



**CLAIMS
DEPARTMENT**

T h e T a l k i n g H e a d s

This issue is the first of several I'm going to do this year about my favorite bands. Yes, there's going to be a lot of 1980s (Tears for Fears, Elvis Costello, David Bowie, The Thompson Twins, The Specials, The Violent Femmes, the B52s) and a fair deal of 1990s (Black 47, Tori Amos, Morrissey, Midnight Oil, The Mighty Mighty Bosstones) and a few 2000s (Florence + The Machine, Regina Spector, Lady Gaga, Arcade Fire, Pixx) and a little orchestral (Aaron Copland, Philip Glass, John Adams, George Gershwin) and no doubt, I had to start with the Talking Heads.

There are few bands that I love as deeply, or who formed so much of my appreciation of music in general. It was through the Talking Heads that I sought out bands like Big Star, Roxy Music, and eventually, The Arcade Fire.

The thing here is I won't just be focusing on the music. They all exist in an ecosystem, so if'n you want a thing that looks at the music in-depth, get the *33 1/3* series of books, and I think they have *Remain in Light* as one of the albums they cover. This will look at the bands, and the artifacts of those bands, and all they entail. This one? Little music.

Plus, this will feature a bit of a return to the original format. The first few issues were all about me writing the story of a trip along with a look at a book, some music, and a movie. Well, each of these issues will feature a bit on that. Sorta an addendum.

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***Once in a Lifetime* and the End of Video Art... sorta.**

David Byrne is first and foremost, and artist. He's unquestionably a member of the Avant Garde and it's really nothing more than Seymour Stein getting what The Talking Heads were doing and signing them to SIRE records that led to him becoming a pop star.

The music videos of the Talking Heads were always at least somewhat experimental. Music Television was not quite new, I mean that's basically what *Bandstand* and things like *The Midnight Special* were, not to mention Scope-a-Tones and the interstitials on *The Monkees*, but the Music Video as a format was still taking shape when *Once in a Lifetime* was recorded in 1980.

And that was when everything changed.

This is not my beautiful house.



The song itself was about rampant consumerism, with Byrne taking inspiration for both the lyrics and the delivery of them. He is alternating between talk-singing and actual singing. This same technique comes up in *True Stories* when John Ingle performed “Puzzling Evidence” as a preacher. There’s a little bit of Steve Reich’s *It’s Gonna Rain* in it, too. It’s clear that Byrne understood Reich from the get-go. Byrne hits it smart, but it’s the backing that makes it a song you get stuck in your head. Supposedly, while everyone was jamming with Brian Eno keeping his peaky little ears open for hooks, Chris Frantz started yelling what would become the bassline as they went along.

The song is great, but the video does so much more than the song.

The video opens with a multi-colored textured screen. This effect was achieved using a system like the Scanimate. Some of the early videos produced by the NYIT Graphics group, and those made by PIXAR, used this same sort of effect. It mimics the look of swells intersecting across the ocean. I believe this can be achieved by mapping multiple SINE and COSINE wave paths overlapping simultaneously.

Byrne then pops up for a few seconds, and then goes back down, acting out of breath. He’s wearing glasses, and a suit with bowtie. He then starts his dance and singing, but after a while, he ends up dancing, after a fashion, with four versions of himself mimicking the main David’s movements. After while, the waves that opened the video, appearing to lazily float across the screen. As the video progresses, we also get background images of preachers and the like, with Byrne in front of them in an early use of Chromakey (probably Bluescreen.)

Now, had this been 1975, all of this would have been potentially possible, but it also would have been more in its depths at a gallery than on television.



This is not my beautiful wife.

Video Art started just about the same time portable video cameras became available. Nam June Paik is often cited as the first significant application of Video Art when he shot the visit of the Pope. Paik would seriously move the idea of Video Art forward with his works like *TV Buddha*, but there were so many others, including Eleanor Antin, ANT FARM, Vito Acconci, Richard Serra, Ed Emshwiller, Chris Burden, and Mary Lucier. They moved the concepts forward, often by collaborating with technologists. Emshwiller was known for that, especially working with Alvy Ray Smith on the video *Sunstone*. Some performers, like Laurie Anderson, began to experiment with video art techniques, but they weren't nearly as often featured on television but as a part of art installations and events.



