

# *LESTER BANGS AUGUST 1979*

One day someone I love said, "You hit me with your eyes." When I hear David Byrne's lyrics, I can imagine him feeling the same thing and saying it in language just oblique enough to turn the pain into percussively lapping waters.

Are you afraid of air? Well, why not (if not)? David Byrne is. Do you think heaven is nowhere (is vacuum the obverse of oid'svoid)? David Byrne does. How about the animal kingdom: wouldn't you say they're a bunch of smug little disease carriers, setting a perfectly rotten example (them being, after all, our elders on that ole evolutionary totem pole) for us so-called human beings who might be a lot more at least interpersonally better off if we wised up and just told all them li'l critters to take a walk? If stuff like that maltomeals round your noggin, you're in D. Byrne territory for sure, friends.

And why not? These are mutant times, and Talking Heads are the most human of mutant groups (hopelessly perfect cross-fertilization); unlike Devo, they actually look good off TV, on a concert stage (in fact, up till now I'd always bemoaned my feeling that their records didn't come near the excitement of their live sound). I may never forget the first time I saw them at CBGB's: though they had gotten Jerry Harrison to swat keyboards by then, they were all still a little ragged (if such a word could ever be applied to such rarefied entities) around the edges. Tina the tomorrowworld sex symbol, playing big brown bonker bass (more funky too than any other New Wave band seen by then), Chris Frantz, an icecream-faced Straight A's kid unaccountably plopped behind a drumkit, and David Byrne, all neurasthenic nettles pointing inward and he jerked and queaked (cross between quack and squeak.) He looked like someone who had just OD'd on Dramamine—all cold sweat clammy and nerve net an exoskeleton. He seemed close to fish but not quite saline enough. He had mental institution eyes, but not melodramatically: when Patti Smith outbugs you know she's declaring, "Goddamnit, I have too seen a vision! Wanna hear about it, puh-leeeeeze?" When Richard Hell does it, he's just rusting off the Strontium halflife of 893 too many readings of Maldoror. But with David the eyeball kicks were more in the vicinity of credence without pre-groupformation cultural referents: he just looked like some nut just holidayed from the ward with a fresh pocket of Thorazine, that's all. There was something gentle, shy, reflective and giving about his hideous old psychosocial gangrene that made it seem less obnoxiously ostentatious. Also, like Joey Ramone, it seemed he'd found a way (job?) of turning pure crystal bone-nervousness into an artform, a righteous stance, a way of life. I sat there wide-eyed, staring with my jaw hanging open, trying to figure this bunch out: getdown bruisers they most certainly were not. "Yeah, one thing you could never say about Talking Heads," a more errant-noise inclined guitarist friend once remarked, "you could never call 'em wimps!" What he meant of course was that they were astoundingly wimpy, wimpier than Gary Lewis which'd be enough to place 'em in the pantheon by itself—what he meant, in essence, was the same old bilge: that rock 'n' roll is MAN'S WORK, honnah, and all you girlies and powderdimple poofboys'd jes better stand aside. Gotta be butch to handle that big ole thang with all them frets and whatchamaplunkems.

Okay, now we've established that Talking Heads are subversive. More than Patti Smith when she arrived, even, because Patti has always for all her sometimes embarrassingly brazen ballsiness, tried to play the male-supremacy angle by its own rules—she wants to be Mick Jagger/Jim Morrison, whereas T. Heads launch a more frontal assault. And maybe the best thing about that is that they obviously didn't plan it that way, probably didn't even occur to them. Which again makes them part of the classic rock 'n' roll tradition because rock 'n' roll always if nothing else is about doing just exactly that thing that everybody else in the world says you're not supposed to be able to do because here's the rulebook for music and personal conduct, chapter and verse. What I thought that first time I saw the Heads was not words but flipping images: they seemed in both their music and physical presence to combine a sinuous plantlike sway with an absolutely rigid, hypertense, stone-frozen lockupstep. It was a magical marriage of diametric poles—abandon and inhibition, freedom and impingement unto paralysis, lush growth and foregone atrophy, life and death, male and female, etc. etc. etc. on down the line but always all in the same irrevocably human body.

