



## TALKING HEADS' DAVID BYRNE INTERVIEW

Few people, even Byrne himself, could have predicted that the new Talking Heads' album would be a radical departure from the previous three. Sure, each album marked a progression in the band's music, the last two being prodded by Eno's production, and, as such, Talking Heads have avoided repetition of any sort, something few bands can lay claim to.

But *Remain In Light* has done far more than avoid repetition as it has swung the band onto an entirely different emphasis, but one which, when you accept and understand it, presents the necessary change to keep the spirit of Talking Heads alive.

### Byrne, Baby, Byrne

It was 10.30 am Milwaukee and 5.30 am Dunedin and neither Byrne nor I were capable of advanced philosophical phone dissertations at those hours. The Heads were in the middle of an American tour and Byrne was still in his hotel room which meant he was probably still in bed and he sounded sleepy, vaguely sluggish but definitely friendly and interested.

The conversation naturally centred around the new album, one which presented the usual Talking Heads' surrealist cover and obtuse title. Why *Remain in Light*?

"Well it was to emphasise the ethereal feeling or the spiritual or subtle side of the songs."

Adrian Belew, who surpassed all superlatives when he took the lead guitar spot with Bowie's hand in the 1978 tour, has appeared on *Remain In Light* but, according to Byrne, only on two tracks, 'The Great Curve' where his Fripp-inspired contributions betray him, and on the beautiful 'Listening Wind'. Belew, a craftsman, has been playing with his own band in New York, and it was there that Byrne ran into him:

"I don't know the name of his band, I think it's just the Adrian Belew Band and they were playing around New York so Brian, Jerry and I went to see him and were impressed so we asked him to play in the studio."

### Byrne on Eno

The first side of the new album is devoted to three pieces of jungle funk, extensions of the ideas that constituted 'I Zimbra' on *Fear of Music*. Eno, who has co-written the album with Byrne, makes his presence felt in no small measure especially on the widespread keyboards' infiltrations which had edged out Byrne's guitar prominence. How does he feel about the keyboards' takeover?

"That doesn't bother me because I played lots of other things on the album. I know people might miss the guitar but for me it was more of a challenge to move away from it, and play guitar is almost the last thing I wanted to do."

Co-writing with Eno must have altered his methods of songwriting?

"Everything became collaboration because of the method of recording and composition as we just went into the studio with nothing and gradually evolved things and added bits. So it has changed in that respect. Also a good part of the music was done before the lyrics and so I had to take my cues from the music."

When in New Zealand XTC's Andy Partridge, who keeps tabs on Byrne so to speak, said the forthcoming Byrne-Eno album had ran adrift because an opera singer who sang on the album had died, and difficulties had arisen over obtaining next-of-kin consent for any posthumous recording. He verified this but apparently they have side-stepped the problem by using another vocal but as to further association with Eno in a Talking Heads' writing capacity Byrne was non-committal:

"I don't know."

### The Beat Goes On

Trying to wheel David Byrne around to a specific discussion of the songs, especially the lyrics, of *Remain In Light* was difficult for reasons that will become obvious.

The opening track, 'Born Under Punches' I took to be a celebration of survival:

"In a way yeah. I took a lot of the lyrics from

evangelists and people who were on the radio who use some very unusual metaphors. I would pick up on a particular phrase they had and that would set me off on a train of thought. But I don't know what the lyrics mean as I haven't sat down and worked out what I've said although I worked very hard on the lyrics for the album."

How does he see the album as relating to the others?

"It's very difficult although some of the numbers ended up sounding not as difficult as I thought. But the underlying principle is very different, the way that the songs hold together as they don't have any chord changes. Over the first three our style changed gradually but for the new one it has changed suddenly and now it has a different emphasis as the singer is not so emphasised and the songs are more about general philosophies and less about personal ones."

Not only has the band's album style changed but they've also made changes in their live performance by including more personnel:

"The new enlarged band has been going real well with people like Busta Jones on bass, Bernie Worrell from the Funkadelics and Steve Scales. Nona Hendryx isn't with us live but Dolette McDonald is, she's done independent studio vocals around New York."

So how does it feel fronting a much enlarged line-up?

"There's less emphasis on personal catharsis on stage as there are more people doing different things and the nature of the music has more of an ecstatic celebratory feeling but I still have to come forward and sort of conduct. Tina isn't always on bass as she swops over and plays synthesiser and percussion. Everyone seems to be enjoying themselves."

This line-up appeared at a recent "new wave" Toronto Festival, Heatwave, with such luminaries as the Pretenders, Costello and Rockpile. Byrne said that Talking Heads "stuck out as not fitting in with the style of music but

that didn't concern me." The new-look Heads were well received.

### Album Assessment

*Remain In Light*'s jostling industry, especially on the "African sounding" (Byrne's terminology) three songs of the first side, will cause apprehension in those people who, like me, were happily conditioned to the sparse guitar orientated structure of the earlier albums. But eventually, the new songs make their own demands, and Byrne's angst, although less personalised, is still the crucial element in the music's power.

"Take a look at these hands" he yells as 'Born Under Punches' ignites and the song takes off with a real funkadelic chorus of "And the heat goes on". 'Crosseyed and Painless' and 'The Great Curve' follow a similar tread with equal density and liveliness.

Side Two and 'Once In A Lifetime' with its life-is-chance message is funk at half-throttle and sports one of the best melodies on the album. 'In Motion' is also comparatively restrained and from thereon the Eno influence becomes decisive. On 'Seen and Not Seen' he provides a typically shimmering mid-tempo basis for Byrne's spoken lyrics and, by using Eno's pastel talents by way of *Another Green World*, the following track, 'Listening Wind', is probably the most beautiful song Talking Heads have come up with. Finally 'The Overload', slow and menacing, again uses an arrangement of brooding despondency that is stamped with Eno hallmarks.

Comparing the new album is difficult because it is so different from the other three, but suffice to say that *Remain In Light* succeeds as a fourth Talking Heads' album. And that of course makes it mandatory.

When compared to this band (almost) everyone else seems to be doing the standing still.

George Kay

