

33 1/3

TALKING HEADS
FEAR OF MUSIC

FEAR OF MUSIC
by
Jonathan Lethem





FEAR OF MUSIC

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For
Joel Simon
Donna Jones
& Philip Price

“The war has been based on a crass error. Men have been mistaken for machines.”

Hugo B

“The earth is the most remarkable of all museums: everything that has ever happened on it is exhibited in situ. From its ‘lurid beginnings’ to this very moment, every tremor left its mark as an archeological gesture. We leaf through the pages of a global past whose factuality can’t be simulated ... some day we will learn to decode this earth we trample on, deciphering every little bit of evidence on it in order to make sense of it by reassembling cosmic history through our planet by carefully inspecting it like a dinosaur bone of the infinite.”

Malcolm De Chazal, *Sens-Plastique*

“A man has barricaded himself inside of his house. However, he is not armed, and nobody is paying any attention to him.”

George Carlin

Warning: Contents under pressure of interpretation. User may suffer unwanted effects vis-à-vis cherished cultural token — possibly including sensations of demystification, or its opposite, mystification.

Recommendation: While using this product, *actually listening to the record* is strongly indicated. don't mean just on those crappy little speakers built into your computer, either. And turn it up, for fuck's sake.

Prelude I: Talking Heads Have a New Album. It's Called Fear of Music.

In the summer of 1979, in New York City, a fifteen-year-old boy sitting in his bedroom heard a voice speaking to him over his radio. The voice said: "Talking Heads have a new album. It's called Fear of Music." The voice was that of David Byrne, the lead singer of the band Talking Heads. The voice had restricted itself deliberately to a halting and monotonous presentation, but the words, spoken softly and their speaker miked close, admitted a degree of tenderness — that high, reedy vulnerability this singer generally finds it hard to mask, even as he delights in masks, in vocal mummery.

Now, after a heartbeat interval — "dead air," in radio jargon, and an enigma, on the terms of a 30-second radio spot meant to advertise a rock-and-roll record — the line repeats: "Talking Heads have a new album. It's called Fear of Music." The voice hasn't altered its sense-neutralized, dead-but-still-warm delivery, but it's *been* altered, by some force of distortion. A phase shifter? A vocoder? (A similarly sound-effected, flat-affected human voice would hit the charts, in 1981, with Laurie Anderson's "O Superman.") Whatever the element, the illusion created is that of the voice multiplying into a swarm of ethereal clones, a chorale of electronic angels. The result is to both modulate and highlight the flat voice's lonely presence in the foreground: if a man stumbling across a cold landscape is shadowed by flights of seraphim, but cannot join in their ascent, is he better off, or worse?

Eventually the voices begin to reverberate and echo, becoming like a tide caressing a pebble as it washes backwards and forwards simultaneously. "Talking Heads have a new album new album. It's called Fear of Music Fear of Music. Talking Heads Talking Heads have a new album a new album. Talking Heads it's called Fear of Music it's called Fear of Music." The pebble of the singer's spoken voice is smoothed or soothed away; the cipher transmission concludes without having varied once, not repeated itself, not exactly. FM.102.7, WNEW ("Where Rock Lives") resumed its regular broadcast with the soothing, informal voice of Vin Scelsa or Pete Fornatale or Jonathan Schwartz commanding the dial, hyping a Bruce Springsteen appearance on the *King Biscuit Flour Hour*, or setting up the new Randy Newman single "It's Money That I Love."

Flights of seraphim? Unlike any other piece of close description in this book, there's likely no way to triangulate my paraphrase with your own ears. Don't go fishing for this experience in the infosea; it isn't there to be found. Those of us who received the original transmission have had to make do with our cargo cult recollections for three decades now, and counting.

Speaking of whom, what about the boy in his bedroom? Can't we leave him where we found him? Need we contend with the burden of his awe and innocence, or may we hit eject? Nope, he's along for this ride. In fact, sometimes, as I set out in this work, I find my present self slackening into passivity. Suddenly the keyboard's entirely in that kid's hands. In 2003 I wrote: "I played the third album by Talking Heads, called *Fear of Music*, to the point of destroying the vinyl, then replaced it with another copy. I memorized the lyrics, memorized the lyrics to other Talking Heads albums, saw Talking Heads play any chance I got ... At the peak, in 1980 or 1981, my identification was so complete that I might have wished to wear the album *Fear of Music* in place of my head so as to be more clearly seen by those around me." Like everything I've ever said about Talking Heads, or about any other thing I've loved with such dreadful longing — there's only a few — this looks to me completely inadequate, even in the extremeness of its claims, or especially for the extremeness of its claims. It's untruthful in its bogus tone of retrospective consummation, its false finality. As though I'd imagined I could have left it at that!

That kid in his room: I've dragged him into the light of so many contexts he ought to be pictured by

now as if blackened from head to toe with font. I want to leave him alone but I can't quite yet, need his assistance for this one last run (last — *hah!*) on the fortress of his vulnerability. He's essential to me, not only because he knows what it's like never to have heard of *Fear of Music* and then to have heard it for the first time, but because he thereupon arranged himself in a posture of such abject identification with *Fear of Music* that he no longer can imagine who he'd be had he never heard of *Fear of Music* wrote the boy, in other words. Which I suppose means that what you hold in your hand is a book *Fear of Music* wrote about itself.

Here's more freight: letting that kid in, you're bound to take aboard New York City too. Fair enough, that's an unavoidable subject when discussing *Fear of Music* anyway. But for the boy in the room it's personal. He hasn't exactly lived *all over this town*, but the room in which he's listening to the radio is a definite-brownstone in a maybe-ghetto. In 1979 and the years just following, the kid would visit CBGB's plenty of times (though Talking Heads, like the other front-line performers associated with the club, had graduated to bigger venues before he'd stood any chance of seeing them there), and the Mudd Club, too.

And the boy knows fear. Whoever knows fear burns at *Fear of Music*'s touch.

