

MUSICIAN

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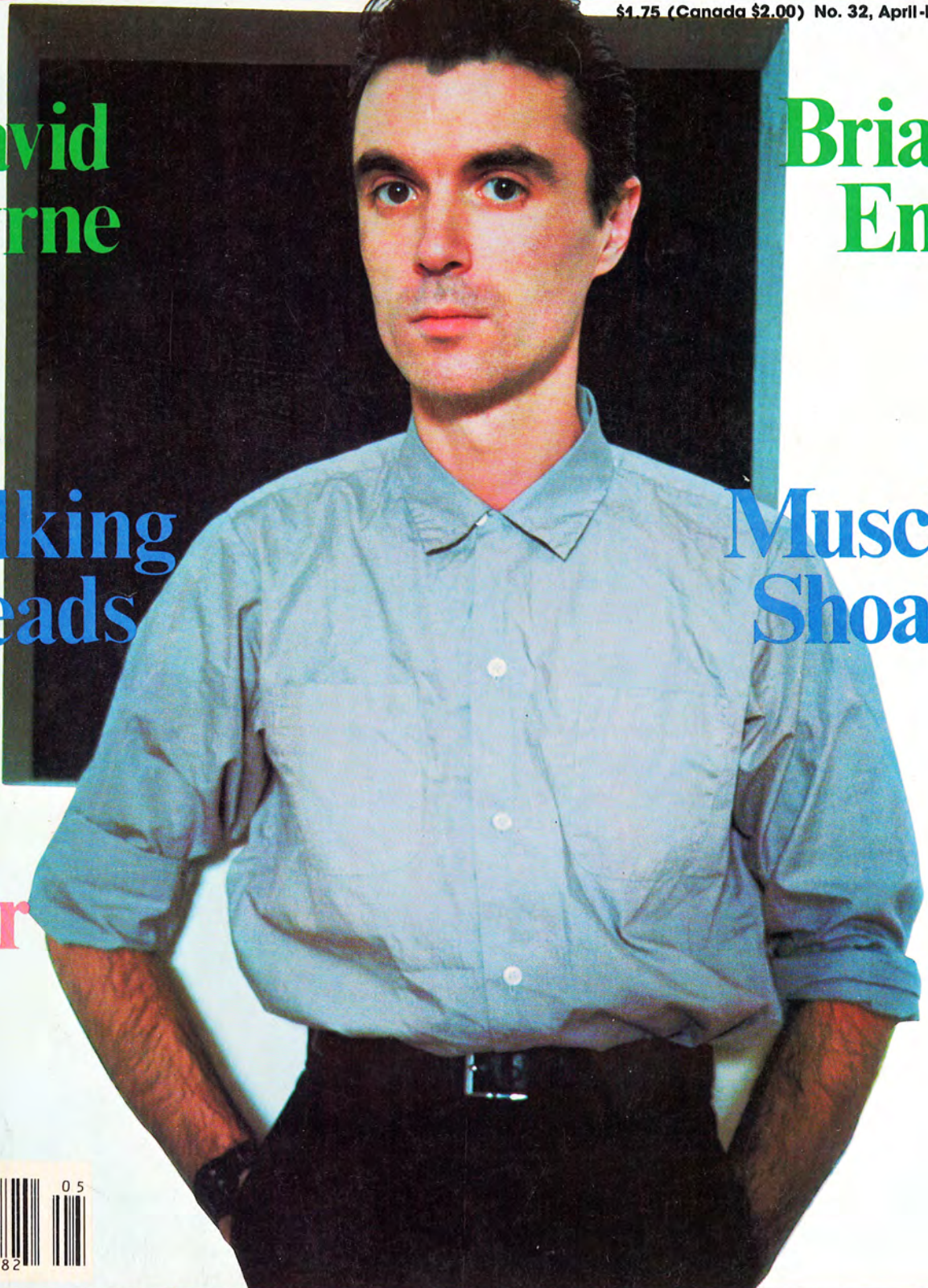


David
Byrne

Brian
Eno

Talking
Heads

Muscle
Shoals



Air



The ambient Mr. Eno again confounds his audience with a new creative collaboration with David Byrne and Talking Heads, divining the mysteries of techno-tribal sound in the third world.

