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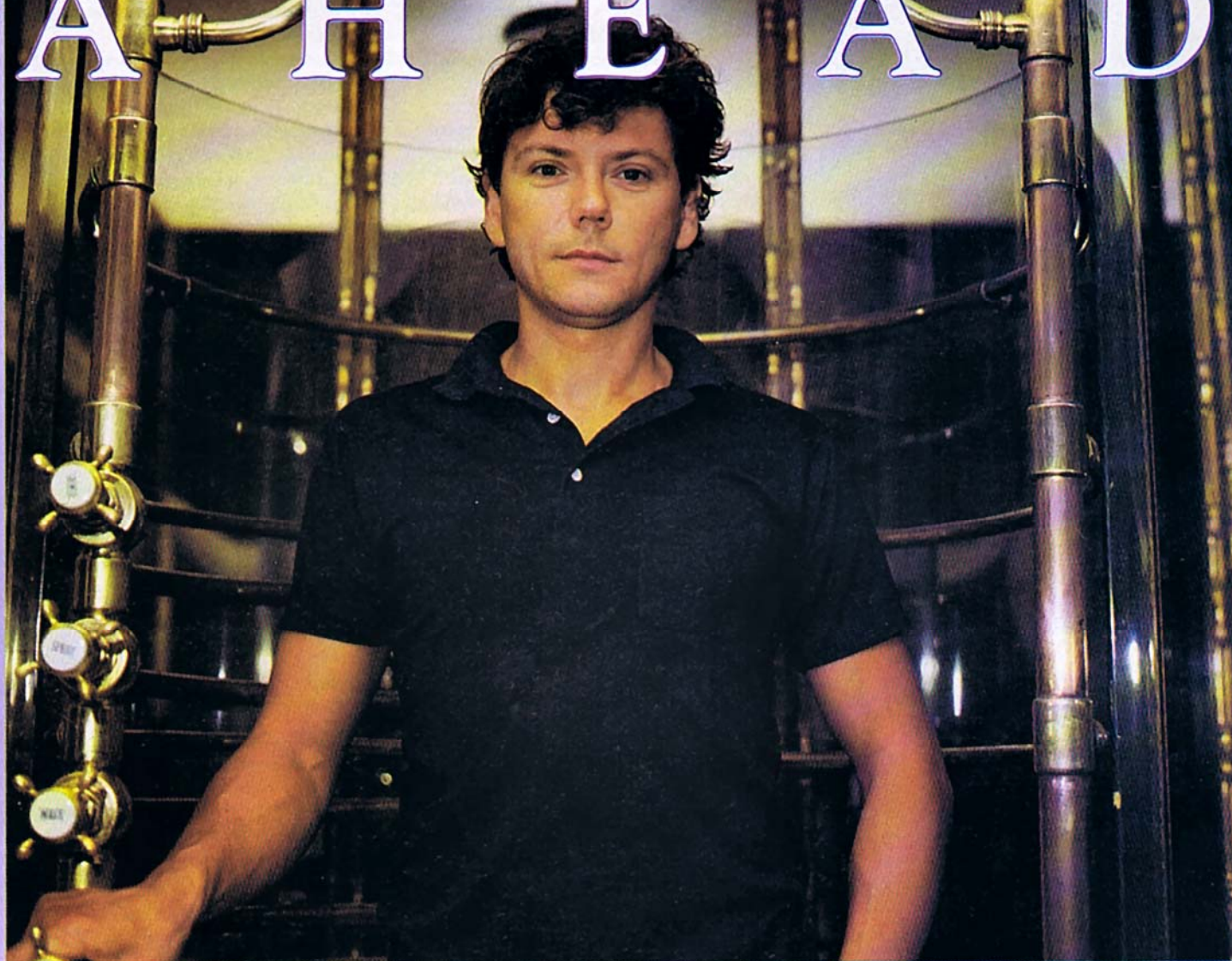
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LOOKING AHEAD

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For more than a decade, Talking Heads have been standard-bearers for a generation of forward-looking musicians. Frontman David Byrne has been the focus of most media attention, but arguably, keyboardist Jerry Harrison has contributed more crucially to the band's sound colors. *Interview by Tim Goodyer.*

THE YEAR IS 1975. David Byrne, 23, is attending the Rhode Island School of Design. There he meets Chris Frantz and Tina Weymouth, and between them they decide to form a band. Byrne takes up guitar and sings, Frantz sits behind the drum-kit, and Weymouth fills the vacant spot on bass guitar. They steal a name—Talking Heads—from *TV Guide*.

