

# REPLACEMENTS

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By Ed Rifferey Jr.

**T**HE MUCH-LAUDED "POPULIST" rock of blue-collar bossman Bruce Springsteen and his faint xeroxed copy John Cougar Melloncamp, brings to mind that grungy four-piece "critics' band" from Minneapolis, the Replacements, and their latest album, *Tim*.

If the Replacements had more media savvy or a song on *Tim* with "USA" in the title, the band might toboggan to fame on the coattails of Springsteen and Melloncamp's *People*-mag populism. It's all the rage. Even James "Livin' in America" Brown sounds more like a patriotic beer commercial than his bad-old self these days. He's getting down, all right—down to business. Boring in the USA? You bet. And it's selling like red-white-and-blue hotcakes.

In the pantheon of blue-collar rock, Brown's a deserving legend, Melloncamp an impending asterisk, with Springsteen falling somewhere in between. No doubt Springsteen's heart is in the right place—witness his gigging for good causes worldwide. But the boss is several years

removed from the hard-edge of poverty—as bosses often are. Money changes everything, doncha know. Springsteen may be the hardest-working, working-class millionaire in showbiz, but the Replacements don't need a time machine to remember their squalid roots. They're still there now: on the edge of poverty, on the edge of fame.

Not that the Replacements are overtly political in any agit-pop sense of the word—the only axes grinding for these boys are electric guitars. Rather, the Replacements embody the unchanneled anger and the rebellious attitude often ascribed to the working class. Like most working stiffs, the Replacements sometimes work too hard, sometimes drink too hard and sometimes think too hard about things they can't change. There's nothing unduly heroic about the band or their fixation on the romance of failure and the failure of romance. Yet there's a raw elegance in the band's plainspoken lyrics and rough-hewn music—an unschooled intelligence that's alternatively surly and squirrely.

### Minneapolis mystique

After a handful of critically acclaimed but largely ignored records on Minneapolis' in-

dependent label Twin Tone, the band made the leap up to major-league record label Sire for *Tim*. Though the Mats, as the Replacements are sometimes known, have barely dented the popular consciousness in terms of mainstream radio airplay or mega-unit record sales, they've been making small ripples in many of the right places. For one thing, they're in the right place at the right time. Minneapolis is the hip recording address these days. National Public Radio has dubbed this vinyl valhalla "the Motown of the '80s" largely on the strength of the black music scene stemming from Prince's various offshoots and antagonists such as the Time, Morris Day, Andre Cymone and Terry Lewis and Jimmy Jam's hit-making production team.

Now the white boys are showing that they can do it, too. Hüsker Dü's hardcore punk crooning and the Mats' grinding pop angst have proven as popular with critics as Minneapolis' black pop has been with the record-buying public.

The Mats are perhaps the quintessential critics' band. More than anything else, rock critics desire to divine raw talent through a welter of technical limitations. They favor singers who can barely sing (typical faves:

Bob Dylan, Tom Waits, Captain Beefheart, Randy Newman, Pere Ubu's David Thomas). Scribes also prefer inept (or barely ept) instrumentalists—though virtuoso players who obscure their talents through alcohol and drug abuse are okay, too. And like most of the rest of us higher apes, the critics love good songs about jaded romanticism. On all of these counts the Replacements fill the bill.

Not surprisingly, then, the Mats finished a strong second to the Talking Heads in this year's *Village Voice* Pazz and Jop critics' poll after winding up near the top of the hipster scribblers' straw total last year with their *Let It Be*. Finishing second to Talking Heads is no disgrace. And it was about time the critics went head over heels over the Heads after their first million-selling album *Little Creatures* and their universally raved concert film *Stop Making Sense*. Not to mention that head Head David Byrne has collaborated with all the *haute-couture* hotshots: avant hooper Twyla Tharp, theater auteur Robert Wilson, minimalist composer Philip Glass, aural wallpaper hanger Brian Eno. In short, all the pop-culture aristocrats.

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