BRIAN

ENO

By Mikal Gilmore and Spottswood Erving

I'm such a lucky person. I don't know how, but everything happens to me just as I want it to. What's funny is I don't even *believe* that some people have a benevolent destiny that keeps endowing them with little gifts. Yet here I am, sort of contradictory proof of that very thing."

For Brian Eno, one such little gift was the opportunity to produce a once in a lifetime record, Talking Heads' *Remain In Light*. His third production effort for the band, and the first in which he asserted his standing as a full-fledged group member, *Remain In Light* took the band way beyond the conventions (relatively speaking) of their earlier rock records: its provocative blend of dense dance rhythms and mazy vocal webs established it overnight as the first convincing fusion of New Wave ambition and African sensibility.

Another little gift came in the unlikely form of a legal setback. The estate of one Kathryn Kuhlman, recently deceased evangelist, denied Eno and David Byrne permission to use her voice — which Byrne had taped off the radio — among the other "found" voices on their then-completed collaboration, *My Life In The Bush Of Ghosts*. Their ghastly sacrilege thus nipped in the bud, Eno and Byrne went back and reworked that track, and then figured they'd fiddle with another, and then another, and so on...until the album, according to Eno, was vastly improved. Serendipitous revisionism never had it so good: *Bush Of Ghosts* turns out to be a richly rhythmic amalgam of art-rock, punk-funk, found vocals, and eerie electronics — all in all, a disquieting montage of modernism and primitivism unlike anything previously produced by popular artists.

Yet a third gift — hardly little, this one — came by way of a United Nations emissary. He brought Eno an invitation from Ghana's Ministry of Culture asking him to attend their art festival and linger for a while if he liked, possibly record with some Ghanaian

musicians. He went, he listened, he produced an album for a local group, he played with them, he recorded: Eno in an Afro-musicologist's heaven.

"I had this idea," Eno said, "that it would be exciting to introduce African — and particularly Ghanaian music — to Western Culture in a big way. And I don't mean as a novelty form, but as a way of asserting that this is incredibly stimulating music, that it stands in comparison with *anything* happening here. Well somehow the Ghanians caught wind of my aspirations and thought it a worthy idea to invite me over. I'm also quite interested in Arabic music, but it's a little harder to come to terms with, partly because that North African melodic sense is very different than ours.

"You see, I've developed this strong feeling about what's happening to so-called 'primitive' and ethnic tribal peoples. I believe that the complexity of their music stands as a symbol of the richness of their societies, and I hope that people, upon listening to this music, might think that if these cultures can produce music this intricate and this intelligent, then they can't really be 'primitive.'"

In a sense, the aesthetic precepts that Eno is working from bear similarity to the musical idealism that guides the Clash in *Sandinista!*, and the untutored iconoclasm that serves Public Image Ltd. in *Flowers Of Romance*: they all seek to expand the vernacular of Western popular music — and perhaps deepen the possibilities of life itself — by melding traditional rock forms with remote cultural modes. In Eno's case though, there are few bridges to burn: "I tried to maintain an enthusiasm for punk, but there just isn't much happening there in the way of ideas. Finally, I realized, Goddamn!, there's a whole *world* of interesting music out there. Why bother about this little scene right here? So what if punk dies off? There's stuff going on in South Africa



right now that's infinitely more interesting, and rewarding."

The following interview took place on the telephone, of all places. Normally, the phone is the worst possible medium for any kind of serious exchange of ideas. Not for Eno. But then, if nothing else, his entire career has been a prime example of an artist's ability to transcend mediums.

MUSICIAN: First things first, how was your month in Ghana?

"I love playing rock music — I find it thrilling to make, but I know once I make it, I'm never going to listen to it again."

