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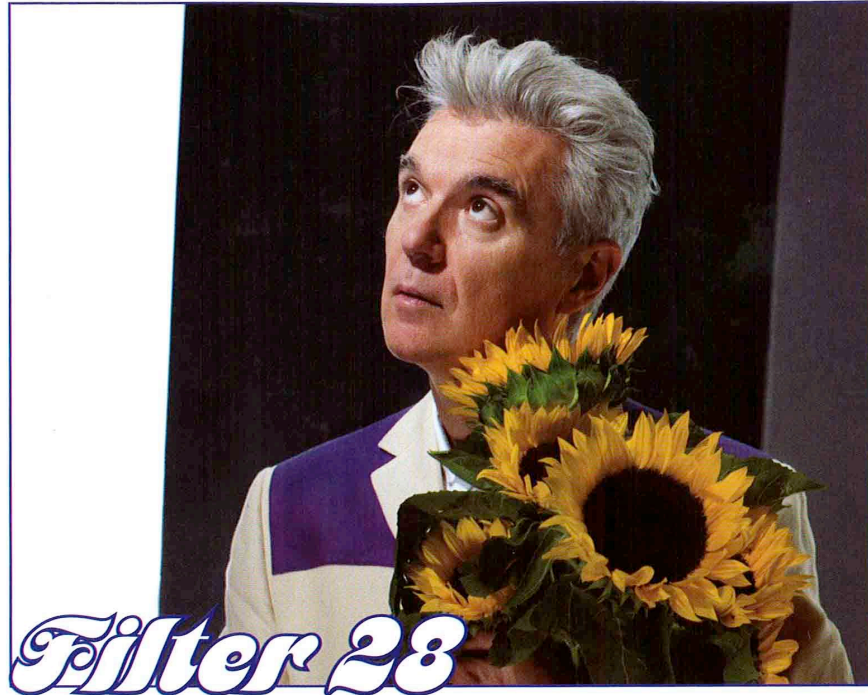
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**THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING DAVID BYRNE**

'77  
LUAKA BOP  
BIG LOVE  
TALKING HEADS  
THE KNEE PLAYS  
ROCK AND ROLL  
HALL OF FAME  
REMAIN IN LIGHT  
MY LIFE IN THE  
BUSH OF GHOSTS  
OSCAR WINNER  
ART SCHOOL DROPOUT  
GRAMMY WINNER  
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THIS MUST BE THE PLACE  
STOP MAKING SENSE  
TRUE STORIES  
SESSIONS AT WEST 54<sup>TH</sup>  
SPEAKING IN TONGUES  
THE LAST EMPEROR  
FEAR OF MUSIC  
THE NEW SINS  
BURNING DOWN  
THE HOUSE  
PSYCHO KILLER  
UH-OH  
FRODO BAGGINS

