment and more powerful range. By the early Eighties, listeners in many parts of the country no longer had to be physically on campus to hear college radio. Exercising the kind of self-conscious, class-influenced taste Pierre Bourdieu analyzes in his book *Distinction*, listeners alienated from the mainstream could choose

college radio as an alternative to commercial rock stations. Without advertisers to appease, college stations could pursue a more adventurous range of music at a time when commercial stations' programming had become stagnant due in equal part to chain ownership and the safe "corporate rock" that defined the Eighties pop mainstream. Along with its growing influence, however, college media had to take on some of the dimensions of its for-profit adversary. Nationally distributed tipsheets like *College Music Journal* featured Top Ten lists that resulted in increasingly standardized playlists among college stations. In turn, small independent record stores in college towns could partly compensate for the spotty distribution of records on independent labels by consulting these playlists and stocking the most popular titles. Though such efficiency arguably squelched free-form broadcasting and the exposure of more "fringe" artists, R.E.M. was a prime beneficiary of this radio-retail nexus. Signed to I.R.S. Records, a subsidiary of the major label A&M, they enjoyed relatively good distribution and focused their early touring on college towns, especially in the South and the Eastern Seaboard.

College radio gave R.E.M. a "cult" presence that years' worth of playing on the club circuit could only hope to accomplish while also allowing them to shy away from any mainstream attention the band deemed intrusive. One result of this selective exposure was that R.E.M. could be a viable band with national visibility and still live in Athens. Previously, Southern bands that played cutting-edge music, like fellow Athenians The B-52's or North Carolina's The dB's, relocated to New York as soon as they had a demo tape in hand, in hopes of catching the attention of major record companies and the influential critics and club owners centered in Manhattan. Because of the support of college radio, R.E.M. was far less dependent on such opinion leaders. In a 1985 essay for the rock magazine *Spin*, Mike Mills championed the region as a breeding ground for alternative music, free from the expectations of the industry:

> You're out of the way here. You can do things as a band without all the pressure. When we started out, we were terrible, just like every band that starts out. But we had a whole year just to play around the South and get better – and to learn to deal with adversity, playing at pizza parlors and biker bars and gay discos…But in New York or Lon-

> don, the minute you start playing – ZANG! There's the local rock magazine reviewing your show and making all these judgments about you. (407)

Mills's modest assessment of his band's early abilities (echoing the band's self-effacing comments during their premiere television appearances in New York in 1983 on *Late Night with David Letterman* and the children's show *Livewire*) helped create a perception of Athens as a supportive arts community, outside the critical establishment, that prized idiosyncrasy and a distinct identity over standard rock showmanship and hype. Instantly, the band's decision to remain in a relatively small town became a major part of their emerging mystique.

Until about 1986, folk-art motifs signified this mystique on posters, promotional photographs and fan-club materials. These relics of the old Hollywood star system were subtly and sometimes whimsically transformed into vehicles for Southern vernacular art, sometimes executed by local artists, sometimes by the band members themselves. Tour programs, t-shirts and souvenir posters often featured Michael Stipe's roughhewn drawings and typography. Rather than push more product, the liner notes to their 1986 album *Life's Rich Pageant* touted "The Cricket Machine," an off-the-beaten-path roadside attraction in Athens that promised potential visitors the chance to "initiate predator-prey interaction exactly as it happens in the wild." In a lighthearted manner, such unlikely advertisements not only reified the notion of R.E.M. as knowing Southern eccentrics but also drew attention to their changing status within the larger marketplace. With their success, R.E.M.'s image shifted from a provincial "garage band" to hip, young connoisseurs of the South at its best. In interviews they held forth on everything from local folk art to the best barbecue joints in Georgia. When pressed on their influences, they would cite writers like Flannery O'Connor and Carson McCullers alongside their postpunk musical contemporaries, articulating a separation between themselves and the stereotypical image of a rock band, especially from the supposedly benighted South. Their enthusiasm for an offbeat South may smack of an overdetermined self-consciousness, but their choice of regional role model is noteworthy: nothing could be further removed from the hypermacho postures of 1970s Southern rock than a knowledgeable discussion of Eudora Welty.

