

Riddle Me This

Reckoning ÷ Crooked Rain Crooked Rain = Around the Sun?

By Jonathan Valania editmail@philadelphiaweekly.com

Twenty years ago—let’s just pause and think about that for a sec, 20years ago—R.E.M. released *Reckoning*. It was the much-anticipated sophomore release by the underground’s then-favorite sons of the South. The album made good on the kudzu-crusted promise of the band’s bewitching and ultimately confounding debut *Murmur*, radiating a murky but hopeful aura to an alt-world grown weary of punk’s safety-pinned doom and goth’s spider web of gloom.

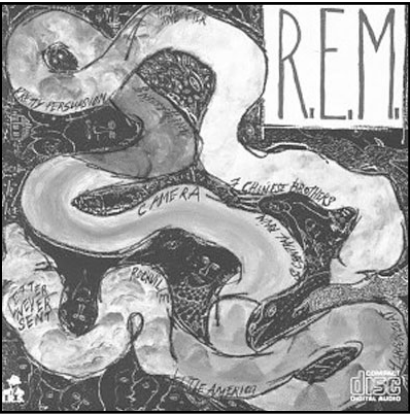
“I’m the sun and you can read,” they sang, or at least that’s what it sounded like—you never knew for sure back then, and that proved to be an awful lot of their charm. And in the jingle-jangle morning of Reagan’s America, we came following them.

Reckoning was full of secret maps and sepia-tinted legends, the autumnal ring of Rickenbacker guitars and the mesmerizing moon-river moan of Michael Stipe, delivering the promised fables of classic rock’s stylistic reconstruction to a post-punk world of shattered expectations, asymmetrical haircuts and skinny black pants.

Reckoning contained multitudes, alluding to the Byrds and the Velvet Underground, mining the backwoods mysticism of Southern folk art and wedding it to love-beaded mid-’60s folk rock to create a new atlas of blue-highway Americana. All across the nation, red-eyed sophomores clustered Indian-style around the dim glow of dorm-room lava lamps, separating seeds from stems, trying to decipher Stipe’s cryptic utterances.

Stephen Malkmus and Scott Kannberg were two of those stoned sophomores passing the peace pipe in the warm wigwam of early-’80s college radio. A photogenic pair of smart-alecky sun-kissed California boys turned indie rock hobbyists, Malkmus and Kannberg put down the soccer ball and picked up guitars, bestowing cryptic nicknames on each other—S.M. and Spiral Stairs, respectively—and trafficking in noise and ambiguity to fill the void of melody and hooks that were still some years in the offing.

Recording under the *nom de rock* Pavement, they released a pile of spazzy, dust-bunny-on-the-needle 7-inch singles, culminating in 1992’s *Slanted and Enchanted*, a bewitching but ultimately confounding debut that resonated with lo-fi crackle, hiss and pretty pop, not to mention jigsaw-puzzle visions of summer



babes, fruit-covered nails and Loretta’s scars. *Slanted and Enchanted* made Pavement the toast of indieland, and the rock literati soon dubbed its boyish members—with their precisely wrinkled shirt tails, stoner smirks and deep-well knowledge of rock-snob ephemera—alt-rock’s most elegant and eligible bachelors.

In 1994—having switched coasts, trading suburban California sun for miles and miles of New York style—Pavement released *Crooked Rain Crooked Rain*, the much-anticipated sophomore LP by the underground’s then-favorite sons of the city.

Shockingly tuneful and self-assured, *Crooked Rain* contained multitudes, alluding to the Fall and R.E.M., mining the majesty of rock and cutting it with irony, enigma and slacker ennui to create a new covenant for a Lollapalooza nation growing increasingly weary of the macho gigantism of grunge’s vein-popping flannel angst.

“Songs mean a lot when songs are bought, and so are you,” Malkmus sang. All across the nation, red-eyed sophomores clustered Indian-style around the dim glow of dorm-room lava lamps, separating seeds from stems, trying to decipher Malkmus’ cryptic utterances.