So of course I always thought Talking Heads were about the individual human units (ha!—and fuck you,

Fripp) response to cybernation, depersonalization, the effect of corporate consciousness on individual identity, all those great contemporary questions nobody can seem to come up with any real or workable answers for. Richard Hell was about the same thing on a darker, more hermetically self-enclosed/obsessed/possessed level, in fact the Ramones, Clash, just about all these New Wave bands that really count seem to be trying to deal with these questions which is why no matter what happens to it commercially New Wave for me will always be a lot more crucial than the R'n'R bands explosion of the Sixties, when it was all too easy to croon how there's somethin' happenin' in here and what it is ain't exactly clear. The point is, now we're all "in here," and apart from each other, and how are we gonna get out?

To be brutally (and saddeningly) honest, the old model of the rock 'n' roll band, four or five people who of course are almost always all guys and it's one for all and all for one us against the world time again and again and again...looks painfully dated. At this point. Talking Heads point to the future not just because "there's a girl in the band" (wowza hubba hubba, woof and barf) but because they provide a kind of ingenious ideal of authentically modern cooperative living. They sound so together and not because they're some outlaw clan hiding in a squingehole gettin' grizzly and stoned waitin' for the pigs to come stomp, but because of certain rather modest ideals they put into practice with each other in and out of their music and with the rest of the world as well: sympathy, gentleness, reciprocity, no ego spasms, an almost childlike awake awareness and curiosity peering out at the world with a preinformed vision whose purity may lie in its very neurosis. For sure when they report back on what they've found they waste no words: David Byrne is probably the first lyricist in the history of rock 'n' roll to stanzify nigh exclusively in simple declarative sentences (tho he may have learned a participle or two from Lou Reed).

So there the original motile human enclave in the computo- cybernetechocratic epoch on whose lip we now cower. Devo are a shrill hive-multitracked voice of appeasement, like giggling mosquito larvae, but the whirrings of adulthood seem a doubtful prospect for them, so nobody should worry too much. I've sometimes found myself feeling more leery of Talking Heads than I'd expected, probably because of the Andy Warhol connection, that when David Byrne decides to call an album More Songs About Buildings and Food he means like nosferatupapa Andy that buildings and food are every bit as significant and worthy of microscopically respectful attention of Constitutionally-amended enfranchisement as mere human beings. (Question of the Week: what would our current crop of "post-art" minimalist/reductionist/no-wave art/post-obscurantist/art-as-comma/endless anticollated namedropping quotestrewn dilettante-hankiewave-to-punk articles in the Voice artists do if real honest to god no fooling around fascists took power tomorrow? Or is the zeitgeist clothesline dangling variouses as no wave and Reich/Glass and you fill in the painter's name so this'll be conceptual art too just a bridge too far tween cultural pluralism and insidiously homogenous fascism?)

I missed the point, of course. Talking Heads are (about) humans who feel pinioned by circumstance and psychophysical predeterminator reacting variously as scarecrows and windmills to the whiplash erosive passage of life point blank their deliberately impassive faces. They are screens, and as we sit, popcorn-lapped looking up we can discern some of our most tugtug-insistent neuroses blown up and carried to logical but decidedly unvicious extremes. If New Wave in whatever manifestation is taking an extreme previously considered at least useless at worst a hideous blight upon nature and turning into an asset, a functioning organism, a thing of beauty, an utile citizen, then Talking Heads are the fore(wo)men in charge of that section of the human remodification factory where no one wants to set these mutants careening off nightraze pathogenic highways. Johnny Rotten in "God Save the Queen" sang "When there's no future how can there be sin?" T.Heads/D.Byrne work at recognizing the damage inflicted by past consciousness of "sin" (cultural conditioning) and formulating workable alternatives in the interests of some non-entropic future coming to pass. (They're in league with The Clash and Ramones on this, except the Ramones don't know it and The Clash wisely hide behind their guitars when pressed for statements of intent.) New feelings for new social systems: "No Compassion" ("Go talk to your analyst, isn't that what he's paid for?"), "The Girls Want to be With the Girls" (So what, especially since most male musicians are too uptight to play with them?), "The Big Country" (finally somebody said it: there is nothing but nothing beyond Andy Warhol's unwildest dreams beyond Jersey. Jack Kerouac made all that shit up, he was a science-fiction writer.)

