

00:00:00	Music	Transition	Gentle, trilling music with a steady drumbeat plays under the dialogue.
00:00:01	Promo	Promo	Speaker: <i>Bullseye with Jesse Thorn</i> is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.
00:00:13	Music	Transition	<i>[Music fades out.]</i> “Huddle Formation” from the album <i>Thunder, Lightning, Strike</i> by The Go! Team. A fast, upbeat, peppy song. Music plays as Jesse speaks, then fades out.
00:00:20	Jesse Thorn	Host	It’s <i>Bullseye</i> . I’m Jesse Thorn. My guest this week is David Byrne. He is, of course, the lead singer and front man of The Talking Heads. <i>[Music fades in.]</i> That band recorded hit songs like “Psycho Killer”, “Life During Wartime”, “Once in a Lifetime”, and “Burning Down the House”, among others.
00:00:36	Music	Music	“Burning Down the House” from the album <i>Speaking in Tongues</i> by the Talking Heads. <i>Here’s your ticket, pack your bags Time for jumping overboard Transportation isn’t here Close enough but not too far Maybe you know where you are Fighting fire with fire</i> <i>[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.]</i>
00:00:56	Jesse	Host	David Byrne is also a solo artist. He’s recorded instrumental electronic albums, pop records, spoken word. He’s collaborated with Brian Eno, St. Vincent, Philip Glass, Selena, and so much more. He’s written books, scored soundtracks, even wrote and directed his own movie. <i>True Stories</i> , from 1986.
00:01:17	Sound Effect	Transition	Music swells and fades.
00:01:18	Clip	Clip	Music: Upbeat, exciting music.
00:01:47	Sound Effect	Transition	Speaker (<i>True Stories</i>): I have something to say about the difference between American and European cities. But I forgot what it is. I have it written down at home, somewhere. You like music? I know. <i>[Beat.]</i> Everybody says they do. Look. I personally believe—I can see Fort Worth from here! Music swells and fades.
00:01:48	Jesse	Host	If you wanted to find a common theme in his work, it might be that he’s always worked to push the boundaries of what pop music can be. At the same time, he takes high art—the kind of stuff you see in Manhattan galleries or in rep theatres in Brooklyn and makes it more accessible or familiar. <i>[Music fades in.]</i> His latest project is called <i>American Utopia</i> . It started in 2018 as an album.

00:02:15	Music	Music	<p>“Gasoline and Dirty Sheets” from the album <i>American Utopia</i> by David Byrne.</p> <p><i>Many people are locked outside Many people lost out there</i></p> <p><i>Many people, they can’t get in Many people, they pay no mind</i></p> <p><i>[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.]</i></p>
00:02:34	Jesse	Host	<p>Then he toured that record a little bit. And because he’s David Byrne, he went the extra mile and then some. 12 musicians, all dressed in identical grey suits, carrying their instruments like a marching band and dancing with them. He then parlayed that tour into a full-on Broadway production, which premiered in 2019. Then, that live show became a film directed by the one and only Spike Lee. That dropped late last year. Which brings us to now: 2021. <i>American Utopia</i> is making its return to Broadway later this month. Things have—as you might imagine—changed a lot since its original run.</p> <p>David Byrne and I will get into that. But first, let’s kick things off with a song from the stage version of <i>American Utopia</i>.</p> <p><i>[Music fades in.]</i></p>
00:03:30	Music	Music	<p>This one is called “Everybody’s Coming to My House”. “Everybody’s Coming to My House” from the album <i>American Utopia</i> by David Byrne.</p> <p><i>The skin is just a roadmap The view is very nice Imagine looking at a picture Imagine driving in a car Imagine rolling down the window Imagine opening the door</i></p> <p><i>Everybody’s coming to my house</i></p> <p><i>[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.]</i></p>
00:04:00	Jesse	Host	David Byrne, welcome to <i>Bullseye</i> . It’s great to have you on the show.
00:04:02	David Byrne	Guest	Thank you! Thank you. Good to be here.
00:04:05	Jesse	Host	I was thinking about your own music and your record label, and I found myself wondering <i>[chuckles]</i> how much of the day are you listening to music and how much of that time is it music that you’re not already really familiar with?
00:04:27	David	Guest	Wow! Okay. Not every day. I don’t—I don’t—there are some days when I don’t listen to any music. And then there are some days when, yes, I find time—like an hour, maybe?—to just browse around and see what new stuff I can hear or if somebody writes me and recommends—you know, a friend or a bandmate or somebody recommends something, I’ll listen to that. And then that will

probably then take me down a rabbit hole and I'll start listening to other stuff related to that. And then I'll save—if I like it, I'll save it to a playlist that I've made. All that kind of stuff.

And then there's—on certain days, there'll be times where I'm actually working on music, listening to music that I—writing stuff in progress or all that kind of thing. Not every day. And it's not—I can't do it all day. That would be kind of—I think my brain can only kind of focus on that for a certain amount of time and then you kind of get diminishing returns. You're not getting much creative coming out anymore.

00:05:41 Jesse Host

Do you get the same kind of charge out of it that you got out of it when you were, you know, a teenager or 22 or whatever?

