

Michael Stipe on having multiple creative lives



March 23, 2017 - Michael Stipe is an American musician and visual artist. He is best known as the lead singer of R.E.M., a band that released 15 albums and sold over 85 million records around the world. Since the dissolution of the band in 2011, Stipe has occupied himself with a wide variety of music, film, and art-related projects.

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2617 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Art](#), [Multi-tasking](#), [Inspiration](#).

Have you always had an art making practice that was outside of doing music?

I took pictures before I made music. I was 15 when I became aware of CBGBs and the whole punk scene happening in New York, and then Patti Smith's *Horses* came out. So that for me was a huge turning point in my life. Just prior to that my father had loaned me his Nikon and I would shoot black and white photos. I took a course in photography when I was 13 or 14 years-old and that just became something I always did. I've taken pictures my whole life. It was always a kind of diaristic thing. I shot the things that I saw that were interesting to me, but it eventually became more and more surreal as my life became more and more incredible. I had these really amazing experiences and relationships, and I'd find myself in these very odd places. I just happened to have taken pictures the whole time.

You must have an incredible archive of images.

I do. I don't know how great a lot of them are, or if I'd think of them in the same way I think of most photography. Most of them might simply qualify as documentation, snapshots. But within that archive there are actual "photographs"—some of them are mistakes, some of them are intentional.

One of the things I'm working on now, with Jonathan Berger, is a book that will come out later this year. It's the first in a series of books I'm releasing. This one focuses on my timeline, on the work I've done all along, all through the band and back to my early 20s. It's all photo based, but some of it's just documentation of things I'm obsessed with and that I focus on to make new pieces from. There are also certain things I'll take, recontextualize, and present as something completely different. A good example of that would be the personal archive of [Roy Cohn](#) which I bought and am currently using for a new piece. There are some parts from that that are going to be in this book. Jonathan and I are also working on a project [for the High Line](#), which will involve composing some pieces of music to be played by this bell tower that will be constructed at the northern end. He and I have several projects going simultaneously.



Installation, 39 Great Jones Street, 2017

Was it always important for you to have a creative outlet that was not connected to music making? Something outside the world of R.E.M. that was just for you?

Music was always like a beautiful fog around me. I'm very susceptible to music. Anyone who has been out to dinner with me, been out in public with me, will tell you how distracting music can be for me. It blocks out all other input. In a way, the band blocked out all this input for me for a long time. It made it very hard for me to be able to focus on other things, like reading books.

I was doing all these other things, I was learning all these other skills, either through the band or in conjunction with the work that I was doing with the band. At a certain point, I found myself surrounded by amazing and unemployed film people who wanted to do things. So Jim McKay and I put together a production company and started working with people like Jem Cohen and James Herbert. Through River Phoenix I met all of these other amazing people and eventually we started Single Cell Pictures and started working on films.

It was exciting because it was a different way of working creatively, but ultimately it was a way of working that I found to be incredibly frustrating. For me, producing feature films is such a compromising and tedious way of expressing oneself, especially compared to just sitting down with a simple guitar riff or a piano. With music or art, I could create something in less than a day as opposed to working for seven years on a film and then having it come out as this extremely compromised version of what you or the director or the creative team you had aligned yourself with had in mind in the first place. I'm glad I did it, but it's not ultimately that interesting to me.

Working in a band is a slightly different version of that, right?

In the band, it's a democratic compromise. Everyone arrives at a place that is hopefully bigger than all of the separate parts. You find yourself working towards a common goal and try very hard to get there together. That doesn't always work and sometimes you fail and you fail horrifically. I was just always really proud of the fact that we did everything we did and that we owned everything that we did. The highlights and the triumphs as well as the fall-on-your-face-publicly-in-a-very-big-way kind of moments. And there were plenty of those. Or the compromises that were made for, you know, position-whether on charts or for some kind of cultural position, all that stuff. To work outside of that is pretty freeing... and also terrifying. The guys in my band had my back and I had theirs. I was very protected. Working on my own I realize I'm not so protected.





Installation shots from NYU studio show with Jonathan Berger, 2014

What do you miss about that dynamic?

