



CONTENTS

UpFront

Features

FOLLOWING FRANZ KAFKA >>  
BY MARK SEAL

CONFESSIONS OF A VODKA COCKTAIL JUDGE >>  
BY BECCA HENSLEY

DON'T FENCE ME IN >>  
BY LORIE A. PARCH

ON A CLEAR DAY YOU CAN SEE FOREVER >>  
BY CHRIS WARREN



In Each Issue

VANTAGE POINT >>

EDITOR'S NOTE >>

AIR MAIL >>

MENSA QUIZ >>

CROSSWORD PUZZLE >>

SUDOKU >>

PUZZLE & QUIZ ANSWERS >>

SHAHIN TAKES OFF >>



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Old Adventures in Hi-fi

Remember when R.E.M. was great? A new collection of the band's early years will help jog your memory. By Kevin Raub

In a 33-year career as a music lover (12 of which I have been paid for my opinion on the matter), there have been only two times that a music video has stopped me in my tracks. The last time, it was Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit," in 1991. The first time was in 1986, when I saw "Fall on Me" by R.E.M. on MTV's *120 Minutes*. Unlike Nirvana, which came crashing through the television like a battle-ax-wielding tsunami of sound, "Fall on Me" was subtle and mysterious. The images were postindustrial mayhem. It was a working-class manifesto for emerging ecofriendly iconoclasts — and the band was nowhere to be found. I'd never seen or heard anything like it, but it seemed ... important.

Of course, those were the hair-metal days. Videos and album covers were basically a vehicle for a band's

hairdresser. I went to the record store and found the album *Lifes Rich Pageant*. More mystery ensued. What the title all about? Its cover featured a black-and-white shot of drummer Bill Berry (and a herd of buffalo), though he didn't look like any drummer I had ever seen, and since the cover was designed to look vaguely antique, I assumed the photo wasn't of him at all. Who was this strange, faceless band, and what kind of music was this? And what on earth was an R.E.M.? It was so foreign to me, I couldn't even bring myself to buy it.

Fast-forward 20 years, and there are few folks anywhere in the world who don't know what an R.E.M. is. Anyone who doesn't (along with those who do) should check out the band's latest anthology, *And I Feel Fine... The Best of the I.R.S. Years 1982–1987*, which, in a two-CD collector's edition, features 21 of the band's favorites as well as an extra disc of rarities, live recordings, alternative takes, and previously unreleased diamonds in the rough. It's a starting point, anyway, released to coincide with the band's induction into the Georgia Music Hall of Fame. That kind of fame is certainly not something I expected from the band — at least not back when I first picked up *Lifes Rich Pageant*. I even lived in Atlanta but had no idea the band was from Georgia.

By the time 1987 rolled around, I was still into Bon Jovi, although I had all but forgotten my curiosity about R.E.M. somewhere in the haze of transitioning from middle school to high school. Then I heard "The One I Love." The way in which singer Michael Stipe ushered in the chorus, "Fiiiiiiiire ..." had a precious yearning about it. I bought *Document*, the band's last effort for I.R.S. Records, and pretty much listened to it nonstop for two years.

There was still no band photo on the cover, though. (Didn't these guys have cool haircuts?) But every song on the album was captivating and unlike anything I had ever heard before. It was an awakening. I'm pretty sure I didn't listen to another hair band again until well into my adult life, when hearing Skid Row's "Youth Gone Wild" became kind of fun in a nostalgic way. Of course, we all know what happened next. R.E.M. exploded, thanks to *Document*. They left indie label I.R.S. Records and signed with a major label for something like \$80 million — the largest recording contract in history at the time.

I was off to college in Athens, Georgia, where the band had met, lived, and thrived. I shopped at the same record store (Wuxtry Records), drank at the same coffeehouse (Blue Sky), and even waited on both guitarist Peter Buck and bassist Mike Mills at a Mexican restaurant, Mexicali, on separate occasions. (I can neither confirm nor deny that credit card receipts were kept as autographed souvenirs.) Bertis Downs, the band's manager, shared office space with the music-promotion company with which I interned. I was in the thick of it.

