



Lead singer Michael Stipe at Walter Brown Arena Wednesday

GLOBE STAFF PHOTO BY JOHN TLUMACKI

## R.E.M. gets better with success

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R.E.M. - With the Three O'Clock, at Boston University's Walter Brown Arena, Wednesday night.

By Brett Milano  
Special to the Globe

If anyone was worried about success spoiling R.E.M., forget it. With the success of their third album, the band is moving up to the arena circuit: The days are gone when local fans could catch them at the Rat or the Paradise. But the band's creativity hasn't let up since it emerged from Athens, Ga., three years ago.

Wednesday night's show had the frenzy of the early club gigs, the gentle lifts of last year's Orpheum show, and more variety than either.

The only drawback was the arena itself: With its low-grade acoustics, the Walter Brown Arena isn't a great place for a rock concert. Up front the sound was passable, but toward the rear of the hall, Michael Stipe's voice got lost in a wall of echoes. Thanks to the hall sound, R.E.M. sounded even murkier than they ever have on record.

### MUSIC REVIEW

But the music had an atmosphere of its own. Some of the peaks were familiar from earlier tours - the Eastern lilt of "7 Chinese Brothers," the country jangle of "Don't Go Back to Rockville," the backwoods anthem of "Little America." But the new songs (from the recent "Fables of the Reconstruction/Reconstruction of the Fables") album were the most surprising, because they usually surpassed the recorded versions.

"Maps and Legends" had a gentler, folkish feel, with the band pulling off some clever three-part harmonies. The recent hit "Can't Get There From Here" became even funkier, with Stipe howling through the choruses, and "Life and How to Live It," a pleasant rocker on record, became a full-tilt release onstage. Here especially, guitarist Peter Buck was a model of restraint. When one note would suit the mood but 10 would ruin it, he always made the right choice.

Bassist Mike Mills and drum-

mer Bill Berry remain a solid rhythm section, but most of the drama comes from the contrast of singer Stipe with guitarist Buck. It's hard to imagine an odder couple: Stipe the thoughtful introvert, clinging to his micstand and often facing the drums instead of the audience; and Buck the whirling, outgoing rocker. The night's opener, "Feeling Gravity's Pull," made a sublime match of Stipe's airy melody and Buck's gritty chords.

As usual, there were a handful of unrecorded tunes: "Hyena," first done on last year's tour, was the fiercest rocker, with Stipe breaking into manic laughter. "Fall On Me" went to the other extreme: The words were hard to catch, but it felt like a gentle love song. Surprise covers included a somber treatment of Creedence Clearwater Revival's "Have You Ever Seen the Rain"; and a Buck guitar workout on Link Wray's "Jack the Ripper."

Best of all was an encore raveup of the Bo Diddley/New York Dolls standard, "Pills." While R.E.M. are still convincing as rock 'n' roll mystics, they can also be

the friskiest party band in town.

The Three O'Clock were uneven in their opening set, but the peaks were high. With the right material, the band puts the freshness of '60s psychedelia into modern-flavored pop; with innocent charm added by helium-voiced singer Michael Quercia. Though the subtler numbers dragged, "Her Head's Revolving" is one of this year's great undiscovered pop songs.