Well, I find that I need to bounce ideas off of people. I need to have people around constantly to ask, "Is this good, or is this shit?" 'Cause a lot of it is shit. And you have to kind of move through that. In terms of the kind of mediums that I work in now, I'm really comfortable with video and I'm really comfortable with film and photography. Making visual art comes very naturally to me, so it's not difficult or complex in terms of imagining what I want. I know what I want. I sometimes just need people to help me with lighting or with the mechanical aspect of taking a picture or creating a video. But I know what I wanna see and I know how I wanna feel when I see it, so that's what I'm always working towards.

These days, what are the most valuable resources for you as a creator?

It's so important, no matter what you are doing or making, to be challenged by your friends and the people whose opinions you trust the most. People who aren't going to tell you something's good if it's not and vice versa. It's also healthy to realize what you're good at and what you aren't and to be honest about that. The things that I know that I'm really bad at: I know I'm a terrible painter, and I know I can't stand my own drawing. I can't stand my speaking voice. I can't stand my signature. That's all the stuff I can't stand. So then I'm left with video and film, and my singing voice which I love, mostly. It's limited, but it's got something.

I'm working on lots of different kinds of music now, but none of it is being made in the way I approach music with R.E.M. or with pop music—it's a very different thing. With Fischerspooner, I'm working as a producer, but also as a co-writer. So the lyrics aren't mine, the arrangements aren't mine, and the ideas aren't mine—they're a combination of several different people. Sometimes it's my creative voice, but it's run through someone else. That for me is really interesting. I also have a piece that's going to premiere at Moogfest. It's a video portrait involving sound and video. I'm really excited about that.

Is the ability to multi-task pretty crucial for your creative life?

I wouldn't say it's crucial, but it tends to be how it happens. And I think that's probably part of being hyperactive and/or ADD. If it's right in front of me, I'll deal with it. Then I just turn away and something else is right in front of me. I'm kind of like a second hand on a clock—I have 60 things going on at one time, it just depends on which of them I happen to be on at any given time. I'm actually a very lazy person, but I'm a wildly hyperactive lazy person. As a result, I do tend to have a lot of output, that's not to say that most of that output will ever see the light of day, or that it needs to.



Jeremy, dance stills from upcoming Moogfest installation, 2017. "The video pieces I'm doing are going to be a looped, but it's basically a dance piece. I created this music for people to dance to—and I film them dancing—but then I strip the music away and I edit what I see into a portrait of that person. Then I have to write new music that is specifically for their dance. So I'm still coming at music, but I'm coming at it from all these different perspectives."

You've had an iconic career as a musician. Is there ever a frustration that no matter what you do people will always be like, *That's great, but when is R.E.M. gonna get back together?*"

That's always gonna be there, so I'm just... well, resigned isn't the proper word, but I know that will always be there, so I just have to kind of sidestep it a little bit. I know that the request and the intention is pure most of the time, and I respect that. Just because one thing ends, the

impulse to make things and be creative doesn't suddenly go away. I can't imagine that.

When you create an iconic work early in your life—whether you are Edward Albee with *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolff?* Or Bono or R.E.M. with *Murmur* or *The Joshua Tree*, or Patti with *Horses*—you can create something like that and for the rest of your career, the rest of your life, people are comparing whatever you're doing to that. So you just kind of have to either fall into a life of chasing after that, which is an easy and shallow trap, or you move beyond it. You just do your work and hope that at some point there's a longer view of your career that looks at everything and considers it all. You hope that your career is something more than a life long game of catch-up, which would just be so uninteresting, right?

How do you define success now, as far as your creative projects are concerned?