R.E.M.'s mid-Eighties breakthrough coincided with the revival of Southern rock after a decade-long slumber. Surviving members of Lynyrd Skynyrd and the Allman Brothers Band reformed their respective groups to popular acclaim. (Three members of Lynyrd Skynyrd, including lead vocalist and songwriter Ronnie Van Zant, had perished in a 1977 plane crash, while the Allmans' Duane Allman and Berry Oakley died in separate motorcycle accidents.) Hank Williams, Jr. mounted rowdy, sold-out arena shows that bridged the gap between hardcore country and blues-based rock. In 1985, Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers released a concept album of sorts, *Southern Accents*, in which the Gainesville, Florida band (who had found their fortune in glitzy Los Angeles) reclaimed their white working-class Southern roots, or at least a marketable simulacrum. In the song "Rebels," Petty proudly sings of being "born a rebel/ down in Dixie/ on a sunny morning," cursing the "blue-bellied devils" of the North to construct a link between the mythology of the Confederacy and the modern-day "redneck." *Southern Accents* was followed by a national tour, dubbed "Pack Up the Plantation," that featured a massive Confederate flag as a stage backdrop; Mike Mills was among the musicians who took Petty to task in interviews for his blithe, ahistorical adoption of such charged, exclusionary symbolism. Though Petty soon abandoned his "Rebel" persona, his foray into exaggerated, belligerent white "Southernness" illustrated both the multiplicity and the pull of the regional clichés that R.E.M. and like-minded musicians and artists maneuvered around in finding their own niche.

To be fair, this niche was a safely apolitical one. Though R.E.M. became known later in their career as a band that embraced "causes" both local and global, their initial "New South" orientation allowed them to slough off many of the burdens of Southern history and maintain an artistic detachment from current issues of race and class. Individually and collectively, the members of R.E.M. employed the relative privileges of their time and place: the thriving Sun Belt economy, proximity to cosmopolitan cities like Atlanta, the relatively relaxed admissions policies of state colleges and the support of college radio and the independent press. The phrase "college rock" became (often pejorative) rock-critic shorthand to describe R.E.M. and other non-mainstream bands that attracted mainly middle-class white audiences and held aspirations (or pretensions) to art. Though many of these bands were mischaracterized as simple R.E.M. clones, a wave of

alternative-rock bands followed R.E.M.'s lead, rooted themselves in the South and incorporated a bricolage of Southern art and literature motifs from their very names on down to their songs, album art and videos, each transmitting their own brand of postmodern regionalism. A partial list would include R.E.M.'s Athens, Georgia contemporaries Pylon and Love Tractor, The dB's and Let's Active (both from Winston-Salem, North Carolina), Jason and the Scorchers (Nashville, Tennessee), Drivin' n Cryin' (Atlanta, Georgia), Guadalcanal Diary (Marietta, Georgia), The Connells (Raleigh, North Carolina), Velvet Elvis (Lexington, Kentucky) and The Reivers (a.k.a. Zeitgeist, Austin, Texas). [1] The dual imprint of William Faulkner and Elvis Presley on this cohort is hardly coincidental, as the two native sons represented the boundaries of seriousness and camp, respectively, within which groups of this era operated.[2]

R.E.M.'s advocacy of a New South sensibility with roots in Faulkneresque ambivalence could take a defensive tone. "The Southerner is the terminal outsider," Peter Buck testily told an interviewer. "In movies and on TV, the Southerners are always hicks. They're idiots. Everyone always tends to look at you as if it's a miracle that you're a normal person from the South" (Fletcher 123). Buck's regional angst – especially remarkable for a transplanted Southerner – recalls in many ways Quentin Compson's anguished response to the needling of his Harvard roommate in Faulkner's *Absalom!, Absalom!,* climaxing in his final protestation regarding the South, "I don't hate it!" Significantly, Buck perceives "everyone" as media-savvy Northerners. Like Faulkner and Presley before them, R.E.M. as Southerners had to carefully represent themselves and their craft to a wider public that rarely understood intra-region distinctions and avoid all appearances of being provincial "hicks" without entirely renouncing their origins.

R.E.M.'s iconoclastic re-vision of the South was introduced to the marketplace on the cover of their 1983 debut album *Murmur*, which features a landscape choked with kudzu. Kudzu, a vine with amazing tenacity and a hydra-like ability to grow, was introduced in the South in 1883, as well-meaning agronomists proffered the weed for soil replenishment and as cheap feed for cattle, only to find it covering up anything in its path within a couple of days, killing other vegetation by strangling their roots (Alderman and Alderman 50). By mid-century, kudzu was just as likely to be found climbing up a telephone pole as the walls of an abandoned plantation house,

with no discrimination between the industry of the New South and the traditions of the Old. As Derek and Donna Alderman observe in their essay "A Tale of Two Weeds," kudzu is regarded as both an eyesore and a perverse source of pride in the contemporary South – it has lent its name to residential streets, a comic strip, a number of bars and restaurants, hair salons, even a few landscaping companies (58-59). Emblematic of deep roots and strength, kudzu has grown to be, to borrow one of William Faulkner's favorite words, an "indefatigable" presence in the South, with its cultural associations virtually unknown above the Mason-Dixon line. R.E.M.'s usage of the image was a brilliant one (and conveniently apolitical): both anti-modern and contemporary, pastoral and menacing, with just a touch of the Southern gothic.[3] It was also an in-joke of sorts: those who had been raised in the South recognized the obnoxious vine and its insidious nature. To this day, many non-Southern R.E.M. fans believe they are looking at haystacks. Just as kudzu's central root could uncannily find water in the most arid climate, R.E.M. seemed eerily adept in delving into the deepest unconscious of rock music and deriving something both familiar and new.

