

# BYRNING UP THE YEARS

## TALKING HEADS INTERVIEW



David Byrne is a happy man. Even across a New York phone connection in late April his high spirits are contagious. The reasons for his good mood lie in the fact that Talking Heads have reformed and that their first self-produced album, *Speaking In Tongues*, matches anything they've done in the past.

So what's it like having Talking Heads back in operation?

"It's a lot of fun, it keeps me real busy." What effect did the lay-off have on the band's outlook?

"When we all played together again it was quite nice. It reminded us of why we got together in the first place."

You can't rush Byrne. His answers are always carefully considered and brief. It's not that he's abrupt, far from it, it's just that his taciturn character prevents any conversational padding.

How does Talking Heads function? Is it through congeniality or friction?

"A little bit of both. Sometimes the disagreements or frictions end up helping things although

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it doesn't seem so at the time; it's certainly not fun at the time. But we had very few arguments recording the new album, very unusual, it was sort of scary."

How did you actually get the band together again? Was it just a matter of phoning them up?

"Sort of. We just started talking and said let's start jamming and rehearsing together."

If the feeling or chemistry wasn't right would you have gone any further?

(Long pause) "No, no. There wouldn't have been much point. No matter how lucrative something is it's no good if it's torture or you're not having fun doing it."

The Talking Heads' holiday took in a couple of years (1981-82) allowing the individual members the opportunity to release solo albums. The surprise was the success of the Frantz-Weymouth Tom Tom Club efforts, a commercial blend of rhythmic fluency and twee,

lightweight vocals that made them more marketable than any previous Talking Heads' product.

Did you like the Tom Tom Club's music?

"Yeah, I liked it and Jerry's album. The Tom Tom Club was incredibly successful and it was very nice to see half of us (Talking Heads) having a lot of success with something. And it was good for Chris and Tina as they thought that they weren't contributing as much musically as they thought they could so when they did the Tom Tom Club it was not only an outlet for

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their ideas but it proved to everyone that they had as much ability as anyone else."

Byrne's sabbatical was spent on *The Catherine Wheel* and his *My Life In The Bush of Ghosts*, a very influential collaboration with Eno which used taped religious/political radio broadcasts as a replacement for orthodox vocals — an idea that has been developed by Cabaret Voltaire and used by Bowie on 'Ricochet' from *Let's Dance*. It has been influential?

(Emphatic) "Yeah, and it will continue to be. Brian (Eno) and I felt that the album was a good technique for a band who couldn't write lyrics they were happy with or who didn't have a singer. Other people should use this as the technique doesn't belong to us."

The solo projects were interesting, sure, but they couldn't take the place of a Talking Heads' album. Frantz and Weymouth missed Byrne's unique desperation and delivery and he missed the unifying conventional imagination of the other three.

What do you think makes Talking Heads a more interesting unit than its separate parts?

(Long pause) "I'm not sure. The different ideas get tempered by the other musicians. If something in Talking Heads gets too far in one direction or another it gets made less extreme and Talking Heads as a group is about one thing and it's the thing that happens to have a specific audience. The other things we did, like the popular Tom Tom Club and the experimental things I did, I didn't know what sort of audience they had."

Do you still feel the pressure to change from album to album?

"Yeah, a little bit. I don't feel it as strongly as I did before. There's no point in changing for changing's sake."

Which changes have you felt most conscious of?

"I'm not conscious of them at the time, I'm more aware of them in retrospect."

The most radical change in the band's devel-

opment occurred between the four-piece space of *Fear of Music* and the big band heat of the first side of *Remain In Light*. Agree?

"Yeah, besides from being more concerned with our interpretation of African rhythms, *Remain In Light* was more a purely studio product, which is fine. *Fear of Music* was recorded like a live rehearsal and I still like the way it sounds."

The double live album of last year, particularly the early live recordings, show how funky the band was even at the outset, yet I can't remember being aware of that facet of your music.

"Yeah, we were always listening to a lot of R&B and that sort of thing and we openly admitted that we got a lot of inspiration from it. But at the time, as you said, people didn't pick up on it as much because the whole punk thing was too much in the forefront of people's minds and they didn't notice that we were back there trying to be funky. People tended to notice our attitude and lyrics more."

The live album features one unreleased song,

"I try to make lyrics that have the quality of dreams ... something that's partly undefined, that's yet to be deciphered."

