

Talking Sense

Interview with Talking Heads' Jerry Harrison

It was Pete Townshend who once said that it was no use progressing unless you took the people with you. Poor Pete, as the Who got progressively worse the more fans they seemed to pick up. Maybe there's a moral there and maybe it's one that could be considered when

looking at the current popularity of Talking Heads.

Ever since the trio of Chris Frantz, Tina Weymouth and David Byrne formed the Artistics at the Rhode Island School of Design and later moved the band to become part of New York's CBGB's

scene, Talking Heads have always been presented as some sort of intellectual alternative to the traditional American love of roots 'n' raunch:

"We've always been outside of the American scene. Obviously we don't fit in like Bruce Springsteen does. Some people think that we were innovative years ago but now they're used to our songs so they're not as aware of that. There's a whole group of people who've just discovered us," explained Jerry Harrison from a Milwaukee studio last month.

Harrison joined the band in 1977, prior to their first British tour. His previous experience included playing keyboards for Jonathan Richman's Modern Lovers and he appeared on their legendary John Cale-produced debut. In Talking Heads his competence was needed:

"In the beginning I was a more experienced musician than everyone except maybe Chris. And I had a great backlog of knowledge of old rock 'n' roll and other types of songs. In some ways I rounded the edges but I made the parts become more clear. I freed David Byrne from being so pressed to being a singer and a guitar player at the same time. I started by reinforcing both what he and Tina did and then I grew into it until I involved myself in the writing of that music.

"As we moved into the layered approach of *Remain In Light* and *Speaking In Tongues*, I became a contributor to the way the various parts of the band worked together. And because of the ex-

plosion in keyboard technology I've had to keep up with the possibilities of sounds that synthesisers afford you, and that's certainly true on *Little Creatures*, where I played all of the keyboard parts. And I'm more interested in the technical aspects, be it mastering or mixing, than the others."

It didn't take me too long to realise why Harrison was doing this phone interview and not Byrne, the usual spokesman. Byrne has never been the easiest subject to talk to. He co-operates, but his answers are rarely expansive; his appearance on *RWP's* report of Sweetwaters South in Christchurch last year showed that much. Harrison proved to be the opposite — articulate and coherent to the point where editing almost became unnecessary.

Big Bands ...

The first three Talking Heads albums defined the band's ambitions and progression as a four-piece in search of that point where the funk of the Frantz rhythm section best complemented Byrne's emotional hang-ups. '77 was a buncha songs, "wow, we've just done an album"; *More Songs* was cute and funky Eno didn't mess it up, but it was *Fear of Music* with its tensions and traumas which epitomised this phase of the band.

Next stop anti-climax, unless ...

"There were so many parts played on *Remain In Light* that it was impossible for the four of us to do it so the big band grew out of this need. I hired the whole band in one afternoon and as an experiment we played at festivals in Toronto and New York. In Toronto we just killed them. Elvis Costello was so afraid to go on stage after us that he delayed for about 45 minutes. We were on as the sun came down and it was incredible. From then on we all felt that it was a calling, like this thing had been born that we couldn't stop. "It came about in an organic way. And one of the differences between us and say a lot of bands in England is that our girl singers and percussionists aren't just added on to live up the show, they played parts we had written for them and so in a way they were duplicating us. But we also gave them the sense that they could do whatever they wanted and they could change their parts as long as they served the original idea. And that's how the songs became moulded."

In 1980, *Remain In Light* anticipated and was instrumental in creating a funk revival that has dominated critical thinking until this year. The freneticism of the first side blended James Brown, Sunny Ade and David Byrne into three tracks that had more energy than purpose. Compulsive five years ago, but these days you lift the needle. The second side was a different story. Byrne as usual was being oblique but the songs were stronger on aura and melody.

Making this whole album work as a live entity must've posed problems:

Touring after 'Stop Making Sense':

"One of the reasons we're not touring straight away is to allow *Little Creatures* to sink in, to see how we're gonna change next time we go out."

"Yeah, for a while we used the Sunny Ade approach, where for the *Remain In Light* tour the band was in a long line in front of the stage and at times it was hard to hear what was going on and sometimes it sounded as though we were two bands playing at once. We had some remarkable shows and it was a great band when we were on form, but it was hard to be as organised as we liked to be so we started being more particular as to how we set things up. We tried to establish a sense of discipline that perhaps we'd had earlier."

On the evidence of *Stop Making Sense* and the Christchurch Sweetwaters show last year it looked as if the band didn't have enough freedom to depart from the strict arrangements?

"Our show required some things that were hard to do in a festival arrangement and where there's more people involved, I think there's more need to have things pre-arranged. But I don't think anyone felt constricted as everyone could change what they did from night to night in certain places as long as they filled the same function."

In 1978 Talking Heads toured New Zealand between *More Songs* and *Fear of Music*. It was a stark, brilliant show stripped to the essentials of rock 'n' roll on the edge. The band stated that they didn't want to insult the audience with the superfluous addition of fancy lightshows and props. Six years later there were changes:

"We realised when we started playing larger places that the even lighting approach, which I still find very attractive, became impossible as half the audience got further away and so their view of things had to be more directed. Plus the possibility of using lights, props, slides and things just became exciting and we adopted those things into the framework of what we considered to be consistent with our general approach."

Would the band return to the smaller venues
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SATELLITE SPIES

Destiny in Motion



Destiny In Motion
THE ALBUM

Reaction