00:05:51 David Guest

Well, it's a little bit different, but occasionally yes. Occasionally yes. Uh. When I was a teenager or younger, everything was completely new, and you were constantly—like every year or every six months or whatever—a friend would bring over a record and you'd listen to it. Or you'd hear something, or you'd see something and you'd—it was completely new. You'd never seen anything like it before. And that would apply to music that I was hearing or movies. There was a point when I went to art school, when I—they had screenings of like European movies and all these different kinds of movies that I didn't know existed. They didn't play in the movie theater in the suburban town that I grew up in. Had no idea these things existed. And then when I came to New York, I also saw kind of avant-garde theatre that kind of blew me away. Thinking about different kinds of—ways over performing and what that might mean and all kinds of stuff.

That still happens. It's not the same completely lifechanging experience that it might have been, but it still happens! I read in a magazine, some guy was being interviewed or writing something and he mentioned this kind of experimental I guess you'd say, or avant-garde kind of electronic music out of Uganda. And he mentioned the name of this group or this collective that does this. So, I just—you know—found it online through a streaming service, and I was kind of blown away! I mean, I think—this—it was really radical. It was extremely radical stuff. It's as radical as anything I've been hearing anywhere. And you kind of realize that the—with all those connections, with streaming and all the kind of online connections that people have now, there's a lot of stuff going on that is in places where you might not expect it. And sometimes it can be very inspirational and surprising.

00:08:07 Jesse Host

I mean, I think especially that surprising part seems like something that you—I mean, you were describing that even in your own like childhood and adolescence, was that surprising thing that really got you. And you're still kind of looking for that—you're looking for something you haven't heard before.

00:08:26 David Guest

Oh, all the time. And sometimes it could be pop music. There's plenty of pop music being [*chuckles*]—being made these days.

[Jesse laughs.]

00:08:38 Jesse Host

And, uh, that hasn't—that hasn't changed.
[Laughing.] But it's gonna be—David, that's gonna be the headline on our piece when it runs on [NPR.org](https://www.npr.org). Byrne to America: "There's plenty of pop music being made these days."

00:08:48 David Guest Yes. Um, number-wise, there's more music being made and uploaded and all that than ever before, which is why I'm *[chuckles]* using the current—the current accounting system. That's one of the reasons that musicians receive such paltry payment from a lot of streaming services, because there's so many of us putting stuff up there. And it gets somewhat divided amongst all of us. *[Laughs.]*

00:09:16 Jesse Host I interviewed Steve Albini one time, in Chicago. And this was like at the beginning—this was 15 years ago, maybe, at the beginning of MP3s and things becoming mainstream. And I asked him—I asked him a kind of future of the music industry question, and a kind of “are musicians out of luck” question. *[Chuckling.]* And what he said was, “I don't know. I think it's probably kind of like tennis. A lot of people play tennis, and some people are good at it, but not that many of them expect to do it for a living.”

00:09:53 David Guest And I was like, “Huh. Well.”
That is—yeah, that was certainly true for me when I—certainly, when I started out. I had no expectations of making a living with music. I thought, “No, there's people who are much—they've gone to school for this, or they've trained or whatever. They've been working at it their whole lives. That are really kind of—really, really good at it.” And I thought, “I feel like I have something to say, but I don't feel like I, in any way, can compete with those people.” So, I had no expectations.

00:10:26 Jesse Host Is there music that you listen to now, nostalgically? Like, in the same way that, you know—whether or not it's transcendently great or just hits a—hits a nerve in you. In the same way that like once in a while, when I'm driving down the street and I'm listening to a podcast or something, I'm like, “Oh, no, no, no, no, no. I—just for a minute, I'm gonna listen to *Blackstar*.” You know. The record that I listened to over and over and over and over and over when I was 17. *[Chuckles.]* You know what I mean?

00:10:57 David Guest Uh-huh. *[Chuckles.]* The other day? Yeah, I probably—I might have put on a playlist that I made of kind of alternative country artists. It was kind of a Lucinda Williams, Neko Case, Rosanne Cash, *[stammering]*—it was a playlist that I hadn't—not too many of the songs on it are really super new. Some of them are. But yeah, so that was kind of like a go-to kind of comfort zone. Although, the songs are—some of them, not comforting. I'd have to say.

[Jesse laughs.]

00:11:39 Jesse Host But as far as a listening experience, it's a kind of comfort zone place to go.
I thought you were gonna say like, “Yeah, once in a while I put on Fats Domino, and I think about the diner I used to eat in when I was six with my mom and dad or something like that.”

00:11:49 David Guest Yeah, well. Sometimes that too. I mean, I've been working on another playlist where it's all kind of doo-wap, stuff like that where—I'm just fascinated by—there was that period where all these nonsense syllables were absolutely a part of lots of songs.

[Jesse chuckles.]

You don't get it very much, people doing dippity-dip-dip woah, woah, numma-numma-numma-numma. You don't get a lot of that

[laughs] in songs anymore. And so, I—yeah. I thought, “Oh, let me listen to people doing all this kind of nonsense stuff with their mouths.”

00:12:27 Jesse Host There was a real sort of arms race of who can have the most distinctive like backup vocals sound. You know, it starts with everybody going la-la-la. And pretty soon it’s muna-muna-mana-bada.

