DAVID BYRNE

"THE ACT OF SINGING [LIVE] RECREATES THE EMOTIONS THAT WENT INTO THE SONGS IN THE FIRST PLACE—LIKE ADDING WATER TO FREEZE-DRIED FOOD."

Phenomena David Byrne can't completely explain:
How British pre-teens know his club tracks better than most Americans
Movies shown in museums where you're not allowed to sit
How presentation affects perception

There doesn't seem to be much need for a standard introduction here. This is David Byrne. And he has a very excellent new album, Grown Backwards, *easily his most stylistically varied, probably his most delicately beautiful.*
—Dave Eggers

THE BELIEVER: You're on a tour right now for *Grown Backwards.* Where were you tonight? Here is my guess: Mumbai, née Bombay.

DAVID BYRNE: Tonight we were in a lovely little opera house here in Newcastle, England. A drunk woman got the show off to good start by singing from her seat. I halted the show but she continued. The audience was laughing. I didn't want to turn it into a thing at her expense, so we began. Later, she was doing some wobbly dancing in front of the stage with her jean jacket on backwards, buttoned up to the top. She must have had help with that.

BLVR: There's something about your live shows. People really dance—which isn't what everyone would expect. They're joyous events, and you do a fair amount of dancing yourself, which drives the audience sort of wild. They love it when you dance.

DB: In hindsight I realize that at first I used to get onstage out of some desperate need—I was so painfully shy that strangely it was the only way I could express myself. So it was cathartic and powerful, but hardly what you would call pleasure. When Talking Heads became a big funk ensemble, I sensed there was something more.

Illustration by Charles Burns

I began to dance, to enjoy myself, to sense the connection between secular music and the gospel church, with the ecstatic religions like Candomblé and Santeria. Now it's completely pleasurable—just the physical and emotional pleasure of singing is completely transporting. The act of singing recreates the emotions that went into the songs in the first place—like adding water to freeze-dried food, the emotions get reconstituted and the singing is the water you add. And I still dance, sort of.

BLVR: You take a lot of photographs on the road, and your ears are obviously open to new sounds from around the world. Do you still get a lot, artistically speaking, from seeing these places, from traveling, or is a grind after a while?

DB: I love the chance to explore these towns. Today we were in Newcastle and I rode my folding mountain bike over to the BALTIC, their new contemporary art center. I swerved around puddles of vomit and broken bottles and immediately saw the beginnings of a kind of vision, a landscape of desolation mingled intimately with big new blobby glass buildings and sparkly new hotels and conference centers. The whole perverse Marxian view was so damn obvious—and this may have been one of the towns where it occurred to him. Duh. (It's certainly not an original vision, but it was so perfectly visually represented.) I could see the arts and spectacles to amuse the public and to feign culture, the conference centers where businessmen meet and figure out how to extract money and resources from these hungover lads and lassies.

I heard that the lovely classic courthouse building across the street from the hotel was one of three major courts in Britain—one in Bristol, one in London, and this one. Significantly, the main shipping and coal export points. There was a sort of hidden spiral staircase that led from inside the courthouse down the cliff bottom to the docks. So those found guilty could be trotted down the spiral stairs and right onto a boat bound for Australia.

So, yeah, it's all still stimulating. Lonely, though.

BLVR: Who decides on the length and itinerary?

DB: The length of the tours are kind of my decision based on what seems appropriate and what it will do to my life. My daughter will join me on part of this tour to help sell T-shirts and other goofy items, so we will have some continuity of a relationship. Otherwise, long tours can do a bit of damage.

BLVR: Rumor has it that you travel with a bicycle. How long has that been going on?

DB: This is at least the third tour. So since the mid-nineties at least. I've ridden in the strangest places—Istanbul, Buenos Aires, Reykjavik… Not every place is used to or conducive to cycling, but it's great, it makes me feel like I'm not totally trapped by the bus-hotel-venue cycle. I feel like I have a life and some freedom. For me it's a means of transportation, though. I don't do it for sport, as I hear Kraftwerk does.

BLVR: Do people perceive you and your work differently in different countries? It seems like this happens a lot, where in America a musician is one thing, but in Germany—for example, since you mentioned Kraftwerk—they're seen as something very different. Are there places where you feel they understand your work most intuitively?