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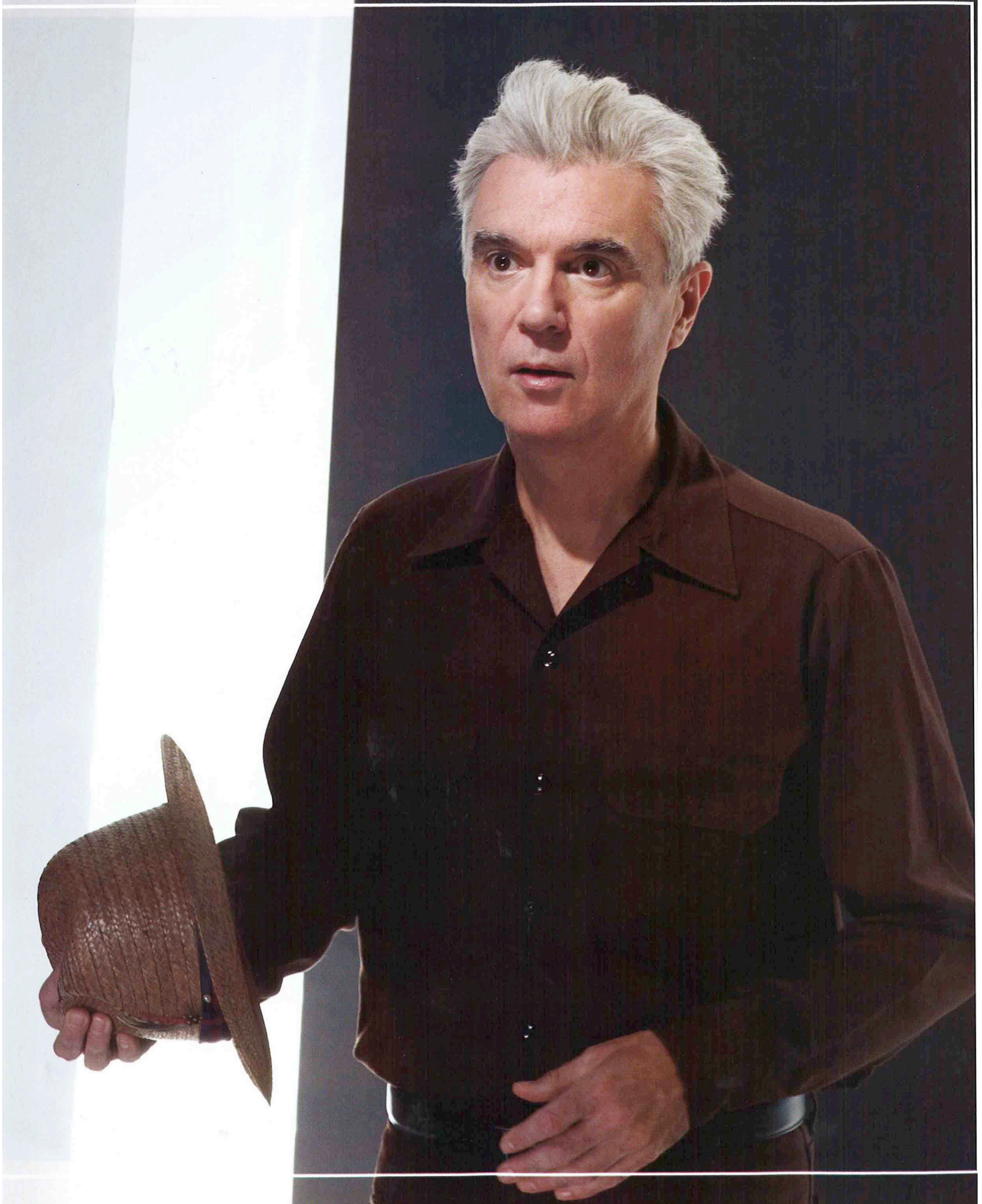
- 44.** People Like Us:  
The Importance of Being **DAVID BYRNE**

# people like us

Throughout history there has certainly been no shortage of one-note geniuses, or even those whose perfection of a particular aesthetic left them with no reason to travel beyond its confines. But from da Vinci to Picasso to Bowie, there have also been artists who were constantly reinventing themselves in reaction to new experiences and revelations—transfiguring to meet the shifting of the sands and changing of the times. Of course, in our contemporary culture, it's hard to imagine anyone who has so skillfully confounded expectations as has the one and only David Byrne.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING DAVID BYRNE

BY KEN SCRUDATO  
PHOTOS BY SEBASTIAN MLYNARSKI







## For all of his accomplishments,

it's nigh impossible to consider David Byrne and not give thought to the place where his singular talents were first nurtured. Central figures in New York's underground rock scene during the late '70s and early '80s, Byrne and his Talking Heads embodied the reactionary spirit of the time, exploring new sounds and attempting unprecedented, groundbreaking performances on stage. As such, the 2006 demise of CBGB wasn't so much sad for the loss of the club itself as it was for its symbolism—what it said about the priorities of 21st century New York City. In many ways, CBGB was post-modern America's answer to Zurich's Cabaret Voltaire, where in 1916, Hugo Ball—revolutionary poet and philosopher—and his band of determined iconoclasts set out to thrash art, and in fact, culture itself to within an inch of its overly precious existence. While in Zurich, Dada was a furious response to the ideologically muddled violence of WWI; in New York, punk was viciously lashing out at the Vietnam-era policies that left so much of the underclass youth in a state of utter despair and abjection.

