

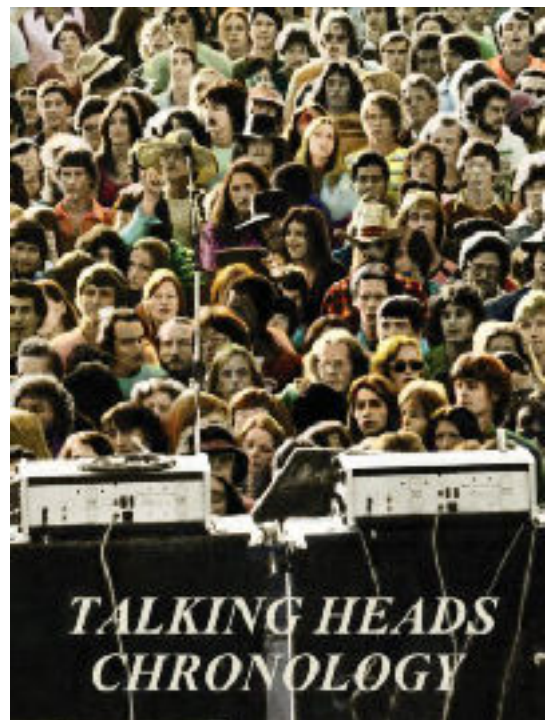
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Head Games: 'Talking Heads: Chronology'



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It seems like every Talking Heads fan goes through a similar cycle. Upon first discovering the dance-rock outfit, novices thrown directly in with the rest of the determined DIY movement but not truly enamored of their outward antisocial stance, one is instantly taken aback. Instead of some street tuffs with Mohawks, safety pins, and a cocky snarl,



the foursome resemble college students—or even worse, their buttoned up nerd professors. As albums like '77 and *More Songs About Buildings and Food* reveal their jagged joys, like turns to love, and then obsession. Around the time of *Remain in Light*, the band has ably overcome one's *Fear of Music* to deliver the ultimate geek dance statement. Then, without warning, the charmless chutzpah of David Byrne and his singular self-importance wears on you. Suddenly, efforts like *Little Creatures* and *Naked* can't hold a creative candle to *True Stories* or *Speaking in Tongues*.

Indeed, Talking Heads probably have as many lapsed members of their formerly fervent fan base as they do current card carrying devotees. While their early catalog demands reverence, their later work suffers severely by comparison. Certainly songs like "Burning Down the House" and "Nothing But Flowers" can still recall the best the band had to offer, but there's just a legitimate law of diminishing returns when compared to where they came from. Proof of such a position can be found on the brilliant new live clip compilation entitled *Chronology*. Focusing on the group's formative years (1975 - 1982) and offering a rare glimpse at the three (and later, nine) piece version of the formidable foursome, the DVD instantly reminds the ex-aficionado of the reasons they loved the Heads in the first place - and why a reevaluation of their current position is probably warranted.

Within a realm celebrating disco, dinosaur rock, and the emergence of corporate oriented and sponsor radio sounds, Talking Heads (no "The" please) turned music on its practiced, pointed head. Leader David Byrne met the amazing rhythm section of Tina Weymouth (bass) and Chris Franz (drums) while at the Rhode Island School of Design. There, they applied the avant garde teachings of their various instructors and unleashed a new and novel aural approach. As he says throughout the commentary track accompanying the various performances, it was more about the "idea" of a song than a song itself. Eschewing guitar solos and traditional verse/chorus/bridge blueprints, the earliest incarnation of the Heads was a tight, terrifying force. While fellow CBGB residents like Ramones and Blondie had the punks in a lather, listeners left the weird noodlings of Byrne et. al for

their dork college comrades.

The first four tracks on the DVD showcase the classic trio, delivering dynamite takes on "With Our Love," "I'm Not In Love," and the arresting "Psycho Killer." With the inclusion of ex-Modern Lover Jerry Harrison on guitar, the Heads became one of the most astonishing quartets ever. Again, Byrne argued that adding another member allowed the ideas to become more fleshed out and full. Another crucial addition was the advice, input, and creative contributions of producer Brian Eno. Onboard since *More Songs*, he encouraged experimentation and the use of varying instruments and approaches. With the full support of their label (Seymour Stein of Sire Records is name checked often), Talking Heads continually expanded their sonic sphere of influence, resulting in what is arguably their masterpiece, the Afro-funk inspired *Remain in Light*.

With the film defining what is discussed, *Chronology* does have some gaps. It's great to see the band's amazing live performance on the original *SNL*, but then to avoid the equally flawless "Take Me to the River" from the same appearance to feature a lip synced *American Bandstand* version of the same is sacrilege (no matter the clueless charm of the questions foisted by host Dick Clark). Equally odd is the sudden jump from a 1983 *David Letterman* performance to the unlikely reunion for their 2002 induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. It just seems like a whole lot of history is sidestepped so we can see the band doing what they do best (in this case, laying waste to the audience with an amazing take on "Life During Wartime"). Rarity also must compensate for less than stellar audio and video. The 1975 material from CBGBs and the equally impressive stuff from The Kitchen circa 1975 reignite the kind of personal passion missing from modern music. Other sources are just sensational.

In fact, with the inclusion of the telling *South Bank Show* episode on the group from 1979 and an interview with Byrne from 1978 (the man looks so uncomfortable in the Q&A crossfire), the viewer is provided with more than enough proof of the Heads original magnificence. Unlike UK entities like The Clash or The Jam, Talking Heads weren't

simply amplifying old rock riffs. Instead, they were intellectualizing the genre while coming up with new and defiant ways of working around the expectations of the audience. When they worked together to formulate their sound, the results became the basis for an amazing music myth. But once Byrne began to believe his own hype, the group turned turgid. Today, the various levels of fandom faithful remember their first exposure to a future fetish. *Chronology* offers such a glimpse - and much, much more.