Fear of Music provides Heads'/Byrne's most explicit blueprint yet for survival in the face of the looming Eighties Mode: The Walking Crepuscle (without Nellie). This is also the best Talking Heads album because

while nothing has yet jumped out with HIT SINGLE beak shining akin to that of “Psycho Killer” (I heard in fact that the songs were largely written just before or during sessions, under deadline pressure—congrats, Dave, you pulled a Dylan better than the Old Master himself could at this point!), still it has a feel and flow that draws you in first listening and keeps pulling you back again and again to catch that one more little bit you missed last time around. Their first LP had great songs, but ho-hum production, second great production but the toons themselves were mostly so cagily ironic and structurally antiflow à la Devo almost that you found it hard to remember them after sitting through a side, in fact you found that though they always seemed to sound fine when somebody else played them at a party or whatever you never really felt like just throwing them on and kicking back. There was an uptight assbackwardness about the music on every level from forced rhythms to Byrne’s strangled-ostrich Mario Lanzaisms, and if you yourself happened to feel just about as uptight, unmoored, queasily Einsteinean, emotionally impacted and hypersensitive human contactwise as this music sounded, you discovered that you really didn’t need or want to turn to this stuff for pleasure or balm or clarification or whatever. Which only makes sense: on a planet gone solipsistic, misery does not love company, so who in turn cares about David Byrne’s neuroses, particularly when he vomits them so fey-obliquely. Let the fretneck bastid go talk to his own fucking analyst (and you know he’s got one)!

But now all comes clear. Clear enough to send you back to rediscover the joys of Buildings and Food for the first time. David Byrne’s a kind of Everyneuroto, wandering through the world encountering ouch-producers every step and breath he takes, and just also incorporately Voltaire enough to dish up the muck and share it with us colandered through his sense of humor, his natural (naturally awkward, like Buddy Holly, Richard Hell and Lou Reed) sense of musicality, his band, and the ever siftingshifting medium that is Brian Eno. Like for instance, HEY, ALL YOU JOGGERS—shag on over here and lissen up, ‘cause Coach Byrne done writ-ch’all a damn veritable anthem: “Air” posits the thank-god-somebody-finally-said-it that getting into obsessive-compulsive physical therapy routines so as to run all the claptrap ‘n’ shiteaten ‘n’ nullromances outa your life is quite probably just substituting one bag of slurping lampreys for another. Yes, if you get out there and do that X number of miles today you’ll be that much closer to Marathonworthy so you’ll never have to sit in the back of a cab with somebody who’s about to shaft you whining “I coulda been a contenduh” and of course you while running away or towards makes no difference won’t have to be bothered with interpersonal relationships on even the most cursory level since all that huffpuffing shuts shop on even “Howdy-do!” or “Spare change?” But, warns seer Byrne, who has been to the Mountain (probably run up it, even) and so knows, there is still one enemy you had not counted on: nature. Nature itself, which is all around you, which cackles at your helpless enclosure in its ever whimsical palm, nature which you cannot tell to fuck off even by committing suicide (sorry, R. Hell) because suicide is death and what is death but just another part of the life cycle so your putrid ol rotflop maggoty corpse’ll just mean more birdseed and fresh loam for tomorrow’s spawn. But nature itself was poisoned before man ever even appeared, let alone up gainst your microscope-slinging environmental pollutanteers, forget it, the truth is that NATURE IS PERVERSE and what’s more out to get you and to reiterate omnipresent so you better watch out with two unblinking eyes in the back of your head as well because you obviously can never ever win given such a universe the best measly you may hope for is a little longer granted hovering in peristalsis a smattering more seconds gratuitous suffering, a chance to make some at least one crude but somehow feasible thing here that may stand awhile and other deathrow neighbors may even walk by and ooh at once or twice if you’re lucky and hell the damn thing might not even collapse under the weight of its own foundation of four popsicle sticks propped up in the mud a good 40 or 50 minutes after you yourself have been wiped clean of this earthen slate not even traces of chalksmear cause history has no need to know any of you faded away just like all the others fore ‘n’ aft.

