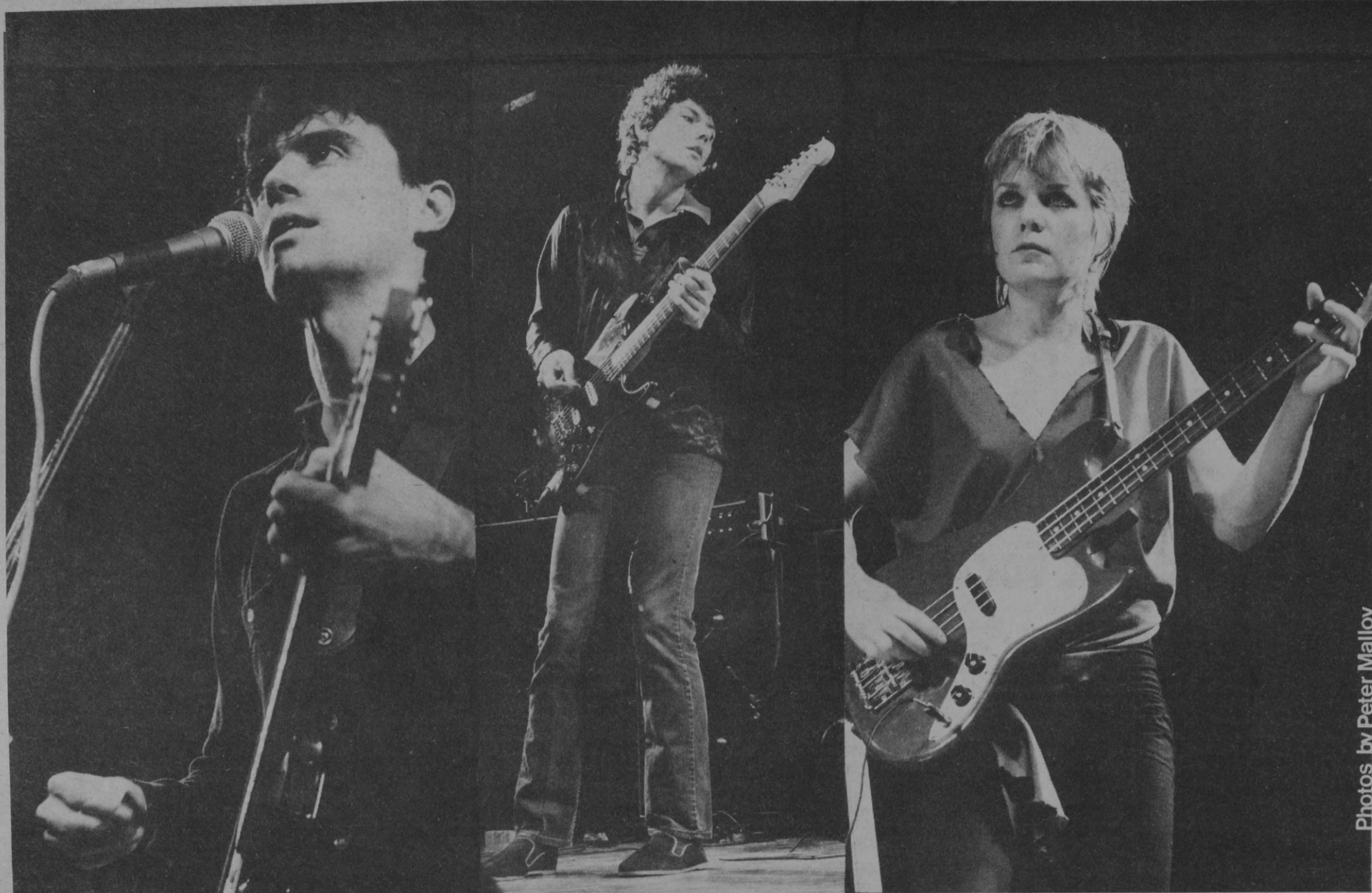


# TALKING HEADS



Photos by Peter Malloy

David Byrne's reputation hitherto has been one of a withdrawn, almost pathologically, shy leader of the Planet's Number One Band Full of Ideas. Tall, thin and self-effacing, he's been writing songs that deal with you, everyday problems and philosophical birds-eye views of life and existence that reach such a perceptive intensity that they can be uncomfortable.

