

# David Byrne

It would be a mistake to pigeon-hole David Byrne. Best known as lead singer and principal songwriter of Talking Heads, the 66-year-old resists categorization—with pleasure. He is an Oscar-winning film composer, a collaborator with Robert Wilson and Fatboy Slim, a bike-rack designer, and, more recently, creator of a virtual reality piece inspired by neuroscience research. In his spare time, he curates the website Reasons to Be Cheerful, a repository for positive things happening around the world that can be reproduced elsewhere. In March, he released *American Utopia*, his first solo album in 14 years. It has since taken him on a massive international tour, during which he is surely discovering more ideas to fuel his optimism. Before he embarked, Byrne sat down in New York City to discuss a heady array of topics, from the need to treat audiences intelligently to the benefits of leaving certain jobs, even if you do the work well.

**You've said that the body understands music before the head does. Do you pay attention to how crowds move while you play?** You can't see the whole audience, but you can see enough to tell if they're physically engaged. I tend to feel that people perceive sound and its structure as a metaphor for something else, something beyond music. I think that's largely unconscious, and that's where some of the enjoyment comes from; it implies a way of organiz-

ing things socially or perceptually, and it does it without language. People know what music feels like. They know if they like it, but they don't analyze why.

**How smart are audiences?** They're as smart as the way you treat them. Treat them with respect, intelligence and empathy, and they respond in kind. Treat them as passive receivers of songs that they know—the hits that trigger instant enjoyment—and they'll regress to being that kind of consumer as opposed to being more engaged. I'll pander up to a point, but audiences don't want that either. They might think they do, but they actually want surprises as well.

**How does music differ from other art forms?** In the late '70s and early '80s, many visual artists went on to incredible continued success, whereas only a handful of musicians did. Maybe it's because you can accept visual art very quickly and see it over and over again. Music is time-based; you have to sit through it. That era's music was often somewhat aggressive, so it's not like you could do anything but sit through it, whereas with art you can look at it and have a conversation at the same time. Music can be emotionally engaging background sound and also something you stop and listen to with your full attention. You have options with how you want to take it in.

**Do you have any pre-show rituals?** I make ginger tea with lemon

The musical polymath talks fame and failure.

and honey, sometimes turmeric—the ingredients are on the rider! It becomes a ritual because I make it myself: I peel the ginger, chop it, let it steep. It takes at least 10 minutes, taking me outside of thinking about what's about to happen.

**Your career has been so varied. Have you ever felt that an endeavor just wasn't quite right for you, or had something not work out the way you had planned it?** Failure is a luxury I had early with Talking Heads as well as with some of my own stuff. You did something that didn't work in front of 30 people and you could junk it. It was no big deal. I wonder whether, now that everything can get disseminated so quickly, the idea of being able to fail publicly and learn from it is being squashed. The internet makes it harder for people to fail because they know that whatever they do might get out. The audience needs to accept that not everything that everyone does is going to be successful; they might have bad ideas sometimes.

I had a small record label for many years called Luaka Bop. It still exists, but although I could run the business, that wasn't the best use of my time. I realized that my skills might be better utilized doing things that other people can't do, and that, even though I could handle what I was doing, there were other people who could do it better than I could. Just because you can do something doesn't mean that's what you should be doing.

"The mind is a soft boiled potato," sings David Byrne on his new album. As the lyric suggests, Byrne's own brain is often powered by sideways tangents.