DB: Well, yeah. Oddly, it seems to go in cycles or phases. For about the last ten years I've been sort of unappreciated in Germany, for example, to put it mildly. Don't know exactly why. I sometimes put it down to the fact that immediately after all the goodwill Talking Heads accumulated, I immediately followed it by a tour with an all-Latin band (the *Rei Momo* tour). That might have pissed some people off; maybe I shot myself in the foot. But there may have been other factors, too. The younger German scene is notoriously enamored of techno and electronic dance music, and while I like the fringes of that scene (Mouse on Mars, Kruder and Dorfmeister) the center of the techno world just didn't relate to where I was going, I guess. I was seen as a has-been who had veered way the hell off course. I was seen as someone busy working out his neuroses in Latin America.

I also have realized that the German audiences obvi-

ously don't think they underappreciate me—they filled the venues and were wildly enthusiastic—but the venues are smaller, so I lose money. I asked a man in Prague, "Who tours here?" and there were some surprises—Dave Matthews Band, for example—hugely successful, but have never once played Prague. I myself can't imagine not playing there.

Meanwhile, the Mediterranean countries became more supportive over the last decade. I often put it down to my sometime inclusion of Latin beats and melodies in my music and my label's support of Spanish-language and Portuguese artists. Or maybe my whole approach became more generally sensuous and Latin and they felt, yeah, he's come over to our side. So I can tour Greece, the former Yugoslavian countries, up and down Italy and all over Spain. I personally love that. It seems natural to me, until I turn around and notice that the other acts touring those areas are wildly different than most of the acts touring the States, for example. Maybe some of us cultivate these audiences and others just focus elsewhere. Maybe that's as it should be—that there is less globalization of music than people think.

BLVR: How did Latin America like those records?

DB: More than a decade ago I took the Latin-band tour to South America, which was like taking coal to Newcastle, I thought. But much of the young audience there, while they had heard Afro-Cuban music and sambas, often from corny records their parents had and that they had grown up with, they were at that time more interested by the punk thing that was happening up north. Punk had such a great do-it-yourself attitude attached and that had a resonance. There was a sense of possibility. So for me to go to Mexico or Buenos Aires and play that hick stuff was for them a weird head-spin for sure. Here was Mr. Psycho Killer coming to Mexico and playing salsa. How weird is that?

I have a funny feeling it had the effect of saying to them, in retrospect, "This music, your own music of a certain type, is OK with me, I love it, you've got something incredible right here and you can appreciate it, appropriate it, use it, borrow from it and mix it up with some of that punk-rock attitude." So that record and tour, while getting a mixed reception from the rockers in the United States, was pretty warmly received south of the border. It led two very separate lives.

BLVR: Meanwhile, your last big single, "Lazy," was a huge hit pretty much everywhere.

DB: That was a collaboration with some English DJs called X-Press 2. "Lazy" was a huge club and radio hit all over the world (number one in Damascus!)—everywhere except the United States. Last night we performed in Leicester, UK, and down in the front row was what looked like an eight-year-old kid (with his mum) singing along to "Lazy." So I've learned that it's all relative and completely confusing. Last tour I got some of the warmest receptions ever in the United States. I played the Ryman in Nashville (the original Grand Ole Opry) for example, which was an honor and a thrill. The first time Talking Heads came to Nashville we played at the Exit/In and the emcee introduced us as "punk comes to Nashville, for the first time, and probably for the last time." Times change.

BLVR: You've said, I think, that playing live now accounts for a good portion of your income, and of musicians like yourself. Is that really the case?

DB: A good portion of my income, yes, but probably the lion's share comes from publishing—the songwriting, which is distinct from record sales. But I have reached a place where I can tour and don't need to have a new record out, which is great. People will simply come to see what I'm up to. Sometimes that uncoupled relationship is depressing, as when I do a show and then folks ask me, "Hey, when are you going to do a new record?" when one has been out for a few months. But I can't complain. I see recording and touring as related, but as very separate skills and activities. Some people can do one but not the other. I feel that sometimes my performances in the past have not been up to some recordings, and sometimes the recordings are nowhere near as exciting as the live versions. Sometimes the recordings are tarted up too much, as they say over here.