But we're ahead of ourselves. The boy hasn't heard *Fear of Music* yet, just the words: "Fear" "Of" "Music". (Is it "Fear-of" music? Of what would "fear-of" music consist? Is fear made of music? Can an album be afraid of itself?) For the signal peculiarity of the long-lost *Fear of Music* radio spot is that though it was a commercial for an album, it didn't consist of any actual music. It was a map that not only wasn't the territory, it didn't consist of more than the word "map." A connect-the-dots diagram with only one dot. An artifact inviting you to consider your own possible future encounter with a subsequent artifact. To presume to say more would have been to betray the spirit of not-yet-knowing which still shrouded, for the boy in room, merely the whole area of everything that mattered most: cities, drugs, sex, music, memories, life.

Prelude II: Another Intermediary Artifact

The matte black cardboard sleeve within which the *Fear of Music* LP is housed features an ocular decoration, made of raised, cross-hatched ridges. The design is more interesting to the fingertips than to the eye. Like the radio advertisement, the album jacket practices the minimalist magic of arresting attention while withholding stimulus, or at least of falling short of what might be regarded as the ordinary standard of generosity for its form. The band's name and the album's title appear in duress, restrained within a rectangular box, as though stamped on as an unimaginative afterthought. The design seems to restrict them — name and title — from interaction with the “real” jacket, which manifests a sculptural range where language is destroyed: *texture v. text*. The subliminal implication being that the album truly ought to be nameless, perhaps a reply record to the Beatles' *White Album*, or an anticipation of Prince's *Black Album* by a decade and a half. The design evokes a steel door or box, imprinted either for friction's sake, or to repel graffiti or stickering. It's hard to imagine that nothing at all could be so exciting, and it isn't, exactly, but it does command a chilly authority and yet at the same time suggest a desire to be stroked.

The wish to be impervious and impenetrable, yet still seductive to the flesh of others, isn't rare (usually) unattainable by human beings, as opposed to monoliths, orgasmatrons, blarney stones, and the like. The typical animal reaction, of course, is to reach out and cop a feel, like the apes in Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. The edifice of *Fear of Music*'s packaging takes this formula further. Rather than portraying a monolith, it becomes one, therefore turning you, with yearning fingertips, into the petitioning ape. As in a Kafka parable, you might wait at this door forever; it never opens. Not the first or last time *buildings* and *people* will be mixed up in this band's lexicon: if “love is building on fire,” fear, apparently, is a building with its steel gate drawn down.

What the album jacket says that the radio spot also says is that this is a band that cares to examine the formal properties of even its most marginal emissions into the cultural stream: not only songs and albums, but the commercial detritus attaching to songs and albums. No surprise. They're former art school students, but not merely in the Mick Jagger or Paul Simonon “dropped out of art school” sense. The investment of artistly formal pressure on their music is a hallmark of what this band has on offer — has had on offer, from the start — as well as one of the tensions generating the band's fruitful discomfort, and forecasting its eventual demise.

Also like a lot of assertively powerful artifacts — Robert Smithson's “Spiral Jetty” and various other minimalist monuments — the long-term status of the *Fear of Music* LP jacket is in truth subject to the depredations of entropy. So, in its physical evolution, the jacket carves out a relation to time. That's to say, move *Fear of Music* in and out of a tightly packed shelf enough times and you'll notice that the album's upraised ridges are gradually being buffed clean of their pigment. These bared ridges grow increasingly prominent, so the jacket gains a new degree of visual intrigue even as it craps out. Are they little minnows, arcing from their black pond in an Esther Williams-style water ballet? Or is *Fear of Music* actually a woven basket?

I Zimbra

The sinuous crisis of “I Zimbra” attains maximum velocity before we’re prepared, a transmission Morse code and stroboscopic scratch guitar thrusting us at once into the album’s future (dystopian) and the band’s future (utopian). In this double action it remains fundamentally impassive, discreet and impersonal — atopian. “I Zimbra” reaches beyond *Fear of Music* even as it opens a door into the record, makes an overture for it. Inscribing a seductive emergency state in our bodies while refusing to name a subject our minds can grasp, the song inoculates us with a “killed virus” version of *Fear of Music* that strengthens and sickens simultaneously. “I Zimbra” is untrustworthy. It compels the listener without bothering to persuade him. The formerly human band has mistaken itself for a machine in operation outside space, time, and mind. Or has it graduated and left us behind? No one is saying. “I Zimbra” has its way with us, like sexual desire or fear itself, which enact themselves in a place beyond language.

Yet, mocking us, there is language, of a kind.

Gadget berry bomber clamored
Lazuli loony caloric cad jam
Ah! Bum berry glassily gland ride
He glassily tufty zebra—

Or so it might unfold, in the fool’s yearning spell-check of the ear — at least until corrected by the lyric sheet. For anyone demanding sense, or instructions on how to feel about the journey you’ve undertaken in dropping the phonograph’s needle on this particular record, here’s a Dada left hook to the jaw.

* * *

The mind making retrospective sense of the artwork is a liar. Or a lie. Unspooling expertise and arcane, the critic spins a web of knowingness that veils its manufacturer, a spider shy of the light. Now here you come, whistling down the bookstore aisle — “*Always liked that record; wonder what he got to say about it?*” — to be enmeshed in the web of expertise. Before you blink, the spider’s remade you as his double, another presider over this mesh of opinions and trivia, which you’re free to brandish as your own. Or maybe not free, but imprisoned. Caught. Do you care to recall what it would like to hear “I Zimbra” before, like a scoop of ice cream rolled in chopped peanuts, I got my words all over (and embedded inside) it? Better retreat quick, friend.

At what point did I learn that Hugo Ball (1886–1927), German-born Dada poet and manifesto writer, was the source of the crypto-tribal chanted nonsense syllables that pass for lyrics on “I Zimbra”? I can’t tell you. I do know this: I was, from the start, an inveterate inspector of credits, curator of microdata. “H. Ball” as a co-composer (with D. Byrne and B. Eno) was there to be spotted on *Fear of Music*’s label, and I probably spotted him before too long. But I’m also certain of this: there was a before. For I remember, dimly, the collision of that knowledge with my primal distrust of the song’s refusal of meaning. I resolutely *didn’t* want this band to stop making sense.