Fast-forward to 2004. Pavement has long since disbanded into thir-



tysomething adulthood, elusive solo careers (or Korea, if you prefer) and horse-race handicapping. Matador has begun releasing 10th-anniversary bonus-track reissue editions of Pavement’s early canon. Following 2002’s *Slanted* reissue comes the snazzy *Crooked Rain* version 2.0, complete with all the attendant B-sides of the era and 25 unreleased tracks of beer-soaked basement jams, high-guy odes to *Smile*-era Beach Boys and the Jesus and Mary Chain, cool demo takes of *Crooked* tunes and embryonic versions of songs that would wow on *Wowee Zowee*, the album that came after.

Ten years later not one drop of *Crooked Rain*’s hook-filled charm

has evaporated. The elbows thrown at Stone Temple Pilots and Smashing Pumpkins, which raised hackles back in the day when the indie-vs.-major-labels debate had the suicidal intensity of a jihad, now seem as harmless as the Pavement boys always insisted. I mean, really: Billy Corgan? Scott Weiland? Like I could really. Give a. Fuck.

And “Range Life,” the rollicking country rocker from which those aforementioned elbows were thrown, emerges as Pavement’s defining moment, a reminder of a time when Malkmus’ obfuscating snark and grad-student sarcasm burned off like morning fog to reveal a shining path of sincerity. That’s foxy to me—is it foxy to you?

Included in those *Crooked Rain* bonus tracks is a B-side ode to R.E.M. called “Unseen Power of the Picket Fence,” in which Malkmus intones the names of songs from *Reckoning*. There is also a squint-and-you-can-recognize-it pisstake of *Reckoning*’s twilight mood-piece “Camera.”

Thankfully, 20 years into an impressive career in rock, R.E.M. doesn’t sound nearly as shambolic, but the new *Around the Sun* finds the band sounding a little weary from the chores of enchantment. With the late-20th-century departure of charter drummer Bill Berry,



R.E.M. has carried on as a “three-legged dog,” as Stipe famously put it.

Aside from the intriguing foray into electronic ambience and *Pet Sounds* exotica of 1999’s post-Berry *Up*, you could be forgiven for concluding, based on the albums that came after—the flat-soda pop of 2001’s *Reveal* and the unrelentingly midtempo mopery of the just-out *Around the Sun*—that the dog don’t hunt so good anymore.

Once you get past the lovely, elegiac folk-pop of the album-opening “Leaving New York,” *Sun*’s first single, things bog down quickly. Much of the blame can be laid at the feet of Stipe, who lost his Delphic aura back in the late ’80s when he traded in-

cantation for clarity and you could actually make out what the hell he was singing.

I liked him better when he just pretended to be deep instead of actually trying to be. Too many songs on *Sun*—all tastefully colored with piano tinklings,

keyboard washes and gilded folk pluck, mind you—sound like the working script to some bad Sofia Coppola movie in which the hip young protagonists languish melancholically in fading romances set against an international jet-set backdrop of high-speed trains and chic restaurants. “Your rope trick started looking stale,” sings Stipe on “Boy in the Well,” and he could well be singing to the man in the mirror.

I’ve seen R.E.M.’s world up close, and it’s all five-star hotels that recycle and solar-powered limousines. And I’d never begrudge those guys the right to get stinkin’ rich from the high art they were capable of transmuting rock into when they were at the height of their powers—or even just stinkin’ drunk on airplanes. But they’re millionaires locked in a bubble of climate-controlled luxury, long removed from the heat and friction of ordinary lives that make for music worth listening to.

In the end you have to choose between the mansion on the hill or the art in the streets. And the only time the twain shall meet is when art is hung over the sofa in the mansion on the hill. That’s a gross overstatement, of course, but that doesn’t change the fundamental fact that when you get to a certain tax bracket and the zip code that comes with it, you can’t go back to Rockville again. ■

The *Bomb Squad*

Why you should buy the new U2 album.

By Jonathan Valania editmail@philadelphiaweekly.com

Because some bands have greatness thrust upon them and other bands thrust greatness upon themselves. Because U2 knew that if they had it both ways, they could be bigger than Jesus.

Because in the early '80s, if you listened closely, you could actually hear Bono's mullet. Because the Edge figured out early on that with the right ratios of pinging echo to peeling delay, the electric guitar could build cathedrals of sound that are holier than thou.

