This sort of reads like a police report, but maybe that'll be useful.

Best, Mitch

I'd had a great time with R.E.M. recording the "Radio Free Europe" single and *Chronic Town*, so when they called me up about doing an audition session for their 1st LP for I.R.S.,

I was thrilled!

The band already had a great scene going, with fans of impressive enthusiasm, and they had a more organized business structure than I'd ever seen in a young band. Now the context was changing and all sorts of advice was being thrown at them, which they seemed to be generally ignoring in that fantastically useful way they have. The fact that I even heard from them again was flattering, and it may have been an early signal from the band to whom it may concern, that they intended to do things their own way. I wouldn't blame anybody at I.R.S. for questioning the wisdom of recording again with some Southern nobody they'd never heard of, but somehow the audition went forward.

I.R.S. required the new R.E.M. sessions to be recorded on 24 tracks; my little studio was 8 short of that. So we went to Reflection Sound Studios in Charlotte. I asked Don Dixon to help because I had about zero experience working in a real studio, and he worked at Reflection all the time. He and I had somewhat different backgrounds; he had made lots of pro records by then, but we shared a certain cavalier attitude about recording and enjoyed lampooning any dogma about the supposedly Correct Way to make records. You know it's good when you hear it, but we figured there are many ways to get there. We weren't concerned with Today's Hot Sounds, and neither was the band. Which proved to be a useful stance; *Murmur* is distinctively free of early 1980s audio kitsch!

This is why we made sense as the people to record R.E.M.'s debut LP: I was inexperienced but enthusiastic with an idea or two; Don Dixon jumped right in and brought his incomparable skills as an arranger, engineer and producer. I think the band felt like we were on their side and maybe had at least an inkling of what they were trying to do. R.E.M. had endured at least one misguided audition session with a producer who didn't get them at all but who most definitely slathered, to the band's horror, Today's Hot Sounds all over their track. So after we somehow passed the audition and got started on the sessions, Don and I had to spend some time establishing the fact that we really respected what they did and had no intention of rejecting their vision in favor of some notion of commerciality or modernity. And we had to figure just what we could do in the sessions which would pass muster with R.E.M.'s new studio-wary outlook. The conclusion was that most non-electronic sounds were OK, plus the venerable Hammond organ and an electric piano. And this was the sort of equipment that Reflection had loads of.

Our audition track, "Pilgrimage," set the tone for the rest of the record. We established a band sound and tracking setup, and we generally agreed, with the occasional mild argument, that when you make a record you have to take the sound at least somewhat beyond the band's stage sound. We didn't want to lose the real sound of the band, but the record listening experience is different from going to a show, and the right overdubs can really clarify and enhance the composition. So in a flurry of "what would this sound like?" we added piano bass, vibes, doubled and tripled backing vocals, did some group percussion jamming and quickly had a track which was great fun to listen to. I'm proud of the fact that I only vaguely know who thought of what, and the fact that we recorded and mixed that song in one day, and didn't remix it for the record. There was still a whiff of punk austerity in the air, and while the sessions were creative, they were no-nonsense and quick.

We figured out that R.E.M. enjoyed a good "found sound" and the odd bit of *musique concrète*, so we started accumulating random buzzes and clacks and band messing around bits for possible later use. A famous example is the slowed-down pool balls colliding in "We Walk." This completely odd idea came from someplace in the collective consciousness, and was immediately approved by all. Moments like that guarantee that **I'll always love this record!**

Looking back, it's so cool that we were busy slowing down pool balls and not comparing what we were doing to something on the radio or worrying very much about what anybody else would think about it. We all hoped people would like the record but a perfect sense of proportion prevailed: we worried about the parts we could control and worried a lot less about the parts we couldn't.

When we were finished I thought the record was great but I did start to wonder what people would think of it. Sonically, it wasn't very "'80s"; it had a smooth, deep, mysterious and classy sound that was miles away from the usual slam-bang. It didn't quite seem to be of its time, although it didn't seem old, either. So it was with some trepidation that I played a cassette of the LP sequence to some musician friends who were on tour. I was taking the tapes to Sterling Sound for mastering and hitched a ride in their van. As the saying goes, they didn't like it; they loved it! I remember thinking, "Wow, cool, all right…."

M I T C H   E A S T E R

Mitch Easter is a guitar player and, since 1980, a recordist for mostly indie rock bands.