00:12:39 David Guest Yeah, yeah. All kinds of stuff. Bop-shew-bop. Boo-bop-shew-bop. Yeah it was all very rhythmic, really nice.

00:12:48 Jesse Host What did you think you were gonna do with your life when you didn’t expect to become a professional musician?

00:12:56 David Guest I’d gone to art school, so my actual ambition was to become a fine artist, to exhibit in galleries and do something along those lines. Which, occasionally, I do. Like, I managed years later to sort of realize that. Not in an incredibly successful way, but successful enough for me in that I occasionally get to realize some kind of installation that I’ve imagined. Like I did this thing called *Playing the Building*, where there’s this device that triggers things that make noises out of the infrastructure of a building. And so, you know, I got to do that kind of stuff. That’s—but that was my ambition, early on. Did you wanna be a painter? Or did you wanna do wild installations like *Playing the Building*?

00:13:46 Jesse Host Did you wanna be a painter? Or did you wanna do wild installations like *Playing the Building*?

00:13:54 David Guest I didn’t wanna be a painter. I thought that was kind of retrograde. I thought that painting was—at that point, it seemed like—it seemed [laughs]—

00:14:06 Jesse Host I mean, you were an insolent teen. You don’t have to—you don’t have to apologize.

00:14:08 David Guest Yeah! Exactly. You’re a insolent, young—you’re a young, ambitious, and insolent young person who thinks that they’re gonna overthrow everything. And that’s what was going on at the time, too. I remember, I had an idea of some sort of electronic system. This was kind of in the—in the mid-’70s or whatever. Some kind of electronic system where artists would find out what art collectors wanted. And art collectors would find out which artists were producing the things that they liked.

So, it would be like all these different lists of criteria. You know, like, “I like circles. I like bright colors.” “No, I like dark colors. I like this and that.” Or, “I’d like to do this. I’d like to do that.” And they would kind of match them up. At the time, that seemed like a really fanciful idea and a little bit farfetched. Now, I would be very surprised if there isn’t an app that does exactly that. Or, you know, a bunch of people in blue chip galleries who do it manually in a kind of way. But anyway, I thought it was just [laughs]—I don’t know if I was being cynical or—

00:15:21 Jesse Host [Chuckling.] That’s what I was about to ask you, David!

00:15:23 David Guest I don’t know! I don’t know if I was being cynical or if I was just thinking, “Oh, why not? Let’s see what happens. Let’s see what happens.” You might end up with really terrible art, because people will be just pandering to the market. But you never know! You might end up with something else.

00:15:46 Jesse Host It’s funny that that question of, “Was I being cynical or not?” came up. Right? Because one of the things that I was thinking about, as I was thinking about your body of work, is that especially in the ‘70s, you’re making music in the context of punk rock. You know. You’re playing on bills with punk bands and, you know—I don’t know if you

thought of yourself as a punk rock guy or of Talking Heads as a punk rock band, but like that definitely was a big thing that was going on. Right? And like a big part of punk rock is questioning everything and sort of discarding everything and seeing what happens. Right? But Talking Heads—and also kind of a spirit that anyone can make art, like anyone and everyone can make art—and Talking Heads, those were all things that describe Talking Heads. Right?

But [*chuckles*] also, like the aesthetics that resulted from your exploration of those questions are so different from, you know, whatever people think of as being punk rock at the time. Right? Like not noisy and abrasive and all of those things.

00:17:04 David Guest Exactly. I agree completely. But I felt like we had those kind of values and aspirations in common. As you said, the idea that anybody could do it, the idea of kind of not accepting kind of received, “This is the way you’re supposed to do it and this what you’re supposed to do, and this is what the music’s supposed to sound like.” But, instead, you kind of reinvent it for yourself, for your generation, for your—the people you know. Make—like, let’s make something that’s relevant to the people you know instead of this stuff that, to us, felt kind of corporate and a little too slick and not speaking to our lives.

And yeah. And I felt like, “Well, yeah. Not everybody’s gonna answer those criteria in the—respond to those criteria in the same way. And I thought that was good! Although, not surprisingly, things do kind of tend to coalesce into a kind of style or, “Well, this is what punk rock sounds like. It’s noisy and abrasive and people have spikey hair.” But not all of it was. But it does tend to coalesce, as things do.

00:18:19 Jesse Host We’ve got even more with David Byrne coming up. Stay with us. It’s *Bullseye*, from [MaximumFun.org](https://www.maximumfun.org) and NPR.

00:18:25 Music Transition Relaxed music with airy vocalizations.

00:18:27 Jesse Promo This message comes from NPR sponsor Discover. Discover matches all the cashback you earn on your credit card at the end of your first year, automatically. With no limit on how much you can earn. It’s amazing because of all the places where Discover is accepted. 99% of places in the US that take credit cards. So, when it comes to Discover, get used to hearing “yes” more often. Learn more at [Discover.com/match](https://www.discover.com/match). 2021 Neilson Report. Limitations apply.

[*Music fades out.*]

00:19:01 Music Transition “Life During Wartime” from the album *Times Square* by the Talking Heads.