That’s what and why David Byrne’s songs are about. That’s also probably why he keeps on insisting on telling us that damn it you better believe he is yes indeed WORKING and here’s an itemization to the sedimental centimeter precisely how hard. Damn hard. What it all boils down to in one sense is varying comparative responses to societal entropy: “I’m a Lazy Sod” vs. “Found a Job.” If everything is indeed rendered equivalent by its meaninglessness and uselessness, then let’s use this solipsistic logic to some good ends: let’s say work is play, anxiety is a psychophysical system responding healthily to outside stimuli it most accurately guages, neuroses are birthrights, synthetic is not only organic but loveable if we will but keep it in its place just like posies in a vase, in fact the life force itself may be nothing more nor less than a

frenetically twitching nerve screaming out of a ganglial bog where it suffers some endlessly burning anomie and declared disenfranchisement. So let that nerve loose, free the poor thing from barbaric indenturedtude, and let it hippetyhop like a St. Vitus spastic Fred Astaire From Mars across concert stages worldwide. McLuhan missed it: we're not a global village, we're a global OUTPATIENT CLINIC, and since even the himalayainest minds in the psychiatric uberthink penthouse done fessed clean that the only finally proven really and truly effective method SO FAR ("so far"—that always kills me) found of treating mental disorders is drugs drugs and more drugs, we might as well all turn away from our thousandfold therapies and attend to what Talking Heads have to say about late Twentieth Century style "COPING" (which I swear to god is one of the new regular sections in Circus magazine a.k.a. People for teenagers: a recent "Coping" section therein was devoted to the subject How to Grow Your Own Marijuana at Home). They're (not the Heads, the feds) putting Thorazine in the air at this point anyway, so we need some ammunition and fast.

Fear of Music might as well have been called Fear of Everything. Show me an item extant in world we share sentient or otherwise and I'll show you a scientifically graphoschematized list of reasons with accompanying hypothetical scenario like high school driver-ed class flicks on all the ways that said item might be considered risk-incurring if not downright predatory by its very proximity. Everybody knows that if you can't get your breakfast crunch to pop up from the toaster and go spelunking for them grains with a knife you'll get a new haircut to the tune of several thousand possibly lethal volts. Or, for another unimpeachably empirical experiment, step in front of a cab trying to make an about-to-change green light at 40 or 50 miles an hour, and see what happens. Yet still you insist that the automobile is your friend, like that yok in the Aamco commercial who yents at his jalopy. Well, friend, what you better face up to is that NOTHING IS YOUR FRIEND. Nowhere. As to air and the new Heads tune of the same title, it's not just the pollutants factories chuff out, it's not just stray carcinogens from passing smokers, or automobile muffler exhaust, or waftings of effulgent doggie-do—no, it's air qua air that's out for your ass. Because in this most richly diversified of all possible universes, it just might happen to be the casual case that AIR DOES NOT LIKE YOU. Nothing personal, you understand. It's not because you're black or Jewish or female or gay or a jogger or a smoker or even that you're a human being—there is this ridiculous presumption on the part of the rightfully embattled human sector that all enclaves throughout the rest of the universe are somehow in cahoots with each other, somehow miraculously see eye to eye on how it all should work and who should take the hind and foremost, that it all fits together like some kind of Kubrick-vast cosmic jigsaw puzzle. This curious superstition may be quite simply explained away by merely recalling that man has almost from the beginning declared himself to be not a part of this ostensibly mutualistic all-systems-go order of things, in fact he's been dead set against it from day one, but he's so stupid on top of blind that he calls it "nature" and insists on enshrining it as some holy and flawless ideal—obviously just another case of his penchant for self-projection when gawd even his self-projections are wishful thinkings—an ideal which he then must of course at all times and costs unto mountains of skulls proceed to subdue and redirect by the crudest possible means. Then, he thinks, once he's got this goddam lilywhite untouchable virgin bitch goddess not only deflowered but gangbanged and strapped down in a veritable Venus in Furs dungeon replete with whips, chaps, spurs, spikes, screws, nails, chains, hooks, winches, hoists, snaps and cleaving boards, then, once he's taken time out to beat it to the boys room for a whiz, he gone come back jez like ole Doc Frankenstein and make this murdered Mudda Natcher broad not only scream 'n' beg hooray for mercy but through 7 league mechanical-surgical remastications so transform the stuck-up whore both inside and out that when he finally lets her offa that table not a soul will recognize her and HE, of course, will be henceforth 'n' forever the Bootromp what strides mightily in her place, a real Jules Verne cartoon uberbastard with the baton what plates the cosmos in his dribbly mitt.

