

[00:00:00] **Music:** Gentle, trilling music with a steady drumbeat plays under the dialogue.

[00:00:01] **Promo:** *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.

[00:00:12] **Music:** “Huddle Formation” from the album *Thunder, Lightning, Strike* by The Go! Team—a fast, upbeat, peppy song. Music plays as Jesse speaks, then fades out.

[00:00:19] **Jesse Thorn:** It's *Bullseye*. 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. That band recorded hit songs like “Psycho Killer”, “Life During Wartime”, “Once in a Lifetime”, and “Burning Down the House”, among many others.

[00:00:33] **Music:** “Burning Down the House” from the album *Speaking in Tongues* by The Talking Heads.

Watch out, you might get what you're after

Cool, babies—strange but not a stranger

I'm an ordinary guy

Burning down the house

(Music fades out.)

[00:00:54] **Jesse Thorn:** David Byrne is also a solo artist. He's recorded instrumental electronic albums, pop records, even spoken word. He's collaborated with Brian Eno, St. Vincent, Philip Glass, Selena. So many more. He's written books. He's scored soundtracks. He even wrote and directed his own movie. *True Stories*, from 1986.

[00:01:15] **Transition:** Music swells then fades.

[00:01:16] **Clip:**

Music: Upbeat, exciting music.

Speaker (*True Stories*): 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. [Beat.] Everybody says they do. Look. I personally believe—I can see Fort Worth from here!

[00:01:43] **Transition:** Music swells then fades.

[00:01:44] **Jesse Thorn:** If you wanted to find a common theme in all of that work, maybe it's that David Byrne has always worked to push the boundaries of what pop music can be while at the same time taking high art—the kind of stuff that you see in galleries in Manhattan or rep theaters in Brooklyn—and making it more accessible and familiar. His latest project is *American Utopia*. It started as an album in 2018.

[00:02:12] **Music:** “Gasoline and Dirty Sheets” from the album *American Utopia* by David Byrne.

Someone in a dangerous place

Someone got lost somewhere

Many people are locked outside

Many people lost out there

(Music fades out.)

[00:02:30] **Jesse Thorn:** Then he toured it with a handful of dates across the United States. Only, because he is David Byrne, he went the extra mile and then some. 12 musicians all dressed alike in gray suits, carrying their instruments like a marching band, and dancing. He parlayed that tour into a full-on Broadway production, which premiered in 2019. Then, *American Utopia*'s live show became a movie directed by Spike Lee. When I talked to Byrne in 2021, he'd just brought *American Utopia* back to Broadway. And since then, another live masterpiece is brewing in Byrne world. It's the 40th anniversary of *Stop Making Sense*. The groundbreaking concert film was directed by Jonathan Demme, the director of *Silence of the Lambs* and *Philadelphia*, among others. Later this year, A24 plans to re-release the film.

If you can watch it, you should. Not a dull moment in there. It would be very reasonable to say the greatest concert movie ever made. Let's kick things off with a song from the stage version of *American Utopia*. This one is called “Everybody's Coming to My House”.

[00:03:38] **Music:** “Everybody’s Coming to my House” from the album *American Utopia on Broadway* by David Byrne.

The skin is just a road map

The view is very nice

Imagine looking at a picture

Imagine driving in a car

Imagine rolling down the window

Imagine opening the door

Everybody's coming to my house...

(Music fades out.)

[00:04:08] **Jesse Thorn:** David Byrne, welcome to *Bullseye*. It's great to have you on the show.

[00:04:11] **David Byrne:** Thank you. Thank you. Good to be here.

[00:04:13] **Jesse Thorn:** I was thinking about your own music and your record label, and I found myself wondering (*chuckles*) 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?

[00:04:35] **David Byrne:** Wow. Okay. Not every day. I don't necessarily—there are some days when I don't listen to any music, and then there's 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—you know, a friend or band mate 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'm 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 where you're diminishing returns. You're not getting much creative coming out anymore.

[00:05:50] **Jesse Thorn:** 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?

[00:05:58] **David Byrne:** Well, it's a little bit different, but occasionally, yes! Occasionally, yes. 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 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. I had no idea these things existed. And then, when I came to New York, I also saw a kind of avantgarde theatre that kind of blew me away, thinking about different kinds of ways of performing and what that might mean and all kinds of stuff.