Since his stint in the University of Georgia's art department, Michael Stipe had been a regular visitor to Reverend Howard Finster's Paradise Garden in Summerville, Georgia, a handmade folk-art installation that drew on a lifetime of Finster's ecstatic religious visions.[4] Finster's travels as an itinerant preacher in the 1940s, documented in photographs, appear now like a living corollary to a Flannery O'Connor story, as he "customized" his ramshackle cars by painting religious exhortations on the side, outfitting the roof with a loudspeaker through which he would announce his arrival and mission in each new town (Bradshaw 47). Settling down on a swampy plot of land in rural Georgia and working with virtually any medium at hand, Finster juxtaposed found objects with painted Christian imagery and large handpainted signs, featuring biblical quotations or small sermons, and arranged them in a maze-like pattern that covered about four acres. By the Seventies, a magnificent five-story "Folk Art Chapel" towered over the garden and housed hundreds of Finster's creations. The Reverend modestly explained that his ambitious life's work, which immediately drew attention from folk-art experts, was a continuation of his Baptist ministry. In Paradise Garden's words and images, art critic John Maizels found "the

Southern evangelical oral tradition transformed into image and painted word" (117). Robert Bishop, the former director of the Museum of American Folk Art, described it as "probably the most exciting, beautiful, satisfying work of art I have ever seen" (Peacock 52). Once considered a neighborhood blight (as welcomed, one would imagine, as an outbreak of kudzu), Paradise Garden became an unlikely destination for tourists and art collectors alike after Finster was featured in *Life* and *Esquire* and made an appearance on Johnny Carson's *Tonight Show*. "Always willing to spend time with visitors to Paradise Garden and to sell them a reasonably priced piece of art, " Reverend Finster clearly enjoyed his newfound attention and would enthusiastically greet his public (Maizels 117).

Like R.E.M., much of Finster's appeal (both in and out of the South) came from his grounding in the region and impressive ability to conceive and cultivate a unique vision far removed from the mainstream. Literally planted in the Georgia soil, Paradise Garden could not be uprooted or transplanted to a sterile museum setting. As Finster rarely traveled, patrons and critics had to make the pilgrimage to see Finster's art in its own context and on his own terms. Just as rock writers routinely began profiles of R.E.M. with fanciful descriptions of rural Georgia, some of Finster's most sophisticated reviewers gave in to temptation and rendered Paradise Garden and its creator with broad strokes of local color.

This representation of a "hidden South" rich with found art carried over into *Murmur*'s accompanying music video for the single "Radio Free Europe," shot in Paradise Garden in May 1983. In *Performing Rites*, Simon Frith notes that music videos are "less interesting as mini-films, as visual narratives, than as ideal types of performances" (224). The "Radio Free Europe" video, then, seems to be the "ideal performance" through which the fledging band wished to introduce itself to the wider, MTV-influenced audience. At a time when videos were crucial in how image was constructed, R.E.M. rooted themselves in a South that still held myth and mystery.

Though seemingly incongruent, the visual wonders of Paradise Garden and the sound of "Radio Free Europe" share a certain sympathy when merged. The video's storyline, such as it is (amid rolling fields of kudzu, the band wanders through Paradise Garden in slow motion to deliver a mysterious box to Finster) bordered on the pretentious, but was enigmatic enough

to stand out from the mini-movie pastiches that were the standard of so-called concept videos.[5] Admittedly, the video represents Paradise Garden very selectively; few of Finster's evangelistic works made the final cut. At times the Garden looks less like the manmade second Eden he envisioned and more like an eccentric's meticulously arranged junkyard. Yet the video documents many of the Garden's more captivating works: a towering collection of discarded bicycle parts, the cement Serpent Mound, and the small outbuilding in which he worked, called the Bible House.[6] The contrasting shots of kudzu, endless and static by the frenetic standard of early-Eighties rock videos, subtly subvert the medium's overstimulating imagery, reliance on flashy special effects, and pandering to an audience with short attention spans. Befitting its location, the video seems to ignore time and move at its own deliberate, willful pace.