The boy in his room demands we take this confession further, take the opportunity to say how, when in first inspecting *More Songs About Buildings and Food*’s label he discovered the names “A. Green and M. Hodges” credited with composition of his favorite punk rock hit of 1978, he tucked a throbbing embarrassment behind a rapidly constructed tinfoil hat of knowingness: oh, sure, “Take Me to the River” was an old R&B or gospel song, makes sense. What a cool gesture on the part of his heroes! At the time the boy guessed the song was probably from the fifties or early sixties, had been funkyed up by

Talking Heads. The boy recalls, with absolute clarity, going on to wonder to himself whether he'd ever know anything more about "A. Green and M. Hodges" than the fact they'd written the song.

Then again, a mere seven years (and seven thousand revolutions of emotion and taste) later, the boy — not such a boy now, but still enough of one to deserve the name — sat on a mattress with his college girlfriend and played her selected tracks from his complete collection of original-issue Al Green Hi Records LPs. Between tracks, in the manner of bragging how far he'd come, the boy retailed this exact saga of his innocence: that he'd once stared at a Talking Heads' label *and wondered whether he'd ever know who Al Green was*. By that time, the boy found his old attachment to Talking Heads an awkward thing, incriminatingly callow, the residue of awkward origins. Meanwhile, his devotion to the works of Al Green seemed to him to define his worldliness. If you'd announced to that twenty-year-old that a quarter-century on he'd be writing a book about Talking Heads, rather than one about Al Green, he'd have arched a skeptical eyebrow.

The point is how right and wrong you can be at once. And that the "information" is only as good as what your ears already know. Or not as good. Like a lot of people, when I — for I *am* that boy in that room — first heard it I thought "I Zimbra" sounded African. Not, I hasten to say, in the sense of African music as I presently know and revere it, for I didn't know what African music sounded like. Rather, under the influence of the track's conga drums, the singing to me sounded like fake-tribal chanting in some African language, Swahili or Zulu or, worse, an invented ooga-booga tongue, an arts school highbrow's version of the cannibal grunts and moans in The Cadets' "Stranded in the Jungle."

In as much, the resemblance embarrassed and bothered me, but I could never have articulated that botheration for many years to come. It was too personal. My disapproval of white-boys-acting-black had determined the plot of my life to that point, my schoolyard crises, musical and otherwise, and with the exact reason I'd fallen on non-blues-based punk or new wave bands with such exultant relief. Talking Heads were meant to epitomize my opportunities to construct a cool that pointed away from "the street," and towards bookish things, but was still cool. I didn't need them glancing at Africa, with or without quotation marks.

Later I'd learn that this band had conceived *Fear of Music* as a chance to close some of the distance between punk and disco. For me, though, it was for the best at the time that I hadn't learned that fact and that my aural defenses were good enough to keep me from hearing it. I needed Talking Heads to be a punk band, not a funk band. But in "I Zimbra" I couldn't help hearing — as anyone would, and everyone did, at least in the retrospect of *Remain in Light* and *Speaking in Tongues* — the homeopathic tincture, the minimum effective transformative dose, of all the funk to come.

This white band was going to have black people in it.

Maybe already did.

But that's getting way, way ahead of ourselves, especially ahead of the boy in his room.

Brian Eno, the only acknowledged intruder on the "official quartet" of Talking Heads to this point, was British and bald, and played not drums or bass but keyboards, or sat geekishly behind a console. Talk about Trojan Horses!

Into this confusion plopped the clue: Hugo Ball. Finding "I Zimbra" credited in part to the dead Dada poet, I could modulate my worries about this turn to the African, but only a little. My ears were still telling me something, still anxiously parsing this harbinger of the band's future (destined, of course, to consist of a series of collaborations with live black musicians, not dead Dada poets).

But what did it *mean*? Inquiring minds, licensed to overthinking by this band's fundamental cerebral founding premise — *heads, talking, rather than bodies unhinged from self-consciousness on the dance floor* — might be obligated to bear down on the thing. Hugo Ball's poem, by deflecting meaning, accumulated speculative-interpretive force, like a Rorschach blot. Dada — European collagistic, prone to manifestos and provocation, to sneering at history — made a fair bedfellow for

punk. The song claimed a precursor in Dada's guttural and spasmodic presentation, and its freedom from conventional logic, but also its tendency to the regimented and doctrinaire. Hugo Ball's drill sargeanty nonsense, and the immobile geometric armor he wore while presenting it onstage: the both satirized the human impulse to control human impulses, and exemplified the discipline needed to make that kind of artwork (if nothing else, a song or poem composed in an invented language foregrounds the labor of memorization that's normally taken for granted in performance).

Still, 1916 Zurich is an awfully long way for a rock band to venture merely to authorize use of nonsense syllables. From well before the Trashmen's "Surfin' Bird" and long after the Police's "Doo Doo Doo," the rock lexicon abounds with blurts and grunts and gibberish of a zoological diversity. Some historically-minded folks place the very origin of the rock song-form in the realm of verbal hoo-ha: early rock-and-roll as a jubilant, irreverent expansion of the nonsense asides in vocal jazz and rhythm-and-blues, or of the kind of Pentecostal babbling-in-tongues recorded by John Loma in the 1934 "Run Old Jeremiah": "I gotta rock / You gotta rock / Wah wah ho / Wah wah wah ho." The conventional reading of the nonsense lyric — or the James Brown grunt, or of jazz scatting — might be that the voice, seeking to reproduce the wild expressivity of the band's instruments, finds it necessary to leave verbal meaning in the dust.

The vocal manner of "I Zimbra" stakes out a different turf. It distinguishes itself not only from the above-described premises for nonsense verbiage, but from Talking Heads' previously established default conceptual-scheme, which goes something like this: freaked-out singer tests his anxieties and vulnerabilities, and yearnings against the bounds of a music that's fierce and impassive in ways he can only dream of. The metronomic drumming and monolithically regular bass lines, the tight-wound guitar-and-keyboard figures, sometimes menacing, sometimes chipper, sometimes both, but always crucially less — or more — than human: on Talking Heads' first two albums, the band frames David Byrne's voice and lyrics as a fragile human entity locked into a ferocious exoskeletal structure, one driving him through confessions, passive-aggressive fits, and bemused homilies about work, love, art, and television.

That voice, when bored, sighs: stays human.

When alienated, reveals dread: stays human.

When angry, goes spastic: stays human.