This theorem of course is the most baldfaced rubbish, especially as the grounding for some fool's cosmology, but it's such a gargantuan lie that perhaps that's why everybody seems to swallow it whole. Human beings are so termitically involved in war with nature and each other that they've never even taken a mere second to step out of the fray for a breather, look around, put two and two together and realize that just because they've expatriated themselves from the "natural" pinwheel doesn't necessarily mean that all the little pricks and porkypines still carrying around in there don't hate each other's guts and vie for power or premeditated inter-species or-strata destructiveness bad as any two little human Hitlers could ever roil up. It doesn't make any difference whether god is dead, because as all theologians have demonstrated from

stone tablet one God is a jaded whimsical asshole with a decidedly sick sense of humor; if He exists at all He's a psychopath. And as for this "harmonious forces of the universe" business, well, that's all very nice for some Limey poets a century or two ago who got so turned on contemplating a peony which thought "Ah geezuz here we go again" but curtsied back anyway that they accidentally dipped their lace cuffs in their teacups, but great blithering Beelzebub, can there be any doubt at least among those here today assembled that THE ELEMENTS DO NOT COMPUTE? They do not add up to a coherent whole with or without our intervention, so they are constantly warring and jockeying for title Top Dog of the Compost Heap, and since we're in the way just like ants crossing the street afront a Lincoln Continental they're gonna obliterate us as a mere byproduct of their internecine circlejerk. It really makes no difference whatsoever whether they're actually out to get us or not, because they effectively are or might as well be even if they aren't; I myself lean to the theory that their awareness that we exist at all in the first place amounts to maybe .0002½, we're less than specks on the windshield to them, invisible as the blood of roaches, the wars are gonna go on forever and we're gonna die in the meantime with nobody that counts anyway left around to even recall our names.

But since death is inevitable we don't have to deal with it (it'll deal with us when it decides to). What we do have to deal with is the psychic, physical, and fusion diseases wrought during our so-called lives as byproducts of the elemental clash. In other words we're all terminally psychotic and no doctor, hospital, pill, needle, book or guru holds the cure. Because the disease is called life and there is no cure for that but death and death's just part of the set-up designed to keep you terrified and thus in bondage from the cradle to the crypt so ha ha the joke's on you except there's no punch line and the comedian forgot you ever existed as even a comma.

