

David Byrne. How music works

Giovanna Silva

19 Marzo 2013

Cosa legge una fotografa di professione, una che insegue in giro per il mondo architetture, oggetti, spazi, persone, quando legge un libro illustrato? Cosa vede con il suo obiettivo davanti agli occhi, quando guarda un libro del genere? La nuova rubrica di Giovanna Silva inaugura un nuovo modo di recensire i libri, leggendo e guardando, non solo parole ma anche immagini, immagini che sono parole: leggere, guardare, scattare.

Il libro recensito è [How music works](#) di David Byrne.

Se continuiamo a tenere vivo questo spazio è grazie a te. Anche un solo euro per noi significa molto.

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HOW MUSIC WORKS



DAVID
BYRNE

Tootsie's would have hated punk rock, and vice versa. When Talking Heads first played in Nashville, the announcer declaimed, "Punk rock comes to Nashville! For the first, and probably the last time!"

Both of these places are bars. People drink, make new friends, shout, and fall down, so the performers had to play loud enough to be heard above that—and so it was, and is. (FYI: the volume in Tootsie's is *much* louder than it usually was in CBGB.)



...tight, too (unlike today's larger halls). I've performed in some of these old opera venues, and if you don't crank the volume too high, it works surprisingly well for certain kinds of contemporary pop music.

Take a look at Bayreuth, the opera house Wagner had built for his own music in the 1870s.^K You can see it's not that huge. Not very much bigger than La Scala. Wagner had the gumption to demand that this venue be built to better accommodate the music he imagined—which didn't mean there



That umbilical cord has been cut. Liberated. The connection between the recorded music and the live musician and performer is now a thing of the past. Although this music may have emerged from dance-oriented early hip-hop (which, like jazz, evolved by extending the breaks for dancers), it's morphed into something else entirely: music that sounds best in cars. People do dance in their cars, or they try to. As big SUVs become less practical I foresee this music changing as well.

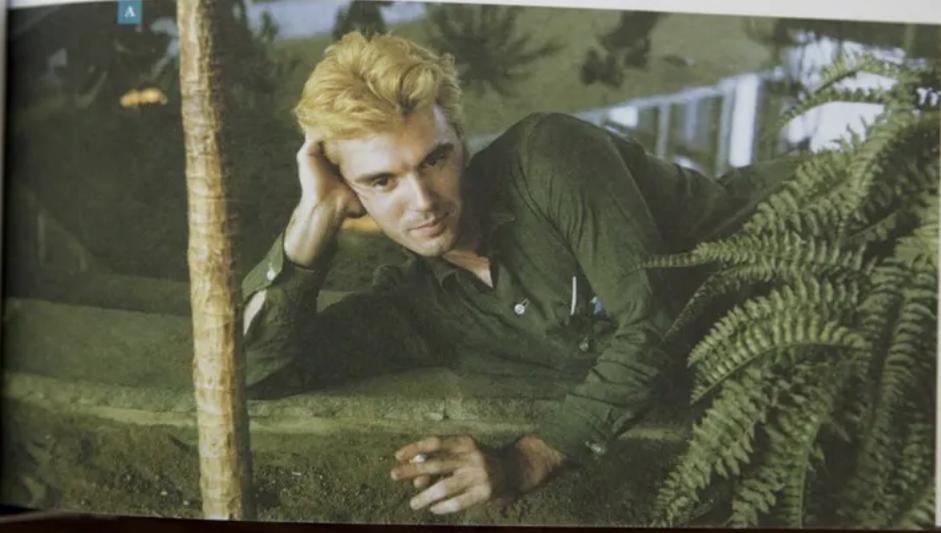


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...together, my guitar plugged into an old Webcor reel-to-reel tape recorder that had a mic input. I filled notebooks with lyrics.

Talking Heads, the name we settled on, started off as a live band. This might sound obvious, but when you think of all the records and musicians that were out there then (and there are more now) who made their records before figuring out how to play their songs live, or how to hold an audience's

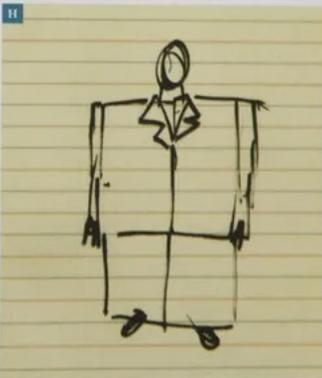


exactly what he meant; he meant gesture, expression, voice. But I applied it to clothing as well.¹¹

On a break from the tour, I went south to Bali, a place the choreographer Toni Basil, whom Eno and I had met during the *Bush of Ghosts* sessions, had recommended as being transporting and all about performance. I rented a small motorcycle and headed up into the hills, away from the beach resorts. I soon discovered that if one saw offerings of flowers and fruit being brought to a village temple compound in the afternoon, one could be pretty certain that some sort of ritual performance would follow there at night.