Eleven years later, Talking Heads have carved out one of contemporary rock music's most startlingly consistent careers. Eight
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albums of scintillating, constantly innovative music have made their way into the homes of millions around the world, since the band played its first gig at New York's CBGB club, supporting the Ramones.

At the time of that performance, the group was strictly a three-piece. But after two years of gigging and formulating ideas, a fourth member, keyboardist Jerry Harrison, became involved.

'It was at a time when I'd gone off at a tangent in my music, and it took a while for ▶

▶ other musicians to reach a place where they could appreciate what I was playing', the keyboard player recalls.

Harrison came to Talking Heads' attention following his involvement with Jonathan Richman and the Modern Lovers.

'Ernie Brooks, a friend of mine from the Modern Lovers, ran into them in New York. They said they were looking for someone who played keyboards and he suggested me. They'd heard one of the Modern Lovers' albums so they called me up and I came down to Boston.

'It took me a while because I was pretty broke at the time. In the end I couldn't even bring a keyboard so I showed up with a borrowed guitar – which surprised them a little bit – but we got together and played and it really worked out right from the start.

'At that time I was at the end of Architecture School, so they had to wait a

"In the beginning our principles about what we wanted Talking Heads to be were based on what we could do. We wanted to turn our limitations to our advantage, and we went off on a real left-field direction."

semester for me. During that time we reaffirmed that it was working by playing together every so often. But I feel very lucky that they were so patient with me, because it seems anyone else could have come along and done the job just as well. I finally joined in January of 1977, about two months before we

began making the *Talking Heads '77* album.'

The completed line-up of Talking Heads saw the punk revolution arrive, and can quote as New York contemporaries Tom Verlaine's Television and the Ramones. They also shared the musical attitude of the punk movement itself, pre-empted by a number of forward-looking bands.

'I think the Modern Lovers were about the same thing that the punk and new wave scene was about: honesty in music and commitment to what you were saying, rather than playing technique. Because of all this there was a certain simplicity in means. It's hard to remember what it was like back then, but music had taken on a rather rococo flavor, a little like it has again with people falling into the music "specialist" categories, like studio musicians who do certain things extremely well but often don't have that much to say.'

Reading between the lines, it appears Harrison's pragmatism was the key to his acceptance in Talking Heads.

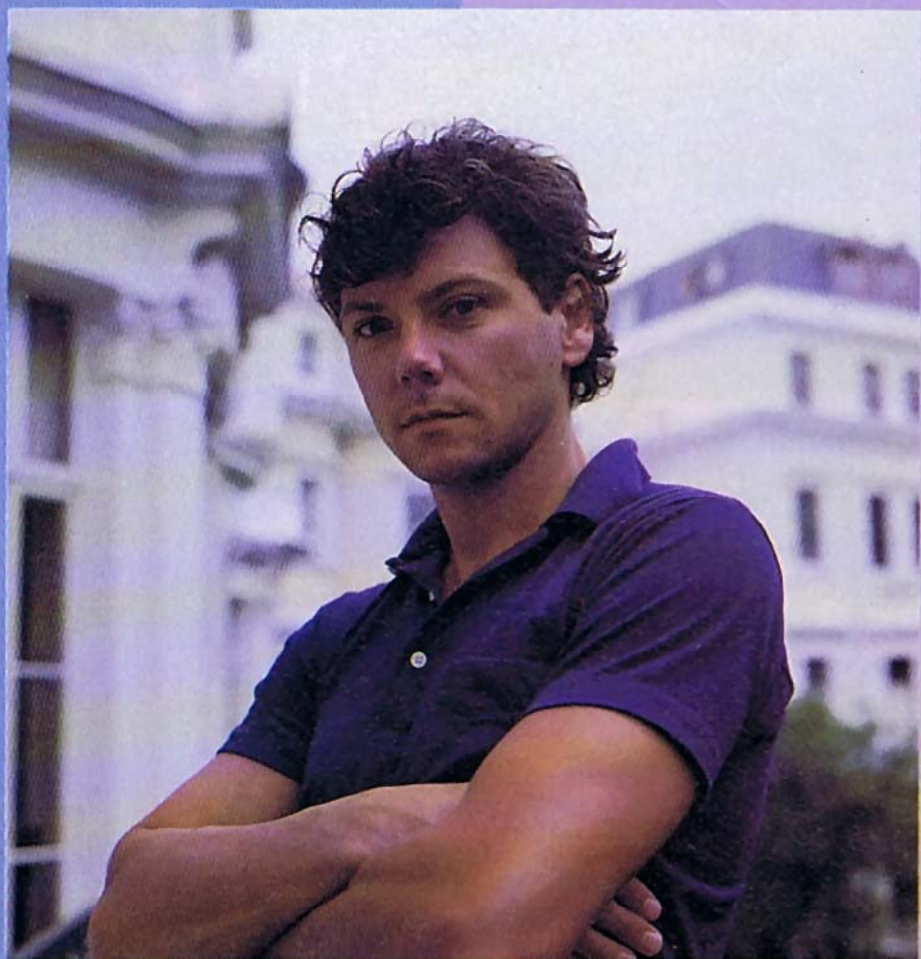
'We had formulated certain principles about what we wanted Talking Heads to be. In the beginning those principles were based on what we could do. Every musician has limitations and we wanted to turn ours to our advantage and, as a result, we went off on a real left-field direction.