David Byrne knows all these things, he has stared wide-eyed and steady of leg and hand into this endless abyss which is the only thing anywhere worthy of being called reality, and his songs are certainly not advertised as cure as I'm sure he'd be the first to not only admit but insist; what they are is little maps, diagrams of various topographical outcroppings of the disease with sly asides on what curious permutations the latest hybrids take formwise (the content essentially boils down to the same thing for Byrne and all the rest of us everyone everywhere, as delineated above) and the reassurance implicit in the fact that the very appearance of these rarefied phobias and tactile dyslexias on record means that you are not the only self-enclammed screwball suffering from such arcane angstwiches. But you should follow David's example and be a little more observant so as who knows maybe even not catch the next popfly virus as it comes whizzing by (ha, fat chance): "Some people don't know shit about...the...AIR..."

That's the trouble with our society today: people take everything too damn much for granted. The Second Depression (which only makes sense in light of the dredging up and rerunning in slightly variant drag of absolutely everything else that ever mattered to anybody including Gilligan's Island, which was obviously not nearly so profound and thought-provoking an entity/property as the first Depression) will take care of most of us re: that department in short order, but in the meantime David Byrne has been sounding Cassandriads like the loneliest Boy Scout tramping the rubble of Entropyville (formerly Alphaville, pop. measureable only in chemical constituents), playing out little exemplary dramas in his songs which shall hopefully ensure that all shall be prepared when the real deal (which ain't no New Deal) comes clanking down.

In this album he examines various popularly proposed panaceas with the eye of a dissecting needle and discards them one by one. The basic situation re: socialized day-to-day living in this imminent nullkreig is outlined in "Life During Wartime": "This ain't no party, this ain't no disco, this ain't no fooling around / This ain't the Mudd Club or CBGB's, I ain't got time for that now... I got some groceries, some peanut butter, to last a couple of days / But I ain't got no speakers, ain't got no headphones, ain't got no records to play." Nobody could accuse David of fiddling while Rome burns! Funny how the reference to the Mudd Club and CBGB's works when there's every reason in the world why it shouldn't, but maybe that's because unlike almost everybody else from the Ramones to R. Hell to Sex Pistols to Clash et. al. they have never aligned themselves with any movement or scene. That's also probably why their music has such a broad appeal: they're screens, as I said before, throbbing surfaces upon which anybody can project his or her own feelings, desires, passions and anguish and see just how they look hung up there tween two thieves. That is, the Heads are just blank enough to be definitive, just individualistic enough to become the private

obsession of masses. A rare trick, which may work precisely because it wasn't conceived as a trick. More like a survival mechanism, which of course is what this song's about. Why complain about disco squeezing rock 'n' roll off the charts and radio when tomorrow you may not even be able to afford a record player or radio? Something is hurtling this way, and only one thing is sure: it will in no way resemble the particular horror we've armed and braced ourselves for. When there is no firm ground, the only halfway sensible thing to do is keep on the move, ergo on their third album the first examples of what may as well qualify as the Heads' version of "road" songs—the other one is "Cities," where Byrne allows as how all these quaint burgs do have their both good 'n' bad points, but rather begs the question, slung out in shredthroat gnarly syllable-splits, of whether or not he will ever in fact be able to "find myself a city to live in." The truth, of course, is that like all of us, he's pinned on the borderline—none of these cities quite fills the bill, the country's quiet as a tomb (that NATURE shit nosing around for victims again, predatory ferns ravenous for human carrion), and there finally is no place at all to rest but on the wing, shove it into automatic pilot awhile.

But Byrne as of now has no more time for automatic pilot than he does for the Mudd Club—he carries on "The Big Country's" grand tradition of trashing the Majestic America of Norman Rockwell/Kerouac/John Ford myth with "Do I smell home cooking? It's only the river," a great line if ever there was one, but the real deal everywhere is more like Birmingham: "A lot of ghosts in a lot of houses," and just like those poor befuddled birds migrant members of the human tribe may "go up north and come back south / Still got no idea where in the world they are."

