



GEORGIA ON MY MIND: A HOLE IN THE BEAT

By KAREN MOLINE

Hey, my name is Keith and I'm a Scorpio from Athens. G-A and I like to find the essence within.

— "Song for a Future Generation," B-52's *Whammy*
No one comes here much. That's why they think it's so neat.

— Peter Buck, REM

It's a great place to go if you want to get away from everything.

— Fred Schneider, B-52's

The road cuts through the red clay countryside, past the fields of kudzu, past the rednecks' pickups with "Honk if U love Herschel" bumper stickers, past, for about 60 miles east of Atlanta, the tumbledown farm houses, up the highway into the outskirts of town, past the Mexican restaurant where they were washing everything in grease, up the hill to the Univ. of G-A campus, pop. 26,000 in a town of only 41,000, first integrated in 1961, where only 1% of the faculty and 4.9% of the students are black, and where Hersheybar W. scored 86 touchdowns on 6,137 yards in three years as a criminal justice major before New Jersey got him. What you ask yourself, am I doing here. Welcome to Athens.

Southern stereotypes notwithstanding, Athens is the kind of town where it seems that everybody who isn't a frat brat, good ol' boy, Baptist, or aggie is an art major or in a band. Or wants to be. Or thinks about it. Athens is the kind of town where you can smell the magnolias and buy a guitar for \$1, sit around with friends and write some songs, play at parties, have people like you, actually get gigs, and make money. Maybe even get a rave review in—Gawd help us—*Rolling Stone*.

When the Bs put Athens on the map, the other Athens bands, for fear of stereotyping comparisons, tried their best not to sound or act or dress like the Bs. Pretty hard to do anyway. And the idea of the Bs being "the" Athens band was pretty ludicrous considering that they moved out as soon as they could afford to ("When we left there was a real lull—Snoreville," says Fred of the B-52's). What's infuriating is that Joe Average Rockfan assumes that any band from Athens will sound just like the B-52's. Give it up, kids.

Open a bottle of Attitude in Athens and you won't smell anything. There isn't any. Maybe it's only surprising to us jaded city dwellers who thrive on backstabbing social climbers, but it's refreshing, albeit naive, and as sweet as a fat Georgia peach. Here, for the uninitiated, is an abbreviated list of what y'all can get in Athens.

Have FUN

Bizarre guitar tunings
Overdrive drumming
Group effort songwriting
Oblique attitude toward lyrics
Danny Beard as executive producer
Support network
Beer
Blue collar jobs
Thrift shop wardrobes
Manners
Golden Party Summer sensibility

Hot humid weather
Anything trendy to do
Buildaws
R'n'R
Tourists
Putt-putt
Conversation
Major record labels

Have Nots

Attitude
Musical training
Rhythm machines
Ego trips
Obsessively pedantic psychobabble
Corporate megagroup mentality
Social climbers
Drug addiction
Money
Designer jeans
NoselinAir Syndrome
Southampton weekends

Smog
SoHo
Herschel Walker
IRT
New Jersey drivers
The Roxy
New York magazine
A&R people coming to town to hear the music

Of course, what this list can't possibly convey is the actual sensibility, the humor, the quirkiness, as well as the quotidian humdrumness punctuated by dreary small club gigs and long-haul commutes to large cities for the real bucks. One word you hardly ever hear in Athens is "roadie." "It is cheap, but it's also real hard to make money in Athens," says Pylon's Michael, who works in a record store part-time (most band members have part-time jobs). "But everybody can get by." The situation is not dissimilar from other college towns—witness what's coming out of Austin, Milwaukee, Minneapolis—where wildly disparate talents are thrown together in the sea of academia. Some sail on, others drop anchor, a lot drown. There is a self-replenishing generation of artists-to-be every four years. It's to be expected that some grads would be lulled into the easy have-another-Bud life in Athens. Relatively cheap living. Endless summers. Established musicians who will—gasp—even lend you their equipment....

But life in Athens might've droned on like bees in a clover patch were it not for the success of the B-52's, still considered a fluke by many in the industry, though their first two LPs went gold here and sold like crazy in the rest of the world. It's been rather *de rigueur* of late to trash the Bs—"Oh, they always sound the same, blah blah blah"—but may I remind you that the Bs revived the long-lost art of danceable party music. No pretense, unlike some of their contemporaries. Next time you hear yet another idiotic Brit synthpop band, or anything by Duran Duran, put on "Butterbean" from *Whammy*, the new album, and I defy you to not dance and have a laugh. (If you disagree, I'll gladly lock you in a room with "MacArthur Park.")

"We couldn't even get a handle on them," says Peter Buck of REM. "Only once in a whole generation do you see a band with that original a vision. What they started with is now typical of what some unknowledgeable kids would call 'New Wave'—the clothes, the cheesy organ..." And the style. "I saw how big they were in Europe and the impact they made on the culture," says Vic Varney, ex-Method Actor and former Pylon manager. "They were one of the first to make a fashion statement."