Sure enough, night after night I would catch dances accompanied by gamelan orchestras and shadow-puppet excerpts from the Hindu Ramayana—epic and sometimes ritual performances that blended religious and theatrical elements. (A gamelan is a small orchestra made up mainly of tuned metallic gongs and xylophone-like instruments—the interplay between the parts is beautiful and intricate.) In these latter events some participants would often fall into a trance, but even in trance there were

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also, samba, merengue, cumbia, and other grooves, was too much to resist. There was a lot to handle musically on that outing, so the stage business wouldn't be as elaborate as on the tour that was filmed for *Stop Making Sense*, though I did bring in movie-production designer Barbara Ling, who suggested a novel set of risers with translucent fiberglass facing that would light up from within. (We used the same material for the stage set of my film *True Stories*.) The semicircular layer-like design of the riser was based on a picture on an old Tito Rodriguez album cover, though I don't think his risers lit up.

The band wore all white this time, and the fact that there were so many of them meant that their outfits would allow them to pop out from the background. The outfits also alluded to the African-based religions of Candomblé and Santería, whose adherents wear white during ceremonies. There was more than one Santería in the group, so the reference wasn't for naught.¹²

I had referenced religious trances and ritual in earlier performances and recordings and I never lost interest in that facet of music. I made a documentary, *De Aze (The House of Aze)*, in Salvador, Bahia (Brazil) partly to indulge my continued interest in those religious traditions. Santería, the Afro-Cuban branch of West African religious practice, and Vodoun, the Haitian manifestation, are both very present in New York music and culture. But it was the



Brazilian branch, Candomblé, that seemed the least repressed by either secular or church authorities in recent decades, and therefore the most open, so when I was given the opportunity to do a film, that's where I chose to go.

As with gospel music, religion seems to be at the root of much Brazilian pop music and creativity, and as with the Asian ritual and theatrical forms, costumes and trance and dance are completely formalized but incredibly moving. And similar to what I felt in Bali, the practice is completely integrated into people's lives. It's not just something one does on Sunday mornings or Sunday nights. There are evening ceremonies, to be sure, but their influence is deeply felt in everyday life, and that affected my thinking as I prepared for the next round of performances.

I may well be idealizing some of what I saw and witnessed, taking aspects of what I perceived and adapting them to solve and deal with my own issues and creative bottlenecks. Somehow I have a feeling that might be okay.

Rather than having a discreet opening act, I brought Margareth Menezes on board: a Brazilian singer from—surprise!—Salvador, Bahia, who would sing some of her own material with my band and also sing harmonies on my tunes. Some of her songs had Yoruba lyrics and made explicit references to the gods and goddesses of Candomblé, so it was all one big happy family. Margareth was great—too good, in fact. She stole the show on some nights. Live and learn.

I booked the ride on that tour. We did mostly new material rather than interspersing it with a lot of popular favorites, and I think I paid the price. While the shows were exciting, and even North Americans danced to our music, much of my audience soon abandoned me, assuming I'd "gone native." Another lesson learned from performing live. At one point we got booked at a European outdoor music festival, and my Latin band was sandwiched between Pearl Jam and Soundgarden. Great bands, but I couldn't have felt more out of place.

I followed this with a tour that mixed a band made up of funk musicians like George Porter, Jr. (bass player for the Meters) with some of the Latin musicians from *Ret Momo*. Now we could do some of the Talking Heads songs as well, even some that Talking Heads themselves couldn't have played live. I intended to make explicit the link between Latin grooves and New Orleans funk, or so I hoped. I had begun to do some short acoustic sets with a drum machine. I'd start the show like that, alone on stage, revealing the big band upstage with a sudden curtain drop.

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...wants to express, true to that unconscious, inarticulate intention. Admittedly, it is no narrative, or might make no literal sense yet, but it's in the ear that I can feel it. My job at this stage is to find words that adhere to the sonic and emotional qualities rather than to the literal sense. Literally destroy them.

