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The deadpan irony and collage-artist approach to mixing musical influences David Byrne brought to the Talking Heads makes him something of a spiritual godfather to artists from Pavement to Beck, but he's never been content to rest on his laurels. More ambitious than any of his punk or New Wave peers, Byrne has experimented with electronic music, Latin rhythms and orchestral scores -- but it wasn't until 1994 that rock's most detached lyricist began releasing songs that had more to do with his inner life than buildings and food. And though Byrne is portrayed as a plastic doll on the cover of his new album, "Feelings," songs like "They Are in Love" and "Finite=Alright" pack an affecting, if abstract, emotional punch.

Of course, the performer Time magazine once dubbed "Rock's Renaissance man" is hardly content to confine himself to one medium, and Byrne has kept busy in the three years since his last album with a book of his photographs, "Strange Ritual;" a multimedia museum exhibit called "Desire" that's now traveling the country and his world music-oriented record label, Luaka Bop. But for someone so busy and famously hyperkinetic, Byrne seems fairly calm as he sinks into a couch and talks about his "Feelings," his new collaborators and his legal tug-of-war with his former bandmates over the name Talking Heads.

Rolling Stone.com: Like [1994's] "David Byrne," "Feelings" seems a little more personal than most of your previous work. Does that represent a conscious shift on your part?

David Byrne: Yeah, well ... yeah. I tried to write stuff that's not always ironic or tongue in cheek -- [songs that are about] what I feel, what I believe, that come from the heart. Not that the more ironic, tongue in cheek stuff doesn't also come from the heart in some way, but you can fall into a trap -- I know I can do that. I wanted to get to something that feels more real to me.

It was conscious. It wasn't a commercial decision, but it was a conscious decision, partly because a lot of the music I listen to is very heartfelt. I might put on a country record, not from one of the hat guys, but something real or somebody whose stuff really moves me, and it's great and I can sing along to it. So I started asking myself: Why can't I write a song like that? So I try. I don't always succeed.

You also pulled in some collaborators like Morcheeba and DJ Hahn Rowe who gave the album an electronic edge. How did you decide to do that?

A lot of the electronica people and mixers and DJs all cite the ["My Life in the Bush of Ghosts" album] I did with Brian Eno years ago as being a major influence or inspiration or whatever. It's something I listen to, it's [a genre] where there's a lot of musical excitement and innovation, people trying things out -- trying them out and failing, trying them out and succeeding. There's an openness and curiosity. It's not like, 'No, that's not how you do it, you do it like this.' [There's more an attitude of] 'Go ahead: Anything you want to try, go ahead and try.' Which is great, because not everything works, but there's a great feeling of possibility.

Punk had that same sense of possibility when you were first starting out in the Talking Heads. Do you think that's gone?

Ninety percent of all music is always crap, and when too many people decide they're going to have guitar bands, then ninety percent of them are going to be crap. It's just a given law. There's going to be 10 percent within that style who are doing great stuff, and it's going to have great songs and memorable sounds and it's incredible, it grabs you by the throat or whatever. The rest of it, you know, they're playing by the rules. And it just so happens that this particular kind of music has been marketed up the wazoo in the last decade ... It's been so overmarketed and we're so oversaturated with it that people start to feel like there's nothing else. But there's a lot else going on. There's an awful lot going on.

One of the interesting lyrics on the album is "Rock bands died when

1997 - Byrne-ing Down the House

Written by Robert Levine

amateurs won" ...
Yeah, anybody can go in with two turntables and a microphone or a home studio sampler and a little cassette deck or whatever and make records in their bedrooms. It's that kind of do-it-yourself thing, where [people] don't feel like they have to go into a real recording studio ... That's where the whole CBGBs punk thing came from. Even if some people could play their instruments, the overriding feeling was that it didn't matter whether you could or you couldn't.
You've been a solo artist for about decade. Was it odd to work with so many collaborators on this album?
No. It was really comfortable. It was exactly the way I wanted to work. It wasn't a band in the sense that you're in a room playing something at a deafening volume and screaming 'No, at the middle eight you're supposed to go like this!' It was the kind of thing where everything is kind of crafted and people were just hanging out and throwing out ideas and sounds. It was a creative studio [collaboration] rather than a performance, which is more what a band is.
When Chris Frantz, Tina Weymouth and Jerry Harrison wanted to release an album as the Talking Heads last year, you took legal action to stop them. What made you go after the rights to the name Talking Heads?
I felt that maybe not now, but that at some point, there [would be] all these records out under the name [Talking] Heads [and] people at some point would get confused and wonder which is the real thing and what's what. Although [the other members of the band] may claim otherwise, it's a pretty obvious attempt to cash in on the Talking Heads name, and yet I would define it as something new they're doing. I would say it's not the Talking Heads, they would say it is -- just without the singer ... It's different and it should have a different name.
Did you hear the album they ended up putting out as the Heads?
Uh-uh.
Do you think you'll ever listen to it?
No, because if I listened to it, then I'd have to answer whatever your next question would be.