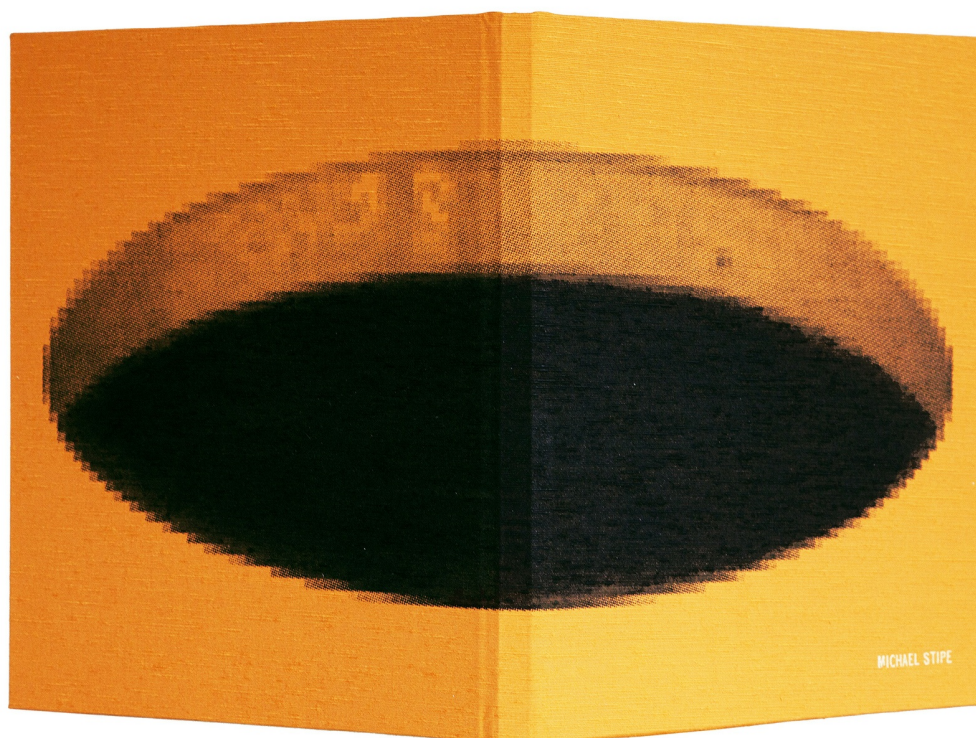
Well hopefully you'd look back on it five or 10 years and still think it's good and successful, but that doesn't happen often. That's a complicated question. If I can surprise myself, if I can look at something and say, "Wow, that's really good. That's possibly great," then I would consider that a success, even if it's fleeting. If I start something and then wake up the next morning still thinking about it, then that's usually a good sign.

It's amazing to have this expansive creative practice that allows you to make all different kinds of art.

Oh yes, though sometimes "expansive creative practice" is also what I would call simply having too many ideas. You have to be a great editor in that regard; you have to be an editor of ideas. For me, when some of those ideas are so abstract that they're literally just a written down thought, you have to take a step back and make choices. You only have this one lifetime—only a certain number of human years—to make things. You have to decide, *Which of these ideas am I going to allow myself to focus on?* And have I made the right choices? And you hope that you do.

So much of doing creative work is just about making choices, deciding where to direct your energies. I've been trying to organize all of my ideas and projects on my computer desktop for the past week. Putting them into folders—folders within folders within folders. Trying to kind of bring it down to what's valuable enough to actually work to produce into being and then looking at those ideas and saying, "Well that doesn't work" or "That was a bad idea" or "That was a misstep" or "My God, this is actually kind of brilliant."

You don't want to do the same thing forever, even if maybe other people wish you would. So for me, this part of my creative life is really exciting. Deciding where I'm gonna go next is really interesting. You don't necessarily choose to be constantly working on something, you just have to do it. And I'm very lucky that people are interested in what I have to say or in what I might be making. Still, regardless of that, you just have to follow the impulse where it leads you. You always have to be moving forward.