[*Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue.*]

00:19:07 Jesse Host Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I’m Jesse Thorn. My guest is David Byrne. He’s the former front man of The Talking Heads and an inductee into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. David Byrne’s latest project is *American Utopia*. It’s an award-winning live show making its return to Broadway later this month. If you happen to be in New York, it’ll be at the St. James Theatre, starting September 17th. You can also see the show on your television. The concert film of *American Utopia* is streaming now, on HBO Max.

00:19:46	Music	Music	<p>Before we get back into the interview, let's hear a song from The Talking Heads. This is "Life During Wartime". <i>[Volume increases.]</i></p> <p><i>This ain't no disco This ain't no fooling around No time for dancing or lovey dovey I ain't got time for that now</i></p> <p><i>[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.]</i></p>
00:19:59	Jesse	Host	<p>I found myself wondering, as I was thinking about you and your friends in 1978 or whatever asking, "Why do we do this and why do we do that?" It's like <i>[chuckles]</i> basically, what you learned from doing that? Like, what things did you learn like, "Oh, this is why we do that?" And what things did you learn that were like, "Oh, we never needed that."</p>
00:20:26	David	Guest	<p>I ask myself things like how does—how should one be onstage? At first, I thought to myself, "Well, just be yourself. Be natural. Wear your normal street clothes." That kind of thing. "Don't—you don't have to wear any costumes or act in some kind of rehearsed way. Let's be real." And then I realized—at some point I realized nothing's real onstage. You've stepped into a kind of—let's say a ritual space. And nothing that happens in that space is real. All of it is artificial. If you're wearing just a t-shirt, that's a statement. It might be your normal street clothes, but it becomes a statement once you step onstage wearing that. It's obviously a decision. And everything you do—the way you move or the way you don't move, everything becomes considered that way.</p> <p>And so, I started to think about all that and started to think, "How do I do that in a way that is—that speaks to me and us? And isn't—again, just moving the way rock and roll bands are supposed to move. Or wearing what we're supposed to wear. Let's come up with something that has some kind of meaning for us."</p>
00:21:54	Jesse	Host	<p>What was something that you remember thinking of, making up, creating as—you know, aware that it was artifice or aware that it was performance that you were like, "Yeah! This works. This fits."</p>
00:22:10	David	Guest	<p>That—it really coalesced with the tour that was—that became—that was filmed for <i>Stop Making Sense</i>.</p>
00:22:18	Music	Music	<p>"Once in a Lifetime" from the album <i>Remain in Light</i> by the Talking Heads.</p> <p><i>And you may ask yourself "Am I right? Am I wrong?" You may say to yourself "My god! What have I done?!"</i></p> <p><i>Letting the days go by, let the water hold me down Letting the days go by, water flowing underground Into the blue again, after the money's gone Once in a lifetime, water flowing underground Into the blue again, into the silent water Under the rocks and stones there is water underground Letting the days go by into the silent water</i></p>

*Once in a lifetime, water flowing underground
Same as it ever was*

[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.]

00:22:59	David	Guest	That tour really—all of that really started to coalesce. It was happening a little bit incrementally before that, but on that one, it really was kind of like we're gonna—we're gonna all wear shades of grey. I'm gonna wear a kind of suit and then at some point I'm gonna wear this giant suit. And I wasn't—I'm not sure I knew exactly what that meant, but <i>[chuckles]</i> I had an idea what it meant. A kind of visceral sense of what it meant, emotionally, but I also just thought, "This is a very resonant image, somehow." So, all those kinds of things. And the fact that I would start to—whatever—codify and kind of... uh, work on the kind of movement and dancing. I mean, you could call it dancing. The kind of movement.
			I would go—you know, the kind of thing where—people do this all the time—where you do something onstage, it works, and you feel like it really is appropriate to that moment. And so, you go, "Okay, I'll remember that. I'm gonna do that next time." Maybe it gets a good reaction from the audience. Maybe it doesn't, but you feel like that feels right, there. And so, I started doing that. And gradually you kind of—little by little, you've got a whole kind of array of bits of movement for yourself and for other people and go, "This you do here, and we do this here and we do this here." And it's a way of making choreography in one way or another.
00:24:39	Jesse	Host	Did you, at some point, have a choreographer?
00:24:44	David	Guest	Later on, yes. Later on, I did. And have continued to do that. Although, it's usually choreographers who are used to working with non-dancers. Used to working with people like myself who kind of improvise our movement and then they helped shape those improvisations in the same way. They'll look at it and go, "What you did just there, that's really good. You should keep that. Why don't you tie that to this other thing?" And that—you know, that kind of thing. Rather than trying to teach you a bunch of steps that, you know, that we've all seen a million times before.
00:25:21	Jesse	Host	I'd love to see you do the hustle onstage.
00:25:23	David	Guest	Uh. I tried. I learned the bus stop. I learned the bus stop a couple of months ago—a very simple version of that. Took me—it was hard for me. I don't naturally learn steps. But I can do it with a little practice.
00:25:41	Jesse	Host	Did you dance at parties, as a teenager? I mean, like you're from Baltimore. Did you ever—did you ever like do the shag?"
00:25:48	David	Guest	No. I didn't—no. Uh, no. I would've never... danced at parties and things. I don't think so. I think I would've been terrified.
00:25:59	Jesse	Host	Were you like going to parties or just out of that loop?
00:26:04	David	Guest	Uuh, I don't remember going to parties. I remember, when I was an adolescent, there was this thing in the neighborhood called the Teen Center. And they would have bands—a bunch of kids would just play in the—in the school cafeteria and bands would—local bands would play in there and it just blew me away. One band came to me—to my ears, at that point, they sound exactly like The Beatles. And I thought, "How the hell are they doing this?" <i>[Chuckles.]</i> And then the next week or the week after that, there was another group that came through and they had all the moves of

The Temptations. They'd learned all The Temptations' dance moves and they had this very intricate choreography. And I thought, "How did they do that?!"