Perhaps not surprisingly, I.R.S. Records re-cut the video with energetic concert footage and layers of the aforementioned special effects, as if to assure impressionable young viewers that this was indeed a music video and not a strange, out-of-sync home movie broadcast by accident. In the song, Michael Stipe's "murmured" vocals work on the listener in much the same way as the figures appear in folk art, at once indistinct and familiar, blurring the lines between representational and nonrepresentational. The slow-motion non-action of the video engages in tension with the song's uptempo "new-wave" beat, as sight and sound match up only by coincidence.

It might seem that Reverend Finster would have been hesitant, if not outright opposed, to his visionary environment being appropriated as a setting for a rock video. But, in much the same way that he had justified his *Tonight Show* appearance, Finster assured interviewers that the "Radio Free Europe" video helped spread his evangelistic message and was quick to praise R.E.M. as "good Southern boys," especially Michael Stipe, who occasionally assisted the artist or performed handiwork in the Garden. This unlikely alliance was continued when Stipe and Finster collaborated on the cover of R.E.M.'s second album *Reckoning*, with its depiction of a snake-like figure. Again, Finster's message is somewhat restrained; if the snake-like figure on the album is meant to represent the serpent of Eden (a common Finster motif), it is an extraordinarily subtle rendering.[7] Despite the suggestive double meaning of the title *Reckoning* – a title that alluded to

both the Southern vernacular and the language of predestination and suggested unspeakable rapture and hellish punishment simultaneously – Finster's signature biblical verses are absent; the hand-painted text consists mainly of the album's song titles. If *Reckoning*'s cover did not offer the same shock of Southern recognition as the kudzu cover of *Murmur*, it did fix the association between the region's grassroots art and R.E.M.'s music. The album's closing song, "Little America," reverberates as an oblique take on their relentless touring through the South's bourgeoning college-rock circuit and a lament over the homogenization of the region, as Stipe sings of "Another Greenville/Another Magic Mart" on the horizon. The song's refrain, "Jefferson, I think we're lost" sums up the band's dislocation from the overconfidence and entitlements associated with rock stardom (the "Jefferson" in this case most likely being the band's then-manager/van driver Jefferson Holt, not the Southern-born agrarian third president of the United States—though listeners can hear more than one meaning). With the critical and popular success of *Reckoning* and their connection with an acclaimed folk artist, R.E.M. were now situated more as connoisseurs and advocates of self-taught Southern invention than outsiders-in-training.

The band promoted *Reckoning* with another video shot in a Southern folk-art environment, this time in Georgia artist Ruben Miller's Whirligig Farm, a wide expanse of land marked by handmade windmills constructed from found objects. The twenty-minute clip, titled *Left of Reckoning* and directed by Stipe's University of Georgia art professor James Herbert, features the band once again wandering through an art installation; the band admire Miller's handiwork and make their own whirligigs as side one of the *Reckoning* album plays with no discernible relation with the onscreen "action." The non-stop visual experimentation is somewhat jarring within the music-video medium, suggesting what a Stan Brakhage-directed episode of *The Monkees* might look like. While many of Herbert's film-manipulation techniques are skillfully deployed, including the alternation of vari-speed motion with still frames, and use of color saturation and double exposures, the film as a whole seems labored, especially since handmade vernacular art is one of its subjects. Ultimately, this self-conscious attempt to recapture the aura of the "Radio Free Europe" video received relatively little notice.[8]

The constructed idea of R.E.M. revealing folk-art Utopias hidden in the Deep South was articulated again in the 1987 documentary *Athens, Ga.: Inside/Out*. Influenced by Errol Morris's irony-rich portrayal of an offbeat Southern community in 1982's *Vernon, Florida*, California-based filmmakers Tony Gayton and Bill Cody attempted to capture the Athens mystique through its music as well as its local artists, poets and quirky scene denizens. Profiled in context with R.E.M. and a succession of younger, rawer bands, Reverend Finster nearly steals the show, relating his ecstatic visions and duetting with Flat Duo Jets' rockabilly wild child Dexter Romweber on "When the Saints Go Marching In." Acting as the film's commentator and default expert on folk art, Michael Stipe frames a visit to African American folk artist Reverend John Ruth with an onscreen appraisal of Ruth's untrained art and raw gospel singing.