Because Bozo-haired bassist Adam Clayton and pretty boy drummer Larry Mullen Jr. could make rock do

what it does best: rattle and hum. Because in the greed-is-good '80s, speaking out about faith and hope and sex and dreams and peace on earth was a thankless job. Because U2 actually went down to the demonstration to get their fair share of abuse.

Because Jesus spent 40 days and 40 nights in the desert being taunted by the devil and never cried uncle. Because U2 went to the desert (aka Joshua Tree National Park) and were tempted by Elvis Presley and America and cried "hallelujah!"

Because by the end of the

Irish eyes:

Because despite the shades, U2 is still looking forward to changing the world.



'80s U2's anthemic pieties had grown insufferably self-serious. Because in the early '90s U2 learned the importance of *not* being earnest.

Because Bono told *Rolling Stone*: "I've learned to be insincere. I've learned to lie. I've never felt better!" Because *Achtung Baby* was the sound of four men chopping down *The Joshua Tree*, and it was even better than the real thing.

Because all the cyber-punk theorizing and dystopian consumerist burlesques of the PopMart tour were dead-on, even if the songs were not.

Because 9/11 turned back the clock on the promised 21st-century hyper-capitalist utopia of a free-range chicken in every pot, an SUV in every garage and high-speed wireless everywhere in between. Because

it's no longer too late, tonight, to drag the past out into the light. Because on that soft

September morn, we were harshly reminded of all that we can't leave behind.

Because despite all that, sometimes even new messiahs have to put down the weight of the world, look up at the sky and notice that, hey, it is a beautiful day, and then step back and let the Edge take it from there. Because during the Elevation tour,

U2 reapplied for the job of best rock 'n' roll band in the world, aced the interview and got hired.

Because *How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb* proves that U2's new sincerity is the same as the old sincerity, only better. Because if the *Nuggets-meets-War* garage-shake-bamalama of "Vertigo" doesn't completely rock your world, we seriously need to send out a search party for your groove thang.

Because when Bono sings, "The boys play rock 'n' roll/ They know that they can't dance" and follows it up with "at least they know," well, pardon my French, but that's fuckin'

funny. Because U2 *should* be doing commercials for Apple. Because I dare you to name two other artsy commercial entities with their combined mega-unit-moving stature that are quantifiably trying to change things for the better.

Because, as Bono sings on "Miracle Drug," "freedom has a scent like the top of a newborn baby's head," and don't let anyone, not even the president of the United States, tell you that some people hate the scent of a newborn baby's head.

Because only a fool would try to save the world, and Bono was fool enough to care—and God bless him for giving it the old college try.

Because Bono was willing to sleep with the devil if he could lift the boot of world debt off the necks of the dying. Because, as the man sings from behind those ever-present blue-state-tinted shades, where you live should not determine whether you live or die.

Because "Sometimes You Can't Make It on Your Own," and we all need something to lean on—be it God, dope, rock 'n' roll or your father's deathbed.

Because, in the words of Max von Sydow's character in Woody Allen's *Hannah and Her Sisters*, "If Jesus came back and saw what's going on in his name, he'd never stop throwing up." Because Bono recently told *The New York Times*: "I don't talk about my faith very much, because the people you might want to talk with, you don't want to hang out with."

Because we live in a time when religion is no longer, in Karl Marx's famous estimation, the opiate of the masses—it's the crack cocaine. Because U2 knows that the last thing the world needs right now is more cocaine.

Because what the world needs now, in the words of another philosopher, is love sweet love. Because only love can dismantle an atomic bomb, and no band on earth has a bigger, more immaculate heart than U2.

Because you can snort, you can scoff, you can even hate on them, but you simply cannot deny that they come in the name of love. ■

>> MUSIC | DISCS

SPIN CYCLE

Various Artists

All Songs Considered 4CD Collection

NPR

Okay, there's nothing nerdier than getting a mix-tape made by NPR. But even people whose sensibilities don't jibe with the organization's gentle, lulling news-and-arts coverage at least have to admire the always-deft use of incidental music.