One afternoon, more than twenty years ago, my friend Mitch Easter called up.

"Jefferson Holt brought this combo up from Athens last weekend to do some recording. Guitar, bass, drums and singer…the normal line up, but they're really interesting. The guitar player does clean, arpeggiated parts, the bass player does these counterpoint lines instead of typical ones and the drummer plays more like Al Jackson Jr. than a new wave guy. The singer makes these amazing animal noises. The only problem is sorting it all out so that it sounds like a record. They're competing for a lot of the same aural space. Any suggestions?"

THE BAND WAS **R.E.M.**

I always have suggestions so we talked a bit and the next time I was in Winston-Salem, we put the two inch multi-track masters on the tape deck and listened to some of the recordings. I remember making a few stabs at mixing "Wolves, Lower" and a couple of other songs, but by this time Mitch had things well in hand and I didn't really have much to contribute. The stuff really appealed to me though. Very fresh. Original even, which is no easy task. Music that made Toto fans furious. Baffling lyrical content that sang really well; by that I mean the sound of the words worked extremely well with the melody and attack of the vocal. Stipe was very gifted at this under-appreciated art of combining vowel sounds and expletive consonants to create poetry that sings…whether it means anything or not. And I believe that the meaning of most rock songs is so subjective that it doesn't compare in importance to the sound of things. Sometimes, the sound is the meaning.

When Mitch asked me to help record R.E.M.'s first proper LP, I jumped at the chance. Mitch and I liked the music and thought lots of other people would too. All we wanted to do was dress it up a little and create a sound that used classic approaches to guitar, bass and drums combined with their unique writing and performing style. But it still had to grab your attention when you heard it on your car radio. Or your roommate's stereo in the dorm.

Since I was yet to be directly involved in their recordings and hadn't even met any of them, I was able to retain an objective point-of-view regarding their development. Now don't get me wrong. Objectivity is highly over-rated. Give me a passionately subjective point-of-view any time, but this slight distance was beneficial to me when I began working on *Murmur* for two reasons. First, I was a stranger to them. They thought of me as an old studio rat that had been in some horrid '70s coliseum rock outfit; not as a peer in any way. This afforded me a kind of anonymity that allowed me to think clearly without any expectations on their part. Nothing to live up to. Second, they didn't realize how much experience with major label politics I already had so it never occurred to them that I might have a secret agenda. And I did. Mitch and I both did. We wanted them to survive these early sessions pretty much intact.

Let me explain.

In the early '80s, recorded music was a gigantic part of the entertainment business. Music videos were the next big thing, beginning to take on a high profile as a marketing tool and, suddenly, "image" meant more than ever. A label would find an exciting new band. They would wine and dine them, trying to woo them into their fold. Unlike today, the big labels were the only real avenue for a group to reach a larger audience so, while trying to maintain some sort of dignity, the bands all eventually fell into bed with a label and, like a sophomore boy in high school who finally gets a steady girl, the label would immediately start looking around for something new. The second-guessing would begin. They would try to turn the band they just signed into something some other label had a radio hit with. Or even worse, they'd try to turn their new discovery into a band that had a video that looked cool. We'd seen this happen before and even though R.E.M. had chosen to sign with I.R.S. because it was an extremely artist oriented company, the band was beginning to get a little dose of this type of hands-on manipulation directly and they were concerned about their decision.

But they trusted Mitch with their fate. And Mitch trusted me.

By the time we began recording, R.E.M. already had a zealous group of fans. Almost Dead Heads in their blind enthusiasm. We recognized the fact that R.E.M. was despised by all the right people (music snobs and Top 40 enthusiasts) and loved by just the right people (college kids and music critics). This bunch was eating out of the band's hand. Hanging on every word. Waiting for every new note. The band had a tangible audience to build on.

"Despised by all the right people," you say. "How can being despised be a good thing?"

Back in the '80s, all that a pop icon like Madonna had to do to get on the front page was wear her bra on the outside of her blouse. Today, a singer would have to wear her bra on the outside while admitting to be a transsexual hooker that was currently having an affair with Oprah, then set herself on fire to get on the front page. But where would Madonna be if she hadn't courted controversy at every opportunity? The criticism of her detractors helped define her to her fans. Her image polarized the public. Of course she wasn't the first entertainer to be defined by controversy. All of the important early rock and roll acts were pushed along to success by adult reactions to a perceived lewdness and sexual innuendo. And that scary "African Beat."