In 1980, Byrne, who had experimented with video art in the 1970s, teamed up with Toni Basil, who did the 'choreography' as much of it as there were. Working with the song, the video introduced all three of the major concepts of Video Art – performance, manipulation, and generation. (For more on that,

The takeaway message for me is about not letting life go to waste.



check out Andre Callot's amazing demonstration video [It's Video Art](#), though he goes with Performance, Abstraction, Appropriation as his three.)

Performance? That clear, I think. The use of Byrne's dancing and singing is a clear form of performance. That opening was certainly generated imagery, and that's where a lot of Video Art that's made an impact on the mainstream has lived. The opening of *Dancer in the Dark* is a fine example of that. Manipulation is easy; those images of preachers and the like that played behind David fulfill that. This was like a primer in the pathway of Video Art.

And it was here that Video Art moved into the mainstream. It was now possible for a Video Artist to make videos that could get play on MTV... well, once MTV was launched a few months later in 1981. Setting popular music to the kind of works that that video artists had been doing since the 1960s utterly changed how Video Art had to behave. The only real way for Video Art to work in the pre-*Once in a Lifetime* days was to work within the context of the gallery, which mean that audiences had an expectation of needing to pay attention. This difference is subtle, but key to understanding how both music videos and Video Art evolved. Works like *Crazy* by Gnarl's Barkley are certainly works of Video Art, but few would see them as such because they exist in the realm of the music video, which is a part of the commercial music and television industry.

The Talking Heads would have other impressive videos, including *Burning Down The House*, but this was the peak for their video output. It's hard to top something that re-defines an entire area of artistic expression.

Same as it ever was.



Into the blue again after the money's gone.



Stop Making Sense—The Best Concert Film

There is no better concert film than *Stop Making Sense*.

Yes, *Woodstock* was a miracle, but *Stop Making Sense* did something no other concert film had tried – it captured a live performance while replacing the theatrics with something far more artistic. It was minimalist at the same times as being an expression of a 1980s pop music ethos. It was beautiful to watch, and at the same time, hard to grasp fully until you really start to dig down. Along with *True Stories*, *Stop Making Sense* represents nearly everything that David Byrne ever could have dreamed was possible in the use of music on film in a relatable Avant-Garde format.

The film opens with distinctive credits, seemingly written by hand. It's very much the same as the ones done for the original *Men in Black* film. The sounds of the audience is all there is until we see a shadow, and eventually the shoes and feet, of David Byrne walking one to the stage. It's an effective opening, starting with the nothing, and building to something. This is ultimately

Psycho Killer—deceptively funky [new wave/no wave](#) song . AllMusic



the entire idea of the film, and I'd argue, the Talking Heads as a whole. It's hard to know how much of this was Byrne and co. and how much was director Jonathan Demme. There's an obvious influence of both, but the large vista shots of the stage scream of Demme's other films, while the progression speaks of Byrne's general artistic concepts.

Byrne walking out on to the stage with an acoustic guitar and a boombox. He approaches the mic and says, somewhat softly, "Hi, I have a tape I wanna play."

And he starts to play *Psycho Killer*.

Now, there's a drum machine track playing under him (I'm told this was played live by Chris Franz off-stage, but it honestly sounds like an 808) and the cinematography treats this as if Byrne is being revealed, as it goes in a long single shot from his feet, up his torso to his face. The song has already begun by the time it gets there. The stage behind him is bare, just some empty scaffolding, a ladder, a lighting rigs. After a while he walks away from the mic, headed towards the back, and the camera follows him, with some drums fills as he sorta stumbles about. After a while stage hands show up and start setting up which he's still playing. This expression, that the music is happening within a space that that requires technicians is an important aspect of the entire film. It establishes the artist's mark, that initially all there is the performer, and from there it builds.