'Over the years I suppose people's tastes have acclimatized to our style, and our abilities have drawn us back into the mainstream. Certainly on this last album, we've played music we would never have played on *Talking Heads '77*. It's ridiculous to be unusual just to be unusual.'

A SOBERING REVELATION from a band generally regarded as being anything from revolutionary to plain weird. Eight albums on from *Talking Heads '77*, Harrison is promoting the band's latest, and in many ways strangest, recorded work. *True Stories* is the soundtrack to a film of the same name conceived and directed by Byrne. But in contrast to the musical innovation of tracks like 'Psycho Killer' from '77 and 'I Zimbra' from *More Songs About Buildings And Food*, *True Stories* marks a return to more conventional, if varied, forms of song writing.

'Because the songs were written for the characters in the movie, they were written in idioms', Harrison explains. 'To try to make those idioms sound different would be missing the point. The other thing is that, no matter what we do, we've progressed to the point where we always sound like Talking Heads, so there's no longer that fear of doing things the same as other people. Somehow our personality will shine through in a plain song.

'A perfect example is 'Puzzling Evidence'; it has the feeling you used to have when you went to your favorite dance at high school. It would have been pointless to have interesting sampled sounds or synthesized sounds, ▶



▶ because they wouldn't have conveyed that feeling at all.'

True Stories – the movie – is a cinemagraphic look at the oddities of American life portrayed in a series of short stories. The stories, while not actually true, are based on facts drawn from sources like press cuttings.

'The movie is really interesting. Tina, Chris and I only appear in it within videos, though they will be seen outside the film. It's a movie that's quite charming – it offers a kind of idiosyncratic view on life. It'll be interesting to see how it moves people beyond just being a movie. There's no question that people who are into seeing movies in a different way will find it really fascinating and quirky.'

But while *True Stories* the album features the singing of Byrne, Harrison, Weymouth and Frantz, the film allows the characters to

goes with the movie. He's really covered every base.'

BUT BACK TO HISTORY. The 1979 release, *Fear of Music*, was Talking Heads' third album and marked the beginning of two significant periods in the band's history. The first of these was the involvement of Brian Eno, in a co-production capacity. Eno's influence extended to full production work on the following album, *Remain In Light* and finally to a collaborative LP with Byrne entitled *My Life In The Bush Of Ghosts* in '81.

One of the results of this association was discontent within the band, Harrison, Weymouth and Frantz feeling threatened by the influence of an outsider. This situation was resolved with a break that resulted in Byrne's score for Twyla Sharp's ballet *The Catherine Wheel*, the commercial Tom Tom

"'Little Creatures' and 'True Stories' are a return to melody; with 'Remain in Light' the rhythm was the essential feature of the music, but once you start concentrating on melody, rhythmic aspects become quieter."

sing their own lines. Apart from Byrne, this effectively limits the involvement of Talking Heads to that of session musicians.

'I was involved when David was first coming up with ideas. I went out with him to Los Angeles to help select some writers, then we went down to Texas and looked at locations. But we made a group decision that it was going to be David's project. There was a great fear that being an actor directed by someone in your band could be humiliating, or in some way upset the normal balance that we have.

It's like a fraternity or a secret society. I think we all make a great effort to be unanimous, but if someone really doesn't like something then we won't do it – and anyone in the band can exercise that right of veto.

'Understanding that made us a little more cautious about handling something like a movie. Movies, don't forget, are very expensive, and when you get into shooting, they can't afford to be run on a very democratic process; they have to be run by one authoritarian. That's OK unless you've been used to having give and take with someone.

'Also, as the script was written the roles started to emerge and we were constantly begging the question: "What role can I have?" There was one I thought I could handle – the computer whiz – but the roles weren't written with any of us in mind. I think we shine quite a lot in the videos we're in anyway.'