R.E.M. didn't need to create a phony controversy to be misunderstood by the music store crowd. This wasn't a band made up of "musician's musicians" and many people had violently negative reactions. They didn't get it. How could this be the next big thing?

R.E.M. was a product of the record store, the library, and the college classroom colliding with the ultimate counter-culture, nerd, dance, ambiguous sex party. They were a band in the most classic sense of the word. The perfect amalgam of The Velvet Underground and The Doors. At a time when pop music was dominated by synthesizers and drum machines, R.E.M. was a guitar band. A throwback to a time that wasn't blinded by science. And they weren't dedicated to teaching you anything but they weren't content to be just another party band. They wanted you to have a little something to consider as you chugged your brewskies and pogoed on the dance floor.

***Murmur* was met with an enthusiasm that** surprised us all a little. From the very beginning, the love was there from smart college kids looking for something a little more challenging and the critics recognized what they were hearing as the arrival of something new. And the band really rocked live. They had been playing all over the country for years and they toured tirelessly behind *Murmur* helping give weight and solidity to a blossoming alternative radio scene around the world.

That's what great bands do.

D O N   D I X O N

Don Dixon makes up songs and sings them. Sometimes he releases recordings of them. He also occasionally records his friends.

MURMUR is simply a brilliant album.

It did not start out that way – and it was my fault. My initial suggestion was to have producer/musician Stephen Hague (Jules & the Polar Bears, New Order) take a crack at "Catapult." It did not work out – we all knew it, no one more than me.

No finger pointing – no screaming – we just moved on.

The band felt Mitch Easter was the correct choice as producer – and the band was right. R.E.M. was often right – their instincts were on point more than any other band I worked with over the last 25 years. I think this was primarily due to their unique four-person democracy that in practice maximized the talents and insights of four people rather than just one leader calling the shots. A perilously difficult form of band governance to operate but, when done right, provided R.E.M. a steady and utterly unique career path.

Pushing them to record on 24-track, Mitch moved the band from Drive-In Studios to Reflection Sound Studios in Charlotte where *Murmur* was recorded in less than 4 weeks. I had seen the band perform most all the songs ahead of the sessions, and I was convinced that it was now a matter of simply capturing the energy that came hurtling off the stage onto tape. When I arrived in Charlotte in early February '83, I was prepared to hear basic tracks on the songs – but what I heard was practically a finished album. The songs retained the power of the live shows, but to my surprise the whirling dervish energy of the live performances were not dominant. Instead, additional instrumentation, vocal harmonies and in some cases – a slowed tempo – had collectively added depth and dimension to the songs. Mike Mills' piano mirroring Peter's guitar in "Shaking Through," an imaginative cello part adding unexpected serenity to "Talk About the Passion," and Peter's cutting guitar virtuosity driving "9-9" gave magnitude and a profoundness to the band's music. And the vocals – I heard in these tracks the same incredible voice of Michael, soaring and slurring, that I cherished in the live show, now enhanced by layers and harmonies that furthered the unique quality of the songs they were creating. I had chills – what I was hearing was extraordinary. It was the first crystallization of the R.E.M. sound, a beautiful noise that will never be duplicated.

And that brings to my mind another point regarding Michael's vocals. Why does it matter that you cannot understand every word when listening to an R.E.M. song? If I had a nickel for every time across the 6 years I worked with the band that someone complained about not being able to understand the vocals, I would have a lot of nickels. To me, a part of the band's magic came from the fact that you could not understand every word. This mystery sparked one's imagination, allowing the band's meanings and messages to become a more personal experience, encouraging a sense of freedom for every individual listener to become emotionally immersed in the melodies, the energy and the art of R.E.M.

As amazing as any individual song may be, to me *Murmur*'s strength comes from the whole – in listening to the entire album straight through. To me, it is R.E.M.'s best album. I left Charlotte a very happy man thinking everyone I played this to would quickly realize that we were listening to one of the great bands of our time.

I was wrong….