His skill as a guitarist has generally been overlooked; his skinny lead lines and choppy-chord style are perfectly suited to his demanding songs. As an interviewee, he is shy, quietly spoken and often thoughtful, taking time to give a reasoned answer in a hesitant manner. His answers were rarely reckless or critical of other peoples' bids for stardom, even when prodded, but the interview developed into a comprehensive summation of the band's progression.

## ART AND TV

Before the advent of Talking Heads, Byrne was at Art School pursuing conceptual art but simultaneously keeping his interest in rock music. Why did he choose rock rather than art as a means of communication?

"The whole art community scene was so insular. All the art seemed to be referring to other art and it wasn't speaking to anyone outside those who were knowledgeable about it. So I thought this was no fun as I was just talking to the same bunch of people all the time, and the possibility of talking to a larger audience, as in rock, was always more exciting."

The name, 'Talking Heads', is a piece of TV terminology referring to those droll, superficially serious news announcers. The name seemed to be a deliberate contrast between the pretended concern of the media men and the genuine feeling of the band for fellow humans. But no. No??

"No, we had these lists of possible names for the band. That happened to be one that was submitted by a friend. We had no idea as to what it was at the time but it did imply a particular kind of music, and if you heard a band with that name you wouldn't know what to expect, and that was good. Shortly after we used it we found out that it was TV terminology, and we were pleased."

## ALBUMS AND SONGS

I drop my intellectual facade and wade into the subject of their first album, "one of the definitive albums of the decade" according to *Rolling Stone* (the band don't like that withering old paper, "conservative and boring" says Harrison. I agree) produced by Tony Bongiovi, a middle-of-the-road commercial producer whom Byrne described last year as being an "asshole", but he was in a bad mood at the time. Bongiovi was used as the band wanted to see what the results would be working with someone who held entirely different views. The result was that the album sounded as if it wasn't produced at all, the songs were left to speak for themselves as Bongiovi and the band didn't exactly get on or agree on any particular approach in dealing with the songs.

"We didn't like the sound of the first album, and it does sound kinda thin but it doesn't

bother me anymore. It's just a very sparse way of recording."

Enter Brian Eno, man of many talents, who went and saw Talking Heads at their first London concert just prior to the release of their first album. They struck up a friendship and they shared the same ideas, so it became logical that Eno should produce the all-important second album:

"We thought that for the second album we would try for a liver sound. Brian (Eno) was excited about that too. We didn't use headphones so we ended up using lots of mikes around the room."

Well, what about the Tony Parson's theory that Eno was using the band to put across his ideas to such an extent that he destroyed the Talking Heads' individuality of the first album?

"An exaggeration. Eno didn't play too much and a lot of the things people thought he did, we did. He was open to our ideas and we were open to his, but we were wary of that synthesiser stuff. Brian liked producing us and he got very involved in it. It wasn't just a job to make money as a producer. The same applies to this record we're working on now."

Eno, then, is also producing their new album *Fear of Music* ("it's a real disease" Byrne grinned), and with only a little mixing to do it is set for August release. The songs from the new album played at their Regent concert that night sounded more dense as there's less space in the arrangements. Byrne agreed:

"Yeah there seems to be a lot of those songs that are really dense sounding on the new record. They seem to be almost drone-like in a way. A lot of them sound pretty psychedelic, not like Jefferson Airplane or the Grateful Dead, but they sound weird in a way, with funny sounds and things like that. Then there's others that are more straight forward. They all have a beat that's fairly consistent and the band are more involved in the arrangements in some of the songs than before."

Which leads us to Byrne's songwriting methods. In case you haven't noticed he's easily one of the most original/idiosyncratic writers around, so how does he write the songs?

"It varies a lot, sometimes there's just words that suggest a texture or rhythm and then it's just a matter of finding something that fits the words. Then there's others that you have little pieces of music that might suggest some kind of words, a subject or enunciation. On the new record we tried another way — just messing around, tape them, take the tapes home and listen to them and pick up on pieces where something seemed to be happening. Then we expand on that, piece them together like a puzzle using some of the words I had. Some of those that worked turned out to be interesting songs."

I asked for an example and at this point Byrne pushed the pause button on my tape-recorder saying that he needed time to think. He bent his head, forehead pressed against his knuckles, then he sat up smiling slightly, we were back in business:

"There's a song on the new album, 'Mind', where I heard the melody and chords for a

while. I wrote them when I was visiting my parents but I could never get the music to sound like it sounded in my head, and we tried time and time again but it wasn't until one of those tape sessions when we were messing around that I heard it, that was it, that was the sound for that song. There was one we didn't play tonight, it's called 'Drugs', it used to be called 'Electricity', and that went through about three different stages. We had played it for the last album in a different form, but it didn't quite make it so we re-worked it and recorded it for this album, but we didn't like it so we re-worked it in the studio and it sounded real good. It's one of those with a lot of empty spaces."