That still happens! It's not the same, completely life changing experience that it might've 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 avantgarde—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, it was really radical. It was extremely radical stuff, as radical as anything I'd been hearing anywhere. And you kind of realize that 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 that is in places where you might not expect it. And sometimes, it can be very inspirational and surprising.

[00:08:16] **Jesse Thorn:** 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, that it 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.

[00:08:33] **David Byrne:** Oh, all the time. And sometimes it could be pop music. There's plenty of pop music being made these days.

(They chuckle.)

That hasn't changed, but—

[00:08:48] **Jesse Thorn:** *(Laughing.)* That's gonna be—David, that's gonna be the headline on our piece when it runs on NRP.org. “Byrne to America: ‘There's plenty of pop music being made these days’”.

[00:08:56] **David Byrne:** Yes. Number-wise, there's more music being made and uploaded and all that than ever before. Which is—*(chuckles)* using 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.

[00:09:23] **Jesse Thorn:** 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 a—I asked him a kind of future of the music industry question and a kind of “are all musicians out of luck?” question.

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 'em expect to do it for a living.” *(Chuckles.)*

I was like, eh! Well!

[00:10:01] **David Byrne:** 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 it, or they've been working at it their whole lives. They're 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.

[00:10:34] **Jesse Thorn:** 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 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 *Black Star*.” You know, the record that I listened to over and over and over and over and over when I was 17. You know what I mean?

[00:11:09] **David Byrne:** Uh-huh. The other day, yeah, I probably—I might've put on a playlist that I made of kind of alternative country artists. It was kind of like Lucinda Williams, Neko Case, Roseanne Cash. (*Inaudible.*) It was a playlist that I hadn't... mm, 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 zones. Although, the songs are—some of them—not comforting, I have to say.

(*Jesse chuckles.*)

But as far as a listening experience, it was kind of a comfort zone place to go.

[00:11:47] **Jesse Thorn:** 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.

[00:11:58] **David Byrne:** Yeah, well sometimes that too. I mean, I've been working on another playlist where it's all kind of doowop, stuff like that, where I'm just fascinated by— (*chuckling*) there was that period where all these nonsense syllables were absolutely a part of lots of songs. You don't get it very much, people doing (*scatting*) dippy-dip-dip, woah-woah! Numma-numma-nummanumma. You don't get a lot of that (*laughs*) in songs anymore. And so, yeah, I thought, “Oh, let me listen to people doing all this kind of nonsense stuff with their mouths.”

[00:12:35] **Jesse Thorn:** There was a real sort of arms race of who can have the most distinctive like backup vocal sound. You know, it starts with everybody going la-la-la, and pretty soon it's manna-manna-manubada.

[00:12:48] **David Byrne:** Yeah, yeah. All kinds of stuff. Boo-bop-shoo-bop, boo-bop-shoo-bop. Yeah. It was all very rhythmic. Uh, really nice.

[00:12:56] **Jesse Thorn:** What did you think you were gonna do with your life when you didn't expect to become a professional musician?

[00:13:04] **David Byrne:** I'd gone to art school, so my actual ambition was to become a fine artist to exhibiting galleries and do something along those lines. Which occasionally I do. I got—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.

[00:13:54] **Jesse Thorn:** Did you wanna be a painter, or did you want to do wild installations like “Playing the Building”?

[00:14:03] **David Byrne:** I didn't want to be a painter. I thought that was kind of retrograde. I thought that painting was—at that point, it seemed like—(*stammers into a laugh*).

[00:14:15] **Jesse Thorn:** I mean, were an insolent teen.

(*David confirms.*)

You don't have to—you don't have to apologize.

[00:14:17] **David Byrne:** Yeah, exactly! You're an 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 mid-'70s or whatever. Some kind of electronic system, where artists would find out what art collectors wanted, and art collectors—it would find out which artists were producing the things that they like. So, it'd 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 like to do this; I like to do that.” And it 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—(*laughs*) I don't know if I was being cynical or—

[00:15:30] **Jesse Thorn:** (*Laughing.*) That's what I was about to ask you, David.