It is only with "I Zimbra" that this voice inscribes its complicity with the machine or machines that bear it forward. Chanting in lockstep, the vocal of "I Zimbra" reveals and celebrates a new possibility of neurosis-free compliance to the music's urgency. It's not only nonsense, it's impersonal. Nobody's home. Or maybe it's an undead lifelessness. Like a vampire, the song gazes in the mirror and finds nothing reflected; it dashes through the room before we've noticed it casts no shadow.

* * *

"I Zimbra," considered as an envoi to *Fear of Music*, plays at refuting the album's methodology before it even gets started, and at the same time clears the ground for that methodology's deeper operations. For *Fear of Music* is all about its subject matter. Like a high school social studies teacher chalking a heading on a blackboard, the song titles function as "topics for discussion." "I Zimbra" coughs into its fist and says "bullshit" to that plan: your pedagogy is all talk, professor, and talk is all nonsense.

The implicit "I" of the band, to this point, was nothing to sneeze at. The persona on *Talking Heads '77* and *More Songs About Buildings and Food* had been funny, neurotic, pretentious, and nerdish — intense — capable, variously, of Dylanesque break-up songs, anthems of mixed emotion, and deadpan self-help advisories which dare you to take them at face value. Yet in every case it tended to exhibit "personality" — someone, whether you want to call him "David Byrne" or "Psycho Killer"

something else — who can be safely taken by the listener as either a portrait or a self-portrait.

What “I Zimbra” announces is the destruction of this individual limit to the band’s paranoid worldview. This is a huge, if stealthy, gain for the album’s overarching authority. *Our* lives all feature air, paper, cities, mind, animals, memories, war, and so forth. “*We dress like students, we dress like housewives ...*” *Fear of Music* will be a collective enunciation in which the listener is helplessly enmeshed or it will be nothing much — a “comedy album” (cf. Lester Bangs). By evaporating her individuality into the group-incantation of “I Zimbra” the singer prepares us, if only subconsciously, for our complicity with matters beyond any individual character’s neurotic grievances.

“I Zimbra”’s origin encodes *Fear of Music*’s motifs in one other sense: the Dada movement itself was a response to “life during wartime.” The European aftermath of the Great War seemed to dwarf all attempts at humane commemoration or remorse; *trench warfare* and *mustard gas* and *shellshock* were the language Hugo Ball and his fellow Dadaists sought to overwrite with their avant-gibberish.

* * *

If there’s any back door out of the future-shock corridor of “I Zimbra” it is proposed not by the singers, but by the bass player, who frequently seems to direct her instrument’s line into a rubbery skid toward this one-lane-highway’s ditch. The propulsive quorum — drums, guitar, and vocals — ignore her renegade proposal, pushing ever forward. The keyboard, gnarling in a neurotic collision with itself, never betrays the song’s pace, and so seems celebratory, a bow on the tightly wrapped package. This keyboard sound, ascending in jubilant dysfunction, concludes the track, boasting *no exit, no exit, no exit*. Relief comes not from within “I Zimbra”’s tensile structure, but from our easefall to the next song’s seeming amplitude and warmth. But look out.

Is *Fear of Music* a Talking Heads Record?

The opening few songs in Jonathan Demme's Talking Heads' concert film, *Stop Making Sense*, reenact or allegorize the band's early formation and later expansion: first the songwriter, alone with guitar and a beatbox, then bass player and drummer to form a rhythm section in support of him, then the keyboard player, who also plays second guitar. Expansion follows: conga players, back-up singer, a second bass, and a second keyboardist — yet anyone who cares for this band is meant to understand that the inner nougat, the band's hard chewy center, is made complete when the fourth member appears on stage. Jerry Harrison, that fourth member, was actually added after Talking Heads had already declared themselves — and, as these things go, I do know at least one stone purist, happily a privileged witness to a string of early gigs, who swears by the band as a threesome, claiming the ferocity and focus was irrevocably diluted by Harrison's entry into Talking Heads — but he made it aboard in time for the first record. That's good enough to qualify for a World Series share, or a plaque in the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, should a band make it that far.

Brian Eno, the first “Fifth Head,” the aforementioned Trojan or stalking horse for all expansions that follow, doesn't appear in *Stop Making Sense*.

A Talking Heads record? To the kid in the room, a stupid question. The quartet of the band, as presented on the first three records, and as would be reaffirmed by the back-to-basics (and post-Eno) *Little Creatures*, never, at the time of *Fear of Music*, seemed in the faintest doubt. Brian Eno was not a *producer*. He hadn't joined Devo, had he?

Yet as quickly as the band's next album, *Remain in Light* (1980) and then the Byrne–Eno collaboration *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (1981) — two records as undeniable in their force and mystery as anything a listener could have wished — the original band's integrity was partly conquered by another story. This went something like: a prodigy, a genius, outgrew, or anyway became impatient with, a context and a format — “rock band” and “pop song” — and at the same time, or as a result, began to separate himself from a group of friends, his bandmates. At the same time, the genius became infatuated with another genius, he who happened to be famously an outgrower to the specifically of the context and format of “rock band” and “pop song.”

Please understand: I've discovered that I'm uninterested in the personal historical facts in the matter at hand, no matter whether these would be labeled *grievances* or *gossip* or *trivia* or *cultural history* depending on the person or persons consulted or the angle or attitude of the accounts given. Any speculations I've framed here are from the perspective of someone invested — utterly and dangerously — in a work of art: *Fear of Music*. Such investment extends to a stake in the notion of that work's implied author: in this case, *Talking Heads*.

When I say “implied author,” I mean of course not the ‘real’ Talking Heads, but the Talking Heads — or David Byrne, or Brian Eno — in my mind.

When I took on this perverse task, of writing a book with the same title as *Fear of Music*, I didn't know what I wanted to do, nor how to begin doing it. My suspicion, though, was that the best value could offer (to myself, I mean, for I was the only reader I could allow to matter) was to simply draw a circle on the page the exact size of an LP. Then to step inside, and put down in words exactly what I heard there.

I didn't want to write about *Fear of Music*, I wanted to write *Fear of Music*.