...makes words work in a song is how they sound to the ear and not how they feel. If they feel right physiologically, if the tongue of the singer and the neurons of the listener resonate with the delicious approach of words coming out, then that will inevitably trump literal sense. If recent neurological hypotheses are correct, then one could say that we empathize with both our minds and the neurons that trigger our vocal and motor responses—when we hear and see someone else singing. In this performance and listening to music is always a participatory act of putting words down on paper is certainly part of songwriting. Proof is in seeing how it feels when it's sung. If the sound is what you can tell.

...judge anything that occurs to me at this point in the writing. I know if something that sounds stupid at first will emerge in the lyrical context make the whole thing shine. So no matter how full up, I try to turn off the internal censor. I never stop trying to force this doesn't work. I never stop, exactly, but sometimes things do slow down. At those times, if my conscious mind might be thinking too much—and I know that I most want and need surprises and weird ideas. Some techniques help in that regard. For instance, I'll go for a jog on the West Side, recording phrases as they occur to me. On the rare occasion that

thing from that... use in the blank, conventional puzzle solving.

This particular writing process could also be viewed as a collaboration: a collaboration with oneself, with one's subconscious as well as with the collective unconscious, as Jung would put it. As in dreams, it often seems as if a hidden part of oneself, a doppelgänger, is attempting to communicate, to impart some important information. When we write, we access different aspects of ourselves, different characters, different parts of our brains and hearts. And then, when they've each had their say, we mentally switch hats, step back from accessing our myriad selves, and take a more distanced and critical view of what we've done. Don't we always work by editing and structuring the outpouring of our many selves? Isn't the end product the result of two or more sides of ourselves working with one another? We've often heard this process described by creative folks as "channeling," or just as often people

NAIVE MELODY

MEMO - IS WRITING, I WANT TO BE
 BUT I GO THE LONG WAY AROUND AND I TRY TO FIND YOUR FACE
 AND I DON'T CARE WHAT YOU KNOW

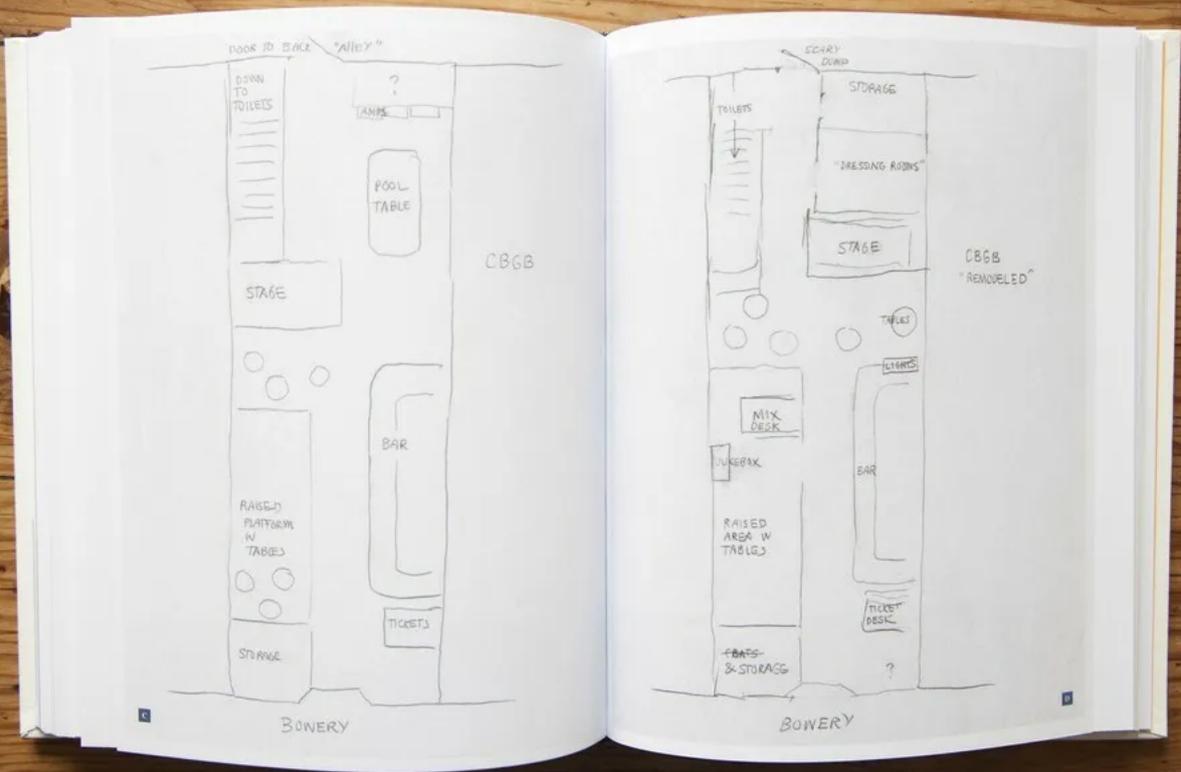
IT'S A SCIENTIFIC JOB
 HOPE AND I COULD GET TO BE
 WASHING UP TO THE LIGHTS
 BUT I DON'T CARE WHAT YOU KNOW

