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Talking Heads

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Monica Berger “Talking Heads.” *Encyclopedia of the American Counterculture*, Gina Misiroglu, ed., M.E. Sharpe, Armonk, NY, 2008.

Monica Berger
524 Talking Heads

The Talking Heads, seminal figures in the history of New York punk, were art-school educated and their artistic sensibilities informed their myriad musical and cultural experimentations. More than any other band, the Talking Heads had an exceptionally enduring connection to the avant-garde of New York. Musically, they evolved to become influential early innovators in incorporating dance rhythms, both funk and African polyrhythms, in their sound.

David Byrne, Tina Weymouth and drummer Chris Franz, who later married Weymouth, attended the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), where the band formed in 1974. The band's early success in 1976 was based on riveting live performances at Hilly Kristal's Bowery club CBGBs, the epicenter of New York City's burgeoning punk movement. Seymour Stein of Sire Records was so impressed that he immediately signed the band. The following year, Jerry Harrison who studied architecture at Harvard, joined the band. The same year, the band released its first album, *Talking Heads '77*.

The early Talking Heads' minimalistic, terse sound was based on David Byrne's yelping vocals and Tina Weymouth's deliberate bass lines. Guitarist Jerry Harrison had played with Jonathan Richman and the Modern Lovers and the Talking Heads were influenced by the preppy visual style of the Modern Lovers as well as their simple and pared down music which was accompanied by surreal and naïve lyrics. In contrast to the Talking Heads, most early New York City punk bands embraced the some form of the rebellious, romantic rock aesthetic and posed as anti-intellectual working class toughs or dissipated junkies.

Talking Heads' edgy pop music and surreal lyrics of alienation evolved from the tradition of New York City art rock which originated in the late 1960s with the Velvet Underground, and later the New York Dolls and Patti Smith, all of whom had strong art and literary world connections. Byrne was inspired by the strategies of the Dadaists and Surrealists and used games and chance elements to create lyrics. From the band's inception, every album design was conceived of and created by some or all of the band members. Later in their career, the band had artist luminary Robert Rauschenberg design a limited edition LP package for *Speaking in Tongues* (1983). *True Stories* (1986) was a full-length film conceived of, directed and starring Byrne.

Eno introduced the band to African music, evidenced by *Fear of Music* (1979) and *Remain in Light* (1980) further infused African rhythms and African-American funk into their sound; the band found mass popularity with the 1983 hit “Burning Down the House.” MTV was launched the same year and the Talking Heads' popularity was enhanced by their unusual music videos. Byrne and Eno further explored the use of sub-Saharan and Northern African sounds on *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* and collaboration with dancer Twyla Tharp entitled *The Catherine Wheel*. The other three members of the band released side-projects and Weymouth and Franz were unexpectedly successful with their white rap project the Tom Tom Club. The Talking Heads finally found commercial success but the members were at odds with each other and soon after producing a final album in 1988, the band broke up. Their legacy of musical boundary-breaking lives on the work of contemporary performers such as Beck.

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