Again, just like the Talking Heads themselves from CBGB's and The Rat to working with Brian Eno, to the final period where they were the biggest alternative band in America in the age before REM make that demarcation unnecessary.

This is followed by a much typical performance, with Tina Weymouth and David on stage together performing *Heaven* with just bass and acoustic guitar. There's also a backing vocal, again, performed off-stage.



Heaven is a place, where nothing ever happens.

And again, stage hands show up to bring in a platform with the drums which Chris Frantz eventually jumps on to and then they start playing *Thank You For Sending Me An Angel*, which was a very straight performance, and then they perform what I think is their best early song, *Found a Job*, adding Jerry Harrison on guitar. The techs appear again, this time setting up more mics for backup singers Ednah Holt and Lynn Mabry, and a chair and bongos for Alex Weir. This delivered the great work *Slippery People*, with it's highly processed vocals by Byrne. The shooting here is a bit frantic until after the major break leading in to the climax where we get a lot of long-shots and some of the most iconic shooting. This is a segment that is meant to establish The Heads as a band of expansion. This becomes more obvious when Steve Scales and the legend Bernie Worrell on Clavichord is added. This is never excess, though the performance of *Burning Down the House* is a masterpiece that would have been the kind of performance that would have closed a lesser concert films.

And they are all lesser concert films.

Byrne is the focus of most of the shooting of *Burning Down the House*, mostly shot torso-tight. His energy is what carries the song, but it comes nowhere near the level of energy that they achieve with *Life During Wartime*. This is where The Heads are the drivers, and the attention is spread around a lot, even if Byrne's legendary full-body wiggle is the iconic image from the entire film. When the entire front of the stage, Byrne, Weymouth, Weir, Mabry, and Holt, lean forward into a run, it's an incredible amount of power as the back row on percussion and keyboards texture the entire piece. Even when Byrne's gets gimmicky by continuing to sing into a mic stand that has been lowered to its lowest height, it feels authentic because we're supposed to be thinking that he's messed up.

After that, the projectors show up. Rear-projected words, white letters on red backgrounds, punctuate *Making Flippy Flop-*



py. The lighting changes, and so do the clothes. They recorded it over I believe four days, and this shows because Byrne was covered in sweat at the end of *Life During Wartime*, and Weymouth has ditched her awesome pant-suit for a skirt and an tights. This is shot much in long-shot, allowing the projections to take effect, but even we're in 1-and-2 shots without seeing the projections, there's a sense that they're there, and not at all important.

But it's also what this has all been building to; this is the Talking Heads as the drivers of a new concept. They're through with stripped-down, and with traditional huge band stuff and are going for re-definition. The big thing here is that the simple words can be seen as a direct reference to the art of Ed Rauscha, especially works like *OOF*.

The projects and lighting then goes all red for *Swamp*. The performance makes great use of the coloring, but the most important lighting is a spotlight that illuminated only Byrne. It's highly effective, and even when we're given close-ups of Weymouth and the others they're entirely lit from behind and in reflection. When Byrne begins staggering around the stage, then theatrically limping across it, his singing is the highlight of the entire song. It's a low-down song, and Worrell does not get enough credit for how much he transforms this song adding a unique funk that only a master of Funkentelechy can provide. Still, this is one which designed to make Byrne larger-than-life.

And then *What A Day That Was*.

Everyone is lit from below, and it's kinda creepy, but it's a literal flip, as eventually they go to a full-stage shot that shows what the audience of the show saw, that the shadows of the band were protected from the front onto the scrims that had been used for the rear-projections. This is shot in a lot of close-ups, including one that shows Weymouth seeming somehow concerned. The relationship between the members was always one of creation through tension, and that shows here, likely simply through a



shot selection by editor Lisa Day.

