



Craft

R.E.M. – *New Adventures in Hi-Fi*

R.E.M. fans all have a favorite era. Some say it's the acoustic brilliance of *Automatic For the People*, some prefer the early days of *Murmur*, some are partial to the sociopolitical leanings of *Green*. But many regard *New Adventures In Hi-Fi* as the last “great” R.E.M. record. Soon after *New Adventures in Hi-Fi* was released on Sept. 9, 1996, R.E.M. found themselves at a crossroads. The next year, founding member and drummer Bill Berry would be gone, no longer willing to risk his health or stay on the road. Longtime producer Scott Litt left, too. The group continued as a three-piece, but their perceived artistic decline was already in effect. R.E.M. exposed our hidden demons

and dreams, first tapping into the restlessness people were feeling when “Radio Free Europe” rattled the college indie airwaves in 1981. By the time “Losing My Religion” aired on MTV, R.E.M. reached mainstream status. Despite their breakthrough success, it still seems hard to believe that by the time *New Adventures* was released, “E-Bow the Letter” was not considered a radio-worthy lead single for it.

The 25th anniversary reissue of *New Adventures In Hi-Fi* captures the band at their apex, and includes B-sides, rarities, and music videos from their 1995 tour. It also contains this beauty from a Houston sound check: a live cover of Glen Campbell’s empirical classic “Wichita Lineman.” Sometimes known as the first existential country song, “Wichita Lineman” is a humble, melancholy song about a single electrical worker, his profile “still on the line.” Michael Stipe’s honest delivery lends the song a quiet dignity. Everything they did was a true collaboration. Stipe’s stream-of-consciousness phrases and odd pronunciations were buoyed by the strength of Peter Buck’s no frills, blues-tinged wall of rhythm guitar; Bill Berry’s drumming, which Buck has called “disco-y”; and Mike Mills’ melodic bass and backup vocals. *New Adventures* is rooted in travel and movement—in the bus rides, vacant hotel rooms and crowded stages they visited throughout the tour. It shares much of its DNA with their previous album, 1994’s *Monster*, but you can hear hints of the rest of their catalog, too.

Dissonant segments of Buck’s lo-fi feedback on “Undertow” carries the fire and passion of *Green*, while “Electrolite” is uncannily close to “Nightswimming” from *Automatic For the People*. The acoustic-based “Wall of Death” is 85 percent country, and the wailing guitar fuzz in “Leave” is an alarm, a direct reference to the toll the tour took on them. “*I don’t know what I’m hungry for / I don’t know what I want anymore,*” Stipe complains on “Bittersweet Me,” and on “Electrolite,” R.E.M. orders the 20th century to simply “*go to sleep.*” Maybe while crafting *New Adventures*, the band sensed what was coming. — Emily Reily