Escape Hatch Case, Front Cover, 2016. "This piece is a hardbound book cover for a book that doesn't exist. It features a super blown-up pixelated image of the hole emoji—the escape hatch—printed on cloth. It's been half-toned to create the image for printing, involving two systems—the half-tone and the pixel—that have no real way of communicating with each other. So the image is neither fish nor fowl, not future nor past. On top of that, it's flipping back and forth between 2D and 3D. It's an empty book, all surface. It's about things that have been lost, ignored, or forgotten. It's our fear that books have been replaced by texts and tweets and alerts, that actual words and phrases and ideas have been replaced by emojis. It's the world we now find ourselves in. To ignore or disregard that is to be forever stuck in the past. In cartoons (like the Roadrunner and Wile E. Coyote) the "hole" has been used when the plot of the story reaches an end point, where there is no escape. It is tossed down onto the floor or a surface and jumped into. It is a surreal emergency escape hatch into another world and it's meant to be cartoonish and absurd. As my curator friend said, "We find ourselves increasingly in a world that is cartoonish and absurd. The idea of an easy escape is enticing."

Michael Stipe recommends:

[Our Lady of the Flowers](#) by Jean Genet

[Those Who Love Me Can Take The Train](#) directed by Patrice Chéreau

Wire's [154](#), and Pylon's [Gyrate Plus](#)

[Oblique Strategies](#) by Brian Eno and Peter Schmidt

My own [tumblr](#), which serves as my own ongoing mood board for basically everything.

Name

Michael Stipe

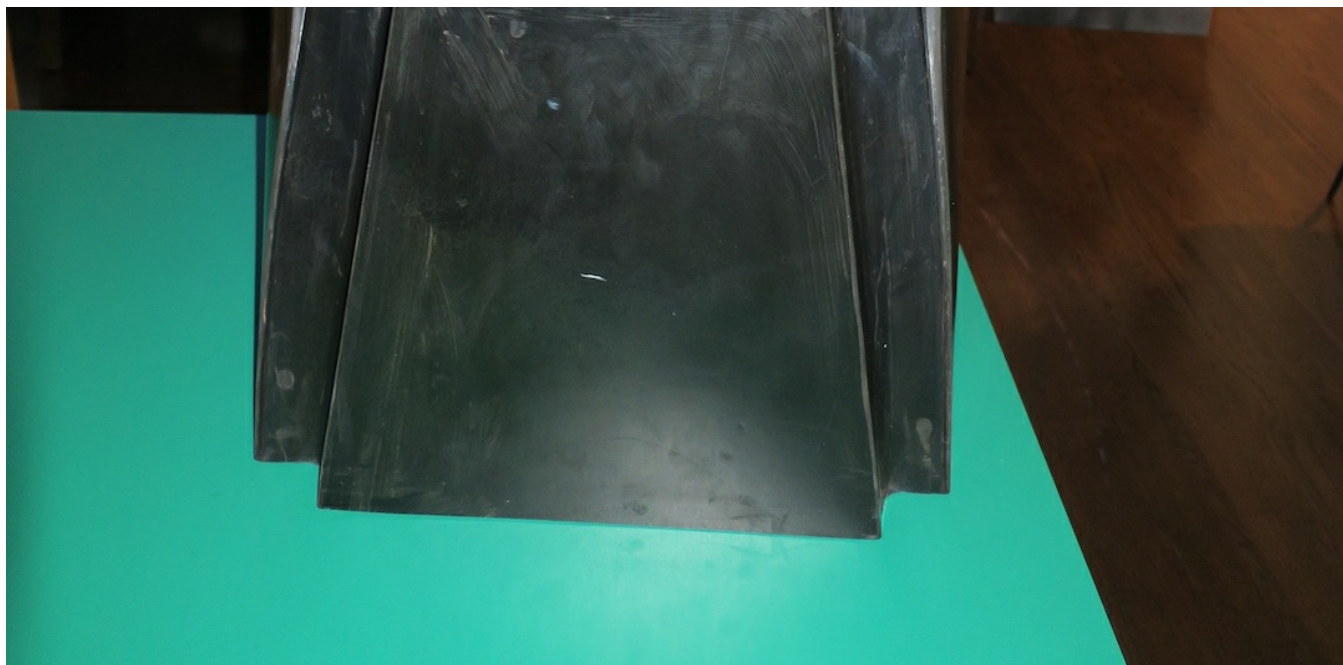
Vocation

Musician, Artist

Fact

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Michael Stipe with one of his sculptures, "A CAST OF THE SPACE UNDER MY CHEAP PLASTIC CHAIR." Photo by David Belisle.