00:26:58 Jesse Host

And uh, yes. *[Laughing.]* So, that was—that was the thing. I would love to be in a C+ version of The Temptations. Like, do the moves, wear the fits.

[David agrees.]

Like, that sounds like the greatest—like, I'm not a strong singer. I'm not a strong dancer. I have outfits. But like, I would—you could—you wouldn't have to work very hard to sell me on being in *[laughs]*—doing Temptations songs in a community center. 100%!

[David agrees.]

00:27:28 David Guest

If somebody'll show me the moves. And you can imagine, yes! Those—a young person sees that and goes, "Boy, does that look like fun! Boy, if only I could do that!" Yeah.

00:27:38 Jesse Host

[Chuckles.] Were there bits of the kind of standard, received orthodoxy that you questioned as a young man that, upon questioning them, you were like, "Nope. I accept it. I've questioned it and actually, it's great."

00:28:04 David Guest

Yeah, I'm gonna have trouble coming up with a good example right now, but you're absolutely right. There are things where you have to kind of throw it out and reject it and then, at some point, you learn, "Oh, there's a reason for that. There's a reason we do that or that's done that way." And if you can then learn how to do that in your own way, then you've got something. I mean, some of those things were like, uh—in performance, it might be like how you enter the stage and how you leave. Those kinds of things, which at first you see it and you go, "Oh! It's so over dramatic, or it's so this or that." And then you realize it's a really important moment and that it actually tells the audience a lot. And there's—you don't have to do it the same way as everybody else, but there's a—there's a reason why that is considered and kind of worked out in some way.

00:29:08 Jesse Host

I mean, I think the stage presentation of *American Utopia* is sooo distinct in that musical performances have a certain aesthetic to them that is determined by the band. Right? Like a big band sits on those risers. You know what I mean?

[David confirms.]

Like, you know, behind those—behind those art deco music stands or like, you know, a rock band has a drummer that come up out of the floor that's in the back. You know, a bassist on one side and a lead guitarist on the other side and a lead singer in the middle. Right? And you have made the choice to divorce the entire band from like the physical requirements of, you know—the traditional physical requirements of being in a band by giving everybody an instrument that they can play either—you know, in their hands or with a shoulder strap.

[Music fades in.]

00:30:15 Music Music Breaking up the drums so that everyone has their own thing in their—you know, in their hands or on their shoulder strap. “Burning Down the House” from the album *Speaking in Tongues* by the Talking Heads.

*We're in for nasty weather
There has got to be a way
Burning down the house*

*Here's your ticket, pack your bags
Time for jumping overboard
Transportation isn't here
Close enough but not too far
Maybe you know where you are
Fighting fire with fire, huh*

*All, hey you don't need a raincoat
Shakedown, dreams walking in broad daylight
365 degrees, burning down the house*

[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.]

00:31:04 Jesse Host You just have this big space to play with. How did you decide to do that?

00:31:10 David Guest Uh, incrementally. I'd done a tour—I don't know, ten years ago or so. I did a tour where I had some dancers and myself and some of the singers, we all did some dancing together, but the band was pretty fixed. And then I did a tour not too long ago with Annie Clark, or St. Vincent, and we'd done a record that featured a lot of brass instruments. So, we brought along a whole brass section. Immediately, I thought, “Oh, brass section. They're like a marching band. We can, uh—they can move around. They can play while they're moving. They—some of them have already done that in their past. And we just put mics on them, and we can make a whole choreographic thing where sometimes they form a circle and sometimes they form a line and sometimes they're kind of doing this crossing back and forth and doing all that kind of stuff.

So, we did that. And I thought we can then change the whole stage picture or the stage arrangement for every song, to some extent. As you said, rather than being stuck with the drummer upstage in the back and the bass player on one side and guitar player on the other side and like—that's what you get for the whole evening. I thought, “No! You can move them around! We can move them around.” And then I thought, “Oh, let's see if the technology exists to do it for everybody, not just whatever—a guitar player or whatever. If we—” And how many—how many players does it take to achieve a kind of drum sound the way you would like in a New Orleans second line group or whatever? How many is it gonna take? Can I afford that? Is it possible to do a wireless keyboard? Is that technically possible? Turns out it is. No, I had [*chuckles*—I wasn't sure!

But yeah, we found like some kind of technology that was being made in Hungary or someplace. And that allowed that—so, we said, “Okay. We're doing it. Every—we're gonna try it with everybody.”

We had to do a test. We had to go to Litiz or Manheim, Pennsylvania, in Pennsylvania Dutch country to do—to test the technology.