Record companies have encouraged the quasi-myth

that touring is what "supports" record sales—that it generates press, excitement, and a buzz that then carries over to the sales counter; so the story goes, anyway. Well, maybe in some cases it does work that way—the show has to be good, for starters—but I've done tours where I've played to a larger number of people than the number of new records sold. They are really two different experiences and only the songs and voice are necessarily the same.

This adherence to the carrot-and-stick, cause-and-effect myth forces musicians who just aren't really very good at performing to spend ages getting a band and show together, then to tour for a long time—often thereby getting themselves more and more in debt to the record company, as the record company often picks up the slack and the losses. Presumably it's done in order to kickstart the artist's career, or so the theory goes. I think it just isn't true—or at least is only true a small percentage of the time. These particular musicians would be better served spending their time and money recording and writing more, if they are writers. Or figuring out another mode of performance. And vice versa: there are those who are great performers but don't seem to make great records.

It's funny how these economic factors in various ways influence and create what we see and hear. It can be a depressing subject, but not necessarily so. Working within restrictions and borders isn't always a bad thing. Occasionally there are acts that seem to defy this logic. Björk often does so musically by not playing the hits; Lambchop and the Polyphonic Spree defy how many people you are reasonably expected to be economically able to travel with. And there are musicians who are getting arts or foundation grants, extraneous income that allows us to see Cuban acts, accordion dance-theater pieces or large Turkish ensembles because a performing-arts center can take a loss as they have some financial slack. This happens more in Europe, of course.

BLVR: And do you manage the touring yourself, or does the label? This might be a bit too much detail for some readers, but a lot of us have always wondered how it all works.

DB: Over the years I've got a support system more or less in place, though various elements change periodically. The record company's involvement is minimal—though of course they're thrilled if I'm touring when their new product is out. But just as often they lose interest while I'm still out there in Serbia or somewhere—the record sales and radio play have become stalled and so their attention moves on to some other chippy. I've learned that if I'm self-sufficient it doesn't matter.

So I have a booking agent who suggests a tour, the venues and the time slots, and then it's discussed. This time I'm doing a fair number of sit-down theaters, as there are songs that don't demand dancing (though there are still plenty that do). And we discovered that since I was avoiding some of these venues as being too staid, a large portion of my audience stayed away, too—some of them want a nice evening out with cushy seats and they won't go to the Bowery Ballroom or Irving Plaza or the Fillmore. So I discovered that in London, for example, I pretty much sold out two nights at the Royal Festival Hall, selling more seats than the three London dates I did on my last tour combined. This all gets discussed between agent, manager, and myself, and then implemented as best as we can. I have a management office that books the tour buses, and negotiates salaries and freight, then various tour personnel handle the touring details—booking the PA systems, bus parking, hotel rooms, etc.

All of this is then budgeted before a tour is started or even agreed to—again by the management office—to see if I'll make money before I decide to go ahead. If I'll lose money I either see if I can make it up somewhere else or I just don't do it. I sort of base the number of musicians on what the income will support, and right now it's pretty much the same number as last time, with only one new person, so I already suspect that the budget should support it. I am traveling with ten, count 'em, ten musicians. That means no money for flying Stonehenge objects or art projections, though the projected income from the U.S. leg looks to be good enough that I will probably have a lighting person, which I haven't had for years.

BLVR: Your new album veers around a bit stylistically,

and I wonder how often you go into an album with a concept in mind—like the Latin-flavored albums, or like *Remain in Light*—as opposed to assembling songs that happened to be composed during a songwriting period. You seem to have done both kinds of albums, most notably maybe with *Naked,* which was sort of split in two, in terms of the sound of it.

DB: Albums seem like archaic concepts now. What with everyone cherry-picking their favorite songs to keep on their computers and tossing the rest away, the unity and sequence of an album seems more arbitrary than ever. That said, I still think, yeah, there are factors that hold a group of recordings, of songs, together. Even if they weren't all written in one batch ("Empire" on my new CD has been around for a while, but I guess now it's found its home), sometimes there's a reason they're all in the same bucket. Sometimes the writing and recording method becomes the unifying factor—the music on *Remain in Light* was written in the studio, layered one track at a time—on this one I knew in advance the makeup of the band, and that I would use the Toscas on lots of the songs, and that I could indulge my recent love of melody.