ENO: I was quite impressed by the friendliness of the people and by their dancing, the way even the old people dance. But the most thrilling thing actually sounds quite unthrilling: I often sat outside Accra in the evening with my little Sony stereo recorder and my headphones and just listened to whatever was going on. Since there wasn't much traffic, I could hear sounds it would ordinarily mask: insect sounds, people in the distance, night birds, various kinds of frogs, and all sorts of distant drumming from all different angles — from very, very far away the drums would drift in and drift out as the wind changed. I spent a great deal of time just listening to the environment, that was the thrill of going to Africa for me, those tapes are a more accurate record than any kind of photograph would be.

MUSICIAN: Might you use those tapes as part of the project you began recording with Ghanaian musicians?

ENO: Perhaps, but I can't work on top of them because those tapes are thick with subtlety and sometimes very faint. I might, however, use them in conjunction with a video project like the one I constructed in San Francisco awhile back; I shot large buildings, office buildings with no people in the frame and dubbed onto the tape a "Sounds of a Cameroon Village" Folkways record. The contrast was really fascinating: totalitarian buildings, no humans, and a soundtrack of people talking and working and goats and chickens clucking!

MUSICIAN: Speaking of dubbing "found" aural materials, which of course is an integral part of *Bush Of Ghosts*, I'm curious as to what precedents influenced your use of that technique.

ENO: Oh yeah, that's important, because we wouldn't want anyone to think this was our original idea. Holger Czukay's *Movies* used the same technique a few years ago, and both he and I got the idea from Stockhausen, who was using the technique fifteen years ago. I would also point to "I Am The Walrus," which nicely uses found vocals, and the most crucial ones for me were by Steve Reich. He did some records in the mid-'60s, first *Come Out* and then *It's Gonna Rain*, which were wholly composed of found voices. No instruments, just voices. This was extremely important for me. I don't claim originality, but I do hope other people use found materials in the future instead of writing cruddy songs like they do now.

MUSICIAN: You once said that your "dream group" would sound something like a coalition of Parliament and Kraftwerk. It seems that the two new records shoot for that ideal.

ENO: Actually, my ideal group is getting bigger all the time. If I were to respond to that question now, I would add into the equation Ladysmith Black Mambazo [a South African a cappella group], Abou Abdel Said [an Arabic farfisa player] and a much larger rhythm section. Lately, I've been trying to write songs that have strong rhythmic undercurrents, but also very complex vocal overlayers — sort of a merger of the West African talking-drums style and the South African part-singing tradition. On certain tracks of *Remain In Light* — such as "The Great Curve," which has about four or five interlocking vocal

lines that I wrote — you get a sense of that fusion beginning to happen.

MUSICIAN: There's very little music on any of your previous records that could prepare us for *Bush Of Ghosts* and *Remain In Light*. When did your interest in African music begin?

ENO: I first became aware of it about 1972, through a record by Fela Ransome [presently known as Fela Anikulap-Kuti], but it didn't occur to me that there was any way of joining my interest with African music. Partly, that's because at the time — this was just after I'd left Roxy Music — I was going through a phase where I was mostly interested in working by myself, and African music is nothing if not social music.

In time, I found myself drawing closer to that vision of communal creativity. In fact, I've become pretty bored with working on my own. The types of interactions I'm after occur when there are certain misinterpretations of an idea among a number of people. For example, you have six or seven musicians working on a single piece, yet each one approaches it from a slightly different angle. As a result, you get a useful collision of views: one person decides to push a beat in a different way from somebody else, and an interesting tension comes of that.

MUSICIAN: What you're describing sounds a lot like jazz improvisation.

ENO: No, not really. It isn't related to the idea of the improviser being given his freedom while the rest of the band holds the threads of the piece together. The pinnacle of that view of freedom, of course, is avant-garde jazz, which I find by and large a dead loss. It operates on the assumption that if you remove all constraints from people, they will behave in some especially inspired manner. This doesn't seem to me to be true in any sense at all — not socially, and certainly not artistically.

The point is that the typical jazz or even rock concept of improvisation is based on the theory of the individual breaking loose of something. The African version is based on the idea of the individual making an important, timely contribution to a social event. Talking Heads is an ideal example of that kind of communion; their whole style involves sociorhythmic interconnectedness.