This is the best thing in the entire film as far as getting across the idea that they're stripping back down again, only this time they've grown to their full potential, and this time they're simply stripping away what you can see, not what they do. That's a huge message for a band that never stopped experimenting.

It's also important to note that this may have been the first film to have the sound fully digitally produced.

This Must Be The Place is a work of intimacy. The three singers, Weymouth, and Weir, are all standing next to a lamp. The song is one of my least fave on the show, but the presentation is about taking it back, about being in every home in America, about being omnipresent. The rear-project includes images of books on selves, extreme close-ups of body parts, of mundane images that in and of themselves have no inherent meaning (like everything, you know...) but they're tying themselves to the idea that this is them; The Talking Heads are as ubiquitous as the images that are being projected.

Yes, this segment is about The Talking Heads as MTV stars.

Am I reaching? No; I'm a pseudo-intellectual!

Byrne does some nice slapstick with the lamp.

Then, we get *Once in a Lifetime*.

I've written extensively about the video that defined the transition of Video Art from the Gallery to MTV, and when Byrne puts on the glasses does his 'being pelted with small cans of baked beans' dance, but this is a performance art piece, and while it's a great piece of concert performance, it's not exactly got the power of the incredibly precise production that made the record version work. This is the only one that lacks the impact of the record version of the song presented, but really, it's the music video

"Seeing the movie is like going to an austere orgy." Pauline Kael



version that makes *Once in a Lifetime* a complete song. The lighting of Byrne only from the right front is an effective tool, and the bit where slowly turns his body into a reverse-C is a great shot.

Genius of Love by the Tom Tom Club is a great song, and here it's slightly out of place because they just perform it straight. The key is, of course, Byrne isn't on-stage. Weymouth isn't exactly the same level of energy as David, but given the ball to run with in her own direction, she doesn't miss. They finally get kinda artsy, with a strobe light, but really, it didn't need to be there. I always liked the song, and it's not until the break-down that it really hits. When Tina finally does some significant dancing, it's just sorta an added bonus.

Oh, and then it's *Girlfriend is Better*.

Oh, and also it's the first appearance of The Big Suit.

In the hands of, or I guess on the body of, a performer like Byrne, anything can be made into a work of absolute art, and the Suit on his lanky frame has a flattened sense to it that makes it seem to be enveloping him, as if the suit is the signifier of success and it's subsuming him save for his face and his voice. The shooting here is masterful. It's fluidity only improves the delivery of what might be the most impressive song they ever wrote.

It's sad that he only did the one song with the suit, but the performance of *Take Me to the River*, which I'm not as big a fan of, but I have to say they perform the hell out of, and I love when David goes and introduces the band. That feels like an important piece of this, that in this, the cleanest of the songs as far as presentation, is where the band is brought to the forefront.

The show closes with a downbeat performance to start before they go into full band mode with *Crosseyed and Painless*. It's a good performance of a good song, but the important part is that a literal curtain goes down. The crowd is going crazy, and

the curtain rises again, but on the empty stage, almost as if the show had never happened. The idea that this is where it ends, that at some point the Talking Heads would leave the stage and all there would be was the stage, that's so important to the idea of The Talking Heads as a band. They would disappear a few years later, and it was like they had never been there. By 1991, Grunge had hit, and the 1990s saw Alternative, or College Rock, or Modern Rock, or whatever your part of the world called it, became a part of pop, and while the Heads had kinda done that, never to the level that happened in the early and mid-1990s. It is documents like *Stop Making Sense* that allow us to fully come to terms with that, and as such, it is an important artifact. I am so happy it's on the National Film Registry, and I hope that it gets another theatrical release for the 40th anniversary.



"one of the greatest rock movies ever made." Leonard Maltin



TALKING HEADS: 77

Art School Kids—Talking Heads Album Covers

The Talking Heads always had great covers for their albums. This started with their 1977 album *77*. This is clearly influenced by artists like Ed Rauscha. It's the words *Talking Heads: 77* in a mustard yellow across the top of an orange-red field. It is bare, but it certainly speaks to the music they were making at the time. You could call this minimalist, though I think the better word is scaled down.