I dug out and listened to a pile of microcassettes I had collected, on which I'd hummed melodies on my little Dictaphone over the previous year or two. That meant I was working "top-down," giving primacy to the melody, as the historical European music has usually done—Western Imperialist Music and all that implies. Those become sort of self-limiting devices that help in the writing, as are the occasional "assignments"—"Un Di Felice" was recorded for the film *Dirty Pretty Things,* rejected, and then "Glass, Concrete and Stone" written in its place. Knowing that someone will release a CD is a kind of assignment too, a challenge to make a bunch of songs in a reasonable period of time. But all that is sort of the nuts and bolts; it doesn't explain why I decided to sing a certain kind of melody, or why I chose one set of words over another or why this rhythm over that one. That becomes evident to me later, years later, sometimes, as those decisions reflect my own person and I can't step back and see or hear what I'm saying so well. To others it all might be painfully obvious.

What's become obvious to me is that even though I write the melody first and write the words to fit the meter and the syllabic emphasis implied by the melodic arc, the words not only make sense, pretty much, but also what comes out tends to reflect what I'm going through and my concerns at the time. Maybe all the odd formal constrictions and hoop-jumping actually allow me to say things I would hesitate to say otherwise, if I was told, or told myself, to write whatever was on my mind.

BLVR: You sing an aria, "Au Fond du Temple Saint" by Bizet, on *Grown Backwards,* something I don't think would have come out of your mouth in the early days. How do you think your singing has developed? Do you have a voice coach or whatever they're called? Your singing seems to be getting bigger and braver as you go along, from the staccato bursts on *Talking Heads '77,* to now, with these forays into Bizet and Verdi.

DB: I ran into Beth Orton here in London and she asked me the same thing—what happened? What's my vocal technique? (She's asking *me?*) I don't have any technique. I put it down to the singing as a reflection of my interior state—it was more "strangled" and now it "sings." Sounds corny, huh? That's all I can come up with. Well, that and I've listened to more singing in the last decade or so: Caetano [Veloso], Celia Cruz, some opera, some Italian singers… including rock and pop stuff. I find Anthony Kiedis's singing incredibly heartfelt. Listening to stuff sort of raises the bar, at least it does for me.

BLVR: What's "Empire" about on the new album? It seems to be a manifesto of a kind, where you're singing to artists and musicians, and talking about their place in a democracy.

DB: Years ago, even before 9-11, noticing the anthemic nature of lots of rock songs, I set myself the task to write a sort of fake national anthem, from the capitalist/Republican point of view. A little like a Soviet Commie anthem as well, in style at least. The line "What's good for business is good for us all" comes from an old General Motors slogan: "What's good for GM is good for the country." Obviously, to me anyway, it

would be completely ironic. Would anybody, even a flag-waving SUV driver, believe GM's slogan now after so much evidence that corporations are transnational? They obviously don't give a shit about their town or their country of origin. The song would also question the seductive, anthemic nature of a lot of arena rock as well, pointing out its similarity to every stirring and dangerous song we've heard, cringed, and cowered at. That's a big burden for a little song.

I performed it a few times and recorded it, but didn't know what to do with it. It sat on the shelf. There are two versions of it now: the Devo-produced collaboration version is the closest to the original vision of the song—stadium rock as Nazi Republican rally. It's the scary version. The Carla Bley–arranged version on my CD is sweeter sounding, but in its own way no less creepy. Stealth irony. I had heard the things she'd done with Charlie Haden under the name Liberation Music Orchestra—brass ensemble arrangements of Nicaraguan anthems, etc., and felt that might be a perfect alternate direction for this tune. It would sound equally as anthemic, but less arena-rock.

I guess the time is right for this song now. I hope its title can now be seen as a reference to the American Empire, a more or less acknowledged fact these days, but denied for quite some time. Unfortunately, no nation had ever been able to resist the temptations inherent in empirehood, and the United States is no exception. Absolute power really does corrupt absolutely.

