

Pretty Evasion

Talking Sex With R.E.M.'s Michael Stipe

BY ADAM BLOCK

W

eird. Enigmatic. Mysterious. Private. Those are the adjectives that writers regularly resort to in

describing Michael Stipe. The 31-year-old lead singer of R.E.M. has long intrigued the band's gay fans with his sturdy, forlorn, androgynous good looks and his elusive, even homo-suggestive, lyrics. The group's videos, which Stipe oversees, have been studded with queer imagery.

Good works complement the great performances: R.E.M. brought the AIDS quilt to their hometown, Athens, Ga., where Stipe saw a friend's panel added to the memorial. Quietly, outside the band,

Stipe has done even more. With his nonprofit film company, C-100, he produced a safe-sex public service announcement that

opens with a stripped boy straining against a glass barrier and ends with shots of androgynous couples embracing. C-100 sponsored a dancer at New York's AIDS Dance-a-thon and also brought the documentary *The Times of Harvey Milk* to Athens for a benefit screening to fund a gay hot line.

Now, ten years after the self-release of R.E.M.'s first single, the band has a Top 10 hit with *Out of Time*, the group's latest album. This success certainly hasn't spoiled Stipe's fashion sense: He arrives for the interview unshaven, wearing a sports coat with a ripped lining and a wrinkled pin-striped shirt buttoned to the neck. He looks as if he'd just been released from San Quentin. The band's

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Singer Michael Stipe
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bassist, Mike Mills, sits a few feet away, letting Stipe field most of the questions.

Sipping a soda, Stipe muses over his failure to develop a classic macho image. "I've always thought that the images popular culture puts forth as the 'perfect man' and 'perfect woman' are a little too strictly defined," he says. "It would be great if all of those guys on C-SPAN had to address Congress in big Baptist women's hairdos."

"I think that's one reason a lot of the songs that I write that have to do with relationships have been gender-unspecific. I liked the idea that anyone could sing the song and apply it to themselves. It seems to be a kind of leveling device—allowing people to draw what they need from the music."

What about the song "Pretty Persuasion," with the lyric "He's got pretty persuasion./ She's got pretty persuasion./ Goddamn my confusion"? Is it wishful thinking to hear that lyric as an expression of queer desire?

"I guess the word *persuasion* has a sexual connotation," he admits almost coyly.

Did Stipe ever think he might be gay? "Yeah," he nods softly, "but I'm not. How do I say this without sounding stupid? I like the ambiguity that is inherent in the band and in me as a public figure, and that stems from something that is very real—that is an ambiguity I carry in myself."

"I don't feel really comfortable talking about my sexual persuasion publicly," Stipe says. "The fact that a lot of the songs are gender-unspecific and that my image as a pop singer is not your typical Robert Plant with my fist punching the air—that, to me,

is enough of a statement for anyone. It's a much broader statement than picking one of those labels and saying, 'This is what I am.' I like the idea that people are sexual without having to attach the prefixes."

Stipe taps his knee and continues, a slight hint of warning entering his voice. "There are degrees of privacy that you give up as a public figure, and I think there is a line that needs to be drawn. I would draw that line at whether or not I have a refrigerator in my house. At one point I did mention to a reporter that I didn't have a refrigerator, and that [remark] followed me around forever. But we'll leave it up in the air for now as to whether I do or don't," he grins.

The analogy is so outlandish, he begins to chuckle. If his reply this afternoon sounds cagey and guarded, it's a lot more helpful than the one he's given reporters in the past who have asked if he is gay. "When I've been asked before," Stipe admits, "I've told them to kiss my ass."

Talk turns to all of the "pretty male persuasion" in the band's videos: the stripped, toned, alabaster soldier in "Orange Crush"; the tributes to Caravaggio, Mishima, and the French gay team Pierre and Gilles in "Losing My Religion"; and the collage of shirtless males slamming hammers and clasping hands in "Favorite Worksong," which Stipe directed himself.

"I definitely see those [homoerotic] elements," Stipe admits. "With 'Orange Crush' I didn't know that [director] Matt [Mahurin] was going to make it that homoerotic, but there is a lot going on in those videos. To me the goal is to put in as many different elements as you can so that there is not that feeling of watching another video of all white men with giant guitars and one woman dancing by herself. That's not something that I want to watch—much less perform in."

But is that a really effective statement against homophobia? Would speaking out more directly and forcefully stand to alienate R.E.M.'s fans?

"I'm hoping to speak to the people we reach in a way that is as compassionate and all-accepting as possible," Stipe explains. "I think that through the videos and the songs, we are doing that. Maybe that is put-



R.E.M.

Top 10 success and still down-home

ting ambiguity into a style by itself—but by not automatically categorizing everything, we're helping to build bridges between people, and I think that is a significant thing to do."

When talk turns to Queer Nation actions—gay "shop-ins" and "kiss-ins" at nominally straight places—Mills shakes his head and interjects, "I think that may be counterproductive. I think I'm as fairly tolerant a straight person as you're going to see, but I have no desire to see two men kiss in public. And I think there are a lot of people less tolerant than me who are only going to be put off by that."

When it is explained that the point of Queer Nation is to celebrate sexual diversity and to fight the forces that keep such diversity invisible, Stipe nods like a peacemaker. "It sounds real positive," he says. "I just want to stress that a lot of people who are different in one way or another tend to just focus on their difference and don't want to see the whole broad spectrum of people who are different and a dangerous intolerance [of them]."

Discussing R.E.M.'s current single, "Losing My Religion," Stipe muses, "It's a classic obsession song: It's about someone who has these feelings for someone, and they're not able to express them. They don't know if they've 'said too much' or 'haven't said enough.'"

Does Stipe think he's "said too much" in this interview? He knits his brow, then candidly smiles and says, "No." ▼