Can't sleep; bed's on fire. Don't touch me I'm a real live-wire.

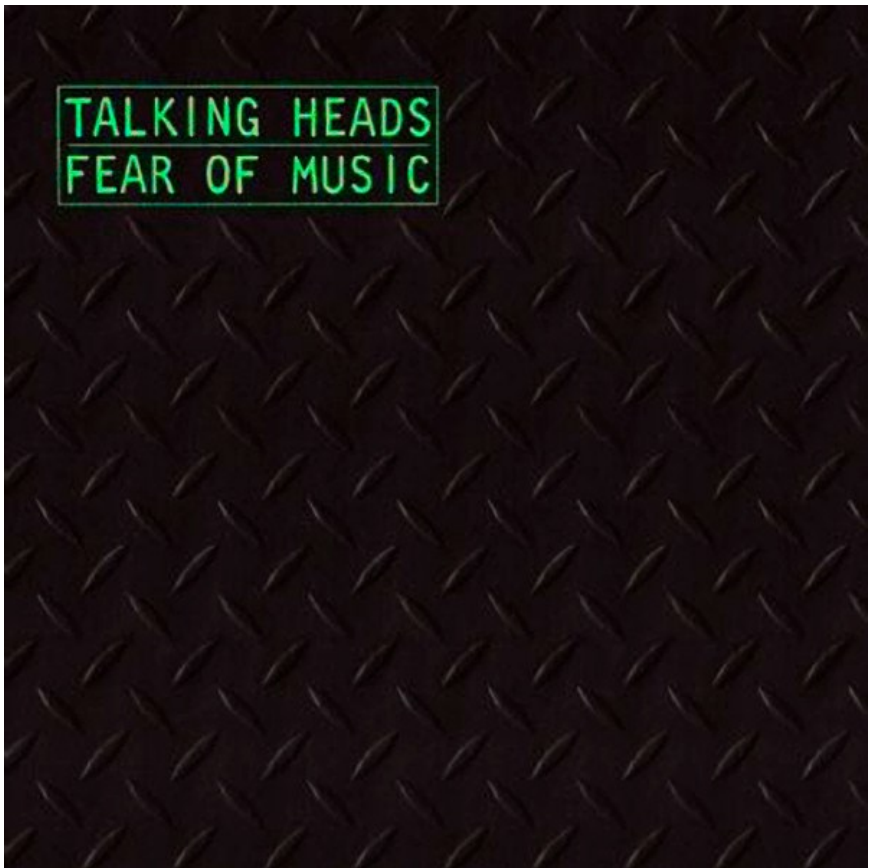
Album covers in the late 70s tended to be photos, and often very busy ones at that. This is a clear break from that, and it's a more artistic approach in doing so. It always made this one easy to spot when I was going through thrift show record bins.

More Songs About Buildings and Food has an incredibly distinctive cover created by the fantastic artist Jimmy DeSana. It's a photo mosaic made up of more than 500 Polaroid shots. It's a cover with each photo somehow coming across



as different though unified. It's kinda disquieting, actually. This more conceptual piece seems to say a lot more about the band at this moment. It's as if they're still coming together to form not only a single unit as a band, but that each of them is almost, though not yet, fully-formed themselves.

Fear of Music is one of the most interesting covers, and again, at first glance, it's a color field, though in this case is textured steel flooring image, with a bit of boxed text (Talking Heads/*Fear of Music*) the field is gunmetal grey,



which calls to mind the paintings of Ad Reinhardt or the Black Paintings of Robert Rauschenberg, about whom we'll talk more in a minute.