After the album was mixed, mastered and the artwork delivered, I began playing it to retailers, record distributors and radio programmers, the people I needed to launch R.E.M.'s brilliant new album. Everyone had a point of view, some said the vocals are too low, others the songs are too fast, still others thought the songs didn't have a strong chorus. It got to the point where a creative director at our U.S. distributor thought the album cover to be "…the worst I have ever seen – what is that stuff?" "It's kudzu, asshole." One distributor in France had the nerve to tell me as I sat in his Paris office after playing him 3 songs (each of which he cut short) that he would not release the album and "this singer can't sing, no one in France will buy an album from this band." I lost my temper and told him that R.E.M. would one day be one of the biggest bands in the world – even in France – as he threw me (literally) out of his office.

Throughout all the initial criticism, the band never flinched. They believed in their music and believed in all of us at I.R.S. to break down the barriers. This band wanted success but it needed to come on their terms. They knew it would take time.

Again, they were right…

And so the band hit the road and took their debut album directly to the people. Amazing performance followed amazing performance as the band toured the world throughout much of 1983. I can't begin to tell you just how good some of the R.E.M. shows I saw in 1983 were, and in every city and in every country they left a trail of loyal new fans, all converted to the sound of this amazing new band. What had started after *Chronic Town* as a small cadre of music critics, independent record retailers & fans mainly from the Southeastern United States, steadily grew into a legion of dedicated R.E.M. supporters around the world. In the end, *Rolling Stone* critics crowned *Murmur* best album of the year, an amazing validation of everything R.E.M. stands for: patience, hard work, an unwavering belief in their band, and an uncompromising musical vision that has stood the test of time.

And so now the entire world knows what all of us at I.R.S. Records knew way back in 1983…

***Murmur* is simply a brilliant album.**

J A Y   B O B E R G

Jay Boberg is the co-founder of I.R.S. Records and served as president 1979-1993. He currently helms Liberation Entertainment.

Back when I used to be Carl Grasso designing covers for I.R.S. Records,

I had the good fortune and cosmic good timing to be a collaborator on the *Murmur* artwork. Mostly that meant ensuring that the band's vision, as I understood it, would stay pure in the face of the powers-that-try-to-be, and assembling the final elements for printing. I flew to Georgia to work with them and instantly realized I was witnessing a part of musical history being made by a group of musicians who showed me nothing but good will, tasty Southern barbecue and endless beer cans. I think Michael at first thought I would interfere in their art but their music was so enveloping and powerful that my naiveté and awe dictated that I should stay out of their way and learn, without interruption or judgment.

Besides, I was having way too much fun.

Then they showed me the kudzu; that creeping, roiling, grow-a-foot-a-minute freaky plant that made the landscape look like a planet out of a science fiction movie. I had never seen anything like it. The relentless vegetation bound up whole buildings, cars and anything else in its path. The band joked with me that sometimes drunkards sleeping it off in the woods would wake up trussed up by the aggressive vines and have to cut their way out. I believed them as I laughed. I loved and feared the kudzu. I understood immediately how the image of that mysterious flora was indicative of who they were and what their music was at that time. It was something you hadn't seen before but wanted to know more about.

When the cover art was done there were some who thought it was an unmarketable proposition and would not help the band reach their sales potential (ahem). But I knew R.E.M. were right: This was a new sound for a new generation demanding new perspectives. They stuck to their vision without reservation and so did I. I didn't know it at the time but that commitment to their art inspired and helped set me on a new path – believe unequivocally in that which you care about and know to be true to you. And while I cherish every memory and hangover of that experience, my only regret now is having left off the last two letters of my first name in the credits. Here they are proudly. Thanks, R.E.M.

C A R L O S   G R A S S O

Carlos F. Grasso was the creative services ambassador for I.R.S. Records from the company's inception. He is currently a creative consultant, writer and filmmaker, and an obsessed collector of sounds for use in installations and self-distributed recordings.

Unlike the other essayists,

I was not involved in the recording, artwork or marketing of *Murmur*, but was instead the perfect target audience – a college student. I first got *Murmur* shortly after its release on April 12, 1983. The album cover featured this mysterious looking kudzu overgrowing everything that came before it, which was a perfect analogy to what I would discover on this 12" vinyl masterpiece. An album that eventually would be called one of the Top 100 Albums of All Time.

Having heard nothing like it before, I became hypnotized by the sound. I first saw the band live on November 11, 1983, at the Beverly Theater in Los Angeles (with Mitch Easter's band Let's Active as the support), and immediately set my goal to somehow work with these and other similar bands who defined a new movement.

