

ike Mills is not having a good day. R.E.M.'s bassist is in Los Angeles for the filming of the group's latest video, "What's the Frequency, Kenneth?" It's the first single from *Monster*, the band's 11th album and one of this fall's most anticipated releases.

Unfortunately, Mills hates music videos.

"I just think the whole idea behind them is disgusting," he says, taking a seat on his hotel room couch and reaching for his sunglasses to block out the late afternoon sun coming through the window. "They're just four-minute commercials to sell your record."

"I never wanted to be an actor," Mills continues. "I didn't get into this business to be on film. I don't like the power music videos assert over the success or failure of songs."

That's a surprising attitude coming from a member of R.E.M., considering the band has won just as many video awards as music awards.

"[Videos] can be nice as artistic pieces," Mills, 35, continues after a brief pause. "Some are really cool to watch. I just think music should sell on whether or not it sounds good — not because some guy can make you look good in a video." Fair enough.

It wasn't long ago that the Athens, Ga.-based quartet refused to even appear in their videos. In the mid-'80s, the group released a string of clips that more closely resembled home videos than music videos. Their hesitation was due as much to disinterest in the booming video industry as to their college-rock ethic.

Lead singer/lyricist Michael Stipe says he never liked the idea of lip-syncing his own songs on camera. But giving in to it on the video for "Losing My Religion" paid off. The band went on to sell more than 3 million albums, making R.E.M. a household name.

Stipe's opinion of film and videos, though, has changed considerably in recent years. Now 34, he actively participates in the making of each new R.E.M. video and even has his own production company, C-00 (pronounced "C-hundred"), where he and partner Jim McKay produce documentaries and public service announcements.

Stipe recently inked a two-year film deal with New Line Cinema to develop and produce youth-oriented films.

Stipe quietly enters the room, apologizing for his tardiness.

Along with Mills, guitarist Peter Buck and drummer Bill Berry, he has just finished a photo shoot for the cover of British magazine *NME*.

Stipe's baseball cap reads "PUNK ROCK." His head is shaved bald, and his thick, black-rimmed glasses make him look like a cross between Morrissey and Mr. Peabody. But he isn't as shy and solemn as the press usually portrays him.

"We all know how to push each other's buttons," Stipe says of the band. "We've maintained doing what we do and have gained a lot of respect for each other,

though, in our ability to maintain doing what we do. Does that make sense?" Apparently, he uses the same word play in conversation as he does in his lyrics.

Why the title *Monster*?

"Peter came up with it," Mills explains. "It seemed like a very descriptive title because the making of this album sort of became a monster that threatened to consume us all. Many of the protagonists in the songs are sort of monstrous, as well as some of the noises heard on the record."

Monster is arguably the band's scariest-sounding record. The mandolins and accordions used on R.E.M.'s

ever done that before," he boasts of "Tongue," one of only two ballads on the album.

With the exception of the cynical "King of Comedy," the 12 new songs focus less on politics and more on sex. In "I Don't Sleep, I Dream," Stipe sings, "You come in to ease my headache/ Do you give good head?"

Does Stipe ever surprise himself as a lyricist?

"I've written some really good stuff," he admits, "and that's always kind of shocking. But every now and then I'll write a 'Losing My Religion' or an 'Everybody Hurts' — songs that touch on a common ground to human experience. When I hit on that, it's really cool."

"A lot of things happened during the making of this record that made songwriting very difficult," Stipe continues. "Outside factors, like birth and death. We were stretching and moving from where our heads were during *Automatic* to the type of sound on this record."

The differences between the two albums are striking. The quiet melodies and introspective words on *Automatic* convey an intimacy rarely found in pop music. *Monster*, however, is an emotional mine field. Stipe's confrontational lyrics on songs like "Circus Envy" and "I Took Your Name" are tension-filled and stirring. The album ends with "You," a haunting composition that recalls the barrenness of 1984's "Feeling Gravity's Pull."

"We all set out to make, like, a punk rock record," Stipe admits. "I wanted it to be a thrash, brash, in-your-face, gender-fuck kind of album — and, on the surface, maybe a little bit ugly."

"Trying these new things was like exploring uncharted territory," Mills adds. "The path was not always clear, so we were sort of feeling our way along."

Another path R.E.M. haven't ventured down lately is the tour circuit. The group hasn't played more than a handful of live shows since the *Green* tour ended in 1990. Will they tour for *Monster*?

"It looks like it," Stipe says hesitantly. "I love traveling, and I love performing, but when you combine the two for 10 months, it's really tiring. I've had five years to catch my breath, though." Plans for the tour are still being finalized, but it is currently set to begin in Australia in January and is expected to last most of next year. Mills says the bulk of R.E.M.'s live set will be material

from the group's last three albums.

With the new album a radical departure in style, is there anything the band hasn't yet explored?

"We'd still like to do the score for a full-length movie," Mills says. "We've had offers and some ideas, but the timing hasn't been right."

Stipe has lofty ambitions as well. "I guess I've never written a perfect song and put it on record," he says. "I've come pretty close. I'd love to go back and re-sing 'World Leader Pretend' [*Green*], because I could have worked a little harder at it the first time. I'm my own worst critic."

"We're all really just a bunch of f—k-ups," Stipe says with a grin. Yeah, well — everybody hurts.

It Came from Athens, Ga.



By Rob Hooper, California State U., Los Angeles

two previous efforts, *Automatic for the People* and *Out of Time*, have been tossed aside. Instead, many of the new songs sound like anthems for a world filled with dark, sexual tension. And Peter Buck's guitar work has never been more aggressive or exhilarating.

"We've never done a record that sounds like this," Mills says. "We wanted to make a really loud record this time, so we put a lot of pressure on ourselves to deliver. *Document* may be the closest we've come to this sound in that it was so guitar-heavy, but *Monster* is not a return to anything. We don't return. We move on."

Stipe says this project has challenged him in many ways. "I sang an entire song in falsetto. I don't think I've