00:33:34 Jesse Host
00:33:37 David Guest

What was the distinctive quality of Manheim, Pennsylvania? Oh. It's kind of interesting. One of the big PA companies, you know, that does sound for pop concerts emerged out of these small towns in Pennsylvania. And so, they would build their speakers and all this kind of stuff and then they built a place for bands to rehearse, a rehearsal room. And then another company comes along and says, "Well, we're gonna make the sets for all those big stadium shows where there's a huge set that's being made." We didn't do anything like that, but they—so, all this stuff emerged kind of clumped in this kind of rural area. It happens to be a place where a lot of highways cross. So, now there's a million like Amazon warehouses around there and other kind of fulfillment centers, because of the same reason.

So, that was a place where we could set up our whole stage and technology and everything and really test it out. And so, that's what—I think there was—uh, yeah, there was some very big pop artist—it's gonna come to mind and I'll remember in a second—who is rehearsing on the other place, but we weren't—we weren't allowed to go in and watch.

[They laugh.]

00:35:02 Jesse Host
00:35:05 David Guest

Your "I'm David Byrne" card didn't work? No, it does not work. No. They don't want—they don't want any—no.

00:35:07 Jesse Host

I just figured they'd give you a lanyard you can show, and they'll let you backstage wherever.

00:35:12 David Guest

Okay, it was Katy Perry and—but I could understand. *[Stammering.]* They don't want—with social media and everything, they don't want any pictures of any of their upcoming things that they're working on to get out. So, yeah, okay. Okay.

00:35:31 Jesse Host

We'll wrap up with David Byrne in just a minute. Stay with us. It's *Bullseye*, from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

00:35:38 Music Transition
00:35:40 Jesse Promo

Relaxed music.

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00:36:13 Promo Clip

[Music fades out.]

Music: Gentle, chiming music.

Speaker: Hey, podcast fan! We'd like to get a better idea of who you are and what you care about. So, we have a quick favor to ask: if you have a few minutes to spare, please go to MaximumFun.org/adsurvey. There, we've got a short, anonymous survey that will take about five minutes to fill out. Plus, if you finish it, you'll get a 10% discount on merch at the Max Fun store. Max

Fun shows have always relied on support from our members and always will. This survey will help keep the few ads we do run interesting and relevant to you. That's MaximumFun.org/adsurvey. A-D-S-U-R-V-E-Y, all one word. And thanks for your help.

00:36:53	Music	Music	<p><i>[Music fades out.]</i> "Regiment" from the album <i>My Life in the Bush of Ghosts</i> by David Byrne and Brian Eno.</p>
00:36:58	Jesse	Host	<p><i>[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.]</i> Welcome back to <i>Bullseye</i>. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is David Byrne. He is, of course, the lead singer of The Talking Heads, as well as a prolific and influential solo artist. This month marks the return of his live show, <i>American Utopia</i>. <i>American Utopia</i> is a collection of Byrne's songs, both old and new. They're performed by 11 musicians on a big, empty stage. Every musician in the show performs marching band style, with their instruments in their hands or hanging from a strap. Everything's wireless, too. With nothing binding them to one spot, the musicians can dance and move completely freely. It's not like any concert you've ever seen. <i>American Utopia</i> returns to Broadway September 17th at the St. James Theatre.</p>
00:38:01	Music	Music	<p>Before we get back into things, let's play a song from David Byrne's solo work. This is from his 1981 collaboration with Brian Eno called <i>My Life in the Bush of Ghosts</i>. The song is "Regiment". <i>[Volume increases.]</i> <i>Oh, oh</i></p>
00:38:22	Jesse	Host	<p><i>[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.]</i> Something I like to do when I'm trying to distract myself on my computer is I will go into YouTube, and I will watch show bands—HBCU marching bands. You know, I'll look at the Florida A&M band or whatever, you know, where they're stepping and doing—you know, playing "5 On It" or something like that. And that is my absolute most joyful, favorite thing to do, is watch the like drum majorettes and like everybody playing tubas while they're on their backs with one hand on the ground. That kind of stuff. That is like my favorite thing to see in the world. <i>[Chuckles.]</i></p>
00:39:11	David	Guest	<p>Yes. And it's kind of like, "How in the world are they doing this?" It takes incredible strength and stamina.</p>
00:39:17	Jesse	Host	<p>And there's like 80 of them! How do 80 people get on the same page doing anything?!</p>
00:39:22	David	Guest	<p>Yes. It is true that if you can get to a point where you're actually doing things in sync like that—like those bands do—there's a real transcendent kind of feeling that emerges from that. You kind of get outside of your own self and your own ego and you become part of this bigger thing that can only happen if you surrender to it, if you become—if you don't decide, "I'm not gonna solo here. I have to do—play my part that locks in with everybody else and I have to move in step with everybody else." And then you get this rush that you can kind of see by watching it. But when you're in it, it's just incredible.</p>