That goal came true in 1985 when I started a job in Production at I.R.S. Records. I worked with R.E.M. on *Life's Rich Pageant* and *Document*, and also had the incredible joy to actually compile *Dead Letter Office* and *Eponymous* with the band, pushing Peter Buck to finish liner notes in time for each release. As spectacular as this was, *Murmur* was always the touchstone for me.

Shortly after R.E.M. moved to Warner Bros., I.R.S. moved offices. In an effort to dispose of clutter, the CFO decided to throw away all the old art files. On my way out of the office late one night, I saw a huge pile of things earmarked for the dumpster, and knew it wasn't right. With no plan or goal in my mind, I knew I had to save these files from the landfill. Almost 20 years of moving these giant files from residence to residence, I still had no plan or goal in mind…until now. When I was contacted about this release, I knew that my efforts were not in vain, but were rather an exercise to preserve a small part of rock and roll history for many people to enjoy. While I wasn't there to be an insider on *Murmur* the first time around, the second time (25 years later) is just as rewarding.

S I G   S I G W O R T H

Sig Sigworth was VP Production/International Marketing at I.R.S. Records, 1985-1996.

As head of Promotion for I.R.S. for nearly 7 years,

I lived in a van with R.E.M. throughout their EP, *Chronic Town*, criss-crossing the country, getting anyone who would listen to come see and hear what we at I.R.S. thought was simply an amazing new band. And after planting many seeds with promo college rep, Keith Altomare, grew the noise of anticipation for *Murmur*.

Like the kudzu on its cover, fans of R.E.M. had emerged and spread wildly amongst the demo that often creates an act's popularity – youth…and above all college kids.

That audience, with its intricate tentacles to indie retailers, press, clubs and an independent lifestyle, also had an FM medium that was challenging the commercialism of Progressive FM radio….A place that helped define the trends to come and held upon its shoulders the music of cool. This was college radio.

Still in its infancy of influence, college radio stations adopted R.E.M. as one of its lead voices. A network of stations in nearly every city or town in America, large reach and small, college radio saw R.E.M. as the band to champion. Athens, Atlanta, Charlotte, Winston-Salem, Raleigh, Boston, San Francisco, Seattle, Buffalo, Eugene, Lawrence, Madison, Chicago, Austin, Minneapolis…way too many to mention, but all impactful on some level.

As R.E.M. relentlessly toured the country, college radio, student unions, coffeehouses, closed circuit AM stations, college halls, clubs, record stores, late night video shows, even MTV, all belted out songs from *Murmur*. Of course they were **THE** band to spread the word about. The excitement of those first drumbeats of "Radio Free Europe" had already been heard on the indie released Hib-Tone single and its lead off this album was a chance for everyone who'd never heard that elusive single to reminisce about the band's original roots. It was already a classic by underground terms, but this solidified it forever.

In my belief, "Pilgrimage" was the moment in every live show that brought a decentralized army together. The beautiful piano of "Perfect Circle" melted girls hearts and the rumored discussions about pool balls being recorded and slowed down on "We Walk" were just a few bits everyone tried to piece together in this intricate puzzle called *Murmur*. Michael's voice—and use of obtuse words—was a brilliant instrument when blended with the likes of Bill, Peter and Mike.

And from this uprising of college radio and indie lifestyle, big commercial stations took notice. Commercial radio was hearing more than a murmur, and started playing "Radio Free Europe" and even "Talk About the Passion" with conviction. Michael Stipe's perceived mumble was soon discovered by radio stations to be an asset….It kept listeners tuned in to what they didn't catch the first time around.

By the time the band had played this country tenfold (and Europe, which definitely fed the appetites of the hip American Youth via *NME* and the BBC), they had put down a serious tent-pole in America. And this was the key to their breakthrough.

The countless programmers who had to be dragged to these shows to see what was going on in their own backyard was hard work, yet comical. One of the best moments was when one programmer came and saw 3000 crazy fans. He quoted, "There must have been a big local opening act"

……NOPE……

"How could this happen in my town without me and my station being a part of it?" After he saw the show, he did what most radio programmers did. They threw down and joined the army with a voice of conviction.

There was the secret midnight meeting in the basement of WZBC in Boston after a show where we did an interview and then edited "Radio Free Europe" into a single. Only 500 copies of this were made. I remember Peter thinking it was cool to have only 500 copies of a compacted "radio version 45 single" floating around that played to his indie retail/collector sensibilities.