The point of destroying a no longer workable system was not lost on Byrne, the impossibly enigmatic frontman of one of New York's most artistically important bands. While the likes of Blondie, the Ramones and Patti Smith floundered their way into the 1980s, the Talking Heads matched the experimental fervor that had gripped both the Dadaists and Byrne's British counterparts in the wake of punk—Public Image Ltd., Magazine and Wire, to name a few. The Talking Heads even went so far as to borrow a confrontationally nonsensical Dada poem written by Ball, "Gadji beri bimba," and turn it into "I Zimbra," a song, with its galloping Afrikaner rhythms, that would prove to be a striking harbinger of the rampant cross-cultural pollination that defined so much of the decade that followed. The band may not sell as many t-shirts now (or even then) as Blondie and the Ramones, but that was never the point. Instead, Byrne wanted to challenge everything you ever thought you knew about the limitations of modern music. And so he did.

It was quite prescient of his parents to have named him David—because Byrne is nothing if not the definitive Renaissance Man. His impact on the mercurial shape of contemporary culture is almost impossible to quantify, but his mission has always seemed clear: to widen the very possibilities of music and to find new contexts in which it might exist. Rock music previously had but two settings: dull and bombastic; Byrne, along with the likes of Peter Gabriel and Brian Eno (a key Talking Heads collaborator),

explored the considerable expanse in between and uncovered a thousand and ten new ideas.

Byrne disbanded the Talking Heads in the late '80s, when it was clear that its structure could no longer contain the range of his creative dreaming. And how could it? He was at once the tall, lanky, wickedly wry gent with the nerdy glasses and oversized suit, and the sleek internationalist, jet-setting around the globe and using his experiences to twist our perceptions beyond recognition. By 1987, Byrne had already written, directed and soundtracked the beguilingly clever faux-reality film *True Stories*, shared composing duties with Ryuichi Sakamoto for Bertolucci's sweeping epic, *The Last Emperor* (winner of the 1987 Academy Award for Best Music/Original Score) and collaborated with modern dance icon Twyla Tharp on her ballet *The Catherine Wheel*. By also making successful forays into video, theater and the written word, Byrne actually *did* all the things that so many of his contemporaries merely promised to do.

Byrne really confounded everyone by releasing *Rei Momo* in 1989, an album of surprisingly pure, earnest and affectionate modern Latin music. His new exploration into international music genres eventually led to his creation of Luaka Bop, one of the most whimsical and unpredictable independent labels of our time. Through it, he has given us everything from the glorious Belgo-African troupe Zap Mama to Venezuelan funksters Los Amigos Invisibles to American alt-country/gospel singer Jim White.

One of his most fascinating projects during that time grew from his considerable enthusiasm for the thriving downtown New York experimental theater scene, as epitomized by the celebrated Wooster Group and visionaries like Robert Wilson. The latter, who resisted against traditional uses of narrative, asked Byrne to provide the music for the staging of an extravagantly conceived project called *CIVIL warS*. Perhaps sensing the impossible scope of Wilson's overall vision, Byrne, hardly one to find himself in the role of pragmatist, suggested composing the music to just *The Knee Plays*, which were to be short, incidental pieces that take place as asides to the main action.

Due to lack of funds, *CIVIL warS* never made it to the stage, but *The Knee Plays* eventually debuted at New York's Lincoln Center and went on to tour the world. The music is now being made available for the first time in wide release, and not surprisingly, it's a many-headed beast, incorporating various jazz, blues and classical influences. Considering they were written in 1985, the lyrics are droll, witty, and shockingly prophetic of the current state of our

**There are those people that complain that they miss the old Times Square, but I think all the signage and lights have turned it into this extraordinary thing.**

social existence—which, if one thinks about it, is what we’ve come to expect of David Byrne.