"Psycho Killer", their most publicised tour de force from the first album and the only song co-written with the other members from that album, intrigued me as it was a particularly morbid and powerful song. Was it difficult to write?

"No it just came together. I sat down and wrote it and the others helped with some of the words."

Well, what about "No Compassion", another anthem to pessimism?

"This may sound a bit stupid, but I thought it was a play on the Zen idea of the dispassionate way of reacting to everyday life. The idea of enlightened self-interest, which I don't always agree with, but I thought it would be good to put into a song."

The marvellously vague title of the second, album, *More Songs About Buildings and Food*, as it turns out, was drummer Chris Frantz's idea. He had just heard "The Big Country" and groaned in his amiable way "oh no not another song about buildings and food." Which brings us to that song. There's been some speculation as to whether Byrne actually meant the line in "The Big Country" — "I wouldn't live there if you paid me". Byrne replies:

"At the time I meant it. I was flying in an aeroplane and I was in a bad mood. But people read things into it, I wanted it to be an objective description. It was a song from the opposite point of view of "Don't Worry About the Government."

## SUCCESS AND THE ROCK BIZ

Comparatively speaking Talking Head's rise to fame has been meteoric. Widespread rave reviews for their albums and concerts. Would Byrne still be in rock if he wasn't so successful?

"I think I'd still keep trying, but I wouldn't be able to do as much. Just for financial reasons I'd probably have to work during the day at some mundane job to buy recording time. I think it would just be a slower process."

The art scene was insular, but surely there's a great deal wrong with the rock'n'roll circus?

"Oh yeah, there's plenty and you could go on for days about the terrible things in the music business but we've managed to cope by learning to say "no" if things go beyond a certain point. You have to live with yourself so you can't go along with any suggestion that's made. We haven't run into it too badly as by our nature people just assume that it's very unlike-

ly we'll do certain things."

Byrne readily admits that the music boom of the last couple of years helped them to reach their present enviable status, but his concluding comment that "we were in the right place at the right time" is too modest for a band of their burgeoning talent.

## THE CONCERT

Local jazz-rock six piece After Dark moved graciously through a half-hour set of originals ("Crusader", "Crazy Haze") and fresh interpretations of old-and-showing-it stand bys like "Moondance" and "Feelin' Alright". Talent at work here, but some effort must be made to avoid the pitfalls of predictability inherent in the choice of some of those old standards.

People were on their feet and down by the stage before David Byrne reached the microphone. Straight into "The Big Country", one of their many aces that I expected them to play near the end of their set, but as Jerry Harrison told me afterwards they open with it because the slide guitar goes quickly out of tune if they leave it too long.

It became obvious in quick time that Eno's production of *More Songs About Buildings and Food* was a fitting reproduction of the band's live punch. Drummer Chris Frantz and his wife Tina Weymouth on bass have been quoted as saying they like Parliament, and it shows. With occasional glances at Byrne's lead-out she kept the band thrusting in and out of those quirky, funky little rhythm changes that have become important features of Byrne's songs. Together with Frantz you couldn't have a more appropriate or capable rhythm section for the band.

Jerry Harrison, who alternated between rhythm lead guitar and keyboards, became Mr. Indispensable. Whether it was perfection slide guitar on "The Big Country" or stark keyboards especially on the new songs, "Paper", "Mind", "Memories" and "Heaven", he more than earned his place.

Byrne, himself, rarely talked between songs, saving his introverted stage presence for intense and emotionally and physically draining performances of his material. He seemed keyed-up, finding release only through the total personality involvement of his songs and their unusual structure. With awkward precision he builds on the intensity of the previous number and gradually takes the whole set towards an exhausting climax. Two encores, "Take Me to the River" and the excellent "I'm Not in Love."

There's a lot of drivel around these days, usually perpetrated by various record companies, about bands who are "leading rock music into the eighties". Along with perhaps Pere Ubu, Talking Heads are the only current American band capable of living up to that statement.

George Kay

## NEXT ISSUE

Jerry Harrison spills the beans on Jonathan Richman and the Modern Lovers and talks about life with the Talking Heads.