[00:15:31] **David Byrne:** 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.

[00:15:55] **Jesse Thorn:** 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 are all things that describe Talking Heads. Right? But 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.

[00:17:13] **David Byrne:** 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 the received “this is the way you're supposed to do it, and this is 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—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 going to 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 spiky hair.” But not all of it was. But it does tend to coalesce, as things do.

[00:18:27] **Jesse Thorn:** Even more with David Byrne still to come after the break. He has cool dance moves, right? The wiggling, the big gestures, the giant suit. Where'd he learn to dance like that? The answer after the break. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

[00:18:46] **Promo:**

Music: Upbeat, fun music.

Emily Heller: I am Emily Heller.

Lisa Hanawalt: And I'm Lisa Hanawalt.

Emily Heller: And we're the hosts of *Baby Geniuses*.

Lisa Hanawalt: We've been doing our podcast for over 10 years.

Emily Heller: When we started, it was about trying to learn something new every episode.

Lisa Hanawalt: Now it's about us trying to actively get stupider, and it's workiing!

Emily Heller: (*Laughs.*) Hang out with us, and you'll hear us chat about:

Lisa Hanawalt: Gardening.

Emily Heller: Horses.

Lisa Hanawalt: Various problems with our butts.

Emily Heller: And all the weird stuff that makes us horny.

Lisa Hanawalt: It's so weird, all that stuff.

(Emily laughs.)

Baby Geniuses, a show for adult idiots!

Emily Heller: Every other week, on Maximum Fun!

Music: *Baby geniuses, we know everything*

Baby geniuses, tell us something we don't know

(Music ends.)

[00:19:27] **Music:** "Slippery People" from the album *Stop Making Sense* by The Talking Heads.

(Song continues under the dialogue.)

[00:19:29] **Jesse Thorn:** Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. If you're just joining us, 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. When I talked to him in 2021, it was just before his show, *American Utopia*, returned to Broadway. This year, Byrne, and the rest of The Talking Heads are celebrating the 40th anniversary of their award-winning concert film, *Stop Making Sense*. Here's a song from *Stop Making Sense*, "Slippery People".

[00:19:58] **Music:** "Slippery People" by The Talking Heads.

This thing is real

Put away that gun

This part is simple

Try to recognize

What is in your mind

God, help us, help us lose our minds

These slippery people

Help us understand

What's the matter with him? (He's alright)

How do you know? (The Lord won't mind)

Don't throw him no games (He's alright)

Love from the bottom to the top

Turn like a wheel...

(Music fades out.)

[00:20:27] **Jesse Thorn:** 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—(*chuckling*) like, 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?

[00:20:54] **David Byrne:** I asked myself things like how does—how should one be on stage? 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 after—at some point, I realized nothing's real on stage. 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 are wearing just a t-shirt, that's a statement. It might be your normal street clothes, but it becomes a statement once you step on stage wearing that. It's obviously a decision. And everything you do, the way you move or the way you don't move, everything becomes a—you know, considered that way.

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.”

[00:22:23] **Jesse Thorn:** 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?

[00:22:38] **David Byrne:** That—it really coalesced with the tour that was—that became—that was filmed for *Stop Making Sense*.

[00:22:47] **Music:** “Once in a Lifetime” from the album *Stop Making Sense* by The Talking Heads.

You may ask yourself

“Am I right? Am I wrong?”

You may say to yourself

“By god! What have I done?!”

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 silence water

Once in a lifetime

Water flowing underground

Same as it ever was...

(Music fades out.)

[00:23:28] **David Byrne:** That tour really—all 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 going to all wear shades of gray. 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 (*laughs*) I had an idea what it meant, a kind of visceral sense of what it meant emotionally. But also, I 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. You could call it dancing. The kind of movement—or you know, the kind of thing where—people do this all the time—where you do something on stage. It works. 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.

[00:25:08] **Jesse Thorn:** Did you at some point have a choreographer?

[00:25:13] **David Byrne:** 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 who like myself, who kind of improvise our movement. And then, they help 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 they'll—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.

[00:25:50] **Jesse Thorn:** I'd love to see you do the hustle on stage.