Athens, Ga.'s documentation of R.E.M.'s emergent art connoisseurship takes an interesting turn in a sequence shot in Peter Buck's home, as he leads the camera to his "Elvis Bathroom." After pointing out the bathroom's purposefully tacky accoutrements – a black-velvet painting of "The King" purchased at a roadside stand and postcards from Graceland adorn the walls – Buck reveals an original Howard Finster wooden figure titled "Elvis at Three," based on the oft-reproduced first photograph of Elvis. By presenting it in harmony with mass-produced souvenirs rather than in contrasting juxtaposition, Buck's deadpan assessment of it as "a beautiful work of art" is ambiguous, suggesting his appreciation for Finster's handiwork is qualified by Elvis's status as a junk-culture icon, well established a decade after his passing. (Significantly, Buck, notorious as a walking encyclopedia of rock lore, never mentions Elvis's brilliance as a singer or performer.) Though Finster had adopted Elvis as a secular (and marketable) adjunct to his visionary art objects, Elvis's image, depicted in almost any form, had become a readymade signifier for both "white-trash" bad taste and gilded excess. While "Elvis at Three" gives us a more pious representation of Presley, how and where Buck displays the work reshapes it within a wholly different context. In this instance it becomes hard to ignore the relative differences in sensibilities, beliefs and privileges between Finster and his younger, hipper and more affluent audience. Buck comes close to upsetting the balance of mutual respect between R.E.M. and Finster by co-opting the intended meaning of the piece.

That same year, a *Rolling Stone* feature on rock-and-roll road trips highlighted both R.E.M's first performance space in Athens (a decaying church) and Paradise Garden, glibly characterizing the latter as "a folk-art frenzy" (Barth and Wilkins 108). By this point, band and artist had become yoked together as tourist-worthy Southern curiosities. Though they remained on good terms, R.E.M. and Finster never worked together again. However, Finster was not yet done with rock and roll; until his death in 2001, Finster made Elvis one of his most common motifs, to the delight of those who came to his art through R.E.M. and the *Athens, Ga.: Inside Out* film as well as those looking for elements of camp in his work.[9] In 1985, he accepted another commission to paint an album cover, this time from the New York band Talking Heads. The work raised his visibility even further and placed him in esteemed modern-art company, as an earlier Talking Heads cover was designed by Robert Rauschenberg.

A rock band trying to attain cultural capital by aligning themselves with art is not in itself remarkable, and given that rock and roll is still arguably idiosyncratic, vernacular music, perhaps the analogous use of "eccentric" folk art does not come as a total shock. But alliances between art and rock before R.E.M. had been mainly in the field of pop art, as demonstrated by Andy Warhol's visually arresting album covers for the Velvet Underground and the Rolling Stones, Richard Hamilton's iconic/ironic work for The Beatles and Roxy Music and the Jamie Reid cut-and-paste designs that gave the Sex Pistols, and by extension Seventies British punk, a visual identity. Folk-art collectors and rock audiences seem far removed in their tastes, discrimination and attitudes. Yet R.E.M. and Howard Finster triggered similar affective responses in their respective interpretive communities. Rodger Lyle Brown, a chronicler of the Athens music and art scene, noted that while R.E.M.'s postmodern music and Finster's evangelistic art seemed poles apart in approach, nevertheless both utilized "scrap…from the cultural junk pile" to connect with audiences (204). Stipe's early lyrics stitched together Southern vernacular sayings (as in "Sitting Still" and "Can't Get There From Here"), allusions to children's' books ("Seven Chinese Brothers"), even a verbatim reading of the liner notes of an obscure gospel album ("Voice of Harold"). In early performances, R.E.M. punctuated their setlists with ragged versions of (best-)forgotten AM-radio hits like Johnny Rivers's "Secret Agent Man" and Zager and Evans's execrable "In

the Year 2525." Similarly, Finster's visions were brought down to earth with the novel "recycling" of pop-culture detritus like abandoned bicycles, broken televisions and discarded soda bottles. Such trawls through the "junk pile" underlined their alienation from mainstream pop culture and reaffirmed both the grounding and the relative exoticism of the band and the artist.

By the early Eighties, Finster's creations were lumped in with the increasingly visible (and lucrative) field of "outsider art," but in truth his work was only remotely similar. Derived from Jean Dubufett's definition/construction of *art brut* in 1945, "outsider art" is not a generic term for all forms of marginalized art, but rather a term used to identify works by those with little to no contact with society. By virtue of his outgoing personality as well as the missionary work he carried out in his art, Finster welcomed both a lay audience and the wider marketplace into his self-created world. Out of the mainstream, yes. Disarming in its directness and fundamental Christian orientation, yes. But Finster was no tortured artist and only an "outsider" to the most insular of critics. To R.E.M., Finster was neither mentor nor mascot. Though never really part of an artistic cohort (as R.E.M. was in the early Eighties), Finster and his work in Paradise Garden had connections with other self-taught artists and, consciously or not, reinforced a regional aesthetic. As Charles Reagan Wilson notes in *Judgment and Grace in Dixie*, Southern visionary artists commonly evoke divine grace through "[n]atural images and portrayals of the beauty and wonder of the garden" (82). Like Finster, African American folk artists like Minnie Evans do not sacrifice earthly standards of beauty in their depictions of holy fire; Wilson concludes, "even her images inspired by the Book of Revelations lack an apocalyptic, cataclysmic tone" (82). Both Finster and Evans eschewed the shock value of fire-and-brimstone evangelism (which could easily be dismissed by non-believing observers as Bible Belt kitsch) to exhibit a gentler evangelism that reaches beyond the church grounds (Wilson 83).