MUSICIAN: Which makes *Bush Of Ghosts* radically different than *Remain In Light*; it seems more like an act of collage than a work of communion.

ENO: Well, there was a lot of influence from one to the other. I started some basic tracks for *Bush Of Ghosts* nearly two years ago, and then in January of 1980 I invited David into the project as a full collaborator. We finished one version of the record, then went into the studio with the Talking Heads with the feeling that we wanted to expand some of the same ideas we'd been working on. For instance, "Once In A Lifetime" has David's preacher rap on it, which is very similar to some of the evangelist rants on *Bush Of Ghosts*. More explicitly, what we were interested in promoting was this idea of interchange between what we knew of American music and what we understood about African music, which we don't claim to be a comprehensive or even accurate understanding.

As it turned out, *Remain In Light* succeeded in a number of places where *Bush Of Ghosts* had failed. So I suggested to David that we shouldn't release our project until we had rethought it a bit. Initially, he wasn't very keen on that idea, but then the Kathryn Kuhlman episode came up, and we were forced into a position where we might have to scrap the album. Actually, I was pretty pleased by that, because it meant we had to work at least on that one track, and if it meant that, then there would be no harm in doing a few other things as well. Since then, we've changed quite a lot of it, and it has become a much better articulation of our original design.

MUSICIAN: How extensive was your role in the Talking Heads record?

ENO: I explained to everybody before we began the record that I wasn't going to produce this one in the normal sense. In fact, originally I didn't want to produce it at all. I told the group that the only way I cared to work these days was collaboratively, and that on top of that, I had a very strong idea about the



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direction I wanted their music to go.

I don't mean to give the impression that the Talking Heads were sitting around without ideas of their own, nor that I was exactly imposing mine on top of theirs. This was a direction they were headed in anyway, though perhaps they hadn't articulated it to any great extent. We all share the belief that music should have something to do with exploring ideas.

Anyway, I *did* take a very dominant hand on this record, though there are places where I did almost nothing. My policy as a producer and collaborator has always been that you should do what's necessary for the musical event at hand, and if the necessary thing is to leave it alone, then you do that. That's what I expect of musicians as well.

MUSICIAN: Yet another view of your role in the Talking Heads — and even some of the group members themselves have expressed this — is that you and Byrne have more or less taken over the band for your own ends.

ENO: That's a statement I would like to guard against. Let me tell you something that might help in that regard. After we had finished *Remain In Light*, I called a meeting of the Talking Heads to decide how we were going to divide the royalties. Traditionally, a song consists of lyrics, melody and arrangement, with royalties being divided a third each. But that didn't reflect the reality of this record, so a continuation of my producer's role was to formulate a list of what I considered the factors in making it.

One factor, obviously, was melody, and another lyrics. A third element was the project's conceptual direction — which is to say that the choices people made musically weren't based on preference or whim, but upon fulfilling that African objective I mentioned earlier. A fourth one was who originated

specific musical ideas. When we were standing out there in the studio playing, someone would come up with an idea which might be incredibly simple, yet for some reason would trigger everyone else off. In some cases, that idea never appeared in the final piece, but since it was the anchor upon which the music was moored, you have to give credit for it. The final factor is who constructed the situation in which this could happen. Clearly, in the case of the Talking Heads this was a group thing. The fact that all the band members — and not just me and David — were emotionally and conceptually and aesthetically *ready* for that music at that time, and were not only prepared to let it happen but to actively engage in it, is probably the single most important factor.

There seems to be a simplistic view at work about the Talking Heads, which is that David Byrne and Brian Eno are the directors of the group's ideas, and that they even produced a record beforehand that had several of *Remain In Light's* ideas on it. To offset that, I'm saying these other creative considerations are equally important. The fact that *Remain In Light* came out sounding the way it did — rather than the way *Bush Of Ghosts* sounds — is because it was the Talking Heads who made that record.