[00:25:52] **David Byrne:** Uh, I tried. I learned the bus stop. I learned the bus stop a couple months ago, a very simple version of that. Um, it was hard for me. I don't naturally learn steps, but I can do it with little practice.

[00:26:09] **Jesse Thorn:** 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?

[00:26:16] **David Byrne:** No, I didn't—no. Uh, no. I would've never danced at my parties and things. I don't think so. I think I would've been terrified.

[00:26:27] **Jesse Thorn:** Were you like going to parties or just out of that loop?

[00:26:33] **David Byrne:** I don't remember going to parties. I remember, when I was in 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 school cafeteria, and bands would—local bands would play there, and it just blew me away. One band came, and to me—to my years at that point, they sounded exactly like the Beatles. I thought, “How the hell are they doing this?” (*Chuckles.*) 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?" And, uh, yes! (*Laughs.*) So, that was the thing.

[00:27:26] **Jesse Thorn:** I would love to be in a C+ version of the Temptations—like, do the moves, wear the fits. 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 wouldn't have to work very hard to sell me on being in—(*laughs*)doing Temptations songs in a community center, 100%! If somebody'll show me the moves!

[00:27:54] **David Byrne:** You can imagine—yes! And you can imagine, yes, a young person sees that and goes, "Boy, does that look like fun! Boy, if only I could do that." Yeah.

[00:28:08] **Jesse Thorn:** (*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"?

[00:28:31] **David Byrne:** 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 that that's done that way." And if you can then learn how to do that in your own way, then—yeah, then you've got something. I mean, some of those things are like—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 overdramatic, or it's so this or that." And then you realize it's a really important moment, and 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 reason why that is considered and kind of worked out in some way.

[00:29:37] **Jesse Thorn:** I mean, I think the stage presentation of *American Utopia* is so 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? Like, you know, behind those Art Deco music stands. Or like a—you know, a rock band has a drummer that comes 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, breaking up the drums so that everyone has their own thing in their—you know, in their hands or on their shoulder strap.

[00:30:43] **Music:** "Burning Down the House" 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 is here

Close enough but not too far

Maybe you know where you are

Fighting fire with fire

Ah, all wet

Hey, you don't need a raincoat

Shakedown

Dreams walking in broad daylight

365 degrees

Burning down the house...

(Music fades out.)

[00:31:33] **Jesse Thorn:** You just have this big space to play with. How did you decide to do that?

[00:31:38] **David Byrne:** Incrementally. I'd done a tour—I don't know, 10 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 Anne Clark with 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. A bit like a marching band. We can—they can move around. They can play while they're moving." They've—some of 'em 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 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? It turns out it is. (*Laughing*) I had—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. We're gonna try it with everybody.”

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

[00:34:03] **Jesse Thorn:** What was the distinctive quality of Manheim, Pennsylvania?

[00:34:06] **David Byrne:** 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 worked. I think there was... oh yeah, there was some very big pop artist—it's gonna come to mind. I'm gonna remember in a second—who is rehearsing on the other place, but we weren't allowed to go in and watch.

(*They laugh.*)

[00:35:31] **Jesse Thorn:** Your “I'm David Byrne” card didn't work?

[00:35:34] **David Byrne:** No, it does not work. No, they don't want—they don't want any—

[00:35:36] **Jesse Thorn:** I just figured they'd give you a lanyard you can show, and they'll let you backstage wherever.

[00:35:40] **David Byrne:** No. Okay. It was Katy Perry. And—but I can understand. They're working. They don't want—with social media and everything, they don't want any pictures of any of any of their upcoming things that they're working on to get out. So, you know, okay. Okay.

[00:35:59] **Jesse Thorn:** We'll wrap up with David Byrne in just a little bit. When we come back from the break: David is definitely neurodivergent, and he thinks probably on the autism spectrum. He'll tell us why his very different brain powers his art. It's *Bullseye* from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

[00:36:19] **Promo:**

Music: Upbeat, high-energy music.

(Three bell dings. The crowd cheers)

Hal Lublin: *(Announcer voice.)* The following pro wrestling contest is scheduled for one fall! Making their way to the ring from the *Tights and Fights* podcast are the baddest trio of audio, the hair to beware, Danielle Radford!