'A Clean Break', which dates back to the band's beginnings. It's a good song, perfectly in keeping with their earlier style, so why wasn't it released on the first or second album?

"I didn't like it at the time. I suppose it's a good song but I was swayed, probably by emotional reasons, into not liking it. It wasn't what I wanted to say at the time so I was blind to the fact that it was a good song."

From the old to the new and Talking Heads' fifth studio album, *Speaking In Tongues*, recorded in New York and produced by the band but with mixing assistance from Alex Sadkin. You must have felt apprehensive about producing your first Talking Heads' album?

"Yeah, but I'm happy with the way it turned out. However, having always worked with a producer I was afraid we'd get through the record and find out 'wait a minute, it's not a record, there's a missing ingredient, there's no producer'. But it came out sounding good, although I'd still like to work with Brian Eno again."

What's the main problem in producing your own stuff?

"It's difficult to hear your own things objectively. Somebody said you have to be real schizophrenic as you have to sing one minute and then the next minute stop singing and then assume the role of detached observer. You have

to play the role of producer on your own self by saying 'I think you can do that much better or I think you sang out of pitch there and if you try it a few more times you'll get it right!'"

*Speaking In Tongues* is a funky, uplifting album and there is a humour and lightheartedness in the music that immediately sets it apart from their previous four. Agree?

"Yeah, there is a lightness, it isn't as serious but there's always been humour in our stuff but it's been missed so I've tried to make it a little more obvious."

It is obvious with song titles like 'Making Flippy Floppy', 'Slippery People', 'Swamp' and 'I Get Wild/Wild Gravity'. There's also a surreal quality to these titles, so what's motivating your lyrics these days?

"Dreams."

Dreams?

"Yeah, I try to make lyrics that have the quality of dreams."

Does this apply to all of the songs?

"Yeah, not that they're all from dreams but I've tried to give them that kind of quality, a something that's partly undefined, that's yet to be deciphered."

Do these lyrics have a practical application in reality?

"The images, if and when they work, have a strong emotional charge to them so then they should have a meaning and effect on you in everyday life. They're not just dreamy wishy-washy sorts of things."

Musically, *Speaking In Tongues*, is also something of a departure. There isn't a big band in sight so, with the exception of backup female vocalists, the sound has returned to the spaces of the first three albums.

"We tried to get some of the space that we felt was in our earlier records as it was kinda nice. So we tried to keep the rhythmic punch and complexity of *Remain In Light* but simplify things a little bit or clean things out so there was space left in it."

The feel of the album is similar to the optimism and brightness of the Tom Tom Club's effort with deft keyboard asides supporting the main melody line, but Byrne's vocals and general attack prevent it from being lightweight.

The music was a band effort?

"Yeah, most of it was. They wrote the music and then I organised it a bit by helping write the melodies and words."

The end result is the best album of the year so far. Nine songs, each one a lesson of craftsmanship and the pairing of emotion with hard-wearing melodic funk. I can't stop playing it, or to a lesser extent, the new Fun Boy Three album, *Waiting*, produced by Byrne who, along with Jerry Dammers, are the only two musicians Terry Hall respects. How do you respond to that?

(Laughs) "Yeah and he broke up with Dammers."

How did you enjoy producing them?

"Most of it was quite good, it was fun and they were certainly easy to get along with. And I think after a couple of days they realised I have a sense of humour too. I enjoyed that record and I'm happy with the way it came out."

What made you produce them because their first album was hardly a good advertisement?

"Yeah, but there were a few things I liked on it and I thought here was a band willing to try things out. They weren't set in their ways and their identity hadn't quite gelled. It was a nice period to work with a band where they don't know exactly what they want to do. So they're open to trying things out, not necessarily my suggestions, but things of their own."

With the return of Bowie, Talking Heads and a magnificent new album from the Undertones, this year is already better than the last couple. Have you felt that rock'n'roll has been mediocre over the last two years?

"Yeah, the most exciting thing happening in New York has been rap music. But I get tired of it after a while."

It's hardly the stuff albums are made of.

"I'll say, but it's great in a club."

Talking Heads would be great in a club, so when are the band resuming live performing?

"I don't know. I'm mystified as to what our new line-up will be. It would be nice to have something different but still keep some of the good."

Good to have them back? Gerroff, the word is great.

George Kay

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