MUSICIAN: The kinetic rhythmic density of *Bush Of Ghosts* is quite a departure from the placid, impressionistic style of music that characterizes so much of your recent work, like *Music For Airports* and *The Plateaux Of Mirror* [the latter with pianist Harold Budd]. Yet that music was also originally an act of deviation, an about-face from the avant-pop inroads you had made with Roxy Music and your early solo albums. You seem to have fluctuated between extremist, seemingly incongruous musical modes.

ENO: What I've tried to do, it seems, is to explore territory that either hasn't been explored or wasn't being explored at the time of a particular project of mine. You see, there's been this whole aesthetic on the rise in rock & roll — which in fact mirrors the avant-garde movement of the '60s — that places greatest import on the artist shocking his audience into some new kind of recognition. The whole idea is based on a methodology of horror — like the work of Hermann Nietsch, that artist who slaughters animals — and it just doesn't work. Anybody who attends an extremist performance by an avant-garde artist has already tacitly accepted the artist's premise. Likewise, we all know what we can expect from bands whose

aesthetic is derived from aggression and violence — the shock methodology — and this too no longer seems original or engaging. In fact, in this context the only really shocking things are delicacy and beauty.

What I'm saying is, the realities of life aren't only harsh. Some realities are beautiful, and choosing to concentrate on them shouldn't be regarded as a mortal sin. One of art's functions is to present you with the possibility of a more desirable reality. Now some people may regard that as an escapist stance, and, indeed, maybe it is. I can't deal with the world in a lot of respects, so I want to study other possible worlds. I need to find what it is I want in a world and see if I can move this one towards that. One way I do that is creating, through music, a simulacrum of the world I want.

MUSICIAN: Yet you produced the *No New York* collection, which featured music by some of the most artfully nihilistic and abrasive New Wave bands to date. In fact, you're widely regarded as one of the principal movers and shakers behind the whole punk and post-punk movement.

ENO: I don't claim any special role in generating New Wave. It just happened to be a movement of people giving special emphasis to musical values I once had an interest in — although people well before me, like the Velvet Underground, had already focused on the same ideas. When the punk revolution happened — and these ideas received new attention and were combined in new ways — it still wasn't too much a revelation for me.

However, one influence I think I had in New Wave — and I'm quite pleased about it — is that I was one of the people who popularized the notion that music isn't only the province of musicians. When I first started making records, there was this whole accent in rock & roll on heroic instrumentalists who could play quickly, skillfully and technically. I thought then, and still think, that isn't what music is really about. I was a non-musician at the time — I couldn't play anything — and I wanted to make the point that, just as one doesn't have to be an

accomplished realist to make valid art, one doesn't have to be an adept instrumentalist to make effective music. In fact, it's what I would describe as a painterly style of music, because the musician uses the instruments as a paint brush and the studio as a canvas.

MUSICIAN: And how does this idea or ideal translate into the actual making of music?

ENO: I always work directly onto tape. Usually I'll be doing something like plugging a rhythm box into an echo channel, and as I'm turning knobs and fiddling with possibilities I'll hit a point where something fairly unique starts to happen, like a complex rhythmic construction. From there, I start to pile things up on tape, and try to figure where the net result is leading to. This is a fairly empirical way of working, in which *form* is the guiding concept.

Another method — and this is the one that characterizes nearly all of my Ambient projects — is first to conceive a structural proposition. In *Discreet Music*, for example, there are two concurrent melodic cycles at work, but each lasts for a different length of time. Of course, since they're different lengths, the cycles always overlay in different ways. So what was important was to construct two different melodies that were not only compatible, but compatible at every possible collision point. In this method, *system* is the guiding principle, and in fact, dictates form.

MUSICIAN: What kind of territories do you see exploring in the immediate future?

ENO: Well I'm pretty sick of rock music, pretty sick of anything that's in that sphere. The thing is, I love playing it — I find it thrilling to make, but I know once I make it I'm never going to listen to it again.

What I'm working on now, since Ghana, is landscape music, imaginary landscapes. I want to construct, in music, a geology and then a geography and then a landscape that sits on top of it. And then I want to populate these places with creatures, some of which might be, eventually, human. **M**

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