The elements of their style—the pogo-a-go-go outfits, the wigs, the bongos, the Jetsons-inspired themes, the loony lyrics, the sixties/sitcom/surferboy riffs, their nonsense lists that'd do Edward Lear proud, the weird noise coming out of Ricky's guitar—were absorbed and copied and regurgitated so quickly that the Bs became a cliché before they even sold a million. Yet they've never pretended to play anything other than "uptempo dance music. With extra humor, or whatever. That's how I describe it," says Fred. "Or whatever." They know what their fans like. You may argue that it's a copout to put out similar-sounding albums, but given their distinct limitations, it seems far more realistic of the Bs to play it as it lays. And just make it better within that context. You don't play the Bs' albums like you do REM's; it's music for parties, not musing, and they're so stylized it can get wearisome. But *Whammy* is polished, hooky, and toetapping. "Whammy" is the tightest, most ferociously sung wonder since "Dance This Mess," and "Song for a Future Generation"'s refrain sounds like what'd happen to a space traveler landing in Ruelles ("Let's meet and have a baby now.") "Trism" and "Queen of Las Vegas" are forgettably dumb, so move your needle over to "Don't Worry," a crazed trancelike vocal tradeoff that makes you do just that. Keith and Ricky play all the instruments on the album, except for the dirty horns on "Big Bird," another paranoid charmer marred only by the lameduck subject (even for the Bs). So get off your high horse and listen—LOUD—to this stuff at a party. It's like junk food: no nutrition, but you love it. And check out Wegman's Man Ray replacement on the album cover. Tasty.

While the Bs were frugging their way into the charts, Pylon was perfecting its idiosyncratic, not-a-spare-note-to-be-found-but-we'll-give-you-a-hook-a-minute sound. Physically funky, some critic wrote. Randy's surfably guitar riffs come sluicing through the jet-propelled dub-for-breakfast drumming of Curtis and Michael's bass-omatic, topped by Vanessa's vocals. Her voice has developed a far deeper range. She's really singing now, and she can go from a sweet honeychile y'all to a raging tigress in about half a second. *Chomp*, just released (best cover of the year), incorporated four songs previously released as singles, "Crazy" b/w "M-Train" and "Beep" b/w "Attitude."

The record's "a little slower and more advanced technically—with the instrumentals, song structure, and production," says Michael. Less is more, and never boring. The beginning of "Reptile" or "K" sounds like a brontosaurus stomping the bouncers at the Ritz, and "Yoyo" is "influenced by the new funk street beat hip hop be bop whatever they call it," laughs Michael. "It was written in the studio, bit by bit, which is kind of unlike Pylon." Songwriting's a group effort, during their "seasonal" rehearsals. Whenever Pylon's chomping away, daring you to dance, I've never understood why people don't run to buy their records. They're so artlessly and beguilingly funky so damn danceable, so clean to listen to, so drolle in a self-deprecating southern way. Screw 'em if they can't take a joke.

The Method Actors used to be just a guitar player and a drummer but you didn't even miss the bass line because Vic's melodies were so sumptuous and David's Mr. America gentle bulldozer beats were so hypnotic that your head filled in the missing link. Still, the MAs were always the most cerebral and least accessible to the lazy I-wanna-dance listener to allow much room for a wide audience. After three records that were critically acclaimed but financially not, David left and Vic retrenched with a version-II MA, complete with bass and sax. Their 10-song, 45-minute LP will be out in mid-September. But the band's gone bust. Why the breakup?

"After a while, you have to question, critically and with as objective an eye as you can, why you're doing it," Vic says. "One, you like music and it's fun; and two, you want to make some kind of dent. But there was something built into that band that people just didn't like." Notice that money has not entered into the picture. Welcome to Athens.

If the Bs are like a Warhol soup can, Pylon like an Ellsworth Kelly, and the Method Actors like de Kooning, then REM, critics delight, is like a James Rosenquist. Can't find enough superlatives for these bozos, even if Michael dresses like a refugee from the Scarecrow of Oz School of Fashion and dances like Sitting Bull on acid. Their gig at the Ritz was the most revitalizing show in ages, made even better by the here-to-dance untrendy crowd. "They're like the American Beatles—or to the Beatles what the

Continued on Page 20



ATHENS BANDS *Continued from Page 14*

Byrds never were," says Jim Fourall, the first person to book REM, as well as the Bs (in the infamous Hurrah gig where the air conditioning broke), Pylon, Love Tractor, Oh Ok, and Limbo District into N.Y.C. clubs.

"REM was the first group from Athens to be an AM radio band as well as keeping their credibility among the New Wavers. When they played at 688 in Atlanta, the college kids and frat boys and beer drinkers and new wavers and punks were all hanging out together—it was a real crossover. Most of what the band sounds like is so typical of what rock 'n' roll dreams are made of—from a garage band point of view," says Fourall. WNEW is playing "Radio Free Europe," the lead tune from the new album, *Murmur*. The earlier indie single version is far more raw, speedy, and sloppy, but even then, and on the EP, *Chronic Town*, their sound seemed to be coming from another place in time—sixties sentiment and folksy guitar chords mixed with some sort of Gothic southern spookiness. It's charming and soothing and upsetting at the same time. Listen to *Murmur*—both sides in a row—and you'll get it: mood music, through a fog, densely. But it's not ponderous or overtly crafted; the riffs and hooks are incessantly seamless. And you can hum 'most all the songs, which negates the criticism of mumblebum Michael—so what if he slurs his syllables? The inflection of his voice is emotional enough to convey whatever meaning he intends.

REM first formed in 1980 and paid their dues gigging year-round in small clubs from Charlotte to Valdosta. Their songwriting's also a group effort—"We sit down together and make noise," says Peter. Much like the Pylons, REM has a rather well-maybe attitude toward success. If Pylon hadn't given a tape of REM to Fourall (as the Bs gave him one of the Pylons), and he hadn't raved over them, perhaps they'd still be cranking it out in Nowhere, G.A. "REM didn't even want to play N.Y.—they were totally flabbergasted that anybody liked them," says Vic Varney. "We never really planned anything," Peter admits.

Figured out what the Athens sounds scene is like yet? Everyone quoted is right, of course. Pylon's bass player Michael Lachowski, a nine-year resident, is more pessimistic (or realistic, in a sense) than others: "Yes, at one time there was a really intense music scene here, but as a social force it's really dissipated. A lot of the naive excitement is gone."

But you can still have a Good Time in Athens.