What else? Where else? Succor, solace, or a shot in the arm. Forget it. There is no peace for the living wicked or not. "Drugs" is a hilariously solemn recitation of the usual splurt of chemical resolutions and remissions; Byrne has said in interviews that it's a send-up of Sixties hippie psychadelia-PR drug songs, but it's thoroughly contemporary, not only because people are taking more drugs in more bizarrely various combinations now than ever before, but also because the passing of these lapsed ten years or so has if nothing else at least allowed us the realization that these putatively magic potions may or ought to be taken with less than total seriousness. "I'm charged up... I'm kinda wooden," Byrne intones, "I'm barely moving... I study motion / I study myself... I fooled myself! / I'm charged up... It's pretty intense."

Surely no one this side of Lou Reed with his series of amphetamine comedy albums on RCA has done more to demystify the whole big dark aura that surrounds the obviously and ever-more banal act of merely swallowing or injecting some crumby little bits of matter run through hog feces filters from bikers' backyard vats. Similarly, "Animals" puts away all those maudlin mabels from Robinson Jeffers through Euell Gibbons on down who persist in belaboring man's odiousness behaviorwise when stacked up against our noble exemplars and ancestors dwelling next door in the wilds or more properly zoos. The truth, as Byrne points out, is that animals besides having no intelligence beyond brute fear reflex are just a bunch of vile little creeps who have nothing to offer us by way either of comfort, example or ecologic balance, "ecology" being a manmade and obviously meaningless word anyway, dependent as it is upon that hoary and already disproved pretence of a "balance of nature." The only trouble with seeing animals accurately at last is that then we also must realize that the smug little bastards are laughing at us! It's a real Catch-22: we started out being foolish enough to think that if we copied their behavior, we'd be in "harmony" with "God's will" or "the elements" or whatever. Then, when we deviated from conformity to their modi, as they knew perfectly well we would, they got the double hoo-hah of witnessing us squirm 'n' twist 'n' turn this way and that in mortal terrified confusion, meanwhile guiltily flagellating ourselves every step of the way for "violating nature." Now that we've turned upon them, they're laughing even harder, because the joke's been on us all along: they've co-existed in perpetual enmity as a given of existence from the dawn of time, and they've survived perhaps because of just that understanding, whereas we went and wasted about 6,000 years squandering our mental and physical resources in the desperate search for some "alternative" system that might actually lead the whole rodentpack of us on to some Eden rerun future where everything would be so perfect nobody would even snap out of their bliss long enough to realize how utterly boring such a scheme would be in the zillion-to-one possibility that it worked. Now, of course, it's too late for us, we're about to disappear under the last wave of the typhoon, but when the sea is mirror-calm again and the sun shines down as guiltlessly as if he hadn't seen a thing, all them animals will still be around, feudin' and a-fussin' away even better this time because no us to get in the way of the festivities.

All this may be starting to sound kinda Darwinian, except David's more akin to Spinoza when you get right

down to it: his philosophy might best be summarized as “I am nervous, therefore I am.” To feel anxiety is to be blessed by the full wash of existence in its ripest chancre—everything else is wax museums. Having rejected drugs, animal husbandry, jogging as well as breathing itself, hamlets, metropolises and indeed whole continents in his search for some little nook where he can relax for even one instant, Byrne finally lays it on the line in “Heaven”: “Heaven is a place where nothing ever happens.” Andy Warhol raises his cadaverous face here again, surely, but this time Andy can stick around, because this point of view is something that Andy shares not only with David Byrne but one guesses approx 99.98% of the current population at large: in a world without rules, where all institutions and methodologies that once served as shelter or security blankets are disintegrating at an alarming place, where as Margaret Drabble observed in her classic Seventies novel The Ice Age every step you take in whatever direction is liable to plant you square atop a live land mine, then of course your dream vacation would be in a featureless vacuum, some place where you never had to move or speak or take on the danger of declaring yourself by action ever, ever at all, ever again. Heaven. The inviolate purity of the totalitarianly predictable: “When this kiss is over, it will start again / It will not be any different, it will be exactly the same. / It’s hard to imagine that nothing at all / Could be so exciting, could be so much fun.”