BLVR: Because there's a certain amount of precision to a lot of your work, one would think you're a working-alone-and-meticulous sort of person. But you're really open to collaboration, and pretty loose about it—from working closely with Brian Eno way back when, to Devo and Carla Bley and X-Press 2 and a thousand collaborators in between.

DB: I'm much less controlling than I used to be. At some point I realized that there is no definitive version of anything, that with music the recorded version is but one approach and the live version another and other versions—remixed, augmented, or recontextualized—will likely follow. And same with other stuff, too. It's never really "done," so just put it out and keep going.

I do spend a lot of time working more or less alone. Especially on the words. Jeez, writing words is the hardest part. I have myself to blame partly, as my writing method has evolved to a point to where I just about always write the words last. It's simply easier than constructing grooves, melodies, and harmonies to support some text. It's a lonely, obsessive, and private period and I have to battle to not let myself get lyrically too low-key. Oddly enough, the lyrics don't really reflect those hours of frustration; when they work they seem natural and effortless, like they evolved at the same time as the music. In that sense there is a bit of sleight of hand involved: a bit of craft that comes to bear, tricks of the trade, to make phrases that have a musical emphasis and hide the effort.

Working with other musicians or choreographers or whatever is, most of the time, easy. It's a joy. Especially compared to the lonely word-writing. Maybe I'm better than I used to be at expressing what I want, or hinting at a possible direction, or maybe the people I gravitate towards have great intuitive skills and compatible ideas, so they sense where the thing wants to go. I continue to do sort of one-off collaborations; I've got a few in the works now. And for a control freak I am awfully easy about returning the tracks back to the collaborators and letting them finish it. Maybe it's a lesson learned from dance music: that the author of the piece is, sort of, the music itself. Same with design, I guess. The folks I've worked with on books and other projects have added directions and ideas that I would never have come up with on my own. I can let go a little and I sense it actually improves things. A Spanish film director once wrote that people who think they are making their masterpieces are probably not, that it is the work they care slightly less about that has more flow and life to it. In his view the work that shouts out, "I am a masterpiece" (*Citizen Kane* was his example) is overworked, overthought, too much fussed over, and is generally not as good as its creator thinks it is.

I find that despite being able to technically do it all myself, it's just more fun and more stimulating to involve others. That said, I either like to maintain veto power or relinquish it completely, as in the case of a film

or theater score where the director knows what he or she wants. There's loads of contradictions inherent here, and I don't honestly know how they all get resolved. What if something just isn't working at all, seems like it's headed down the wrong path? What does one do then? What if it turns out good, but it's just not "me"? Some projects actually seem conceived to be collaborative; by their very nature and structure they simultaneously invite and manage the collaborators. Kind of like DNA—the form determines the function, or sometimes even *is* the function. I really think that's true, that some projects, like the American government structure as conceived by the Founding Fathers, are self-actuating and have built-in control mechanisms that arrest destructive tendencies and temper wild egocentric urges and whims. Of course, many of us sense that the American Oligarchs have hopelessly distorted that vision and structure, but in its original form it was a pretty good model.

BLVR: You engaged in probably the most collaborative medium when you made your film, *True Stories.*

DB: I was incredibly lucky to make *True Stories* when I did. I had directed, and sometimes edited, a bunch of the band's videos, so I had some hands-on experience, but 35 mm was a big step. A year before that, Jonathan Demme and co. were generous when shooting and editing *Stop Making Sense* by including me and other members of the band in on the whole process. So my involvement in that film lessened my fear of 35 mm. It's such a weird, archaic form, like some complicated Victorian device that only specialists can manage. So I began to cover the walls of the rented apartment in L.A. with clippings, storyboards, scenes, and character ideas. I'm not sure of the time sequence, but at that time Spike Lee and Jim Jarmusch were making their first feature films, and those were funny and real and approachable. So it all seemed doable, within reach. I was inspired by movies, of course, but also by a lot of avant-garde theater that I'd seen in the previous five years or so. I saw that the rules could be flexible, the three-act structure wasn't written in stone. Talking Heads were having pop hits around that time ("Burning Down the House") so it may have seemed like a bankable idea at the time to the investors. Once they saw that I had an experienced executive producer, Ed Pressman, on board, it seemed to assure them that things would not go out of control.