R.E.M. that year was crowned the top college band and laid the groundwork for a commercial success that would keep steadily building. And their success moved the entire indie/alternative lifestyle medium into a place where many other credible and critically vital acts broke through because of the path by R.E.M. and *Murmur*.

***Murmur* was truly a sound to be reckoned** with...and I'm very proud to have been a part of this band's life and spirit, for they are blessed friends and pioneers.

M I C H A E L   P L E N

Michael Plen was the head of Promotion at I.R.S. Records 1980-1987 and currently is one of the marketing principles of Shangri-la Music.

R.E.M. PETER BUCK MIKE MILLS BILL BERRY MICHAEL STIPE

DISC ONE THE ALBUM
I.R.S. SP-70604 RELEASED APRIL 12, 1983

RADIO FREE EUROPE
PILGRIMAGE
LAUGHING
TALK ABOUT THE PASSION
MORAL KIOSK
PERFECT CIRCLE
CATAPULT
SITTING STILL
9-9
SHAKING THROUGH
WE WALK
WEST OF THE FIELDS

Produced by Mitch Easter and Don Dixon. Recorded January 83
Production, Engineering: Mitch Easter, Don Dixon at Reflection, Charlotte, NC Mastered: Greg Calbi at Sterling Sound

Bill, Michael, Peter, Mike
Other R.E.M.: Jefferson Holt, Bertis Downs
Cover Collaboration: Ann Kinney, Carl Grasso, Sandra Lee Phipps
R.E.M. and Tressel Photographs: Sandra Lee Phipps
Special Words on 'West': Neil Bogan
P.O. Box 8032 Athens, GA 30603.

All songs by Berry/Buck/Mills/Stipe except "West Of The Fields" additional words by Neil Bogan All selections published by Night Garden Music (BMI). Administered throughout the Universe by Unichappell Music, Inc. (BMI) ℗ 1983 I.R.S., Inc.

DISC TWO LIVE AT LARRY'S HIDEAWAY
TORONTO, CANADA, JULY 9, 1983 PREVIOUSLY UNRELEASED

LAUGHING
PILGRIMAGE
THERE SHE GOES AGAIN
7 CHINESE BROS.
TALK ABOUT THE PASSION
SITTING STILL
HARBORCOAT
CATAPULT
GARDENING AT NIGHT
9-9
JUST A TOUCH
WEST OF THE FIELDS
RADIO FREE EUROPE
WE WALK
1,000,000
CARNIVAL OF SORTS (BOX CARS)

All songs by Berry/Buck/Mills/Stipe except "There She Goes Again" by Lou Reed.
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Rewind CD2 Track 1 For A Little Surprise

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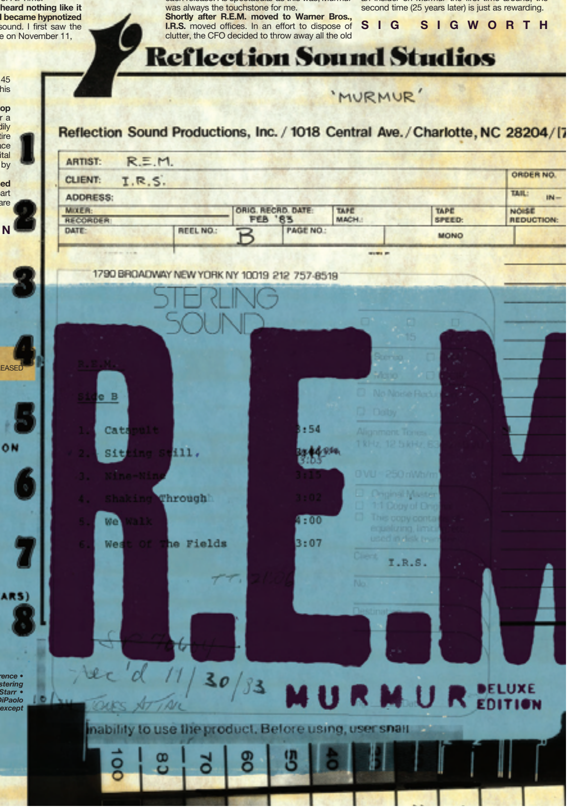
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