Once begun, I found that the more I invited other stories inside that LP-sized circle — already so crowded with the enormity of the songs, plus the boy in his room who I'd discovered waiting to meet me there — the less I was able to make my own language for what I heard. In our age of information

and access, getting off-line is already a commodity. (I write these words while using *Freedom*, a program I downloaded from the internet which temporarily kills the internet on my computer. I paid for it.) What's less clearly valued (and impossible, I hope, to commodify) is the value of what Donald Barthelme called "not-knowing": the manifold mercies of ignorance when setting out to do or say nearly anything.

Facts won't do what I want them to.

Like any artist a part of what I want is to make my needful guesswork, my cherished misapprehensions, so persuasive and glorious that they become more valuable than any fact could ever be. In that pursuit, though I've had a stack of books at my elbow (listed in the endnotes), I've mostly used them to prime the well of my own biases. Otherwise, I've made it a point to undertake this work utilizing no direct sources whatsoever. Not only were no animals (or electric guitars) harmed, no one was interviewed in this effort beside myself — myself, and that kid in his room. Who are in many cases the same person, but at other times are not only two people but are complete fucking mysteries to one another.

Thus, in exclusive consultation with Selfipedia, allow me to declare that every once in a while rhetorical questions have definite answers. Of course *Fear of Music* is a Talking Heads record! Its permanent force and presence arise from the context and format of a rock band playing pop songs. The boy in the room was right never to question this.

What he couldn't have known until *Remain in Light* and beyond, but what he then began to suspect and I have found myself troubling over ever since, is that in some ways it may be the last *Talking Heads* record. And that suspicion — that it is for the boy in his room not only the summit of the efforts of his favorite rock band, but a kind of too-sudden termination of those efforts (no matter how compelling some of the subsequent work done under the name seemed to him at the time, or later), the possibility that the secret of its terminal status is disclosed throughout the album in the form of a series of small but unmistakable fissures, in the form of tiny farewells, will be one of the subjects of this book.

Mind

One place this band has always excelled is in what a comic-book fan would call the “gutters” — the white space between panels on the page, and the implications created by the panels’ juxtaposition which resides in that white space. Of course, songs on LPs always had pauses between them. What self-conscious Pop Art did to the comic-book panel was isolate it and put a frame around it. (As the Dadaists will tell you, it’s context that turns an artifact into art.) From then on, any artistically ambitious page of comic-book panels — or, if you accept my analogy, any album conscious of being more than a collection of singles (i.e. post-*Sgt. Pepper’s*, at latest) could be taken as the equivalent to a museum full not only of artworks but of transitions *between* artworks. These intervals are charged with the interference of residual vibration, smashed up against the arrival of new forms after an unspecified duration of anticipatory silence.

The heartbeat between the first and second track of *Fear of Music* is one of the best gutters in Talking Heads’ repertoire. Where “I Zimbra” is closeted, “Mind” blurts open. Guitars chime to declare an atmosphere of musical and mental spaciousness, but not a chilly spaciousness (at least by contrast to “I Zimbra”). Fleshier tonalities and a goofy call-and-response by the guitar and keyboard seem to present a humane invitation to the reasonable listener, whose presence — “you” — is not acknowledged, as is his/her native tongue. The elastic, plosive bass line has not only got the song firmly in its grip this time, the rhythm section seem to be the only players with a sense of the song’s plot.

Elsewhere, loose-jointed guitar figures evoke a marionette stumbling onstage, keyboard washes point straight to Sun Ra’s outer galaxies, and the singer’s gone all dreamy, humming and mumbling to himself when he’s not detailing his unguarded and tremulous desire to locate the magic ingredient that will “change your mind.” The proposition’s initially inviting; it might be gratifying to satisfy the melodically pinning of the song’s narrator, who resembles, for an instant, anyway, the Hank Williams of “You’re Gonna Change (Or I’m Gonna Leave)” or “Why Don’t You Love Me Like You Used to Do” or “Half as Much.” We may find ourselves compelled, when those songs reach our hearts, to sing back: “I’ll change!” or “I still do!” or “I love you *twice* as much, you big dummy!” Where the album’s first song seemed to leapfrog beyond *Fear of Music’s* stated premises, at the start “Mind” seems to slip back, toward the manner of the two earlier Talking Heads’ records. A listener could reassure herself that this is just another alienated and neurotic take on the “first-person relationship complaint” song. This narrator is charismatic, so his petition is flattering. “Don’t give up!” the listener may wish to reply. “You’re changing my mind, I can feel it now!”

Yet “Mind” gets a second chance to make a first impression. As the pleasant contrast with “I Zimbra” fades in sonic memory, the song’s warmth abates too. Its invitation becomes steadily less promising — harder to imagine taking, and more baited than it initially appeared. The first thing that overtakes the song’s pleasant aura is a hostility deeper than can be cheerfully resolved within the song’s terms, if one takes it for a relationship song. The second thing that overtakes it is the suspicion that it can’t be taken for a relationship song. There’s a kind of M.C. Escher action of self-erasure in “Mind”’s inmost pattern, an unwinnable game between an uncertain number of players. The song has trapdoors in its pronoun structure: the “I–You” doesn’t persuade us, in the end. Or should I say that it doesn’t persuade *you*?

First, though, comes the matter of “Mind”’s placement as the start of a series: a Table of Contents that’s also a Table of Elements, or a list of Topics for Study. Mind, Paper, Cities, Air, Heaven, Electric Guitar, Animals, Drugs. (See also: *Fear of Music*.) The solitary nouns seem to propose

quarantine of sheer necessity: these items are too potent — especially for those of us enduring background of fear, those living through wartime or sifting through memories that can't wait — deal with except in turn, in a series of scrupulous isolations. Taken individually, possibly we can make some useful sense of them. Like Mister Spock freshly landed on a strange new planet, we can use *Fear of Music* like a tricorder, to dissect the novelty and danger residing in things we take for granted, but shouldn't: "*Mind*, Captain, appears to be an elusive projection generated by the biological brains of these creatures; a metaphor, really, for the self-narrating consciousness they experience but whose existence in themselves or others they may only assert or postulate, never prove."

The stumbling block will turn out to be the traditional one for students of consciousness: the flashlight is incapable of shining on itself, so we can't trust what its light reveals. The song has a mind of its own! This narrator's crazed muttering reveals that he's preemptively bogged down in a suspiciously sticky relationship, both to "mind" and to "you," the mind's possessor — exasperated, fond, contemptuous, above all invested, obtrusively invested. Our leader's more like Captain Kirk than Mr. Spock: he's come to this crisis pre-deranged, too full of emotion.