Also new is Byrne’s soundtrack to the second season of HBO’s hit drama series, *Big Love*. Starring Bill Paxton and Chloe Sevigny, among others, the show is the story of a modern-day Mormon and his three wives, carrying on with their curious lifestyle in spite of well-established bigamy laws. Byrne’s music is reverent, earnest and remarkably visceral, based as it is on his interpretation of the traditional religious hymn. It’s also witty and at times chillingly ominous, and most importantly, fits the continuum of Byrne’s fascination with the wondrous peculiarities of the everyday lives of everyday people, something which was first fully revealed in his *True Stories*.

Catching up with Byrne for a chat, it’s both fascinating and hardly surprising that whether he’s talking about his latest work or something that he did two decades ago, you can hear the echoes of everything with which he’s ever been involved. He’s at times charmingly reticent and somewhat mysterious, and yet at others, boldly revelatory and endearingly hilarious. Byrne has brought the world to our doorstep, forever further enlightening our understanding of it, but he’s also one of a few artists who has been just as much responsible for the cultural shape of his hometown of New York as it has been responsible for him—a man, his work, his persona and his city all coming together in one of the most reliably unpredictable, intellectual and endearing artistic canons of these modern times.

David Byrne, just by being David Byrne, has simply made everything a little bit less like everything else, and a lot more like him.

**Although you’re a global citizen of sorts, you’re inextricably linked to New York. Much has been made of these soul-less high-rises going up throughout the city, making it a very different place from the one that first inspired you. How has this “selling off” affected you as a creative citizen of New York?**

Some things are better, I think. There are those people that complain that they miss the old Times Square; but I think that all the signage and lights have turned it into this extraordinary thing. It’s a plastic thing, but it’s an interesting thing, anyway. But the condos...I think that is driving the young creative types either to the further reaches of the boroughs, Bushwick or Staten Island or wherever... It makes them think differently—and this is the really scary part—because they think about how they’re going to make enough money to live here. New York has always been more expensive to live in than L.A. or Baltimore or other places, but now it’s approaching London.

**It’s been exponential.**

To live in Manhattan, anyway. And when these people start thinking, “How am I gonna make money? How am I gonna survive?” It starts changing the kind of work they do—because they think, “Oh, this will sell.” Then you’ve really killed it.

**But you were part of something that was reasonably pure in its naiveté.**

Yeah, and there just wasn’t the kind of money changing hands—at least in the art world, anyway. Which was inextricably linked with the music world at the time... even the hip-hop world, they were all mixed together. But, you know, money changes everything.

**What did you think of the demolition of CBGB?**

I would have been all in favor of gutting CBGB and turning it into an arts center or some kind of contemporary music venue. But you could see that they were really angling for museum status. I just thought that’s not what it was about. It’s not about preserving every bit of graffiti on the walls.

