

DAVID BYRNE

This is a bonus. David Byrne, by reputation the Interview Subject From Outer Space, is smiling as he pours a cup of pale chamomile tea. If he's not exactly chatty, he hasn't fetched up that blank savant look to all the introductory chat. Lord, he's even hip to my excuse for not having seen his gig the night before. Y'know, special birthday, babysitter, the big chance to go out to dinner without the infant wanting to chew the cutlery...

"Yeah, our little girl's three now, but for the first year it was, like, where did our private life go?"

The need to drink chamomile first thing in the morning might seem to indicate an excess of nervous energy, but Byrne's as chilled out as you'd expect, a man in a black cowboy shirt, black jeans and a string tie, even if he did have to launch his world tour at the ghastly Logan Campbell Centre ("a good place to herd cattle").

"This tour lasts until November and I'm giving it my best effort... but I like it, I like being on the road. I have more time to myself, so I can actually listen to music, really focus on it."

But wasn't the bust-up with the rest of Talking Heads largely centred around his refusal to tour?

"It was a refusal to tour with them," he smiles wryly and gives a little laugh. There is no love lost here, it seems. There was a lot of bitter complaining from some other members of Talking Heads during the *Stop Making Sense* tour, that I was using the band as a design project and making it into a theatre piece or whatever... that sort of thing."

They wanted stripped-down rock and roll then?

"I think they just resented me getting involved in the staging and lighting and all that sort of thing. It would've been okay if we'd hired someone else to do it."

"From my point of view, I'd done small bits before, videos and that sort of thing. It just seemed like a natural step. I just thought, I can handle this now. It also seemed like an obvious idea to just start with a bare stage and put it together in front of the audience, an idea that no one had done before."

This isn't Byrne's first tour since Talking Heads. He took the 16-piece Latin band that played on his first (if you discount a welter of other collaborations) solo album, *Rei Momo*, out on the road a couple of years ago. He had fun but lost money.

"But it was a good way for me to get back into it, because it was a completely different kind of music from Talking Heads."

It's still body music, though, like the funky end of Talking Heads was.

"Yeah, like rap or funk. It still has that in common."

Do you think you've been drawn towards music for the body to offset the perception of you as... an egghead?

"I don't know. It's something I've always liked since I was a kid. I think the first things I ever heard were like James Brown on one side and the Byrds and the Beatles on the other. That's what got me excited — there was a real visceralness to rock or soul that was missing from the children's records and the pop that I'd heard before."

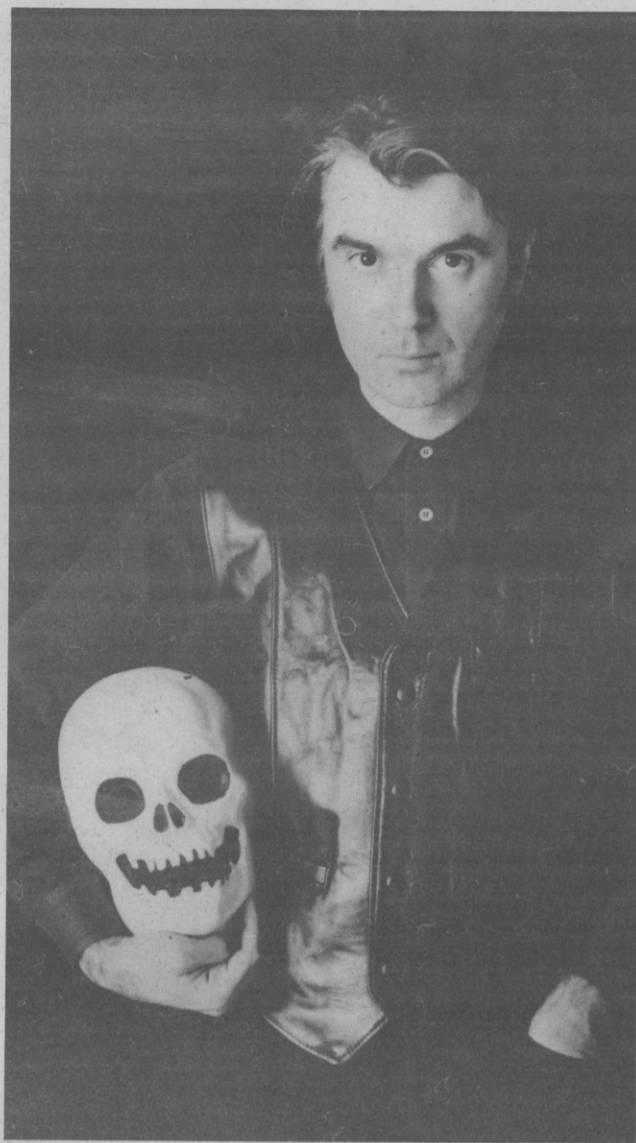
Some of the Latin players are back on his new album, *Uh Oh*, but they've been joined by others, most intriguingly George Porter Jr, bassist for New Orleans' legendary Meters, the band which became what we now know as the Neville Brothers.