I loved directing. It's the best, it's pure megalomania. A script tells people what to say, when they die, you tell them what to wear and how to walk. You create a whole world, a world that mirrors ours in many respects, but is more focused and metaphorical. How godlike is that? I obviously didn't have studio interference.

BLVR: Have you pitched movie ideas since *True Stories?*

DB: I have pitched a few ideas since then over the years. But either I got cold feet, not being 100 percent in love with the project, or I just got tired of the prospect of what could be potentially years of pitching, lunching, and begging. I knew I could always write lots of songs, make piles of art, or just *live* during those possible years of pitching, so I would abandon things that didn't catch fire after a while. I did do a one-hour documentary in Brazil, an impressionistic piece about Candomblé, which ties back to my earlier interest in Afro-Atlantic religions and the way sacred and secular music intertwine. It also gave me an excuse to spend night after night hanging in the compound, watching people go into ecstatic trances and listening to the drumming and singing.

BLVR: You've shown dozens of your works in galleries and museums. Do you think about bringing those two worlds together—your interest in film and in fine art?

DB: One thing that puzzles me at the moment is the way movies, or rather videos, have in recent years inundated the art world and museums. Not as short films, which is basically what they are, but as "installations." Okay, some of them use multiple screens (Christian Marclay's four-screen music-video installation was amazing), but just as often the gallery is turned into a little movie theater without comfy seats. What's up with that? The "experimental" filmmakers from an earlier generation—Bruce Conner, Stan Brakhage, Michael Snow, and Derek Jarman—were shown in alternative

cinemas, which eventually disappeared, as did people thinking about that format.

So for years, no one was working very visibly in that medium, but now, given a venue (the galleries and museums) and the possibility of income (these are sold in limited editions, a completely weird and artificial construct, but OK) there is suddenly a whole gaggle of people producing stuff in this form. Pierre Huyghe, Sam Taylor-Wood, Tacita Dean, and on and on. I show my PowerPoint pieces this way sometimes.

Lots of this work is really good, but why do I have to watch them standing up? Michel Gondry videos, for example, are at least as innovative [as art-gallery videos] but are perceived differently due to the venue they're presented in—not given less attention or respect, but it's a different parallel universe. Don't get me wrong, I'm thrilled these things exist, and I'm fascinated how the venue partially, some might say totally, determines how things are perceived. And how people produce things to fit existing venues. Arena rock is written specifically for arenas. Art is made because it looks good in white-box museums and galleries. Books are written to be an object to hold in the hand. The audio book has yet to take off as a medium on its own, right? And only a few people are writing specifically for readings, but why not? That reminds me, readings—mixed with beer and music and odds and ends—are taking off as a performance medium, aren't they? Or is it just a place to pick up other writers?

BLVR: You're often asked to contribute to art festivals and biennials, though it seems that with some projects, it could get nightmarish—all the coordination, complicated with cultural and language differences. Are there ideas you've pitched that didn't work out?

DB: In Tokyo I got offered to do public art on a subway train. I suggested replacing all the ads with pictures and captions, and there are lots of ads on Tokyo subways. I thought just images would be too arty and not give commuters enough engagement, so I added text to some pictures I had taken of mysterious hard-to-identify objects. Each picture was a multiple-choice question—three options what the mysterious object might be. One of them was always correct. Naturally, dealing with a subway-line company and all the city bureaucracy was a trip. Some picture captions were deemed possibly offensive to Canadians (one option for an image of some flimsy duct-taped boxes was labeled "Canadian luggage") and there were offenses to other nationalities. Some translations were surreptitiously altered by the railroad company. One option, which I wrote as "Victorian Crack Pipe," was changed, in Japanese, to "Victorian Cracked Pipe."