00:40:08	Jesse	Host	One of the things that is most distinctive, to me, about your music is that a lot of it is dance music. And I wonder how you came to think you could or should make music for people to dance to.
00:40:27	David	Guest	<i>[Laughs.]</i> It was always something that I liked. I liked music that had a strong rhythm to it. I remember, with the original Talking Heads band members, we all shared a loft at some point. And our record collection was pretty much—you could look at the like record collection and see where we were going. I mean, it was things like Al Green, a guy named Hamilton Bohannon who did kind of dance music and like, you know, Philadelphia Soul, Velvet Underground, David Bowie, Roxy Music, all the—and if you kind of stir all that up, well, that’s where—that’s where we ended up!
00:41:13	Jesse	Host	<i>[Chuckles.]</i> I feel like Afrobeat, too—especially in those—in those like mid—in those like early to mid-’80s Talking Heads records, I hear it all day.
00:41:27	Music	Music	“Born Under Punches” from the album <i>Remain in Light</i> by Talking Heads.
			<i>Take a look at these hands Take a look at these hands The hand speaks The hand of a government man Well, I’m a tumbler Born under punches I’m so thin</i>
			<i>All I want is breathe I’m too thin Won’t you...</i>
			<i>[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.]</i>
00:42:05	Jesse	Host	I remember being—I was probably 19 or 20 and Questlove from The Roots started getting really obsessed with Fela Kuti, and I was on his message board—Okayplayer—and he would be posting about different Fela stuff. And I was like, “I should check this out.” And when I first heard Fela, I was like, “Oh! How did I not know about this, one of the greatest musics ever?!” <i>[Laughs.]</i> Like I was like, “This is the most amazing thing I’ve ever heard in my entire life! And I had not heard of it until nine months ago.”
			And I hear those sounds in Talking Heads records a lot. Like, there’s a lot of that—you know, it’s dance music where there’s a lot of stuff going on. You know? There’s a lot of interplay.
00:42:54	David	Guest	That came a little bit later, but yes. I started being aware of kind of African pop music, pop music—and later on, I got very immersed in kind of Latin American music and borderless pop music or singer-songwriters or dance bands. Whatever. Yes. And this was all part of New York, too—this—not so much the African bands, although they would come through occasionally. Play to the community. But the Latin music was just all over New York. In that—during that period. It was just—the clubs were—you were just hearing it everywhere. It didn’t... obviously, there was not a lot of crossover with the kind of punk rockers, <i>[chuckling]</i> but it coexisted. They existed at the same time. Uh.

00:43:56 Jesse Host *[Chuckling.]* Well, I mean, Joe Kubo would occasionally play CBGB's right?

00:44:00 David Guest Well, yeah, they would play—they would play at Sophie's, they'd—

00:44:03 Jesse Host Ray Barretto would be *[laughing]* over there on the double bill with—

00:44:06 David Guest No—they played—I think it was the Village Gate, which is now Poisson Rouge, and they'd play there—I think it was on Thursdays. They had a series called Salsa Meets Jazz, where there'd be like Ray Barretto's band and then some incredible jazz soloist. You know, a pretty good name, who would sit in and kind of improvise and take solos during some of the dance breaks. And there was a dance floor in the club so that people would dance. And there was tables around the side, but there was also—it was music for dancing that was also really great music, too.

So, yeah. So, I realized that if you can get people to move their bodies, if you can play music that has that kind of rhythmic connection, you can kind of hang a lot of things on that. You can hang a lot of ideas and what you wanna say, lyrical stuff, musical stuff. Keep the groove going and you can really carry a lot of baggage with that. There's things that might have seemed difficult to put in front of an audience in other ways, but if you've got their asses moving, they—you know, you can kind of put a lot of things out there.

00:45:38 Jesse Host I have read in a thousand different places people describing you as possibly being on the autism spectrum. And I don't know whether that's something that came from a diagnosis or came from just people saying, "Well, this guy has a history of performing awkwardness onstage sometimes," or whatever. But I wondered like—you know there are things that people associate with autism who are neurotypical that are—you know, social awkwardness, those kinds of things. The sort of obvious things. But like those differences in how brains work are much more expansive than just, you know, it's challenging to read faces for somebody's who's neurodivergent.

Like—and I wondered, a) if that is something that you've thought about yourself and b) if there are like ways you've noticed your brain is different from a lot of the people around you? You know, sensory sensitivities or ways that you organize your thoughts and you're like, "Oh, you don't do that?"

00:46:48 David Guest Uh, okay, yeah. Obviously, I'm not as socially awkward as I was in the past. When—yes, and I was fairly socially awkward in the past. I was very uncomfortable just kind of having normal conversations with people or being around whole groups of people. So, I'd hang around with some friends. I did have some friends and I'd hang around with them and let them do the talking and do the introductions and I would just kind of vicariously be part of that. At some point—*[laughing]* at some point, a friend of mine—this whole idea of the spectrum became kind of an idea that was being floated around and a friend of mine said, "David! Look! That's you!"

[They chuckle.]