Let it never be said that David Byrne was the only artsy one of the Talking Heads. Weymouth and Frantz were art school kids too, and they conceived of an album cover working with Walter Bender and the ArcMac (now MIT Media Lab) team. Now, computers had been used in graphic design for more than a decade by 1980, with the pioneers com-

Remain in Light yields scary, funny music to which you can dance



ing from Bell Labs, including my friend Aaron Marcus. Frantz and Weymouth had been auditing classes at MIT, and that brought her into contact with a number of folks in the computer science and technology groups, including Steve Fisher. She came up with a fairly simple concept – four Grumman Avengers flying in a row over a scenic background. I always thought this was a riff on 1940s and 50s travel shots by airlines like TWA where they'd show their planes flying over various scenic areas, but in this case, they were war planes doing the same. Bender's group digitized the plane image and colored it red with yellow highlights, then created a typeface and inverted the As. This cover was absolutely beautiful, and it paid a kind of homage to Weymouth's dad who had flown planes in WWII.

And they didn't use it.



That's not entirely true, they turned it into the back cover, though the front was a bit more complicated. They took a four-banger photo of the group, much like the cover of *Let It Be* by the Beatles. The MIT folks then scanned the images and used

red blocks to cover everything but the eyes, nose, and mouth of each member. This was a blotchy affair, and it took forever. I believe it was a Digital Equipment Corporation PDP-10 (or perhaps a VAX-11/780) that did the work. These would have been painfully slow to work with, but the graphics capabilities were there. The result is a much less lyrical cover than the Avengers one, but it's iconic and actually says something about the band. The specially designed font that was used on the back (with the upside down 'A's) is used again, very large at the top. The album title is practically tiny at the bottom. The faces dominate, but they're also largely obscured. That is an image that a band who has come to the point where they can obscure their faces can get away with.

Still, the original was better.

I'm going to tell you something you might not believe – there is a Grammy for Best Package Design. Now, this is weird, but covers were so important to the world of music

when the record store was the basis for almost all the money the business made. The regular cover for *Speaking in Tongues* is pretty good. Created by Byrne, it's a blue circle with a spiral meant to invoke a record. The band



Watch out; you might get what you're after.

name and titling are uneven, broken into different words. The way it's all put together makes this feel very much like one of the Jasper Johns pieces of the mid-1960s. It was a good cover, but it wasn't the one that won the Grammy.

That was by Robert Rauschenberg.

The outer holder is a clear plastic clamshell. The record itself was translucent with a very Rauschenbergian collage image. It's a remarkable piece of design, but more im-



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The album is exceptionally cool, though not the ground-breaking impact that *Speaking in Tongues* and *Remain in Light* were.

Naked, the last studio album, is a gorgeous old picture frame, with a photo of a chimpanzee and the word 'Naked' in a laurel with 'Talking Heads' below it. It's such a simple cover, and the most straight forward conceptually. I like it. It's their last studio album, though the covers for the compilations like *Sand in the Vaseline* still manage to evoke Talking Heads-style artiness.

In Short: The Trip, The Book, The Movie

As usual, for Christmas, we went to the desert. We visited my Mom in Beaumont, California, about half-hour from Palm Springs, so we went to Palm Springs. It was a good trip, one where I got a little rest, and more importantly, I got some media time!

First, I listened to an audiobook! I had never read *The Great Gatsby*, even though the Luhrmann film version is one of my faves. It's one of those books that reads so much faster than it feels like it should. Fitzgerald's all about style, particularly when compared to plotting. The voice of every character worked together in a form that felt like a really well-constructed screenplay. I loved it, even if I knew the story almost by heart.

At my Mom's, I usually cook about 1/2 the meals. I did a standing Crown Rib Roast of Beef and it was really good. Super simple, just salt, pepper, garlic, and then mirepoix and mushrooms in the bottom of the pan, soaking up juices.

We watched a lot of Food Network, but I did watch a few short films, notably one that I'd seen about 25 times before—*Love in the Time of Monsters*. It's a horror film with a lot of comedy, especially from Michael McShane. I love the story that somehow combines *Toxic Avenger* with Bigfoot, and even though I have trouble with gore, I really dug the whole dang thing!

