

Talking Heads



Talking Heads was an American rock band formed in 1975 in New York City and active until 1991. The band comprised **David Byrne** (*lead vocals, guitar*), **Chris Frantz** (*drums*), **Tina Weymouth** (*bass*), and **Jerry Harrison** (*keyboards, guitar*). Former art school students who became involved in the 1970s New York punk scene, Talking Heads integrated elements of punk, art rock, funk, and pop music with avant-garde sensibilities to become a pioneering post-punk and new wave group. Led by the anxious, neurotic stage persona of frontman Byrne, the group produced several commercial hits and a number of multimedia projects throughout its career, and often collaborated with other artists, such as musician *Brian Eno* and director *Jonathan Demme*.

Critic Stephen Thomas Erlewine described Talking Heads as "one of the most critically acclaimed bands of the '80s." In 2002, the band was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Four of the band's albums appeared on Rolling Stone's list of the 500 Greatest Albums of All Time, and three of their songs ("*Psycho Killer*", "*Life During Wartime*", and "*Once in a Lifetime*") were included among **The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame's 500 Songs that Shaped Rock and Roll**. Talking Heads were also included at #64 on **VH1's** list of the "**100 Greatest Artists of All Time**".

History

1974–1977: First years

David Byrne, Chris Frantz, and Tina Weymouth were alumni of the *Rhode Island School of Design* in Providence, Rhode Island. There, Byrne and Frantz formed a band called "*The Artistics*" in 1974. Weymouth was Frantz's girlfriend and often provided transportation for the band. The Artistics dissolved within a year, and the three moved to New York, eventually sharing a communal loft. Unable to find a bass player in New York City, Frantz encouraged Weymouth to learn to play bass by listening to Suzi Quatro albums. They played their first gig as "*Talking Heads*" opening for the Ramones at CBGB on June 20, 1975.

In a later interview, Weymouth recalled how the group chose the name Talking Heads: "*A friend had found the name in the TV Guide, which explained the term used by TV studios to describe a head-and-shoulder shot of a person talking as 'all content, no action.' It fit.*"

Later that year, the trio recorded a series of demos for CBS, but the band was not signed to the label. They quickly drew a following and were signed to Sire Records in 1977. The group released their first single in February that year, "*Love → Building on Fire*". In March 1977, they added Jerry Harrison (keyboards, guitar, backing vocals), formerly of Jonathan Richman's band The Modern Lovers.

Their first album was released soon afterwards, *Talking Heads: 77*, which did not contain the earlier single. The album received considerable acclaim and spawned what became the group's first charted single, "*Psycho Killer*". The song was released to the radio just months after the serial killer known as the Son of Sam had been terrorizing New York City, prompting many to assume some eerie connection. However, it was later revealed that Byrne had written the song nearly four years earlier.

1978–1982: Collaborations with Eno

1978's *More Songs About Buildings and Food* brought about the band's long-term collaboration with producer Brian Eno, who had previously worked with Roxy Music, David Bowie, John Cale and Robert Fripp; the title of Eno's 1977 song "*King's Lead Hat*" is an anagram of the band's name. Eno's unusual style meshed well with the group's artistic sensibilities, and they began to explore an increasingly diverse range of musical directions, from post-punk to new wave to psychedelic funk to funk rock. This recording also established the band's long term recording studio relationship with the famous Compass Point Studios in Nassau, Bahamas. *More Songs...* cover of Al Green's "*Take Me to the River*" broke Talking Heads into general public consciousness, and gave the band their first Billboard Top 30 hit.

The Eno-Talking Heads experimentation continued with 1979's *Fear of Music*, which flirted with the darker stylings of post-punk rock, mixed with white funkadelia and subliminal references to the geopolitical instability of the late 1970s. Music journalist Simon Reynolds cited *Fear of Music* as representing the Eno-Talking Heads collaboration "at its most mutually fruitful and equitable." The single "*Life During Wartime*" produced the catchphrase, "*This ain't no party, this ain't no disco.*" The song refers to the Mudd Club and CBGB, two popular New York nightclubs of the time.