**So it should have been about how to recapture the spirit in a new, modern way?**

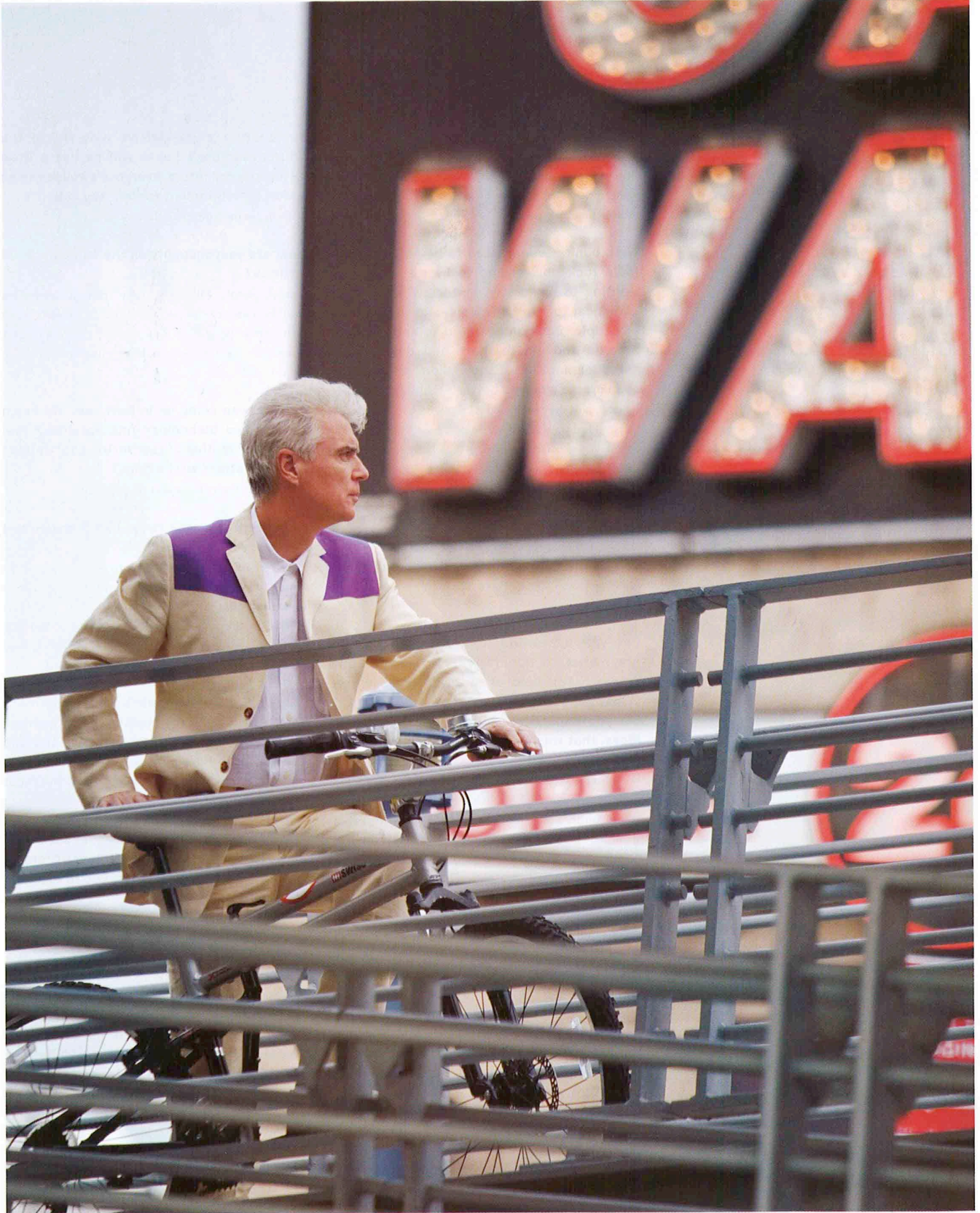
And to encourage new creativity.

**Now, *The Knee Plays* is being re-released. One of the things I found interesting about your collaborator, Robert Wilson, is in regards to the whole idea of what defines creative methodology in a postmodern world. There’s a quote from him about his work: “I can’t tell you what it means, but I can tell you how I make it.” And a lot of people speak of contemporary art now as being more about the process than the finished product. But if art is about the artist’s process, shouldn’t it be destroyed as soon as it’s completed? Why should anyone have to look at the end result of just a process?**

[Laughs] Yeah, I don’t know.