There are predictable instrumental choices like Medeski Martin & Wood and Palm Fabric Orchestra, but also a lot of wild cards in NPR's hand. The four-disc *All Songs Considered*—named af-

ter its source material, the show *All Things Considered*—sets indie rock next to jazz next to electronic next to folk next to, well, whatever you'd call Lambchop. Some songs may already be familiar from other uses outside of albums, like the Polyphonic Spree's car-commercial symphony "Section I (Have a Day/Celebratory)" or Moby's New Order-ish "Porcelain," used so well in trailers for *The Beach* a few years back. The wise choices come courtesy of NPR talent, who show a distinct knack for mining musical treasures that are quirky enough to pique your interest but not so quirky that they overshadow the topics being segued between on the show. You'll hear accordion-playing both Spanish and classical, haunting Finnish choir-tronica (Sigur Rós), Norwegian fiddle, tidal Australian rumblings (Dirty Three), Hungarian folk, rock-bred jazz (the Bad Plus) and even, as the website describes it, some "1950s rock 'n' roll sax." You'll also hear the work of everyone from concert violinist Itzhak Perlman to blues slide guitarist Ry Cooder to Irish folkie Damien Rice to jazz visionary Bill Frisell. In the name of range, there's alt-rock supergroup Tuatara, country soul guitarist Duke Levine, the 88's hooky nerd-pop, jazz bassist Rob Wasserman, Lanterna's moody Midwestern atmosphere, pre-bop pianist Butch Thompson, acoustic jazz group Pearl Django, oddball Brooklyn troupe Piñataland and Granddaddy's lumberjack-slacker majesty. Let's face it—despite most people's claims that they like all kinds of music, nobody you know has a playlist quite so eclectic. *All Songs Considered's* greatest feat isn't the broadness of the artists, but rather the overall organic flow that keeps even the sharpest transitions from feeling forced or jarring. For those fearing the big commitment—and we all know the holiday season is the single biggest threat to commitment out there—of a box set, three of the discs are available separately. So get comfy under your favorite blanket, put on this cozy campfire collection and silently congratulate yourself for appreciating every micro-genre under the sun.

—DOUG WALLEN



buy these records

By Jonathan Valania editmail@philadelphiaweekly.com

Frank Black Francis

Black Francis Demo

Frank Black Francis

SPINART

Okay, everybody who's not a member of Franz Ferdinand, please raise your hand if you're bored with the '80s revival. I see, I see. Thanks, you can put your hands down. Yeah, I *knew* it wasn't just me. Still, I have to say that one of my very favorite CDs released this year was recorded in 1987. The first disc is a one-take hootenanny of nearly all the songs that would appear on the Pixies' *Come on Pilgrim* and *Surfer Rosa*. It's just Charles Michael Kitteridge Thompson IV, soon to be known as Black Francis, armed with an acoustic guitar and a splash of reverb singing into a Walkman recorder the day before his band entered a Boston studio and cut the legendary *Purple Tape*, the Rosetta Stone of the early Pixies cave paintings. The recording session took place at the apartment of producer Gary Smith, who made pasta while Thompson sang (in the middle of "Nimrod's Son," you can hear the phone ring). The real revelation here is not just how adroitly and soulfully Thompson performs these songs on God, sex, death and incestuous union—that much would become gloriously obvious in a few years—but how fully realized they are. Thompson does double duty, sketching out his arrangements for the songs for Smith by singing the Kim Deal parts, mimicking spacey Santiago guitar leads with his mouth, cueing thunderous air drum Valhallas and even meowing when need be. He cutely announces before the beginning of "Caribou," "This is the one I want to sound like Hüsker Dü." The second disc is not the unqualified triumph of the first. It's Thompson circa last year, re-singing Pixies classics and then turning things over to a pair of Pere Ubu alumni, the aptly named Two Pale Boys, who gamely attempt to transmute classic Pixies songs into a largely guitar-less and drum-less electronica. And while Thompson's vocals are spot on, most of these arrangements are anemic and ruderless. The best electronica points out the limitations of guitar-bass-drums, but the Two Pale Boys succeed only in reminding us of the unassailable majesty of rock in the hands of the Pixies.