I suggested less offensive options whenever I could, which helped, I guess. But the zinger was when they became alarmed at some of the images that were on the ads that were high up or on the ceilings of the subways cars. Apparently there was concern that some of the images were of heavy large objects and they said people might be afraid these might fall on them. Huh!? Didn't know if I heard that one right. You mean that looking at a picture of a heavy object over one's head is the same as that object actually being over one's head? Wow, we really are in a society of simulacra, as the French would say. I have proof. I didn't argue the point, I simply re-arranged the placement of the images and everyone was happy. I have another proposal that uses the facial identification security system at an alternative art museum to refuse entry to some people. Don't know how that one will be received.

BLVR: Having run a record label, Luaka Bop, and having worked with major record labels, film studios, and also independent record labels and publishers, what have you learned about dealing with big companies, small companies, self-run companies—trying to navigate it all, maintain some control, freedom, and make a living?

DB: I remember reading the old adage, "The musician who doesn't pay attention to his business pretty soon doesn't have any business." I think it referred to jazzers, but was pretty universally applicable, and was a response to the "I'm an artist! I can't deal with that shit!" kind of attitude toward business that is always lurking deep in alt-bohemian minds.

So with Talking Heads we had heard the horror stories and therefore felt there was no virtue in being aloof laissez-faire aesthetes. If we could incorporate financial realities into our aesthetic then we'd be around longer.

The prior assumption is that we were making music for possible mass consumption. Not that we would pander, but that we were not trying to be obscure, difficult, elitist, or off-putting. We were working within a popular form, songs, and in regular bars and dives (though a gig at an alternative arts venue was welcome too).

BLVR: You usually worked with bigger labels.

DB: Working within the system, albeit on its fringe, was possible, we believed. We were not taking the route of applying for arts grants, academic or institutional support. We would jump into the chaotic and glorious mess that was pop music and see if we could survive. It all probably comes from some anti-elitist attitude left over from the sixties, I'm afraid, and the idea that popular music could indeed say both fun and profound things. This was believed to be true for all popular forms—novels, movies, art. There was a belief that there is a small corner of the mass marketplace that could support innovation, passion and experimentation. It might not be always a huge percentage of the market, but the market for pop music was so large that a tiny niche would be plenty big enough.

Anyway, pop music then was turning into a business. There were big companies, arena concerts, radio formats and playlists and the weirdness seemed to be being co-opted and was being marketed back to us (sound familiar?), which I guess was what the punk era reacted against. So, despite not wanting to ignore the business side of things, we didn't want it to rule our lives and culture. It's a puzzle: how can one have as much creative freedom as possible and still be in the game? There were examples of idiosyncratic records that made money out there—at the time, Funkadelic, Kraftwerk, Bowie (at least we thought these records made money). And the contemporary equivalents, the *Kid A*s or *O Brother Where Art Thou?*s—that sort of surprisingly sell millions of copies and seem to fit no known categories. It was possible, and seems like it still is.

I had an attitude that says one could maybe make enough money to pay the bills *and* have a certain amount of creative freedom too. Sometimes you might have to play the game a little, but if one was careful it was possible to survive with one's integrity intact.

BLVR: The catch is when you want to step off the mainstream carousel, it's hard to get back on, right?

DB: Sometimes I committed sins in this regard. Releasing a fully Latin record followed by a mostly wordless orchestral score right after Talking Heads may not have been a smart career move. The Latin record actually was well-received in Europe and South America, and the latter meant a lot to me, of course, as it validated a wacky change of direction. It didn't seem to hurt me that much, except in the United States.

BLVR: And that's when Luaka Bop was formed?

DB: I started a record imprint about thirteen years ago. Artists' imprints were seen by the major labels that funded them as vanity projects, gifts to the artist. And many of them were—overstaffed and overfunded. They didn't survive long. I ran Luaka Bop out of my loft; Yale Evelev joined very early on and I think with the two of us and Sarah Caplan that was it. No rent or utilities as it was out of my house, and we began doing just compilations, which didn't involve studio bills, touring artists, or deadlines. So, the only expenses (at that time) were the labor of licensing the tracks, creating artwork, and remastering.

