



LOOK WHO'S TALKING

Dancer, cyclist, “anthropologist from Mars”: David Byrne is so much more than the oversized suit guy from Talking Heads. This summer, he’s bringing questions about love, life and autism along on his Australian tour.

by Aimee Knight

@siraimeeknight

Aimee Knight is an Autistic writer, editor and critic from Tarntanya/Adelaide.

What if moisturisers really worked?” asks David Byrne. “Really, *really* worked?” That’s the premise of ‘Moisturizing Thing’, his recent song about the life-changing potential of anti-aging cream, in which the singer applies lotion at bedtime and wakes up with the plump, dewy face of a literal baby. He now looks so young, he gets carded at the club. People condescend to him, disrespect him.

“It becomes this parable of judging a book by its cover,” Byrne explains. “So it actually has a little moral at the end of this slightly ridiculous thing. That’s the sort of thing I do,” he says with a self-aware smile. “I’ll take a subject and be” – he lets out a short, sharp laugh – “very logical about it, just to see where it goes.”

This line of curious enquiry has earned Byrne an oft-cited reputation as “an anthropologist from Mars”. His body of work – which spans music, books, film, photography, philosophy, bike racks and beyond – asks more questions than a preschooler at a museum.

“There’s a lot of: Why do people do that? Why do I do this? Why do people fall in love?” he lists.

“How did I get here?” I offer, as per the lyrics of ‘Once in a Lifetime’, his immortal pop warning to not live life on autopilot.

“Oooh!” Byrne enthuses. “A lot of my songs ask those questions. Somebody answer my question!” he says, his volume sliding up to the heavens.

At this point, you too may have questions. For example, “Who is David Byrne?” Professionally, he’s a musician and artist best known for fronting new wave trailblazers Talking Heads. Existentially, he’s kind of like if an inflatable tube man from a car yard sprang to life (compliment). Byrne has made a career of dancing like no-one’s watching, though his idiosyncratic jitterbugging is the focal point of *Stop Making Sense* (1984), widely considered the best concert film of all time.

This month, you can experience for yourself the specific euphoria of seeing David Byrne live. He’s back in Australia, on a world tour promoting his new album *Who Is the Sky?* (named for a voice-to-text mistranslation of the question, “Who is this guy?”)

Since the 1970s, this guy’s been wondering about the world and its fascinating inhabitants, exploring the mystery of other people through myriad musical genres and other media. Given he’s 73 and recently remarried, is Byrne and his work any different, or same as it ever was? The sonic social scientist is still asking what it means to belong.

Byrne was born in Dumbarton, Scotland, in 1952. He was only a bairn when his family moved to Ontario, Canada, but he learned to speak with the Glaswegian brogue of his parents – an early quirk that made him “a bit of an outsider” when the clan finally settled in Arbutus, Maryland, a few years later.

Fixated with his record player from age three, Byrne learned to play the guitar, harmonica, accordion and violin before high school (his awkward presence and discordant warble were, however, given the old “Don’t call us...” by his middle school choir).

In 1970, Byrne enrolled at the Rhode Island School of Design. His time at college was not long, but it was transformative: there he met fellow pupils Chris Frantz and Tina Weymouth. They moved to New York City in 1974 and co-founded the seminal art-rock outfit Talking Heads. Their first gig was opening for the Ramones at the legendary punk venue CBGB. Though their polo shirts and tennis shoes stood in preppy contrast to the leather and denim of their contemporaries, Talking Heads caught on with their uniquely nervous bops about murderers and civil servants.

Joined by Jerry Harrison in 1977, the band soon released their debut album, *Talking Heads: 77*. They would become one of the most lauded and influential groups of the 1980s, thanks to enduring jams like ‘Burning Down the House’, ‘Road to Nowhere’ and ‘Wild Wild Life’.

Across Byrne’s body of work, as both a member of Talking Heads and in his prolific solo career, there are two persistent themes. The first is travel: transport, roads and highways, giving a sense of perpetual motion. In 2009, he wrote *Bicycle Diaries* about his preference for pedal power. He’s designed whimsical bike racks strewn across NYC, and he even arrived at the 2023 Met Gala not behind the wheel of a large automobile but on his fixie. Byrne’s other go-to motif is cities, houses and buildings. When I mention this, he starts to laugh – a hearty sound, and a leitmotif of its own throughout our interview.



SUITABLE: WITH THE STOP
MAKING SENSE CREW IN 1984

Most of the things I encounter with people – how they behave and how I behave – I'm still trying to figure out.

"Well, I sort of poked fun at that years ago," he says, referencing the Heads' second album, *More Songs About Buildings and Food* (1978). The title, per Byrne, was his response to "some music writer's joke" about his lyrical proclivities (though, in true Talking Heads fashion, there's debate over who actually named that record).

In the years since, Byrne has only given his figurative critic more material. See: 'Cities', 'Everybody's Coming to My House' and, from the new album, 'My Apartment Is My Friend'. "Now they can say, 'He's come up with some more!'" Byrne exclaims. But why? What is it about buildings that lights up his grey matter? He turns thoughtful.

"I think it means: What's your safe place?" he says. "Where do you feel comfortable, like this is where you belong? I suppose 'home' doesn't have to be a specific building, although that's fun to think about. It could be a person – often is. And on the other side," he adds, "sometimes a building is like a person. Oh, I see your eyes going, *whoop!*" he giggles. "Where's he going now?"

I explain to Byrne that I'm Autistic and will look away to process big thoughts. "I do that, too," he reassures, then circles back to his own. "Yes, sometimes a building is like a person. Not that it has eyes and a nose and a mouth," though we agree, in unison, that sometimes they do. "A building is an enclosed thing," he says. "It has a character. It has a life... I mean it's a person in a metaphorical way. Obviously, I'm not being literal."