"It was interesting because there's a lot of Latin in New Orleans and the early R&B out of there and Memphis. There's a Scott Joplin quote about how there wouldn't have been any jazz without what he called the 'Latin tinge'. The kind of riffs he did with his left hand were very much influenced by Cuban and Caribbean stuff."

You could also say that without the Meters there wouldn't have been hip-hop as we know it.

"Yeah — George has been making a bit of pocket money on samples lately! They're catching up on samples now, so the people doing it are a lot more careful. They realise that they have to go and check, make a deal ahead of time, because if they don't George or whoever can come along and say thank-you, I'll have all your profits."

"What a lot of groups need to be doing now is using samples to make a track and then learning how to play it, because they can't afford to pay off the people they're taking samples from. It's kind of a double-bind. I mean, it's great with the sample stuff that anyone can make a tune, anybody can throw the riffs together and do this and that... that's great."



But Byrne's own records of late, and certainly those on the world music label that is his pet project, Luaka Bop, have been very much about human noises played by real musicians.

"It's a lot of what I happen to like. But we've got an Indian record coming out on the label with a lot of sequencers and samplers on it. But from us it's maybe the last place you'd expect to hear that sort of thing, so it's okay. To hear sequencers and drum machines coming out of Madras is a little different from hearing it come out of New York."

You got your real hi-tech stuff out of the way early on. The Eno collaboration *My Life In The Bush of Ghosts* and Talking Heads' *Remain In Light* in particular are monumentally influential records.

"I guess so. I've heard that a lot of rappers really like the *Bush of Ghosts* record..."

If nothing else you brought those techniques into the popular domain.

"Mmm-hmm... we were hoping to get rid of the idea of the lead vocalist. See if you can make records without lead vocalists."

Which is a big element in contemporary dance music — it's just the records.

"Exactly. The lead vocalist is just another element in there. Quite often you don't even know who it is."

Some musicians these days are talking about it being more rewarding to write for other media, computer games for instance.

"The money, you mean?"

Just the idea of a different medium. I can imagine you writing an interactive novel with music for CD-ROM.

"That sounds pretty good. A friend of mine sometimes does these radio plays with music. It's not books on cassette, it's not a musical, it's something in between. I don't know the computer game stuff. I'd imagine you're kinda limited by the sounds the machines can generate, but maybe things have changed a lot."

So far, so jolly. Time perhaps for the Editor's suggested question, the one about the recent essay in *GQ* which essentially accused Byrne of being a dilettante, a man who has achieved success largely through his collaborators. Has he read it?

"No."

Byrne's face tightens. This is already looking like the question that ends the interview. Um, do you read much of your press?

"I read some of it. Not all of it."

What's your reaction to that kind of accusation?

"That I'm a dilettante? Well how am I supposed to react? Yes, it's absolutely true... I mean, what am I supposed to say to something like that?"

His face has visibly reddened, his eyes are wide open and his voice has shifted to quite a different register. David Byrne is seriously disinclined to discuss the matter further. Okay, so what about this children's book doing the rounds with his name on it?

"Someone took the lyrics to 'Stay Up Late' and illustrated it."