**Did you and Robert clash at all in your working methodologies, with you being someone who wrote pop songs?**

No. Well, we worked together twice. The second time maybe we clashed a bit, but with *The Knee Plays* we got along fine. I’d seen his stuff before, like *Einstein on the Beach*, which he did with Philip Glass. Robert was determined to put these completely wacky things on Broadway or at the Met or whatever. He would say, “Look at this in the same way that you would look at a serious Broadway production.” He demanded that kind of audience. To me, when I first saw it, it was so radical. So I knew I was going to have to be flexible and I wasn’t going to write just pop songs for it. A few years before, I had done *The Catherine*





**We thought if we did anything decent, something for real, we would just turn everything completely upside down.**

*Wheel* with Tivyla Tharp, and she wanted pop songs embedded in it. I resisted, but she kept insisting. But that piece also ran on Broadway, and she, too, wanted to kind of shake up the whole Broadway establishment.

**Well, punk never wanted to be small, either. Indie rock now seems to be all about not wanting to make any contact with a larger audience; to play for this select little group of people. But punk wanted to sell a zillion records and get in there and destroy the establishment from the inside. And maybe even create a newer, better establishment.**

I agree. Not everyone said it, though. A lot of people were so fed up with the state of music, they thought, "Well, if we offer something that has some kind of integrity and a good chorus, then why is anyone ever going to go to an Eagles concert again?"

**And you were half wrong.**

[Laughs] Yes, pretty far wrong, actually. We just thought if we did anything decent, something for real, we would just turn everything completely upside down.

**But you found yourself having to be the pragmatist to Robert Wilson's extravagant dreamer. You said of his *Civil War* show: "What good is a spectacle if no one sees it?" Did you think if you put on just these *Knee Plays*, that way an audience could get to see part of it?**

Well, yeah—I'd seen some of his stuff and it was pretty amazing. But it also costs a million dollars to put on in a theater. So I thought, "Oh, there's a small part of this huge extravaganza that I could have people see."

**Was there a positive reception?**

You know, my office gathered some of the old reviews and posted them on a website, but to be honest, I haven't looked at them. I think they were actually O.K.; but his form of theater was so radically new to a lot of people, a lot of the reviews were saying, "Don't try to make sense of it, just go with it."

**I found a few of the lyrics to *Knee Plays* to be actually very prophetic. For instance, "In the future, water will be expensive." I don't remember; were people drinking expensive bottled water in 1985?**

Perrier or something was coming around. But water is still taken as being one of our human rights; we have a right to fresh water. And I think now that's being questioned.

**But another quite incisive lyric is, "In the future, everyone's house will be like a little fortress/In the future, everyone's house will be a total entertainment center." You nailed it.**

Both of them came true, in a way.

**What are your thoughts on the "cocooning" of America?**

I think people will move away from it. There's a basic human urge to socialize, and to be in a room with other people. I don't think that will ever completely go away—even though in places like L.A. it's very difficult.

**But it's even going on in New York. So much of this new technology has assaulted real human interaction...I see "fortresses" walking down the street all the time.**

Right, with their iPods and their phones.

**If you walk down the street like that, you're a fortress; you're an island.**

Yeah, you are. And you're going to get hit by a car. In a funny way, though, it comes from the same urge. A lot of time what people are doing is just pinging their friends or their social group, as a way of keeping the flock together. But you lose a lot of the physical interaction, body language, facial expressions.

