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Fifteen years ago, David Byrne was not so much a pop singer, more a walking, squawking, twitching cartoon of a man. Stop Making Sense, Jonathan Demme's 1984 concert film of Byrne's former band Talking Heads, captures him much the way people still think of him - a long-necked, bug-eyed praying mantis bleating out the words, "I'm tense and nervous and I can't relax."

These days, stockier but crop-haired again after a few years of sporting hippyish locks, Byrne seems relaxed enough. When he sits down to be interviewed, he unfolds full-length into his armchair, leaning right back in a bilious mustard-coloured safari suit. He's either mellowed considerably, or is letting jet lag take its course. Then again, there's an espresso in his hand.

These days, Byrne could be promoting any of a number of projects - either his own or other people's records, exhibitions, books, ballet soundtracks. So it seems almost touching that he's in London to promote the re-released Stop Making Sense, a 15-year-old film of a now-defunct band. "I'm really proud of it," Byrne says in a soft, high quaver that's surprisingly close to his singing voice. "Even though it's Jonathan's movie."

Stop Making Sense has a reputation as the most straightforward pop film ever, in which Demme simply stuck his camera in front of the stage and let things happen. In fact, it's considerably more contrived than that. Byrne admits to practising his "herky-jerky" dance moves - "but where it came from, how bizarre and stick-man it looked, that I couldn't help."

As first Byrne, then member after member of the expanded Talking Heads wander on to the stage, song by song, the film is structured as a potted history of the group - of how a reserved, gauche-looking three-piece turned into a sprawling stadium-funk ensemble.

Vibrant as the film still feels, it nevertheless evokes a bygone 80s atmosphere, not just in the severe conceptual-art trappings, but in the music, the hard funk that Talking Heads popularised as the de rigeur stylistic borrowing for fashion-conscious young white bands at the time. In the mid-80s, everyone played funk; now you can't help wondering where it went. "I have no idea," confesses Byrne. "Funk is very sexy, whereas a lot of other dance musics are not about that. They're about another kind of release, they're about an energetic explosion of energy, or a nervous kind of shaking," he says. He flaps his hands in a pretty convincing impersonation of David Byrne.

The film marks the last moment at which the Talking Heads entirely did make sense. After that, the band downsized, then fragmented into assorted side projects - Byrne's 1986 directing venture True Stories, bassist Tina Weymouth and drummer Chris Frantz's Tom Tom Club - before trickling out anti-climactically at the end of the 80s. "It just seems to be a natural course of events for bands," Byrne says. "We got together not because we were good musicians, but more because we were friends and shared a musical and visual aesthetic. Although our musical chops improved, our likes and dislikes tended to diverge. Our tastes were so different that it just

didn't mean much any more."

Byrne's post-Heads career has wandered far from the conventional "solo artist" curriculum. He's made a handful of records as singer and several more as composer of stage soundtracks for high-culture names like Twyla Tharp and Robert Wilson. The latest, *In Spite of Wishing and Wanting*, is a collaboration with choreographer Wim Vandekeybus and the Belgian dance group *Ultima Vez*. He also co-wrote the score for Bertolucci's film *The Last Emperor*. This is what they call a steep learning curve, and Byrne admits he sometimes didn't know quite how much he'd bitten off.

"Some of it was having the nerve to try it," he admits, "Having the belief that, even if you can only play two or three chords on a guitar, you can still make a song out of it. And then taking that into other areas."

Byrne has taken the multi-disciplinary to lengths that occasionally smack of dilettantism. He had a stab at directing, but - apart from a documentary about the Brazilian Candomblé religion and a solo concert film - he never got into the oddball stride suggested by the Texan cultural freak-show *True Stories*, his one feature proper. "I've tried and I'm going to keep trying. I think sometimes it's my own fault - I got somewhat flattered into thinking, "Well, you've made a film or two and now you should just be able to go to LA and get a deal." But as often happens, you end up sitting round in circles, getting a script half finished."

Byrne's solo pop recordings over the past decade have been middling, straying from the old Heads template. He admits that as he gets older, whatever he does now is bound to seem marginal, never headline-making as it once was. "There's no sense in me trying to compete with youth, because a young fresh face will win out every time." But he's still committed to the bread-and-butter job of songwriting. "In the last few years, I've actually managed to write stuff that has a measure of sincerity to it. Not that there's anything more valuable about that than there is about writing things that are ironic. But it was new for me. Whatever sincerity manifested itself in the earlier stuff was always kind of unintentional."

I suggest that his songs never told us much about him. Perhaps not, he says, but they often reveal him to himself. "I think I write songs that tell me what I'm going to be doing a year ahead. The song tells me what I'm feeling in a kind of coded message and a year later I realise, "That's why I just got myself into this jam.' "

Byrne's most influential achievement over the past decade, however, has been as a curator of other people's music, with his record company *Luaka Bop*. It's not so much a world music label, he says, "just a bunch of uncategorisable things" - including British Asian band *Cornershop*, whom *Luaka Bop* launched in the US. Most recently, the label has unearthed a legendary late-60s Brazilian trio called *Os Mutantes*, who could almost have been invented as an Austin Powers spoof - "one of the best psychedelic bands ever".

Byrne's next project is a photography exhibition - specifically a show of "lenticulars". As he enthuses, "Sometimes they call them 'winky-dinks' - those pictures where if you turn them, you get different pictures: the lady takes her swimsuit off or whatever. There's a company in New

1999 - My life's a mess - as you'd expect

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York that can make big ones, and they can put lots of images together, so you can see lots of different things or have things move around."

Byrne sounds like an enthusiastic kid with a new hobby. The mystifying thing is not that he does all these different things, but that he can ever concentrate enough to see a particular project through, let alone have time for a private life. "It's a mess, as you would expect," he says with a nervous laugh. He recently went to Spain for a month with his costume-designer wife Adelle Lutz and their 10-year-old daughter, but took recording gear so that he could write songs. "It was OK - I was there part of the day."

What if he just stopped for a while? He looks positively grief-stricken at the suggestion, and the pitch of his voice rises a fraction. "Then I'd be a monster! Then they wouldn't like me! They'd kick me out!" It's somehow reassuring to think that after all this time, Mr Anxious is alive and well.

Stop Making Sense is re-released on Friday