Did the idea of it being used in that way appeal to you?

"It seemed appropriate for that song. It seemed good that it wasn't one of those namby-pamby nicey-nicey children's books. Kids are much more into nastiness and messy stuff than they're given credit for."

It seems appropriate also given the fact that you've always handled the idea of naivete quite well. There was a lot of naivete in the *True Stories* movie — along with the idea that it was quite a nice human trait.

"I guess if you go into some place with an open mind, you're likely to get something out of it. Whether it's what's intended is another matter, but you at least get something out of it. If you go in with a closed mind you're gonna come out of it with nothing. So maybe that's the reason. I don't know..."

Musicians are always more keen on talking about pet projects than about themselves and Byrne is no exception. The Luaka Bop label is, indeed, something worth shouting about. Byrne and his two label staff have collected what is essentially non-Western pop music (and mostly from Central and South America) onto a string of hugely enjoyable compilations. He seems to like the label work more than fronting up as leading man with all the baggage that carries when you're David Byrne.

"It's really tempting just to do it all the time. The fun of it is just listening to records, listening to other people doing things and helping out where possible. It's what I and a lot of other people do any way — listening to records and if you like 'em, you tell your friends about 'em. I've kinda turned it into a small cottage industry. Very small..."

So do you turn up at the office at nine in the morning?

"A little later than that... 10, 10.30."

How's it gone commercially?

"It breaks even, that's about it. Of course the record companies and distributors say they want us to do more commercial material or something but our contention is we are doing commercial material, they just don't know it."

The latest project, *India Classics*, is a collection of the works of Indian producer Vijay Anand. Like most Indian pop artists, Anand writes for film.

"Film soundtracks are the pop records there. People listen to them over and over again and they go and see the films over and over again — like a video. The cinemas are huge and they're pretty cheap, so people go often."

"I'd heard this guy doing stuff where he was mixing Indian stuff with Western things, using samplers and sequencers and stuff — it was amazing. So we tracked him down in Madras and put together a bunch of his stuff. It's like a lot of modern pop groups — he doesn't play on it, he doesn't sing on it but nonetheless his name's on the package. He'd be given the title Music Director, which is sort of like composer / producer. He'll just write the topline melody, someone else writes the lyrics and he's present at the sessions."

That stuff seems to sound good in clubs too. Another Indian film writer, Bappi Lahiri, has club hits in Europe.

"Yeah, this stuff seems perfectly compatible for clubs. We gave some of the tracks to Dee-Lite and another guy in London to do dance mixes of. I haven't heard those yet but they should work out pretty good."

Do you like the term 'world music'? Some people hate it.

"I don't care either way. I'm old enough to remember when Talking Heads were called a punk band. That used to annoy me at the time, but then it faded away. So I figure the same thing will happen — a few artists will emerge and distinguish themselves away from that particular label and people will start to realise that each one's unique."

But will that happen with the media as we know it? Lahiri can come to London and fill Wembley Arena two or three nights in a row and no one outside the Indian community knows he's in town.

"Yeah, they play big places in New York and LA too. But it's totally segregated, in the same way that a lot of Latin music is in New York. They're playing huge shows all over town and it'll be an almost exclusively Latin audience most of the time, which is a great shame — I think people are missing out on a great part of what's happening in the city. But that's changing, sorta..."

But what's it going to take for pop music from other places to be accepted just as pop music? Some really strong personality?

"Yeah, something like that — a Bob Marley figure. Either that or something like what happened in LA — people setting fire to the city and saying 'hey, we're here, take some notice.'"

That's the kind of comment you wouldn't have winkled out of Byrne with a direct question. It's also the end of the interview. There's a bunch of ephemera to be signed before the band heads for the airport so Byrne can do his thing in dozens of other cities. It's a good time to have caught him — you sense that by tour's end in November, all the most obvious David Byrne interview questions will be drawing a major blank. He's a sensitive man, a man struggling to release the red-blooded samba in his soul, to do stuff he likes and to make a dollar on the side. He is... a very nice man.

RUSSELL BROWN



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