Though it had its share of disturbing images (depictions of Hell were a specialty), Finster's otherworldly art was comforting to a jaded set of urban art collectors. Even his most extreme visions were tempered with smiling faces and written descriptions offering advice on repentance and forgiveness. Far removed from Boschean nightmare, Howard Finster's paintings of Hell are actually pretty charming, taken as a whole. Not only were his works more tactile than, say, performance art or most "live" conceptual

pieces, but they also carried an aura of simplicity and guilelessness, the obverse of the irony-soaked art of the decade. Finster, in his method and manners, sat diametrically opposed from other "art superstars" of the Eighties. Jenny Holzer's machine art and Laurie Anderson's performances brought issues of power relations and gender to the fore in their works. The multilayered self-portraits of Cindy Sherman exemplified the postmodern desire to blur or even obliterate the lines between artist, subject and audience. Jean-Michael Basquiat's iconography (Aunt Jemimas and the like) tweaked the liberal guilt of many of his patrons. Postmodern art routinely confounded traditional art appreciation through its collapsing of high art and mass culture. Most disturbing to the collecting establishment, video and performance art could not be bought, sold and amassed quite in the same manner as paintings and sculptures. True products of the age of mechanical reproduction, neither their appearance nor their "aura" (to use Walter Benjamin's term) could be adequately reconstructed. With home-video technology, video art appeared too easily reproducible from a technical standpoint to give it much value, while performance art had obvious limitations in its reproduction.

By contrast, the works of Howard Finster looked like quaint relics from a kinder, more earnest time. Finster never imposed an ironic distance between himself and his art nor hid behind a media-made persona. Despite Finster's obvious sincerity in his mission, the fundamental Christian themes in his work pleased collectors looking for "naïve art" more often than it challenged them. Many times, Finster's evangelism was interpreted (and marketed) as an aspect of his perceived primitivism, another quirk every bit as childlike and endearing as the occasional misspellings in his texts. For many Eighties art denizens, seemingly exhausted by the ambiguity of the times, his brand of folk art was a welcome retreat from the outer limits of conceptual art; created in good faith, it was representational, accessible and never assumed to know more than the patron. Art collectors could exert the superior intelligence needed for connoisseurship by imagining the artist as an untrained, provincial "outsider." Additionally, they could rationalize their accumulation of unschooled art as an act of social work, reinforcing the lofty self-image of the collector as patron and benefactor.

Finster's regionalism was an equally value-loaded issue in the art world. While most critics contextualized the Eighties' minor folk-art boom as a

continuation of Dubuffet's concepts or as an anomaly within an overspeculative art marketplace, some cried fraud. Interviewed for a 1987 review of Southern vernacular artists, John Michael Vlach, then director of the folklife program at George Washington University, spared no words:

> Howard Finster's a wacko. Howard Finster and these others are eccentric to any normal image Southerners hold about themselves, but it's good enough for Northerners, for Yankees who always look at all Southerners as crackers anyway…Folk art is any funny looking painting, by some guy who is slightly off the edge, a guy who talks to God and God moves his hand across the canvas. (Hitt 54-57)

Such a judgment both implicates and problematizes R.E.M.'s working relationship with Finster. While R.E.M.'s interest in Finster was mainly aesthetic, there was valuable cultural capital to be gained by bringing Finster, whose work was deemed both eccentric and collector-worthy, into their fold. Yet the members of R.E.M. do not fit neatly into Vlach's schema: recall Peter Buck's desire to shed the "hick" stereotype and be presumed "normal" by judgmental Northerners in context with his ironic positioning of an original Finster piece in his home. However ambivalent (or naïve) Buck and his bandmates might have been in their role as untrained art connoisseurs, and however "funny looking" the cover of *Reckoning* appeared to mid-Eighties rock consumers, few could seriously accuse R.E.M. of exploiting an already established artist. Ultimately, it must be remembered that in the decade of Michael Jackson, Madonna, and Ozzy Osbourne, there were more dependable ways of grabbing the mass public's attention than patronizing the work of a rural visionary artist in his late sixties.

