



MAN IN THE MOVIES

In *Velvet Goldmine*—the gorgeous new flick about pop icons and pansexuality—you'd think **Michael Stipe** would want to be the star. Instead, R.E.M.'s complicated front man opted for executive producer. **B.J. Sigsmond** checks his frequency.

Michael Stipe is playing a new tune these days. The lead singer of R.E.M. served as executive producer on *Velvet Goldmine*—the new glam rock film in which we once again romanticize a decade most people would love to forget—working alongside director Todd Haynes and producer Christine Vachon. While Stipe's duties on the indie included securing financing and helping with casting, he's the first to admit that he was useful simply "being on the set as a real-life, gosh-darned rock star."

Velvet Goldmine is the story of Brian Slade, a David Bowie-like pop icon who rises to the top of London's pansexual rock scene in the early '70s. It's not hard to see why Stipe was interested. The singer, born in 1960, came of age watching "glam rock and glitter rock through the CBGB scene in New York," he says—of course, this was from his perch as an awkward teenager in East St. Louis. "My real alliance was with Patti Smith and Television," he recalls. Other influences included Wire, the Velvet Underground, and T. Rex. "I discovered this music while I was exploring and questioning my own sexuality," he says. "It wasn't hetero-centered or even homo-centered. It was just about being wide open. And if you've followed me in interviews over the last ten years, you'll see that it really informed my opinion."

Though you probably have followed Stipe's sexual healing in myriad magazine profiles, you probably didn't know he'd also been making movies for the last decade. While they've been "off the radar by Hollywood standards," he's produced small films through two companies, Single Cell Pictures in Los Angeles and C-00 Film Corp. in New York. You'd see the films he produced "at festivals," he says, "if at all." Until now. When Haynes called Stipe to see if he'd take the role of executive producer on *Goldmine*, "sight unseen, I said OK," the singer recalls. "He's my favorite American director," Stipe says of the auteur behind the heady *Poison* (1991), *Safe* (1995), and, most famously, *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (1987)—which was acted out with Barbie dolls and blocked from distribution by the Carpenter family. "I think he's a genius."

Stipe enjoyed "that I wasn't the center of attention" on the set and was pretty "hands-on" for an executive producer—a role usually reserved for an invisible man with money. Not Stipe. Once they'd cast Jonathan Rhys Meyers as Slade and Ewan McGregor as his Iggy Pop-like American hero and sometime lover Curt Wild, Stipe imparted some of the lessons he'd learned during his decade-and-a-half as a musician for the masses. He began by taking McGregor into a studio. "Neither [co-story writer] Jim Lyons nor Todd Haynes has been in that situation," he says. "How the fuck do they know what it's like not to be able to hear what they're saying behind the glass?" he asks, alluding to one of the film's most emotionally violent scenes. "I'm not Curt Wild, but I've thrown mike stands at people," he says, before adding, "but I'm a very peaceful guy, as the world knows."

What the world may *not* know is that Stipe is also a photographer—and no amateur. In fact, he published a book earlier this year called *Two Times Intro: On the Road with Patti Smith*. It documents, with cinema vérité-type pictures, his longtime idol's two-week 1995 tour, during which he rode the bus every night and hung out anonymously in the twelfth or thirteenth rows of concerts. Stipe also took about 70 rolls of film on the *Goldmine* set, photos he deems, with a snicker, "cover material." He bristles if you call his shooting pictures a hobby. After all, he's been taking photos since he was 15—five years longer than he's been making music. "If you look at all the R.E.M. records, anything that's uncredited is mine."

Speaking of albums, the band's eleventh, *Up*, has just been released. "We're a three-piece now," Stipe says of R.E.M., which lost Bill Berry when the drummer retired last year after suffering an aneurysm in 1995. Possibly inspired by the time he spent working on *Velvet Goldmine*, Stipe says he had the moxie to attempt something truly rebellious on this record. He wrote a song "with zero distancing, zero cynicism," he says. "It's a punk rock, to-the-balls, romantic love song—the most radical thing I could do."



From *Velvet Goldmine*: Ewan McGregor as Curt Wild, Toni Collette and director Todd Haynes on the set, and Jonathan Rhys Meyers as Brian Slade