"That is definitely you! All these things, they fit!" I mean, it was—in my case, it was pretty mild. Not debilitating. And as probably many

people have said, it's a kind of superpower in a way. You're very uncomfortable socially, so there are certain drawbacks. There's certainly big drawbacks in that way. But there's other advantages. I could concentrate, focus on kind of learning guitar parts or writing or doing whatever it was I was doing. You know, you can really focus because *[laughing]* you just shut all that other stuff out. You don't get distracted by that. So, that—it has some advantages. You also tend to—one tends to take a view of the world as—I've been described as like an anthropologist from Mars. You tend to, as you said, look at folks and go, "Oh, when people do this, it means this." *[Chuckles.]*

You're trying to understand why do people do this? Why do they act like that? Why did they say that? And what are they making—what does that face mean? All those kinds of things. This is not—nothing too extreme. It sounds a little exaggerated, as I describe it, but there's a element of that and it's apparent in a lot of the songs that I've written where I'm trying to understand people's human behavior. What does it mean? What does that signify? What's that about? And everybody does that and recognizes those things, but not *[chuckling]* not everybody, I guess, steps back and goes, "Oh. Why are you doing that?!" Which sometimes seems like, "Well, that's just what we do!" That's just what it—but then needing to stop and go, "But why are you doing it?" is a very different thing.

00:49:42 Jesse Host

Yeah, I mean I think that that is true for many to all artists, is that there is something in their life that has led them to consider the world around them as an outsider. You know? Because if you are part of the dominant culture, if you're part of—if you're neurotypical, if you think in the very similar way to the other people around you, there isn't much reason for you to take a, you know, third-eye perspective on what's going on. Right? Like, if you're not an outsider in some way, you can just ride with the current. You know?

And certainly, neurodivergence is not the only version of that. You know what I mean? Like, you could be—I mean, you could be African American in the United States, for example. And, you know, the dominant culture is constantly forcing you to, you know, have a—have an outsider's perspective. Right?

[David agrees.]

But that is—that really is like—you know, you talked about thinking about the way that costume affects the audience. Right? Like, I'm a menswear writer and it's something—so, it's something I think about a lot. And yeah. It is a question of like how do you, you know—if you're looking at it as a communication system, which it is—you know, you're making choices and you are an artist. You know what I mean?

00:51:20 David Guest

Mm-hm! *[Sighs.]* I'm not sure what else to say. It's—it doesn't seem like a disability when you're in it, because you're in it. It's like when you're—when you're a child, you can be having what, in retrospect, might seem like an unhappy childhood. I'm not saying I did, but you can, but you don't know that always. You don't always know it, because that's your only experience. You don't have anything to compare it to. And then later, when you can get a bigger

perspective, you realize, “Oh. I was not as social as some of these other people were.” *[Chuckles.]*

00:52:02 Jesse Host Do you think that you are a cheerful guy?

00:52:06 David Guest For the most part, yes. I think I am.

00:52:08 Jesse Host Do you think that’s just your—how you were born into the world? Or do you think it’s like a choice you made?

00:52:16 David Guest Ah. If it’s a choice, it’s one I’m unaware of. But I find a lot of the people—things in the world—kind of amazing and kind of marvelous, surprising, and sometimes very funny.

00:52:34 Jesse Host There’s a lot of joy in that. I mean, if you can walk down the street and see something you like, and it makes you happy—

00:52:39 David Guest Yeah, usually—mmm, that happens fairly often. That happens fairly often. I take little pictures of things that I see on the street.

00:52:48 Jesse Host What’s something that you took a picture of, recently?

00:52:52 David Guest I think I was walking in a rural area, and I took pictures of trees that looked like body parts, some of them quite rude and some of them just kind of absurd looking. Yeah.

[Jesse chuckles.]

There was one where, really, it looked like the roots of the trees—two trees—had grown out and were shaking hands with one another. They’ve kind of intertwined from two different trees.

00:53:21 Jesse Host David Byrne, thank you for taking all this time to talk to me. And thank you for your wonderful show. I’m excited to—I’m gonna do what it takes to get to New York so I can see it in real life.

00:53:31 David Guest Well, thank you. Thank you for that.

[Music fades in.]

00:53:33 Jesse Host David Byrne. The *American Utopia* live show, as we have mentioned, is premiering September 17th at the St. James Theatre in New York City. We’ll go out with one more song from that show. This is the Talking Heads classic, “Road to Nowhere”.

00:53:48 Music Music “Road to Nowhere” from the album *Little Creatures* by the Talking Heads.

We’re on a road to nowhere
We’re on a road to nowhere

[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue.]

00:54:05 Jesse Host That’s the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye* is created from the homes of me and the staff of Maximum Fun, in and around greater Los Angeles, California. Here at my house, we’ve been watching the Giants lose a few games in a row and the Dodgers win a few games in a row, much to the delight of my producer, Kevin, and much to the disappointment of the people who live in here.

Our show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. Our producer is Jesus Ambrosio. Production fellows at Maximum Fun are Richard Robey and Valerie Moffat. We get help from Casey O’Brien, as well. Special thanks this week to David Byrne for recording himself at his home in New York City. Our interstitial music is by Dan Wally, also known as DJW. Our theme song is by The Go! Team. Thanks very much to them and to their label, Memphis Industries, for sharing that song

with us. If they're not *[chuckling]*—if they don't count The Talking Heads as an influence, I'll eat my hat.

You can also keep up with the show on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. We post our interviews in all of those places. And I think that's about it. Just remember: all great radio hosts have a signature signoff.

00:55:29 Promo Promo

Speaker: *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.

00:55:36 Music Music

[Volume increases.]

We're on the road to nowhere

[Song ends in a chorus of cheers from the audience.]