Such issues demonstrate that in pop music sincerity and authenticity are tricky subjects; the field is full of anti-establishment multi-millionaires, and those who have parlayed their eccentricities and anti-social postures to the top. R.E.M. evaded much of the authenticity debate by not playing in an established subgenre. Standing in opposition to Southern rock allowed R.E.M. to move forward with a minimum of cultural baggage. Unlike contemporary blues or punk bands, R.E.M., with its oblique take on post-Beatles pop, did not perform within a strictly formalist genre defined by an unwritten orthodoxy and policed by dedicated fans and critics. It helped their integrity immensely to hew to rock's archetypal guitar-bass-drums lineup,

even if they employed this instrumentation in novel ways. This neo-traditionalism was welcomed by many American rock critics alienated by punk, preoccupied with attacking the supposed artificiality of so-called "synthesizer bands" from England and who had yet to form a critical framework from which to assess the emerging field of hip-hop. Despite stylistic trademarks like the indecipherable lyrics and the jangling guitars, R.E.M. could be linked by approach and/or sensibility to such touchstone figures (and critics' darlings) as The Beatles, Bob Dylan and The Velvet Underground, without being accused of slavish imitation or stigmatized as novices.

On the cusp of mass popularity, critical debates about R.E.M.'s authenticity focused less on the music and more on its audience. Descriptions like "college rock" and "alternative rock" foregrounded the consumption of the music by a fanbase who were largely detached from the pop mainstream yet relatively affluent and well educated. By contrast, in the art world terms like "outsider," "naïve," "vernacular" and "folk art" describe (and often implicitly judge) the creation, and not its end user. Rock criticism's master narrative is highly invested in a confrontation with and eventual surmounting of the status quo: examples include Elvis's emergence in the Fifties and the stylish and stylistic revolts of punk and hip-hop. If rock music, especially from the South, has been largely Dionysian – from the wild abandon of Little Richard and Jerry Lee Lewis to the hard-livin', hard-drinkin' clichés of Seventies Southern rock – R.E.M. forged a more Apollonian sound; "dreamy," "wistful" and "sublime" became pet adjectives of partisan writers. To the consternation of R.E.M.'s more "rockist" detractors, there was virtually nothing about the band at the time that suggested rebellion or disenfranchisement; for a rock group, R.E.M. was (and remains) almost embarrassingly articulate and conscientious.[10] Even their championing of Howard Finster had less to do with his status as a marginalized figure than an art-for-art's-sake appreciation expressed through an informal sponsorship that responded to Finster's generosity of spirit as much as his art. Consequently, R.E.M. advanced a notion of the South as a creatively distinct and vital region that nurtured and inspired artists of varying ages, approaches and backgrounds.

Perhaps R.E.M.'s most self-consciously "arty" record, 1985's *Fables of the Reconstruction* continued this thread, adapting a distinctly Southern mode of storytelling without the explicit references to the postbellum period

that the title might suggest. Rejecting any generic pronouncements on the region, songs like "Old Man Kensey" and "Wendell Gee" were character sketches of eccentric Southern outsiders, reminiscent of the quietly suffering figure Sherwood Anderson labeled "the grotesque" in *Winesburg, Ohio* and who became transplanted in three generations of Southern fiction from Faulkner to O'Connor to Cormac McCarthy. The song "Life and How to Live It" took its title from a strange, self-published book of cryptic ramblings by an Athens resident named Brivs Mekis. After Mekis's death, all the copies of his book were found boxed and sealed in one of his closets; apparently he had no interest in distributing his own book, a peculiarity reminiscent of the posthumous and disturbing discoveries that unearthed hermetic artist Henry Darger's work (Gray 277). The lyrics to "Maps and Legends" have commonly been interpreted as an oblique tribute to Reverend Finster, perhaps signaling their amicable parting (Gray 276).

Fables also marked a physical separation of R.E.M. from the South. While their previously released work had been completed in North Carolina at Charlotte's Reflection Studios (where televangelists Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker regularly recorded) and producer Mitch Easter's Drive-In Studio (so named because it was housed in his parents' garage), their third album was recorded in London, and supported with a major world tour, commencing an exhausting album-tour cycle that did not subside until late1989.

Fables of the Reconstruction and 1986's *Life's Rich Pageant* indicated an endpoint – perhaps a necessary one – for R.E.M.'s sponsorship of Southern folk art. In the case of *Pageant*, the back-cover illustration by local artist Juanita Rogers appears more naïve and one-dimensional in its context than anything Finster had created for R.E.M. As a sign of the times, the reproduction of Rogers's work lost the clarity it would have had on a traditional 12 1/4" by 12 1/4" album sleeve; instead, it had to jostle for space on the CD liner's 5" by 5" canvas with a UPC symbol. Such a change illustrates that if R.E.M. had taken their connoisseurship much further, every subsequent record could have been ten musical portraits of rural obsessives rather than ten freestanding songs, with each album cover introducing a new folk artist informally competing with Howard Finster. The continued cultivation of an "outsider" Southern sensibility would probably have been limiting to overall artistic development. Moreover, the alternative music press and radio that had grown reciprocally with R.E.M. was

defining itself even more narrowly, and often through crude dialectics – independent labels vs. majors, alternative vs. mainstream – largely shutting out R.E.M. by virtue of its improbable commercial success. Up to that point, Peter Buck referred to his band as being "the edge of the unacceptable stuff," a harbinger of mass-marketed yet "alternative" rock that straddled the line between popular and underground, and blurred arbitrary genre distinctions along the way.