1980's *Remain in Light* was heavily influenced by the afrobeat of Nigerian bandleader Fela Kuti, to whose music Eno had introduced the band. It explored West African polyrhythms, weaving these together with Arabic music from North Africa, disco funk, and "*found*" voices. These combinations foreshadowed Byrne's later interest in world music. In order to perform these more complex arrangements, the band toured with an expanded group that included Adrian Belew and Bernie Worrell, among others, first at the *Heatwave* festival in August, and later in their concert film *Stop Making Sense*. During this period, Tina Weymouth and Chris Frantz also formed a commercially successful splinter group, *Tom Tom Club*, influenced by the foundational elements of Hip hop, and Harrison released his first solo album, *The Red and the Black*. Likewise, Byrne – in collaboration with Eno – released *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, which incorporated world music and found sounds as well as including a number of other prominent international and post-punk musicians. All were released by Sire.

The fourth song from *Remain in Light* utilized Eno's *Oblique Strategies* technique and featured Byrne's alienated meditation on life. The song was named one of the 100 most important American musical works of the 20th century by NPR.

Remain in Light's lead single, "*Once in a Lifetime*", became a Top 20 hit in the UK but initially failed to make an impression upon its release in the band's own country. But it grew into a popular standard over the next few years on the strength of its music video, which was named one of *Time magazine's All-TIME Best Music Videos*. After releasing four albums in barely four years, the group went into hiatus and nearly three years passed before their next release, although Frantz and Weymouth continued to record with the *Tom Tom Club*. In the meantime, Talking Heads released a live album, *The Name of This Band Is Talking Heads*, toured the United States and Europe as an eight-piece group, and parted ways with Eno, who went on to produce albums with U2.

1983–1991: Height of commercial success and break-up

1983 saw the release of *Speaking in Tongues*, a commercial breakthrough that produced the band's only American Top 10 hit, "*Burning Down the House*". Once again, a striking video was inescapable owing to its heavy rotation on MTV. The following tour was documented in Jonathan Demme's *Stop Making Sense*, which generated another live album of the same name. The tour in support of *Speaking in Tongues* was their last.

I try to write about small things. Paper, animals, a house...love is kind of big. I have written a love song, though. In this film, I sing it to a lamp.

—David Byrne, interviewing himself in *Stop Making Sense*

Three more albums followed: 1985's *Little Creatures* (which featured the hit singles "*And She Was*" and "*Road to Nowhere*"), 1986's *True Stories* (Talking Heads covering all the soundtrack songs of Byrne's musical comedy film, in which the band also appeared), and 1988's *Naked*. *Little Creatures* offered a much more American pop-rock sound as opposed to previous efforts. Similar in genre, *True Stories* hatched one of the group's most successful hits, "*Wild Wild Life*", and the accordion-driven track "*Radio Head*" which became the etymon of the band of the same name.[40] *Naked* explored politics, sex, and death, and showed heavy African influence with polyrhythmic styles like those seen on *Remain in Light*. During that time, the group was falling increasingly under David Byrne's control and, after *Naked*, the band went on "hiatus".

As David Byrne experimented with world music and brought extra percussionists on tour, Chris Frantz and Tina Weymouth formed the dance group *Tom Tom Club*. They are pictured here performing in 1986.

It took until December 1991 for an official announcement to be made that Talking Heads had broken up. Their final release was "*Sax and Violins*", an original song that had appeared earlier that year on the soundtrack to Wim Wenders' *Until the End of the World*. During this breakup period, Byrne continued his solo career, releasing *Rei Momo* in 1989 and *The Forest* in 1991. This period also saw a revived flourish from both *Tom Tom Club* (*Boom Boom Chi Boom Boom* and *Dark Sneak Love Action*) and Harrison (*Casual Gods* and *Walk on Water*), who toured together in the summer of 1990.

1992–2002: Post break-up and final reunion

After the band's break-up, Frantz, Harrison, and Weymouth released an album as The Heads and Frantz and Weymouth have continued in *Tom Tom Club*.