Everything else, every state but zero cool emptiness, every place on the map but Nowheresville, spells anxiety under a wide assortment of brand names. This point of view is eloquently summed up in “Memories Won’t Wait”: “There’s a party in my mind... and it never stops / There’s a party up there all the time... they’ll party till they drop.” To have existed for even one second is to have opened up a trackless sargasso of expectations, suspicions, possibilities, alternatives, desires and frustrations and fears. Once yanked, nerves never forget even if the mind blots out the trauma. You are going to be driven crazy by all of this, inevitably, no, wait, you ARE crazy because of all this, and you always will be as long as you live. Crazy is simply your birthright, your card signifying citizenship in the human race. Those furshlugginer animals never go crazy. Air don’t go crazy. Only you. And that’s because as Mr. Rogers has been trying to tell you for years, you’re a special person. Isn’t it wonderful? Sure. So give up all those silly little totems you got clenched in your itty mitt: drugs, religions, politics, family, jobs...

“Paper” is just exactly as ambiguous as it should be, demonstrating the uselessness and interchangeability of papers of all denominations with their supposed conferrings of latitude and power and suchlike: dollar bills, deeds, writs of habeas whatever, pocket manuals with capsule quotes from your faverave guru, rolling papers, pawn tickets, lottery tickets, backstage passes...forget it. If you get in backstage you’ll just be in one more prison. If you win that lottery you won’t know what to do with the money, you’ll despair, feel guilty over not working for it, it’ll drive you finally to suicide. Your guru is screaming and tearing his hair out in some charity ward or jail cell at this precise moment. That house you own is going to cave in sooner than you think. Money gets more worthless by the second.

Even rock ‘n’ roll, that holy grail for so many benighted souls, comes up on trial, literally: in the song “Electric Guitar,” an example of same is put on the witness chair in a courtroom and found guilty of a crime against the state. The state now decrees no more listening to electric guitars. Which is just as well, since why should anybody listen to any being or object which, as electric guitar did in the first verse of the song, was so stupid or drunk as to end up prostrate in the middle of a highway where it got run over by a guitar. Certainly, you don’t prosecute the driver. You prosecute the technology, and what’s more you prosecute the victim. The victim should have stayed out of the way. Nature has enough on its million seething minds as it is, as we have already established. A solution is reached: “Electric guitar is copied, the copy sounds better.” That takes care of that. The trouble, see, is that “Someone controls electric guitar.” Which is one dead myth in the first place, since if anything is true (nothing’s permitted), it’s that no one, absolutely no one has control of anything, anywhere. So get all them goddam Stratocasters outa here, I don’t care if Patti Smith or Steve Hunter in the driver’s seat, just bulldoze ‘em outa sight and maybe erect some guillotines while you’re at it; they constitute a public nuisance, them and that feedback no good to nobody but themselves and even that’s doubtful.

So what’s left? Well, David’s position is that, at least for now, nothing is. And it’s not heaven. Its greatest reward is that for perhaps the first time in history we can see all things as they really are, i.e. worthless: “Time won’t change you / Money won’t change you / I haven’t got the faintest idea / Everything seems to be up in the air at this time.” The only constant is the stasis of decay, and the omnipresent feeling that nothing

is ever quite what it seems. But, given the hopelessness of the situation, we might as well laugh at it. It's been written that in the Middle Ages the populace of Europe felt so haunted and tainted by the devil, so hopelessly damned, that they developed a predilection, as manifested in the paintings of Bosch, for taking all this damnation and redemption business as a kind of huge joke, with God, Satan and all his demons as great cartoonlike figures.

The closer you get to whatever it is you're terrified of, the more it and the dread of it begin to seem like old friends, ergo you become progressively less terrified. As a second Dark Ages seems to loom over us, David Byrne strolls right down its maw, placid and bemused, humming little tunes to himself. Sometimes I think Fear of Music is one of the best comedy albums I've ever heard. Which doesn't mean he makes you forget the fear is real. He just reminds you that it's something you're going to have to live with, so you might as well get a kick out of it while you can.