Danielle Radford: *(Gruffly.)* It really is great hair!

Hal: The Brit with a permit to hit, Lindsey Kelk.

Lindsey Kelk: The queen is dead; long live the queen!

Hal: And the fast-talking, fist-clocking Hal Lubliiiiiin! *(Sweetly, as himself.)* See? I can wrestle and be an announcer!

Danielle: Get ready for *Tights and Fights*!

Lindsey: Listen every Saturday or face the pain.

Hal: *(Announcer voice.)* Find us on Maximum Fun! Now, ring the bell!

(Ding! Ding! Ding!)

[00:37:01] **Music:** “This Must Be the Place *(Naïve Melody)*” from the album *Speaking in Tongues* by The Talking Heads.

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

[00:37:10] **Jesse Thorn:** Welcome back to *Bullseye*. 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 year, The Talking Heads are celebrating the 40th anniversary of *Stop Making Sense*. Jonathan Demme directed that concert film, which captured the band at the height of their powers. At the time, they had just released their smash hit album, *Speaking in Tongues*, and they pulled out all the stops: massive set pieces, stunning projections, choreographed dance moves. And of course, the giant suit. This is a time when I think you can actually call an outfit iconic. When I talked to David Byrne in 2021, he was in the middle of another grand live show, *American Utopia*, which had just returned to Broadway.

Before we get back into our conversation, let's hear another song from *Stop Making Sense*, “This Must Be the Place *(Naïve Melody)*”.

[00:38:03] **Music:** “This Must Be the Place *(Naïve Melody)*” by The Talking Heads.

Home is where I want to be

Pick me up and turn me round

I feel numb, born with a weak heart

I guess I must be having fun

The less we say about it the better...

(Music fades out.)

[00:38:23] **Jesse Thorn:** 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 five 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.

[00:39:12] **David Byrne:** Yes. And it's kind of like, “How in the world are they doing this?!” It takes incredible strength and stamina.

[00:39:18] **Jesse Thorn:** And there's like 80 of 'em! How do 80 people get on the same page doing anything?

[00:39:23] **David Byrne:** 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—allow—if you don't decide, “I'm not gonna solo here. I have to 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!

[00:40:10] **Jesse Thorn:** 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.

[00:40:29] **David Byrne:** *(Laughs.)* It's always something that I liked. I liked music that had a strong rhythm to it. I remember with the original Talking Hands band members; we all shared a loft at some point. And our record collection was pretty much—you could look at the record collection and see where we were going. I mean, it was things like AlGreen, a guy named Hamilton Bohannon, who did kind of dance music. Like, you know, Philadelphia soul, Velvet Underground, David Bowie, Roxy Music, all that. And then, if you kind of stir all that up—well, that's where—that's where we ended up!

[00:41:15] **Jesse Thorn:** I feel like Afrobeat too, especially in those like mid—in those like early to mid-'80s Talking Heads records, I hear it all day.

[00:41:28] **Music:** “Born Under Punches (*The Heat Goes On*)” from the album *Remain in Light* by The Talking Heads.

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

All I want is to breathe

I'm too thin...

(Music fades out.)

[00:42:06] **Jesse Thorn:** 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?!” (*Laughs.*) 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.

[00:42:56] **David Byrne:** That came a little bit later. But yes, I started being aware of kind of African pop music. Uh, pop music—and later on, I got very immersed in kind of Latin American music, and (*inaudible*) was pop music or singer songwriters or dance bands, whatever. Yes. And this was all part of New York too. This—not so much that African bands, though they would come through occasionally—play to the community. But the Latin music was just all over New York in the—during that period. Just the clubs were—you were just hear it and everywhere. It didn't—obviously, there was not a lot of crossover with the kind of punk rockers, but it coexisted. They existed at the same time.

[00:43:57] **Jesse Thorn:** (*Chuckles*) Well, I mean, Joe Cuba would occasionally play CBGBs, right?

[00:44:01] **David Byrne:** Well, yeah, they would play—they would play SOB's. They—

[00:44:04] **Jesse Thorn:** Ray Barretto would be over there on the double bill with—

[00:44:07] **David Byrne:** Yeah, no, they played like 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, pretty good name—who would sit in and kind of improvise and take solos during kind of 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 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 seem 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.