Despite David Byrne's lack of interest in another album, Tina Weymouth, Chris Frantz, and Jerry Harrison reunited for a one-off album called *No Talking, Just Head* under the name *The Heads* in 1996. The album featured a number of vocalists including Debbie Harry of Blondie, Johnette Napolitano of Concrete Blonde, Andy Partridge of XTC, Gordon Gano of Violent Femmes, Michael Hutchence of INXS, Ed Kowalczyk of Live, Shaun Ryder of Happy Mondays, Richard Hell, and Maria McKee. The album was accompanied by a tour which featured Johnette Napolitano as the vocalist. Byrne took legal action against the rest of the band to prevent them using the name "*Talking Heads*", something he saw as "*a pretty obvious attempt to cash in on the Talking Heads name.*" They opted to record and tour as "*The Heads*". Likewise, Byrne continues his solo career.

Meanwhile, Harrison became a record producer of some note – his résumé includes the *Violent Femmes'* *The Blind Leading the Naked*, the *Fine Young Cannibals'* *The Raw and the Cooked*, *General Public's* *Rub It Better*, *Crash Test Dummies'* *God Shuffled His Feet*, *Live's* *Mental Jewelry*, *Throwing Copper* and *The Distance To Here*, No Doubt's song "*New*" from *Return of Saturn*, and in 2010, work by *The Black and White Years* and *Kenny Wayne Shepherd*.

Frantz and Weymouth, who were married in 1977, had been recording on the side as Tom Tom Club since 1981. Tom Tom Club's self-titled debut album sold almost as well as Talking Heads themselves, leading to the band appearing in *Stop Making Sense*. They achieved several pop/rap hits during the dance-club cultural boom era of the early 1980s, particularly in the UK, where they still enjoy a strong fan following today. Their best-known single, "*Genius of Love*", has been sampled numerous times, notably on old school hip hop classic "*It's Nasty (Genius of Love)*" by Grandmaster Flash and on Mariah Carey's 1995 hit "*Fantasy*". They also have produced several artists, including Happy Mondays and Ziggy Marley. The Tom Tom Club continue to record and tour intermittently, although commercial releases have become sporadic since 1991.

The band played "*Life During Wartime*", "*Psycho Killer*" and "*Burning Down the House*" together on March 18, 2002, at the ceremony of their induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. However, reuniting for a concert tour is unlikely. David Byrne states: "*We did have a lot of bad blood go down. That's one reason, and another is that musically we're just miles apart.*" Weymouth, however, has been critical of Byrne, describing him as "*a man incapable of returning friendship*" and saying that he doesn't "love" her, Frantz, and Harrison.

In the 2011 update of *Rolling Stone*'s "*100 Greatest Artists of All Time*", the band was ranked at **No. 100**.

Influence

One of the most celebrated bands of the 1970s and 1980s, Talking Heads' art pop innovations have had a long-lasting impact. Along with other early 1980s anti-corporate and experimental groups such as Devo, The Ramones and Blondie, they helped define the new wave genre in the United States. Meanwhile, the more worldly popularities like 1980's *Remain in Light* helped bring African rock to the western world.

Talking Heads have been cited as a primary influence by many artists, including R.E.M., *Vampire Weekend*, *Primus*, *Bell X1* and *Radiohead*, who took their name from the Talking Heads song "Radio Head" from the 1986 album *True Stories*. The Italian filmmaker and director Paolo Sorrentino, in receiving the Oscar for his film *La Grande Bellezza* in 2014, thanked Talking Heads among others as his sources of inspiration.

What the Songs Look Like

What the Songs Look Like: Contemporary Artists Interpret Talking Heads Songs is a visual art book published in 1987 by Harper & Row. It comprises full page artworks by over fifty contemporary artists, each matched to a specific Talking Heads song. Artists featured in the collection include David Byrne, Keith Haring, Sue Coe, and Robert Rauschenberg.

Discography

- *Talking Heads: 77* (1977)
- *More Songs About Buildings and Food* (1978)
- *Fear of Music* (1979)
- *Remain in Light* (1980)
- *Speaking in Tongues* (1983)
- *Little Creatures* (1985)
- *True Stories* (1986)
- *Naked* (1988)