I COME HOME - AND I TEACH YOU TO SEE
 BECAUSE YOU GET TO KNOW YOU ARE - YOU DON'T MAKE IT IN MY OWN
 I'M NOT GETTING UP AT ALL
 I'VE BEEN THROUGH BEFORE YOU
 AT THE LAST REHEARSAL YOU TOLD ME
 I CAN TEACH YOU WHAT YOU CAN WANT
 DO YOU FIND ME OR I FIND YOU

THE LISTEN OF HER MINDS
 I CAN'T LIVE SECONDHAND
 I GOT ME UP A TURNING TO REVERSE
 I DON'T GET WHAT I SAID
 I'VE BEEN THROUGH BEFORE YOU
 I'VE BEEN THROUGH BEFORE YOU
 I GOT ME UP A TURNING TO REVERSE
 I DON'T GET WHAT I SAID

AND I CAN TEACH YOU WHAT YOU CAN DO
 DAYLIGHT IN ONE SPOT/PLACE
 I CAN TEACH YOU WHAT YOU CAN DO
 AND I CAN TEACH YOU WHAT YOU CAN DO

IF SOMEONE ASKS, THIS IS HARD, I'D BE
 YOU GO TO THE PARK TONIGHT



...explicit: "Pictures raise
 other? Believe it, toil-worn
 lodging, thy thin, pale wife,
 ave your share of beauty."⁹
 ed in working-class neigh-
 taste of the finer things in
 self, I can attest that some-
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ustry continued this trend.
 in New York in 1872, filling
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 the sixties and seventies,
 nal Gallery in Washington,
 everyone to like the things
 at here, in their museums,
 f with that mystical aura.

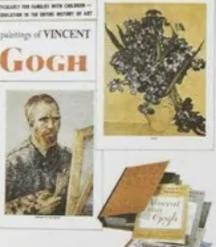
...brought King Tut to
 the masses—or, more precisely, it brought the masses to Tut. These shows
 "reached out," and made the Met and other like-minded museums into tem-
 ples where all were welcome. Hard to remember, but the Met was once a fussy,
 dusty old place, and that show set it on its way to becoming super popular.
 Here are some blockbuster-exhibit attendance figures from the Met:¹¹

- *Treasures of Tutankhamun* (1978–79), 1,360,957 visitors
- *The Mona Lisa by Leonardo da Vinci* (1963), 1,077,521 visitors
- *The Vatican Collections: The Papacy and Art* (1983), 896,743 visitors
- *Painters in Paris: 1895–1950* (2000–01), 883,620 visitors
- *Origins of Impressionism* (1994–95), 794,108 visitors

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Part XXI: The Listening Experience

Part XXII: The Listening Experience

Part XXIII: The Listening Experience

Part XXIV: The Listening Experience

Part XXV: The Listening Experience

Part XXVI: The Listening Experience

Part XXVII: The Listening Experience

Part XXVIII: The Listening Experience

Part XXIX: The Listening Experience

Part XXX: The Listening Experience

CHAPTER TEN

Harmonia Mundi

"You are the music, while the music lasts."
 —T.S. Eliot

So far, we've covered how music is distributed, how it's affected by architecture, and a lot more, but why do we need music? Does it even matter? Where did it come from?

Far from being merely entertainment, music, I would argue, is a part of what makes us human. Its practical value is maybe a little harder to pin down, at least in our present way of thinking, than mathematics or medicine, but many would agree that a life without music, for a hearing person, is a life significantly diminished.

Everything started with a sound. "In the beginning was the Word," the Bible tells us. We are told that it was the *sound* of God's voice that caused the Nothing to become Something. I'm not given to being literal about such things. I doubt that "Word" here means a syllable or an actual utterance. I can more easily picture this "Word," this sonic event, referring to a celestial vibration than to an actual word. Maybe we could go a step further and imagine that