What's more, the conceptual quarantine between elements won't hold. From the very first recombination among these nouns is the order of the day: maybe "Drugs" will change "Mind" — no. Well, we've got some other stuff to try. But "you," whoever you are, you're not easy. Among the many things that *won't*, it turns out, change "you": time, money, drugs, religion, science and, finally, "I," which returns us to pronoun difficulties. Impossible not to notice, too, that the first pair of items fruitlessly applied to "your mind" — Time and Money — while not included as song titles on *Fear of Music*, do appear on Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* (1973), that unlikely and possibly embarrassing precedent for a concept-album anchored by generic nouns. This application of one element to another suggests *Fear of Music*'s silliest side, the album as a kind of absurdist — Dada? — kit-and-kaboodle. What if the animals tried to play the electric guitar? What if we gave *them* the drugs? Excuse me, my mind's wandering. More germane may be the hiding-in-plain-sight noun *fear*. It's been proposed that "Fear of (signifier)" is the key to parsing the album: the "real" subject being fear of air, fear of drugs, fear of heaven, fear of cities and animals and so forth.

So — Fear of Mind? That gets closer to the song's secret attitude, its slide into aggrieved mockery — hear how the word "mind" gets chewed like scenery in the song's second and third acts, its validity as a positive human attribute cast in doubt. It almost sounds as if the term is being employed as a sarcastic retort to an apology for a pedestrian collision, or rather to an apology that was expected but didn't come: "Do you *miinnnd*?" (A later Talking Heads song, "The Lady Don't Mind," repurposes the word exactly this way, defiantly, jubilantly. Having stopped making sense, you're free not to mind, to lose your mind, even to ... never mind.) Fear? Maybe. In my hearing, the longer this fellow hurls himself against its battened hatches, the more he *resents* the mind in question, or the fact of mind altogether.

"Mind," like mind, is miasmatic. (If only it had been called "Brain" instead, we might have had something to properly dissect.) Is there a noun on this list less tangible? Air, like mind, is invisible but, unlike mind, its existence can be easily demonstrated, and its absence would be immediately disastrous (if you lose your air, you know it, but that isn't necessarily true for losing your mind). Heaven might seem as much or more a matter of faith — like mind, you're free to dispute it as wholly imaginary — but every now and then we can agree with another person that this world may in fact be heaven, or at least some particular clearing in the woods might be, or a sublime meal, or a sexual epiphany. There's never anything you can point out to another person and say: "This is *mind*, right here!" The more you press the case, the more the subject slips away. And yet it's also everywhere. Consider at least everywhere we look.

What a lousy start to our inventory! As the first in the album's noun collection, "Mind" was

probably a regrettable choice. Perhaps if mind exists at all, it's a bourgeois vestige, best left behind like the burned notebooks in "Life During Wartime": mind won't help you survive. Worse, it raises the specter of solipsism: "It was all in his mind."

* * *

"Everything seems to be up in the air at this point." Here's one of *Fear of Music's* characteristic equivocal and tenuous "coping" statements, along with "still might be a chance that it might work out" ("Paper"); "some good points, some bad points" ("Cities"); and "it'll be over in a minute or two" ("Drugs"). The counterpoint to panic isn't a revelation of immanent deliverance or satisfaction, but rather the consoling notion that at least nothing's final. Here's the good news: Dreadful outcomes are far from certain! Much remains open to negotiation! This kind of blandly palliative remark is unusual in rock 'n' roll songs, which specializes in "hotter" expressions of rage, dread, or sorrow — traceable to the medium's primary sources in blues, sermons, and overwrought teenage emotion. A prevalence of these moderate, forestalling, or placating phrases is one of this band's true signatures.

Then again, "you're not even listening to me." Casual a joke as this may seem, if taken literally it's one of the oddest uses of the second-person pronoun in pop, rivaled only by Carly Simon's more blatant stunt, "You probably think this song is about you." What both this and the Carly Simon lyric accomplish is the instantaneous division of "you" from the song's actual listener. If you're hearing these words, they *don't* apply to you, whereas drivers who don't tailgate never see the words "If You Can Read This Bumper Sticker You're Too Close." In both cases the partition of you-the-subject from you-the-hearer enlists you-the-hearer on the side of the singer's criticism. How *dare* you be so vain as to not even listen to this song about you ... you, you, dirty rotten whoever-you-are.

Then again again, "you're not even listening to me" is a lyric that mutates when the song moves from the studio to a live stage. It goes from a sort of truth — a singer recording a track is displaced spacio-temporally, from his listener's ear, even more so a songwriter jotting a line on a piece of paper — to an exuberant falsehood, one lampooning those within hearing range and in full-frontal view, the paying customers. *Fear of Music* is an album created by a largish-cult band with a modest live reputation playing gigs in clubs, but who were in the process of becoming major stars and a legendary live act giving concerts in arenas. Like this line, many of this claustrophobic album's meanings were destined to transmute when shifted into the celebratory air of a mass event.

* * *

In traditional accounts (that's to say, in Bob Dylan's accounts), when a singer sings "you" he often means "me," much as in dreams where the dreamer's persona is projected onto another. Could "Mind" be a self-addressed stamped envelope? More particularly, is the singer addressing his own deafened mind? If we supposed that "You" and "I" were trapped in the same skull, it would at least explain the singer's investment in the hopeless effort: "*I need something to change YOU, mind.*" The repetition and the mounting derangement, make this perhaps another portrait of a psycho killer standing before an occluded mirror ("You talkin' to me? I don't seen anyone else here"). Yet with what would he address his mind if not his mind? The answer appears: "It comes directly from my heart to you." The entry of this other phantasmal body part — the human heart personified as a seat of emotion, rather than the blood-pumping workhorse of anatomy — is so unexpectedly cornpone that we may experience it as sardonic. "Winning hearts and minds," you'll recall, is a military goal, but here our heart claims access to another, while damnable mind goes on huddling in its lead-lined bunker.