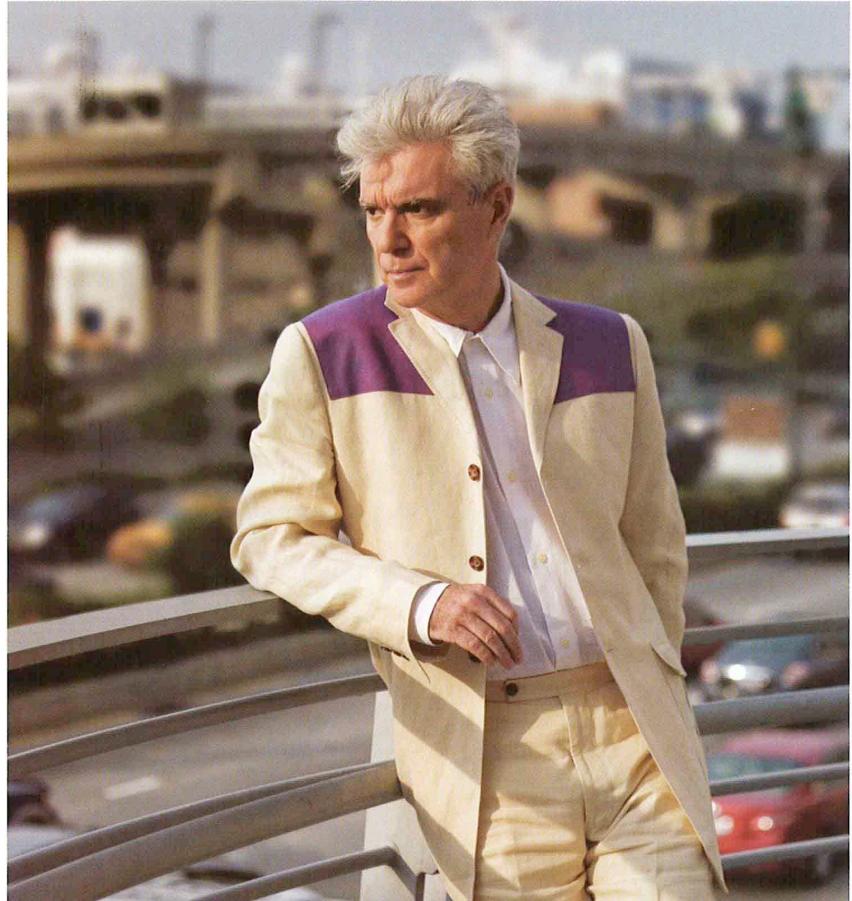
**Speaking of human interaction, in the lyrics to "Social Studies," I'm guessing the "groceries" are a metaphor for local cultures and the way we pretend to have indulged in them when we've really just grabbed onto the most surface aspects. You now have all these musicians talking about being influenced by music from Brazil, but do they ever shed light on the rampant poverty and violence there? It seems like in "Social Studies" you're touching on these issues.**

Yeah, it's really sad. Look, a lot of people that love hip-hop are really racist. I always thought that if you start to love someone's music or their food or their literature, how can you think of them anymore as being any less human than you are? I guess people are pretty good at compartmentalizing. But I've also talked to friends who listened to the compilations I did from Brazil or Cuba, and that made them in general more interested in those places; and one thing leads to another. So, little by little you learn more, and that actually even increases the enjoyment of listening to the songs.

**But everything now is so easily accessible. Any record shop has music from Mali or Thailand at your fingertips. Do you think the**



If you start to love someone's music or their food or their literature, how can you think of them anymore as being any less human than you are?



**appreciation was greater when you had to work harder for it?**

I don't know. I spent a lot on records that weren't very good. I'm really thankful that now some of these records get reviewed—it saves me a lot of money.

**And obviously someone who can't travel to distant lands can at least buy a little piece of the culture.**

Right. But the first trip I made to Brazil was probably around '85 or '86, and while I heard a lot of music that I was very excited about, I also heard on the radio stations nothing but American music—Madonna and all that big corporate stuff. And it was really depressing.

**How about the *Big Love* soundtrack? It does seem to be a show that would be a right fit for David Byrne—just cheeky enough. But was there a moral fascination that drew you into it?**

Oh, yeah. I could sense from talking to them that they wanted to walk that line between showing stuff that would be totally inappropriate for most people—someone having three wives, and this sort of cultish compound—and wanting to really humanize it, to keep it kind of freakish, and...well, no show is

going to work if you can't identify with some of the characters. And I just thought, "Oh, that's a really interesting line to walk," and I wondered how I could capture that musically. I thought I would do these kinds of hymns that would imply that they're always aware of the religious underpinnings that they see as supporting their lifestyle and how they behave. It never goes away, it's always there.

**And they really believe it.**

Yeah. And they've chosen to live in a way that's different from the rest of society.

**Do you think we're a little too righteous towards that point of view?**

Look, if somebody wants to have three wives, I have no problem with it. But the way that it often works is that the wives don't have any say in the decision. It's a very different matter. Often it's an adolescent girl being chosen by some old guy, which is creepy.

