

## “Remain In Light”--Talking Heads (1980)

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Essay by Philip Maddox (guest post)\*



*Talking Heads, c. 1980*

Formed in 1975 in New York City by singer/guitarist David Byrne, bassist Tina Weymouth, and drummer Chris Franz, Talking Heads (properly without the “The” that many people insert before their name) never sat still for very long. After adding second guitarist Jerry Harrison in early 1977, the group cut their first album, 1977’s appropriately named “Talking Heads: 77.” This album consisted of quirky new wave music that was largely memorable due to Byrne’s unforgettable voice. The album was solid, but the group had no desire to simply reuse the same template for the rest of their career and began seeking out new artistic pathways to travel down.

In 1978, they teamed up with producer Brian Eno, formerly of Roxy Music. Eno was well known for producing music with an experimental edge, ranging from the somewhat skewed art-pop of albums like 1974’s “Here Come the Warm Jets” to the experimental proto-ambient music found on album such as 1975’s “Discreet Music.” The pairing of the Heads’ new wave music with Eno’s experimental drive proved to be a match made in heaven, producing some of the finest music either Talking Heads or Eno ever produced.

Their first album together, 1978’s “More Songs About Buildings And Food,” showed more unusual elements creeping into their sound. By their third LP, 1979’s “Fear Of Music,” their music was getting considerably more experimental. The most notable new element to their sound on this album was an interest in African music, exemplified by the wonderful lead-off track, “I Zimbra.” Co-written with Eno and featuring stunning guitar work from King Crimson guitarist and former Eno collaborator Robert Fripp, the song utilized African rhythms and chanted vocals while still being identifiably the music of Talking Heads. The group had successfully managed to incorporate these new elements into their sound without the sound overtaking their identity. The group was extremely pleased with the way “I Zimbra” turned out, with Jerry Harrison claiming in 1997 that the group knew that their next LP was going to be a further exploration of that sound.

The band went all-out in pursuing this sound on their fourth and arguably greatest LP, 1980's "Remain In Light." Brian Eno was essentially an unofficial member of the group at this point, receiving co-writing credit on every track, producing, providing backing vocals, and playing keyboards and percussion. Every song on the album is credited to all four official members of the band and Eno, reflecting how the structures of the songs were built out of jams--the group creating intersecting parts to create intricate polyrhythms.

Starting with "Born Under Punches (The Heat Goes On)," the album quickly establishes that it is going to follow no known precedents. The band lays down a sparse, repetitive groove that contains elements of funk, but is far from being standard-issue funk. David Byrne shouts over the music with one of his trademark paranoid-sounding rants before the song eventually explodes with a series of alien-sounding synthesizer sounds over the vamp. It truly feels like music that could have come from another planet.

The next track, "Crosseyed And Painless," continues on in much the same way as "Born Under Punches," featuring a wonderful rhythm and some of Byrne's most abstract, paranoid lyrics. "The Great Curve," which closes out side one of the original LP, is possibly the greatest track the group ever recorded, despite not being among their most famous. The song is a swirling mass of guitar, bass, percussion, horns, and vocal chants, with elements piling up over the course of the song. Despite how incredibly busy this song is, it never sounds overly cluttered; the song is crisp, catchy, and even danceable. The song culminates in dissonant guitar solos performed by guest guitarist Adrian Belew that accentuate the music perfectly and never feels weird-for-the-sake-of-weird.

Of course, the most famous song on the album is the classic "Once In A Lifetime." It's the definitive Talking Heads track. Over a two-note bass line that never changes over the course of the song (no matter what the other instruments are doing), David Byrne sings in a very declarative style about how we can find ourselves in places that we don't truly recognize, having been pushed by the nonstop flow of life into places we never really wanted to be. Byrne had covered the topic of alienation with modern life on tracks such as "The Big Country" from "More Songs About Buildings And Food," but which he truly mastered here. The song ebbs and flows, adding and subtracting elements constantly, but always underpinned by that same wonderful bassline. The song is truly timeless, combining an eternally relevant message with music that truly belongs to no era--the song could be released and recorded today and it wouldn't feel dated in the slightest. The music video, featuring an army of David Byrnes dancing jerkily in suits and an empty white room, remains one of the greatest music videos ever made--simple, yet extremely effective at creating memorable images that one can easily identify with the song.

The last four tracks on the album find the group slowing down and growing far more experimental. "Houses In Motion" features a repetitive groove and largely spoken vocals leading into a more conventional chorus. "Seen And Not Seen" features entirely spoken vocals--the tale of a person obsessed with the idea that if he focuses his mind, he can force his face to adapt the shape of whomever he wishes. "Listening Wind" provides a sympathetic look into the mind of a terrorist bomber trying to drive American forces out of his village. The music--cold, sparse, and dark--creates a terrifying atmosphere that accentuates the chilling lyrics.

The album closes on the appropriately named “The Overload”--a deathly slow, repetitive drone that feels like the sound of the end of the world. The song is dark, dreary, and oppressive drone, never giving the listener a reprieve from the crushing darkness in the form of any identifiable hooks. The song divides listeners, but in this writer’s opinion, it’s a perfect end to the album, completing the album’s journey from being upbeat, complex, and danceable to being slow, oppressive, and dark.

This album marked the end of an era for Talking Heads--the group didn’t make another album until 1983’s “Speaking In Tongues,” which maintained some of the worldbeat elements of this record but was overall a far more mainstream effort.

“Remain In Light” remains totally unique-- an album that was hard to even attempt to imitate, let alone duplicate. While African music influences continued to become more pervasive in popular music of the era--peaking with Paul Simon’s masterpiece, 1986’s “Graceland”--nobody quite approached them the way Talking Heads did here. Using African rhythms and rhythmic styles as a structure to build new wave dance and experimental music on was a masterstroke. While every album in the Talking Heads discography is worth hearing, “Remain In Light” remains singular--one of the most striking and original pieces of rock music ever recorded.

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