Byrne's most heartfelt rendering of this idea that home can be a person, and a person can be home, is heard on the Talking Heads track, 'This Must Be the Place (Naive Melody)'. After years of singing about social alienation and urban planning, it was the band's first overt love song, albeit an unconventional one.

"I wanted to use phrases that weren't a rehash of what I'd heard in other love songs," Byrne explains. "I was aware that similar phrases get used an awful lot, and that could be a real pitfall. I thought, *Watch out for that.*" Straying also from the group's favoured polyrhythms and Afrobeat grooves, it's a delicate, airy tune about learning how to express love, and how to receive it. "Home is where I want to be," croons Byrne on the track, "but I guess I'm already there."

Upon release in 1983, the song was no chart-topper, but in the streaming era, its popularity has grown exponentially. It's now the group's second-most-played song on Tidal. Byrne even had an all-girl brass band play it at his recent wedding to businesswoman Mala Gaonkar. "We did this sort of processional thing," he says. "People had to learn little movements."

When I ask what the song's evolving legacy means to him, Byrne says, "I'm aware that a lot of people like it. It has meaning for them. It certainly seems to be popular amongst quite a number of generations." He takes a beat. "To me, that means it must have touched something that transcends a particular time and place."

I tell him I once saw it called "the best Autistic love song of all time". A pause, then he cackles with joy.

"Byrne has a withdrawn, disembodied, sci-fi quality," wrote Pauline Kael in her 1984 review of *Stop Making Sense*, a film she called "close to perfection". She wasn't wrong. It's an 88-minute tour de force – think: *Jane Fonda's Workout* for music nerds – in which Byrne careens across the stage, jogs on the spot, and sings 'This Must Be the Place' to a floor lamp.

The movie also gave us the quintessential image of Byrne: that wild-eyed white boy sweating rivers as he's swallowed alive by his big grey suit. "Though there's something unknowable and almost autistic about him," Kael noted 40 years ago, "he makes autism fun."

When I read this quote to Byrne today, he quietly snickers, in good spirits. He's never sought the piece of paper that would declare him officially Autistic, but he identifies as such, citing traits like his tendency to hyperfocus on stuff he enjoys, and his fluctuating capacity to navigate social interactions.

In 1991, after years of intra-band friction, Talking Heads called it a day. Drummer Chris Frantz and bassist Tina Weymouth have spoken at length about their former co-worker's alleged selfishness; his (in their eyes) calculated, transactional relationships. Byrne, for his part, has copped to being "a bossy pants", as he recently put it to Louis Theroux, when reflecting on his meticulous work ethic.



THE ANTHROPOLOGIST FROM MARS, LIVE IN 2025



IN TRUE STORIES, BEHIND THE WHEEL OF A LARGE AUTOMOBILE



TICKLED PINK IN CHICAGO, 1997



BYRNE WITH HIS WIFE MALA GAONKAR

Byrne's unique ways of speaking and being tend to baffle journalists, who are confounded by his sporadic eye contact and ponderous trains of thought (wondering how a building is like a person, for example, or whether moisturiser can de-age you by seven decades). Yet it's precisely these qualities – this presentation of joyful befuddlement – that makes Byrne so intriguing, endearing and relatable, especially to neurodivergent fans. "Being in bands and performing, I've become more socially comfortable," he says. "But I still think in a way that I realise is not always typical."

Though Byrne's work to date hasn't explored his neurotype head-on, it offers an affective sense of how it feels to be Autistic. "It comes across all the time," he says emphatically. "All the time." On his latest album, the song 'She Explains Things to Me' plumbs the gap between what people say and what they mean, which can sometimes be tricky for Autistic people to infer. Byrne mentions another new track, 'What Is the Reason for It?'

"It asks, 'What is love? What is it for? Why do we talk about it?'" he explains. Such questions are par for the course on Byrne's lifelong quest to make sense of the world. "Why is it the way it is? Why are we the way we are? Those sorts of things, with no answers really," he laughs.

Back in the day, Byrne's opaque, stilted persona made it hard to tell whether he was serious, silly or sincere. His 1986 film *True Stories*, which he wrote, directed and starred in, is packed with lines drier than the Texan landscape on which it was shot. ("Things that never had names before are now easily described," he observes over footage of intertwined highways. "Makes conversation easy.") By contrast, Spike Lee's concert film *American Utopia*, filmed in early 2020, captures a version of Byrne so playful on stage that he could be mistaken for a new Grey Wiggle awaiting anointment.

What is Byrne's relationship to humour? Is it important to him? He takes a long, thoughtful pause. "Wow..." he whispers, in deep consideration. "I think it's very important for me. Maybe it's an escape valve sometimes. I often find that, by putting into words what I literally see before me, the absurdity of it becomes manifest – and it's often funny."

A thought comes to Byrne. He chortles to himself for 12 full seconds, then tells me his wife is writing a book. "She said, 'David, David, how would you write a sex scene?' I described everything very, very literally, and she said, 'That is...not going to work,'" he laughs.

"Most of the things I encounter with people – how they behave and how I behave – I'm still trying to figure out," he says. "I find that asking the right questions gets you more than halfway there. Do I need to have answers? Only occasionally. When something fits together and makes sense, that's kind of wonderful."

And when it doesn't, can David Byrne live with life's mysteries? "Certainly," he chuckles. "I have little choice in the matter! I'm not young. I'll probably never get it all figured out. But that's okay."

DAVID BYRNE TOURS AUSTRALIA IN JANUARY.
WHO IS THE SKY? IS OUT NOW.