The next 10 years were rich with highlights, though the armor was cracking. Albums like *Out of Time* and *Monster* were decked with classics, but they also revealed an occasional weakness in the band's bulletproof run ("Radio Song," for instance). Then Berry bailed, and things have never been the same. By that time, I was working in New York City at *Rolling Stone*, where running around with rock stars was the routine. As music journalists begin the slow journey to Jadedville, it's always the bands that were important to them when they were growing up that leave them star-struck when they cross paths with their heroes backstage or at record-label soirees. During my professional career, however, R.E.M. managed to avoid me.

As I listen now to the I.R.S. years, I miss those days. There is a dull pain in Stipe's vocals on songs like "Swan Swan H," a live version from the documentary *Athens, GA: Inside Out*, that — while not nearly as loud and brash as Kurt Cobain's — is somehow just as raw and incessant. It's so undeniably indie (and in 1986, nobody knew what that even meant). On the simultaneously released DVD companion to the compilation, *When the Light Is Mine... The Best of the I.R.S. Years 1982–1987 Video Collection*, the band stupifies a live British audience with a performance of "Radio Free Europe" in 1983; they stare motionless, unsure of what to do. Dance? Swing? Sway? Feel sorry? The band was just ahead of its time. I mean, Stipe was singing about insurgencies ("Begin the Begin") back when the U.S. and Iraq were allies.

During the I.R.S. years, most of the lyrics were indecipherable on a grand scale, adding to the ambiguity of it all. Who are they? What are they mumbling about? I never did figure it out, nor did I ever officially meet anyone in the band. Perhaps it was because I didn't know what they looked like. And, anyway, it was always the music that mattered. R.E.M. never had an image. They were always in the business of selling records, not posters, and still are to this day.

But I do know what they look like now. *And I Feel Fine ... The Best of the I.R.S. Years 1982–1987* is the first release in the band's catalog to feature a band photo on the cover.



Other Links





#### Meet José González

A voice as tender as that of José González is as rare as the lineage from which it was spawned. This half-Swedish, half-Argentine singer-songwriter was reared on bossa nova in Gothenburg, Sweden, a national dichotomy if there ever was one. The warm, passionate Argentines and the cold, distant Swedes are polar opposites on the cultural thermometer, leaving González with a sparse sound that is bogged down with Scandinavian melancholy yet oozes with the sexiness of the Latin classical guitar. Call it "Scandinova."



If you haven't heard of González, that wouldn't be a surprise just yet, but it soon will be. Not many others had, either, until a British-based Sony Bravia television commercial turned the track "Heartbeats" into an overnight sensation (though filmed in San Francisco, the commercial has not run in the United States). That led to intense word of mouth lauding his debut album, *Veneer* (Mute Records), in critical circles, and suddenly González became a sonic icon of simplicity. *Veneer* was entirely written, recorded, and produced by González and his nylon-stringed classical guitar, with the exception of the occasional appearance of a trumpet and the odd percussion here and there.

As a result, the starkness of *Veneer* is very Swedish, but the instrumentation is very Latin. "As a person, I'm pretty Swedish," says González, in a soft-spoken Latin accent. "But all the music that I listen to is a mixture of all kinds of styles, including the Spanish guitar. But if I had lived in Argentina, I wouldn't be playing this moody music."

González's parents fled Argentina in the '70s during a military dictatorship that routinely "disappeared" those who dabbled in politics (his parents were forward-thinking students at the time). They spent time in Brazil before making a new life in Sweden. The multiethnic stew turned out to be the perfect fodder for *Veneer's* musical melting pot.

But it almost didn't happen. González made a go at music several years back but had all but given up in favor of a PhD in biochemistry. Then his demo found its way to the right people at Swedish indie label Imperial Recordings; they convinced the tunesmith to dump the beakers for ballads.

If you listen closely to *Veneer*, there is a subtle anger that permeates the underbelly of the album, something that is no doubt reflective of González's transcontinental upbringing. "I don't feel the album is melancholy; the predominant feeling is *uncomfortable*," he says. "There's more anger than sadness. Many of the songs are about not settling down ... about moving on." — **K.R.**



#### Do It Yourself

**Ben Kweller has been a solo act for years, but never as much as he is on his great new album. By Mikael Wood**

"This is the best thing I've ever made," Ben Kweller says on the phone from his home in Brooklyn. "It's a mindblower." The 25-year-old singer-songwriter is exceedingly proud of his new CD, but that's not what's got him throwing out superlatives like they're going out of style. In fact, Kweller's talking about his son, Dorian, who was born last spring right about the time his dad finished recording *Ben Kweller* (ATO), his third full-length collection of catchy pop-rock tunes.