**People should, of course, be allowed to live however they want—but when there's this matter of female servitude...**

In some cases there isn't. But in most cases the women are really subjugated.

**But you really do seem to capture an amazing range of emotion in the music to *Big Love*. I also found that to be the case with the *Young Adam* soundtrack you did a couple of years ago. It really stood apart from the film, in that you could experience every emotion just by listening to the music. You weren't always associated with grand emotional sweeps.**

It was certainly a very dark film, but I kind of felt that the music had to have a lot of emotion. Otherwise, the character seems just a total prick.

**Right, the Ewan McGregor character, "Joe Taylor." But he was sort of the classic, existentially-detached man. Not so much a prick as someone who just couldn't exist within the structures society presented. And in a way, you're that guy, the outsider, especially in terms of ideas, but also in persona—but you've made it work in the world. Do you feel it's still a bit of a struggle?**

Oh, yeah! To some extent, anyway. But when Justin Timberlake says his new record is supposed to sound like a cross between me and David Bowie, I think, "Oh, maybe the world is getting to be a little more like me." **F**



## As We Get Older and Start Making Sense

### DAVID BYRNE TAKES US THROUGH THE LAST THIRTY YEARS

In an attempt to gain perhaps just a little understanding of how the David Byrne of '77 became the David Byrne of '07, here Byrne himself pinpoints the most pivotal moments of a wondrously, impossibly peripatetic career.

#### **THIS AIN'T NO DISCO**

Early on, it was hearing some of the other bands at CBGB, like Television and the Patti Smith Group. I was already writing songs, but seeing these bands made me think, "Oh, there might actually be a place for these songs." And then also during that time, I was going to see a lot of experimental downtown theater: Bob Wilson, the Wooster Group and all these things that were non-narrative and sometimes very confusing. I thought it was all really, really exciting, and it wound up having a tremendous effect on what I did on stage; and also what I did in film, later on.

#### **BURNING DOWN THE HOUSE**

The next big thing was working with Brian Eno. He really pushed the Talking Heads to create more of our songs out of improvisation. He's a great cheerleader. You have to have a certain amount of confidence if you're going to throw out a lot of the way you've been working and try something completely different. And he was very encouraging. He would be going, "That's great, that's really exciting," which is kind of what you need in order to be able to do something really new... instead of having someone going, "No, no, it still doesn't sound good yet." It was terrific—it led us down a road that took us to a completely different way of writing songs and making music. It was very exciting.

#### **MOVING OUT IN ALL DIRECTIONS**

By the mid-'80s, I was more interested in moving out into other media, whether it was music videos, or *The Knee Plays*, or the *Stop Making Sense* tour that had a lot of

staging and projections. There was an opportunity then that just kind of presented itself to branch out. It wasn't, "Oh, I'm going to make this move and therefore I'll be more popular"—it was just this excitement about bringing music into these other areas to create this larger experience.

#### **MY GOD, WHAT HAVE I DONE?**

I started going to hear salsa bands and Latin bands in New York clubs in the late '80s at places like S.O.B.'s or the Village Gate—which were really just walking distance from the rock clubs. I got to know the music and really loved it because it was dance music that was being played live. There was a lot of other dance music out at that time; but when you're dancing to a live band, you can react to them. I mean, some DJs can make you do that, but it's still an entirely different thing. So that led me to start working with a large Latin band. And some of the elements of what I learned then have never gone away.

#### **THIS MUST BE THE PLACE**

In the '90s and the last several years, I've slowly managed to write songs and make music that's more heartfelt and less ironic. It's a lot warmer, less cool. That doesn't make it better; it just means it's different—I enjoy it because it's different for me. Irony had become a shield. If you do it really well, it can be totally riveting and exciting and entertaining. But I'd done a lot of that, so now it's about, "Well, let me see what else I can do." And that's led me, of course, to where I am now.