Whether heart's petition is sincere or mocking, "Mind" is the nearest this album comes to a love song, albeit a failed one. Perhaps that expectation needed trashing right up front: if "I Zimbra" wasn't clear enough, here's a literal demolition of anyone's hopes for interpersonal communion. Happy now

“Paper” will mention a love affair dismissively (only paper, and some rays passed through), and together with “Life During Wartime” — “no time for lovey-dovey” — plainly establishes that we can’t afford that sticky stuff anymore. So, if we sort these songs out into separate implicit-narrators, the singer troubling sentimentally over changing your mind may be, despite all his animus, and his tone of superiority, the most hapless in the album’s array. He’s a throwback, one caught with his mental pants down, apprehended in the very act of getting the *Fear* memo. Elsewhere, mostly, the narrators are pre-disenchanted, have already learned of the intransigence of formerly viable modes like dancing, talk, names, breathing, parties, nightclubs, etc. They’ve more often come to deliver bad news than to receive it.

* * *

The lunatic optimism of “Mind”’s ascending guitar pattern and squirting keyboard noises (sound effects for screwball-comedy chemists brewing novelties in a beaker) together with the chipper can-do-ism of the rhythm section, present a burbling wind-up toy that mistook itself for a machine with some great and important purpose. Really, the thing’s only bumping into walls (science, religion, whatever), righting itself, and continuing merrily nowhere. By the end the singer seems in on the joke but that doesn’t mean the thing’s run down yet — the key was wound too tightly for that. He’s obliged to continue his fruitless search, which by its absurdist nature is unlikely to succeed but can never decisively fail, either. (If I can’t change your mind, then how can my ass follow?) Just after the 1-minute mark, and with nearly a minute remaining, relief of a sort comes in the form of a guitar part, one expulsive and obtrusive enough to dismantle, if not resolve, the song’s dilemma. The player rudely howls a pair of long, bent notes, then scratches convulsively to fill the measure before he can howl again. The result is alternately jeering and spastic — disdainful, then complicit. Hard to call it a solo, exactly, though like a lot of the rudimentary instrumental passages on the album it looks (in retrospect) like a placeholder for more elaborate adornments fellows like Adrian Belew and Bernie Worrell will offer in live renditions. Whether anything could improve on this guitar’s commentary, though, is unlikely. The song never recovers its mind. Since it never had one in the first place, we feel great.

Is *Fear of Music* a David Byrne Album?

I've referred, variously, to *the singer, the songwriter, the guitar player, the narrator, and he*. All of these are, approximately and most of the time, also a single human person named David Byrne. (The guitar player might sometimes be Jerry Harrison, or Brian Eno's secret weapon, Robert Fripp). Talking about noun and pronoun difficulties! No matter your investment in the premise of a collective entity known as Talking Heads, we're forced here to pause and admit that this band has a clear leader. Even the boy in his room knows this, in 1979. When, later, this band broke up, David Byrne was the apparent author of that rift, just as he's hovering behind any notion of the "implicit author" of *Fear of Music* as a single artwork or set of songs. This shouldn't necessarily be a difficulty: talking about Talking Heads while acknowledging David Byrne's primacy. As with loads of other bands whose singer is also the chief songwriter — The Doors, say, or the CBGB-generation contemporaries Television — much of the songs' meaning flows through the personality, or at least the assumed persona, of the singer in question. And, if "everyone knows" that David Byrne's solo work doesn't merit comparison to his achievements working inside the Talking Heads apparatus (a received opinion I'm comfortable passing along so long as I confess I haven't personally conducted the investigation that would bear it out as my own view), it's worth saying that nobody would even bother making the same comparison with Jerry Harrison's solo career, or Tina Weymouth's. So let's face facts: we're crediting a tremendous amount of what we admire in *Fear of Music* to this individual person even though we tend to want to chide him — and bystanders whose view of the band's career may seem to us superficial — for undervaluing the fertility of the group dynamic in creating what was presented under its collaborative auspices.

I'm still very much like that kid in his room, wishing for this mysterious collective unit to possess uncanny powers unknown to any individual human including themselves.

A fan's romance with the notion of a band as a gestalt creative entity weirdly both extends and reverses the Romantic-Modernist ideal of the individual creator as possessor of a Promethean imperative. The "genius" exists so long as Lennon and McCartney & Co. — or the Go-Between's Grant McClennan and Robert Forster, or Husker Du's Bob Mould and Grant Hart, or ? and The Mysterians or whomever you may choose to romanticize — remain locked in one another's orbit. This kind of "genius" is always humbled by the mortal fall into individualism (despite the fact that the individual participants may experience this change as analogous to the universal human experience of outgrowing one's original family and venturing forth into the world-at-large, a comparison especially hard to dispute for those whose collaborators include Dave Davies or Dennis Wilson or Pop Staples).

My excuse for laboring at this subject is the suspicion that such anxieties swirl in the undertow of some of *Fear of Music*'s peculiar voicings. To put it in terms of a simple and completely irresponsible biographical speculation: it looks to me like David Byrne, the hyper-aware singer-songwriter and bandleader, feeling the Talking Heads' project moving steadily from the realm of amateur underground-art-project and into that of a professional success on music-industry terms, was motivated as much by the anxiety over the limitations (and routine) of the role as by the prospect of fame and wealth, or by continued growth opportunities for the band configured-as-such. In other words, David Byrne didn't want to become the nerd Mick Jagger. For it was Jagger's fate to be seen somehow both apart from, and utterly incomplete without, his musical collaborators, even as the potential meaning of the Rolling Stones' music became more and more a product and symptom of Jagger's projected persona, circumscribed by its established interests and attitudes.

Evidence for my irresponsible theory is easy to amass in the long run: Byrne's shift to film, theater

writing, and impresario work; his abjuration of his personal voice (in various senses) through the *Remain in Light*, *Catherine Wheel*, and *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* projects; his expansion of the Talking Heads onstage population so as to render problematic or irrelevant the band's strict definition of itself; his attraction to uncommercial "outsider" models of ongoing musical activity, like Brian Eno and Terry Allen; and of course, his tiptoeing off into solo work.

Evidence that this impulse was afoot as early as *Fear of Music* is more a matter of wild supposition. It also interests me totally, because it converges with the album's inbuilt themes. Endtimes. Self-dissolution and disassociation. Collective apprehension and distrust. Stress.