So there are videos as well as the movie...

'David has documented that movie in more ways than I could have imagined – there's a movie about the movie, there's the book about the movie, there's the record that

Club of Weymouth and Frantz, and Harrison's solo vinyl debut, *The Red and the Black*.

Fear of Music also bore the first evidence of a fascination with percussively-based material that came to fruition on *Remain In Light*.

'*Remain In Light* was born with the song 'I Zimbra'. I remember how excited we were making that song. Originally it wasn't going to be on *Fear of Music* but I had a demo-tape at home and I just loved it. We were actually at the point of listening to the masters for *Fear of Music* in the studio and I said, "can we just put that rough mix of 'I Zimbra' up?". It was an instrumental at the time, and we ran it and it sounded so great that everyone said, "God, we've got to finish this song". We all went to Australia and Dave and I flew back to finish it off. It was that song that set the root of the next step.

'I think it depends what you focus on. *Little Creatures* and *True Stories* are a return to melody, which is great; David's singing is better than it's ever been. Once you start concentrating on melody, the rhythmic aspects become a little quieter. In the *Remain In Light* period, rhythm was the essential feature of the music. I think there are some great rhythms on the new tracks as well, but they're not mixed as far to the forefront.'

The period of healing ended in 1982, in a grand tour recorded and released as the LP *The Name of this Band is Talking Heads* and immortalized on film by director Jonathan Demme.

The film and album are considered by the band to represent the end of an era, a statement that invites the question: 'What do you do upon reaching the end of an era?' As ▶



►ever, Harrison has the answer.

'Begin a new one. It's the great problem with all bands that have had successful songs. It's also a reason for us taking so long between tours. I certainly don't want to be in the position that Chuck Berry is in where, for 30 years, he's played songs that are classic songs that he wrote in the first five years of his career.

'So we're always looking for a way to have new with old. There's no way people are going to latch onto something new unless it becomes such a hit that it takes on the same importance. So far we've always been able to re-invest energy in old songs. We've played songs like 'Psycho Killer' in a multitude of different arrangements so it can still seem fresh.

'I don't have any problem with playing old songs because I love them all, but you can play them for too long. Sometimes I think we

"It takes so long to learn one instrument these days, it gets to be very hard to want to change. For instance, I can't imagine trying to recreate all my samples on another sampler."

should do a tour of entirely new songs and announce that in advance, and then you could do another tour for people that want to hear the old songs. Perhaps we'd play smaller places with a more intimate environment to which people that now love those old songs could come to love them.

'There's no question that the larger you become, the more you're working with the memory of the audience because they can't be involved closely in the performance. But, because of what they've heard before at home, they have a picture in their minds already, so you're just adding to that. That can be an advantage, but overcoming those expectations can present even more of a problem. Personally, I'd prefer to state that there'd be no old songs, only new ones.

'We're talking about another tour at the moment. David, I think, feels that we have to be entirely different than anything we've done before. It's only now that he's finished his movie that he's giving it any serious thought. Until we come up with what our plan is, we won't be able to set any dates.'

ON THE SUBJECT of equipment, Harrison has gravitated through the use of sampling to the Emulator II.

'When the Emulator II first came out, E-mu were smart enough to invite a number of musicians to be the first user group. And in the United States, there's a large user group that is pretty open to trading. You can buy samples, and it really appeals to me that there's a great experimental base out there.

'I do like sampling, but you tend to spend so much time collecting samples and thinking about it that you can lose your ability to remain objective about the sounds. What's starting to happen with sampling is

what happened to the DX7, in that you're starting to be able to recognize sounds throughout other people's records like the shakuhachi sound that the Emulator uses. I used it too with the Violent Femmes and then, suddenly, I was hearing it everywhere and that was a drag.

'I recently bought the Optical Media CD ROM for the E-mu, but I haven't used it much yet because I'm waiting to get the hand-held CRM3 controller. Going through the original Macintosh interface is a bit slow. It's wonderful for in the studio because everything's there: you haven't got to shuffle through disk after disk of samples.'

For Harrison, though, digital sampling hasn't entirely replaced old analog favorites.

'When I was looking for a synthesizer I was directed towards the Prophet 5, which was new then. I had my first Prophet 5 through England because I just couldn't get one in the United States. Now the trouble with the rev2 Prophet is that no-one makes a good MIDI retrofit.'

Mention more modern synth gear to Harrison, and your gaze is met with a knowing smile. The problems of keeping abreast of technology without falling into the trap of 'too much technology, too little creativity' are obviously familiar to him.