Inspired by the "really pristine '80s-era" sound of records like Tom Petty's *Full Moon Fever* and Bruce Springsteen's *Born in the U.S.A.*, Kweller made the self-titled disc with producer Gil Norton, who convinced Kweller to play all the instruments himself — a first for the young rocker, who's toured with the Strokes and Death Cab for Cutie. He'll spend the fall on the road supporting the album with his wife and baby in tow. The idea is to pack as much as possible into the next five years. "We don't really have to settle down until kindergarten," he says of his newly minted family. "That's lots of time to work."

**You recorded your last album, 2004's *On My Way*, live in the studio with your band. But you played all the instruments on the new one yourself. Was making *Ben Kweller* a more meticulous process?** Totally — and that's what I wanted it to be. When I made *On My Way*, I set out to record the band that I'd been touring with for the past year and a half. I wanted to document that four-piece; I didn't want to do any preproduction or work on the songs beforehand. I just came into the studio, and we'd play a song four times and pick the best take. And that's it. Maybe I'd sing a harmony or add a tambourine track. But for this one, I wanted to make something more anthemic and a little bigger-sounding, and that was a big leap for me. Drums were my first instrument, but I had never really recorded every instrument before. So working with somebody as experienced and as talented as Gil really gave me the confidence to pull it off. It would've been a lot different if it were just me in the studio with a friend engineering. I would've been in there for years trying to finish it.

**Norton is best known for working with bands like the Pixies and Foo Fighters. How'd you decide to hire him?** I sent demos to a bunch of producers and met with probably 12 or 13. It came down to two, and I picked Gil because we really hit it off. It was his idea for me to play all the instruments; he thought it would make such a special album. He'd never worked with a solo artist before — he'd only worked with bands. And he'd never worked one-on-one with anyone in the studio, so he was really excited about that idea.

**What about you? Did you dig it immediately?** Deep down, I really loved the idea, but there was a big problem with it because my best friend, Josh Lattanzi, who's been playing bass guitar with me for years, immediately came to my mind. I've had different guitar players and drummers, but Josh has really been a constant. So I told Gil, "It'd be really cool to play all the instruments, but Josh has to be on this record." And Gil was sympathetic to that and totally respected where I was coming from, but he also said, "This is one album in your career, and you're gonna make tons of albums." He really believes that you've gotta do whatever's best for the album. And if this batch of songs needed to be played by me and have my fingerprint on every instrument, then that's what needed to happen.

**There's more piano on the record than on your last few.** A lot of the songs were written on piano. I wanted it to have all the classic rock-and-roll instruments. But every song pretty much has piano and guitar happening together. It's hard for me to say that "Sundress" is a piano song and "I Don't Know Why" is a guitar song, because you can play 'em on any instrument. I'm trying to simplify my music, and I think that's a big goal for a lot of songwriters. The more you do it, the more you just wanna get to the real root of the subject. I think my music sounds easy to play, which is good. But I know that not just any guy could come up and do what I do.



**Monster Mash****The real Godzilla finally arrives. By Bryan Reesman**

When I was in kindergarten, I allegedly scared the other children in my class by imitating Godzilla, Gamera, and the other gargantuan monsters that routinely crushed Japan on the *Saturday Creature Double Feature*. I was simply having a good time imitating the disasters unfolding on television, which both mesmerized and frightened me. Recently, I was thinking about how Godzilla and his brethren do not possess the same kind of power to awe us that they did in the '60s and '70s — although they certainly scare up some fond personal memories. But then some good news arrived.

*Gojira* was coming!

When I found out that Sony/Classic Media was finally releasing a DVD double-disc set of *Gojira*, the original version of *Godzilla* before it was sliced and diced by its Hollywood distributor, I was enthralled. The original is far superior — the acting, story line, political subtext — than the shoddy dubbing and editing hack job of *Godzilla*, which deleted 40 minutes of original material and inserted 20 minutes of new footage with reporter/narrator Raymond Burr. Here is a chance for Americans to finally see that this was not just a monster movie that redefined the term *lizard breath* but a serious metaphor for the lethal weaponry of the nuclear age and a criticism of our atomic follies.