The first one we did was a collection of amazing Brazilian pop music from the previous couple of decades that just wasn't available on any collection. It sold half a million copies! The major-label distributor, seeing it as a vanity project, was lackadaisical and made ridiculous licensing deals, so they actually lost money with every copy sold. Needless to say, I didn't make anything on it either. And the artists themselves: well, sadly, it was up to their own individual record companies to channel the international funds to them. Did this happen? I doubt it. But it did have a pretty huge impact in introducing this incredibly innovative music to a new audience, and like me, people got excited and went off and have since made their own collections and compilations and discoveries.

BLVR: The downside to having control with a smaller label is that sometimes, without all the muscle of one of these huge companies, it's very hard to see any money. It seems to disappear into a million rabbit holes. There's

rarely an intersection between those two goals—that the advantage of the major-label system is that you can actually get a check, worry less about money, and concentrate on the music. Is there an ideal balance between big and small, security and control?

DB: I asked my business people what they think about the way things have tilted in recent years. Most artists on a major label have to sell a hell of a lot of records to see any royalties on sales. I myself haven't seen any for about a decade. I do get a nice piece of change to fund the recordings, most of which gets spent, I'm afraid, for recording costs. And lately I rarely sell enough to recoup those advances in addition to the various other investments a major label makes to one's career. It's a horrible and ridiculous situation. One literally has to sell half a million records before hoping to see any royalties through a major label. To sell that many there need to be so many palms greased that most of the time only a major label can afford to reach those sales levels. That's a severe burden on the abovementioned artistic freedom.

An act (like me, sometimes) who occasionally wants to put out oddball records and projects won't have much luck doing that in a major-label context these days. The arithmetic is just bad. They don't need or want that stuff. And it's worse for the non-writers in any group. I receive a big chunk of my income from publishing, as do many of the artists on Luaka Bop. Music publishing still retains its name from sales of sheet music—but now it has nothing to do with printed music. In my case it's income from CD sales and licensing songs to movies. In their case they get advances in return for giving a big chunk of their publishing to a large publishing company like Tonga or Warner Chapel. They live on that money while they're writing, making their record, and rehearsing. But as they gave away a big chunk to have the cash in hand, there won't be much trickling in down the line. They'll have to repeat the process. A pretty vicious cycle.

So, I'm incredibly lucky. And maybe I was sort of smart from time to time, too. Lucky that I did in fact have a few fairly popular records at one time—the licensing from those continues to trickle in—and since I retained a portion of publishing, and all writers are guaranteed their writers' percentage by law, I have some creative room to maneuver as a result.

With Luaka I was less lucky. The label makes money for whatever major label was distributing the records, Warner or Virgin in the United States in the past. But even running it out of my house, occasionally putting up money myself for an artist's recording, and covering a lot of the office costs myself, there still wasn't enough to pay all the bills and give the artists enough to feel truly comfortable. We were all constantly struggling, which is OK, exciting, stimulating—and hey, what do you expect with the kinds of records we do? But after a while one gets tired.

BLVR: But at this point, you're still inspired, right?

DB: I've been quoting one of Ren Weschler's essays recently—the one in which he points out that Vermeer (I'm in Amsterdam today) invented peace. His paintings, calm and sublime, were done during a time of tremendous upheaval, horror, terror and turmoil. There was no peace outside his door. What Weschler proposes is that the paintings proposed an alternative universe, one that could exist, but was barely imagined or considered given the times he lived in. His work, by its existence, proposed a new way of being, of looking and behaving. Art or writing or music puts an idea, a possibility in your head that maybe didn't occur to you, that didn't exist before. It plants a seed—not a didactic or overtly political seed, though it can have those implications—but its power is to invent something that wasn't there before. It's sort of a Yoko Ono idea, that if one can imagine something it can and possibly inevitably will happen. I once had a long talk with a friend in Zagreb, the main city in Croatia; I was there during the tail end of the war. I wondered how an artist, a musician, was supposed to respond to madness and human monstrosities like those happening there. He said he felt that the artist's job is to be honest and faithful to themselves—not to necessarily deal with politics or war on its level. By doing so the artist proposes and creates a kind of positive energy (this man ran a health food shop), a counter force to the chthonic hell-bent forces which too often rise up. And the existence of this counter force gives people hope, and a place to return to, to see where life is and always was. ✯