



## Stipe, Michael (b. 1960)

by Linda Rapp

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Michael Stipe has been the lead singer, lyricist, and composer for the successful rock band R.E.M. for over two decades. Among his best-known songs is "Losing My Religion," which rose to number 4 on the United States rock charts in 1991. He has also become involved in film and now has his own production companies.

As is typical for the child of a career military officer, John Michael Stipe had a peripatetic childhood. Born January 4, 1960 in Decatur, Georgia, he grew up on bases around the United States and also in Germany, and spent his high school years in Illinois.

Stipe returned to his native state for college, enrolling as an art student at the University of Georgia in 1978. There he met fellow alternative music fans Peter Buck, Mike Mills, and Bill Berry. Within a year all four had dropped out of college to forge a career as a rock band, R.E.M.

They went on a concert tour and in 1980 put out their first single, "Radio Free Europe." Its success, particularly on college radio stations, won them a recording contract. Their first full-length album, *Murmur* (1983), was chosen as Album of the Year by *Rolling Stone* magazine.

Stipe's vigor on stage contributed to the success of R.E.M.'s concerts. He interacted with the audience and charged about with boundless energy. He blasted his often dark and brooding lyrics into the microphone with such force that they were frequently barely intelligible.

In addition to composing and performing, Stipe has also directed several of R.E.M.'s music videos and oversees the creation of their album covers.

R.E.M. has enjoyed unusual longevity for a rock band. They have evolved over the years, using horns, strings, and electronics to back up their music at various times.

By 2004 the band had recorded nearly twenty albums with collective sales of almost fifty million copies worldwide, making it one of the most successful in the history of rock music.

Stipe has received consistent praise for his lyrics, which Christopher John Farley of *Time* magazine describes as "erudite and elusive." Some of Stipe's compositions reflect his concerns with social, political, ethical, and environmental issues. Fiona Sturges of *The Independent* calls him "arguably the most important and influential rock icon of his generation."

Stipe's brash persona on stage contrasts markedly with his demeanor off it. He does not like to discuss his private life with the media, and long declined to comment on speculation about his sexual orientation. He did dispel rumors in the early 1990s that he had AIDS.

A few years later he commented that he had been attracted to both men and women. By 2001 Stipe was



Michael Stipe performing in Italy in 2003. This image is attributed to Flickr user Stark! and appears under the Creative Commons Attribution ShareAlike License.

identifying himself as a "queer artist," and in a *Time* magazine interview said that he was "in a relationship with an amazing man" whose name he did not reveal.

Stipe has founded two film companies, C-Hundred, based in New York, and Single Cell Productions in Los Angeles, which make low-budget films. Since 1997 Stipe has been producer or executive producer of a dozen films, some for television. By far the most successful was Spike Jonze's *Being John Malkovich* (1999), which was nominated for an Oscar.

One of Stipe's recent movies is Brian Dannelly's *Saved!* (2004), a comedy set in a Christian high school in which a girl questions her beliefs when her "perfect Christian boyfriend" reveals that he may be gay. The Reverend Jerry Falwell condemned the film--without having seen it--but film critic Phoebe Flowers wrote that "*Saved!* is actually a fairly balanced portrayal of the faith, ultimately preaching tolerance and kindness." This assessment fits well with the philosophy that Stipe expressed in a 2003 interview: "Idealism has been the springboard for almost everything I've ever done."

In March 2007 R.E.M. entered the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Eddie Vedder of Pearl Jam, who presented the band at its induction, stated, "R.E.M.'s music is truly all-encompassing. They used every color on the palette, they invented colors on their own, and they put up this huge mural of music and sound and emotion."

Stipe expressed his pride in the honor bestowed upon the group by recalling that his late grandmother had told him that to her, R.E.M. meant "remember every moment. And this," he added, "is a moment I shall never forget."

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