Following the release of the remastered *Gojira* (currently out on DVD), Sony/Classic Media plans to reissue six other films — including *Godzilla Raids Again* and *Mothra vs. Godzilla* (Mothra being everyone's favorite giant butterfly-moth hybrid), which are arriving in November — with both the American and original Japanese versions on single dual-layer DVDs. This is like the holy grail for *Godzilla* fans here, most of whom have never seen *Gojira* or any of the undubbed originals before. And now he can win over new converts.

Part of the problem with the perception of the Big G is that after the first couple of movies emerged in the '50s, the franchise began to degenerate steadily into safe kiddie fare. By the time *Godzilla vs. Megalon* emerged in the mid-'70s, the series had been completely neutered as *Godzilla* turned into mankind's buddy. But its gnarly resurrection in 1985 — plus subsequent series in the early '90s (the Heisei Series) and the '00s (the Millennium Series) with great effects-laden entries like *Godzilla vs. Megaguirus* (2000) and *Godzilla 2000* (1999) — transformed *Godzilla* from our savior back into the lean, mean (and, for these two films, green) fighting machine who topples over Japanese skyscrapers and rumbles with other giant rubber beasts. Even better, in the epic series's swan song, *Final Wars* (2004), 15 of the creatures in the then-50-year-old franchise returned to decimate urban centers across the globe. But, hey, it's our fault anyway for dropping bombs and tampering with Mother Nature, right?

It seems that, for a time, the idea of a destructive behemoth had lost its appeal or ability to frighten us. We became so obsessed with the human monsters lurking in our midst that we forgot how something larger and more devastating could befall us at any moment. A recent slew of disaster films playing on our fears of global warming, tsunamis, and giant meteor impacts has proven that man isn't the only thing that can harm us today. Mirroring recent world events, the concept of *Godzilla*, essentially the personification of a deadly nuke pummeling us into oblivion, is all too real again.

Welcome back to the A-list, G-Man, even if you're a dark omen for the world.

**Not Your Mother's CSI****Witness the frightening Dexter-ity of Michael C. Hall. By Ken Parish Perkins**

That Dexter Morgan really, *really* enjoys what he does — and what he does is kill people — you might suspect that Showtime has gone off the deep end in trying to out-HBO HBO. Mob boss Tony Soprano proved unrepentant lowlifes are people, too, not to mention a ratings draw. So his incarnation has emerged in various degrees on cable television — Michael Chiklis as the brutish cop on *The Shield*, Denis Leary as the troubled fireman on *Rescue Me*, Andre Braugher as the career criminal on *Thief* — where likability and redemption aren't mandated as character virtues.

Portrayed with icy precision and emotional depth by Michael C. Hall, whose performance on *Six Feet Under* was often like dipping into a weekly treasure chest, Dexter has the opportunity to be the most dark, complex, and awfully weird character on television. He's the kind of basket case that, if he landed on Dr. Melfi's couch on *The Sopranos*, would send the poor woman into early retirement.

*Dexter*, premiering on October 1, pushes the boundaries of viewer tastes and tolerance. Plucked from Jeff Lindsay's e-novel, *Darkly Dreaming Dexter*, Dexter is a forensic investigator for the Miami police who's so good, he's able to conceal his own crimes. That he's hunting down murderers who get away (evidence doesn't lie, but that doesn't keep good lawyers from getting the guilty off) makes for a vigilante we can root for. How he does it — well, that's another psychoanalytical story. Whether viewers will digest this weekly adventure of vengeance is another matter, of course. Showtime is banking on viewers following a protagonist who — unlike the more-civilized-in-comparison Tony Soprano — is clearly not suited to walk among us.

If the pilot is any indication, *Dexter* is the best new series in a new season of pretty good shows, even among commercial networks like NBC (see: *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip*, *Kidnapped*, *Friday Night Lights*), which is good news for Showtime. The network itself is looking for redemption or is at least trying to crawl out from under the large shadow of HBO. Granted, HBO has okayed a number of misses lately — surely you caught *Lucky Louie*, or if you're lucky, you didn't — but the HBO brand is so synonymous with "quality" television, hoodwinked viewers don't see *Lucky Louie* as bad so much as daring.

*Dexter*, on the other hand, isn't so much daring as it is honest, particularly in the writing and in Hall's multilayered portrayal. When we first meet Dexter, he's been doing this sort of thing for well over a decade. Part of his journey (and ours) is coming to terms with just who he is and *what* he is.