What George Lipsitz writes about the East Los Angeles *conjunto*-rock band Los Lobos applies equally well to their Athens contemporaries: "Their definitive contours come from the conscious choices made by organic intellectuals attempting to address the anguish of invisibility by bringing their own cultural traditions into the mainstream of mass culture" (151). As organic intellectuals emerging from the latest iteration of the New South, R.E.M. navigated around musical clichés and pieced together a regionally informed aesthetic as an antidote to rootless, homogenized Eighties pop culture. Howard Finster's grand-scale folk art proved to be a perfect complement to the band's ambitious endeavors. While R.E.M. distanced themselves from Finster's evangelistic message, they did elevate the man and his art as a vital symbol of dogged individualism, creativity and the "do-it-yourself" ethic. After R.E.M., "Southern rock" became a dated, meaningless term, as the influence of self-taught Southern art widened the parameters for what rock music from the South could express, reference and celebrate. In the place of regional clichés, a receptive generation was granted a point of entrance to an aesthetic that prized originality and independence.

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NOTES

[1] Drivin'n Cryin' provided one of the few links between traditional Southern rock and its alternative counterpart. The band opened several Southern tours for R.E.M. in the late Eighties, while Peter Buck and Mike Mills made guest appearances on their albums. Through the Nineties, however, Drivin' n Cryin' shifted gears and became headliners on the revitalized Southern-rock tour circuit.

[2] Faulkner's shadow was cast over R.E.M. as well; *The Sound and the Fury* was a working title for what became *Fables of the Reconstruction* and eventually the name of a widely circulated bootleg album.

[3] Performing at New York City's Peppermint Lounge as a surprise guest at a 1984 Halloween-night show, opening for The Cramps, a Cleveland-via-New York band who drew heavily from 1950s Southern rockabilly and trash culture, R.E.M. dubbed themselves "It Crawled from the South," a name in line with both The Cramps' horror-movie aesthetic and a kudzu-like "creepiness" (Gray 194).

[4] As ownership of Finster's art installation has changed, so has its appellation, vacillating between "Paradise Garden" and "Paradise Gardens." The more common singular form is used throughout this essay.

[5] Even the band had mixed feelings about the final cut of "Radio Free Europe"; Bill Berry, the most straightforward interviewee in R.E.M., simply called it "pretty boring" (Black 79). All the R.E.M. videos discussed in this essay are compiled in the 2006 retrospective DVD *When the Light Is Mine*.

[6] Sadly, the "Radio Free Europe" video doubles as a visual time capsule of Paradise Garden(s) at its most beautiful. Finster's failing health through the 1990s and his willingness to sell the garden's constituent pieces and buildings to collectors left the space a shadow of its former self by 2001 (Bradshaw 137). Paradise Garden(s) endures in book form as well; see Robert Peacock, et al. *Paradise Garden* (1996) and Thelma Finster Bradshaw's *Howard Finster: The Early Years* (2001).

[7] Intriguingly, Finster created an alternate cover image, incorporating photographs of the band (Black 95). Characteristically, R.E.M. turned down this more commercially attuned approach; until 2004's *Around the Sun*, R.E.M. was one of the few major rock bands that had never appeared on their own albums' front covers.

[8] James Herbert applied many of these same painterly techniques to R.E.M. live footage for the 1985 videos "Life and How to Live It" and "Feeling Gravity's Pull." When R.E.M. "graduated" from college venues to arenas, they utilized Herbert's experimental films as widescreen visual backdrops, creating a synesthesia closer in spirit to Andy Warhol's Exploding Plastic Inevitable "happenings" with the Velvet Underground in the 1960s than the concerts of any other band touring sports coliseums in the late Eighties.

[9] Not all critics were receptive to Finster's choice of subjects and ultimate execution, however. In his book *Dead Elvis*, Greil Marcus curtly dismisses Finster's renderings of Presley as "tramp art" (151).

[10] This conscientiousness encompasses the band's advocacy for the preservation of historic buildings in Athens, their appearance on a youth-literacy poster for the American Library Association, and years of hands-on support for a number of environmental and human-rights organizations. The band helped deflate their own do-gooder image in a 2001 episode of *The Simpsons*.

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