[00:45:39] **Jesse Thorn:** 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 on stage 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 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?”

[00:46:50] **David Byrne:** Yeah, okay. Yeah. Uh, obviously I'm not as socially awkward as I was in the past. When—yes, and I was fairly socially awkward in the past, just 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'd 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—(*laughs*) 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! That is definitely you. All these things, they fit!”

I mean, it was—in my case, it was pretty mild, not debilitating. In—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 you just shut all that other stuff out. You don't get distracted by that. So, 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.*) And you're trying to understand why do people do this? Why do they act like that? Why do they say that? And why do they make—what does that face mean? All those kinds of things.

This is nothing too extreme. That's a—it sounds a little exaggerated, though, as I describe it. But there's an 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 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 when—to just stop and go, “but why are you doing it?” is a very different thing.

[00:49:43] **Jesse Thorn:** 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 a part of—if you're neurotypical, if you think in a 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 an outsider's perspective. Right?

(David agrees.)

But that is—that really is like especially—like, you know, you talked about thinking about the way that that costume affects the audience, right? Like, I'm a men's wear 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 are looking at it as a communication system, which it is, you're making choices, and you are an artist. You know what I mean?

[00:51:24] **David Byrne:** Mm-hm. I'm not sure what else to say. It's, um... it doesn't seem like a disability when you're in it, because you're in it. It's like 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.)

[00:52:03] **Jesse Thorn:** Do you think that you are a cheerful guy?

[00:52:07] **David Byrne:** For the most part, yes. I think I am.

[00:52:10] **Jesse Thorn:** 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?

[00:52:18] **David Byrne:** 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.

[00:52:35] **Jesse Thorn:** 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...

[00:52:40] **David Byrne:** Yeah, usually—mm, that happens fairly often. That happens fairly often. I take little pictures of things that I see on the street.

[00:52:49] **Jesse Thorn:** What's something that you took a picture of recently?

[00:52:53] **David Byrne:** 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. 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 kind of intertwined from two different trees.

[00:53:22] **Jesse Thorn:** 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.

[00:53:32] **David Byrne:** Well, thank you. Thank you for that.

[00:53:34] **Jesse Thorn:** David Byrne. The *American Utopia* live show played its final performance in April of last year. You can watch the film, which was directed by none other than Spike Lee, on Max. The *Stop Making Sense* rerelease will premiere in theaters in September.

(Music fades in.)

Let's go out on one more Talking Heads song, "Road to Nowhere".

[00:53:56] **Music:** "Road to Nowhere" from the album *Little Creatures* by The Talking Heads.

We're on the road to nowhere

Come on inside

Taking that ride to nowhere

We'll take that ride

I'm feeling okay this morning

And you know...

(Music continues under the dialogue.)

[00:54:24] **Jesse Thorn:** 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. My house is currently covered in napkins, because I just gave away on Craigslist the chest where we kept all the napkins, but I did not have a good plan for where the napkins were gonna go afterwards.

Our show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. Our producers are Jesus Ambrosio and Richard Robey. Our production fellow at Maximum Fun is Bryanna Paz. We get booking help from Mara Davis. Our interstitial music is by the great DJW, also known as Dan Wally. By the way, I just put—we had a co-op launch party for Maximum Fun, and Dan Wally and I DJ'ed. I just put the mixes up on Mixcloud. So, go search for Jesse Thorn or DJW on Mixcloud, and listen to our classic 45 Soul Mixes. Our theme song is “Huddle Formation”, written and recorded by The Go! Team. Thanks to them. Thanks to their label, Memphis Industries. Special thanks to David Byrne for recording himself back in 2021 and immediately sending a pristine .wav file, then following up to make sure that we got it. True professional, if ever there was one.

Bullseye is also on YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook. Follow us in those places. We will share with you our interviews. Please share them thence. And I guess that's about it. Just remember: all great radio hosts have a signature sign off.

[00:55:59] **Promo:** *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.

[00:56:05] **Music:** “Road to Nowhere” by The Talking Heads.

We're on the road to nowhere

(Song ends.)