The series — produced by John Goldwyn (grandson of Hollywood legend Samuel Goldwyn), Sara Colleton, and Clyde Phillips — works hard to give viewers a road map to Dexter's soul (such that it is) by exploring, in flashbacks, the roots of his torturous ways. His father, a cop played by James Remar, recognized his son's disturbing behavior early and crafted Dexter to use his, well, *desires* for good, not evil.

"You can't help what happened to you," he tells young Dexter. "But you can make the best of it."

Because Dexter has had this "code" ingrained into him, he's as moral as we are — in his own reality, at least. "As long as you take situational ethics seriously," says Jeff Lindsay, author of the

Dexter novels. He has earned the right to do what he does, Lindsay adds, "because he follows the rules that he has learned to live by."

Hall is extraordinary, playing Dexter as an emotionless drone, though not completely void of humor. He even has a relationship with a woman (Julie Benz), albeit one as emotionally detached as he is. It's a tricky character, yet it's one Hall pulls off with ease.

"I saw him and went, 'Oh, my God, that's Dexter,'" says Lindsay, who initially wasn't convinced Hall was right for the part. "I mean, he absolutely nails it."

Given the subject matter, I'm not sure if that's good news for Hall. But it is for viewers.



### Via Chicago

Lost amid constant dispatches by the likes of *Star* magazine and *Us Weekly* from the set of *The Break-Up* was the fact that the film was a true labor of love for Vince Vaughn. Besides starring as tour guide Gary Grabowski — opposite Jennifer Aniston, as you may have heard — Vaughn also served as a producer and came up with the story. Given such a position of power, he made sure the film was peppered with some of his favorite things, including his parents (Vernon and Sharon), one of his best friends (his *Swingers* cohort Jon Favreau), and one of his favorite bands (the Old 97's, who appear in a concert scene).

But Vaughn's most beloved costar, perhaps, is the city in which *The Break-Up* is set: his hometown, Chicago. So it's not surprising that, with the film coming out from Universal Studios Home Entertainment on DVD on October 17, Vaughn has delved even deeper into his attraction to the Windy City. Though the disc includes the usual extras — making-of shorts, deleted scenes, outtakes, commentaries (one with Vaughn and Aniston, and another with director Peyton Reed), and so on — the real treat is *Three Brothers: A Tour of Chicago*. It's pretty much exactly what it sounds like, as Vaughn channels his onscreen character and guides viewers on a trip to some of the city's noteworthy locales.

Here are a few things I learned from taking Vaughn's virtual tour. Well, beyond the fact that he has a future as a tour guide, should he decide to give up on the Hollywood thing.

#### 1. Wrigley Field

The home of the Chicago Cubs is also the location of *The Break-Up*'s first scene, wherein Vaughn's and Aniston's characters meet and begin their inextricable slide toward the title of the movie. "By opening the movie here, it really celebrates it as a Chicago movie, which is very much a character in the story," says Jay Lavender, a writer and coproducer.

**Fun fact:** A home run has yet to strike the scoreboard in center field. Bill Nicholson (1948) and Roberto Clemente (1959) have come the closest.

#### 2. Skylark Bar

"It's a real neighborhood-type place," says Favreau, whose Johnny O. owns the bar in the film. Specifically, it's in the Pilsen neighborhood, which has long been a haven for the city's immigrant population, though increasing real estate values are starting to price them out.

**Act like a local:** The Skylark doesn't accept credit cards.

#### 3. Riviera Theatre

This is where Vaughn favorites the Old 97's perform in the film, and it's been a Chicago landmark since 1917, when it opened as a movie house and soon after became one of the first theaters to employ live music during silent features. Speaking of the 97's, they've (sort of) collaborated with Vaughn before: Their song "Time Bomb" appears in his 1998 film *Clay Pigeons*.

**Fun fact:** The Riviera's construction cost nearly twice as much as the building of Wrigley Field.

#### 4. Sushi Samba Rio

The voyeuristic of you out there may already be aware of this restaurant, which features a blend of Brazilian, Peruvian, and Japanese cuisine. Vaughn took Aniston here, just one stop on a tour of his favorite restaurants in the city.

**Act like a local:** If you see Vaughn and/or Aniston here, don't freak out. If you have to acknowledge their presence, momentary eye contact followed by a quick "what's up?" head nod will suffice. — **Zac Crain**



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