If, just as a band is meeting the world's embrace, and doing so much to the delight of its other members, you find yourself already less than completely comfortable being its Head, and doing it all Talking, what's the solution? Disappear into the band, or from it?

Could Talking Heads be the mind the singer's afraid he can't change? How do you change a mind you're in, one that dreamed you up in the first place?

Paper

Confronting the first of the tangible nouns, the band renews their commitment to guitars, which abruptly in command, seem delighted to have rehabilitated themselves from the daffy slackness “Mind.” No dubious keyboard doodles here. In fact, after a brief, tightly wound but deceptively lyric overture, the guitars attack their subject with a needling acuity, answering the challenge of the Gatling-gun drumming and a mercenary bass line that labors to double down on the song’s blood pressure. These are art-punk guitars when they want to be, the equal to any No Wave compatriot, though the poppy neatness of the songcraft tends to disguise it.

With the album’s third song this band appears to have recovered its grip on sonic urgencies: the sensuously layered textures of well-articulated panic, the urban-neurotic imperative. What a relief. You could say that “Paper” splits the difference between “I Zimbra”’s edginess and “Mind”’s unspooled languor, or that it claims the first song’s scratchy ferocity as a curative to the second’s atmosphere of illness, its failure to delineate clear boundaries on its uneasy subject. “Paper” is a fence that makes a good neighbor to “Mind”’s unkempt lawn. And meeting the second on our list of Things To Consider renews our sense of the project’s forward momentum.

But oh, the disordered tenant staring from between the blinds of the windows behind that good fence! “Paper” is the first of the album’s admonitory songs (“Life During Wartime,” “Air,” and others will bear this mode forward: *Fear of Music* as a series of flashing Warning Signs) and possibly its least coherent. What’s at stake here, and which is the corrupted element? Who’s the victim? Candidates range among the obvious and obscure, the named and unnamed: Paper, light, ray, priorities (“it’s been taken care of”), time (“expose yourself for a minute” / “take a few weeks off”) or the limits of expression (“don’t think I can fit it on the paper” / “Make it tighter, tighter”). “Rays” are, inevitably, radiation. This forecasts “Life During Wartime,” and alludes to this band’s generation’s backdrop of Cold War fear, of Mutual Assured Dystopia — klaxons to send you scurrying to basement clutching a few useless personal documents, the sky-flash which brands photographic impressions of evaporated bodies onto plaster and pavement, transforming the city’s surfaces into light-sensitive paper, and the fallout which erodes all substance from within, exposing the innate permeability of skin or paper, rendering it translucent, fated to petrify into dust.

Another candidate for the song’s true subject, one proximate to twentieth-century war-fear, may be paranoia itself. For, along with advancing the list of nouns, “Paper”’s been entrusted with one baseline thematic task — just as “Mind” conjured solipsism, “Paper” is here to inject paranoia into the album’s bloodstream. Judging by the singer’s tone of panic, those rays passing through paper and self and love affair all too absolutely unmake this song’s effort to “hold on”; the guitars, hypervigilant in the foxholes, seem to agree. “Nothing to fear but fear itself,” the summit of Greatest Generation bravado finds itself rewritten in Cold War jitters: just because you’re paranoid doesn’t mean there isn’t somebody out to get you. The character peering through his blinds in a tinfoil-lined beanie may know something you don’t.

In a less global sphere, “Paper” enacts an artistic crisis, possibly even discloses a blatant and embarrassing case of writer’s block. The harder you try to parse the lyrics the more they resemble a vortex of notes — pages flying off a calendar, or perhaps a refrigerator daubed with Post-It proposals for possible songs about paper that never quite got around to being written. These notions may have been jotted down on waking from a dream, or while stoned: they seemed good at the time. Transitions are missing, maybe because they were impossible in the first place, negotiating as they would have had to between unresolved and contradictory premises residing warily in the same zone.

Not so much thesis and antithesis as a constellation of inklings suspended at awkward angles from one another. ~~The sole element linking all this paper, ironically, is those rays passing through.~~ These perhaps stand for the intangible substance of the singer's exigencies, his yearning for solace and confirmation — mind again!

Let's tabulate a few of these fluttering scraps:

"It's been taken care of" / "Take a few weeks off." Office politics, agendas. Voice of the boss. The paper discloses a whiff of Kafka bureaucracy.

"Long distance telephone call." The paper's outmoded. Yet communication breakdown's always the same.

"Hold on to that paper." Someone may want to inspect your credentials or ID. "*Your paper please.*"

"Don't think I can fit it" / "Go ahead and tear it up." Bad day in the artist's studio.

"Even though it was never written down, still might be a chance that it might work out." "*W sounded pretty good in that jam a while ago. If only the tape had been running.*"

"Was a lot of fun, could have been a lot better." This extends a groggy tendrill toward the dissolute morning-after party-animal of "Memories Can't Wait" and "Drugs."

And so on.

Well, at least we can now check two items off our topic list, even if the second is a song that's like a list itself, a compilation of half-muttered remarks on the degraded viability of doing things like writing down lists and checking off items. On earlier albums Talking Heads treated art-making pretentively; "Paper"'s where that reverence goes to die. It's the nemesis-song for an earlier Talking Heads' track: the heartfelt "The Book I Read," in which stable value is accorded to a bound stack of pages and also to a fan letter jotted in the encounter's aftermath, thus doubly affirming the efficient and humane connection between writer and reader. ("Mind" is nemesis-song to "You Pulled Me Up" rebuking its glib reach-out-and-touch-someone/Bill Withers' "Lean On Me" vibe. "I Zimbra" abjuring meaning, picks no battles, unless it picks them all.)

"Paper" is one of the smallish ambulances racketing through this war zone, bearing just a casual or two. The song is taut, and svelte. At 2:39 the shortest track on the album by a good measure, perfectly hinges Side One, while risking being the album's most forgettable. Not "worst" — it's too taut, svelte, and guitarishly fierce to be that, and if this album needs a worst song there's a better candidate, surely — but the most generically obedient to the overarching concept. It's also lodged at the portal through which now comes a procession of indelible monsters. All it needs do, then, is pick that door open.

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