Nirvana

With the Lights Out

GEFFEN

Sometime between *Bleach* and *Nevermind*, Kurt Cobain repurposed

the Pixies' patented lulling verse/volcanic chorus dynamic to prop up the enormous chip on his shoulder during the Frankenstein-ish gene-splicing experiments with the Beatles and Black Sabbath he was conducting out in rainy Seattle. The monster would, of course, rise from the slab and kill its creator in the end. In 1994, when Cobain bit down on the barrel of a 20-gauge shotgun and pulled the trigger, he killed a lot of birds with one stone. He widowed his wife and essentially orphaned his daughter, his art and an entire generation of disciples who hung on his every word. He also managed to freeze-frame his legacy into the hallowed halls of martyrdom, ensuring that every future assessment of his work would be filtered through the grim prism of his self-inflicted crucifixion. Doled out by the keepers of his



flame to re-up the visitorship to the shrine of St. Kurt, *With the Lights Out* is a four-disc barrel-bottom-scraping time capsule of his electrifying tantrums and territorial pissings, and when he felt like it, his seemingly bottomless capacity for heart-shaped melodicism. There are three moments on this collection of 80-some tracks that make the hair on the back of my neck stand up: a demo version of "Rape Me" with a newborn Francis Bean Cobain crying throughout; a solo acoustic reading of "All Apologies" that has the same angel-wing flutter of John Lennon's acoustic demo of "Strawberry Fields Forever"; and a filmed segment of the band in a Brazilian recording studio performing Terry Jacks' maudlin '70s soft-rock meisterwork "Seasons in the Sun"—with Cobain on drums, Dave Grohl on bass and Krist Novoselic on guitar—interspersed with home movie footage of the band members in younger days having joy and having fun, despite the growing sense that the hills they climbed were just seasons out of time. Much of this material—home demo tapes, radio station performances and early acoustic versions of classic Nirvana tracks—has long been traded in the shadowy digital chop shops of file-sharing networks, but the true value

in this enterprise is that, as you read this, a runny-nosed kid eating Froot Loops out of a dirty bowl in some flea-bitten double-wide in Cow's Ass, Ind., is listening to *With the Lights Out* and realizing he can purge all his rage, self-loathing and ham-fisted fumbling for grace into three serrated guitar chords and a primal yowl. And one day he—or for that matter, *she*—will change music once again.

Elliott Smith

From a Basement on the Hill

DREAMWORKS

'Tis the season, so let's end with a bit of blasphemy: The loss of Elliott Smith is far more significant than the loss of Kurt Cobain. There. I said it. Both were immensely talented, deeply troubled souls not long for this world. Profoundly bruised on the inside, both earned the right to spend their time on earth doing the backstroke in the deep wells of self-pity. The crucial difference is that Smith's fall-back position was beauty, no matter how ugly he felt on the inside, and that will lend his songbook a far lengthier shelf life. Cobain's fall-back position was always ugliness—I *hate myself and I want to die, and this is what that sounds like*—and maybe one day all his angry noise will mellow into fine whine, like, say, *White Light/White Heat*-era Velvets. But 10 years A.D., a lot of it just seems to be rusting out in the weeds alongside unsold copies of the last Love Battery album. Quoting Neil Young in his suicide note, Cobain noted that it's better to burn out than fade away. And while that may be true, Neil also pointed out that rust never sleeps. Elliott Smith never slept much, and he too wrote a suicide note, but he set his to pretty music, and it more or less became *From a Basement on the Hill*. Despite my misgivings that what I'm about to say might be misinterpreted as glorifying suicide, *Basement* is my hands-down choice for album of the year. Nothing I heard all year came close to matching its unflinching emotional courage, brutal honesty, druggy swoon and, most important, breathtaking beauty. Smith dubbed the sound he was going for in the last years of his life "California frown," a post-Prozac update of the orange-sunshine whimsy of Wilsonian West Coast pop—sunbeam harmony, hymnal organ, infinite echo and good vibrations—crossed with Plastic Ono Band junkie confessionals that make William Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* look like *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. Yes, he was trying to break your heart, but the beautiful difference between life and art is that in art, Elliott Smith doesn't die in the end. ■