'I think what happens is that it takes so long to learn one instrument these days, it gets to be very hard to want to change. For instance, I can't imagine trying to recreate all my samples on another sampler. Although you can move samples using the Digidesign software, they're still not the performance things, all the balancing and setting up of how you want to access them from your keyboard.

'With the DX7 you have such a tendency to page through sounds 'til you find one that fits your needs. Generally I like to blend sounds together, like a couple of DX7 sounds along with a sampled sound. That way it's different to anyone with the same DX7 sounds or sampled sounds – they're not going to automatically sound the same as you.

'Now I'm using a TX816 rack, but before I was using two DX7s. I got on with the programming all right for a while, but now I've got the Emulator I'm spending more time with that.

'I feel I've lost a little of my remembrance of the DX7. What I mainly do is search for a sound and then change the envelopes a little bit – that gives you the most immediate change in sound. If you're trying to make a sound a little more dynamic you can have trouble with recording – the top becomes just too much. If you start making it less dynamic, you've got to start changing so many things just to remove some of the touch-sensitivity. If you simply lessen the sensitivity, the sound becomes duller and duller because you're taking it from the top and not the bottom; that's such a pain.

'I've sampled a few of the sounds off the DX7; generally I like it better than just

playing them on the DX7 but then the touch-sensitivity is different. Just opening up the filter or making it louder isn't the same as what happens with the DX7's touch-sensitivity.

I've been working on another solo album for a few years. When I first started I only had a DX7 – it had only just come out and all the sounds were so new. Now you've heard them all. The sounds I began using were all cartridge sounds because I didn't know how to program, but some of the results are wonderful where I've mixed two sounds together.

The trouble is I didn't write down what I'd done; I try to write down the things I do but I'm not too good at it. What happens is you get excited and you start moving more quickly, and you hate to keep interrupting your process. So they're lost to me now.

IN KEEPING WITH the solo projects that first evolved during Talking Heads' period of recuperation, Harrison has a number of projects of his own currently underway. First there's Harrison the solo artist, with the new album just hinted upon.

I used Alex Weir who played on *Stop Making Sense*, but he's the only musician that's contributed. They're all my songs, but there's been people that have contributed. It's closer to the *Remain In Light* Talking Heads than our latest album.

Then there's Harrison the producer.

I did a single called 'Driving Away From Home' with a band called It's Immaterial. But I asked for my name to be taken off it because they did a remix and took away the life of the drums.

They came out from England to Milwaukee, which must have been quite a shock for them on their first time in America because it's not the most glamorous place, but I had this little studio I worked in there. I was between a bunch of things but I fitted it in.

I had a lot of real great musicians around there; I had a great real drummer and they made him sound like a drum machine. I think drum machines are great in their place, but I cannot see why they wanted to do that. It's one of those songs that grabs you and you don't know why – it's not the lyric exactly, there's just something kind of mysterious about it. It was an unfortunate situation because I never spoke to the band again, only the record company, so I didn't know who was doing what.

We were joking about how successful it had been in England after I'd asked for my name to be taken off the other day, but it was a matter of principle more than anything else.

So is Jerry Harrison enjoying himself now?

It's an exciting time because there seems to be a number of things to do, but the hardest thing is the scheduling problem. People take on outside projects and, when they don't last the amount of time they were intended to, then things overlap.

It will be interesting to see what we next do

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as Talking Heads. I really don't know what it will be because the making of *True Stories* ending is like the end of another era. Talking Heads actually made two albums during that period. I think David's theme will be casting around a little bit looking for what comes next, and seeing whatever takes his attention.

The rest of us will not have something as monumental as *True Stories*. For me I did the Violent Femmes album, the It's Immaterial single, a single for Fine Young Cannibals, and I've been working on my solo album. But I've been working on the solo album for as long as David's been working on the film. It was just about done right before the Talking Heads album came out; now I've stopped working on it but it shouldn't be released until sufficiently after the Talking Heads album, so we won't be competing with ourselves.

"I've sampled sounds off the DX7, generally I like it better but the touch-sensitivity is different. Just opening up the filter or making it louder isn't the same as what happens with the DX's touch-sensitivity."

And so it is that with two distinct and contrasting eras behind them, Talking Heads face yet another crossroads. But my fears that the endeavors of individual members outside their collective might lead to the band's demise are quickly dispelled by Harrison.

As long as we enjoy working together we'll continually return from doing these solo projects to make records', he asserts.

With *Remain In Light* I started to see this circuitous path that we had followed, and that the albums marked the directions of that path. To me it's continuous. ■

