

David Byrne's *American Utopia*: Fighting difficulties with false cheerfulness

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This past March, singer-songwriter David Byrne released his eleventh studio album, entitled *American Utopia*. The album is intended to be the musical component of a larger multimedia project entitled *Reasons to Be Cheerful*, which is an attempt at spreading “positivity” in the wake of the election of Donald Trump to the US presidency.

Byrne first became well known in the 1970s for his work with Talking Heads, a group that had considerable popular and artistic success, finally splitting up in 1991. Byrne then set out on a solo career. His music has been heavily influenced by African and Latin polyrhythmic styles and features elements of rock mixed heavily with brass, string and electronic instrumentation. He frequently shares songwriting credits with Brian Eno, and, in 2012, produced a collaboration album (*Love This Giant*) with St. Vincent. *American Utopia* is his first solo album since 2004's *Grown Backwards*.

Reasons to Be Cheerful is a multimedia project that Byrne created this past January as a response to the political crisis in the United States. He wrote on the project's web site that the year 2017 was particularly hellacious due to events such as the US presidential election, the French election and the Brexit vote.

During the 2016 US presidential election, he indirectly encouraged his fan base to vote for Hillary Clinton out of fear of Donald Trump.

“We’re better than this,” he wrote. “We are a country that, to the surprise of many, elected a black president... folks turned out in droves to vote for Obama. Citizens in many areas—especially places with young, low-income and minority populations—got out to the polls and made themselves heard... Sadly, that has not been happening this year, and we need that to change.”

Byrne's response to the current political and economic crisis is to urge his followers collectively to stick their heads in the sand. He writes: “I wake up in the morning, I

look at the paper, and I say to myself, ‘Oh no!’ Often I’m depressed for half the day... As a kind of remedy to this, and possibly as a kind of therapy, I started collecting news that reminded me, ‘Hey, there’s actually some positive stuff going on! I will share thoughts, images and audio relating to this initiative and I’ll welcome contributions from others.’”

American Utopia, his newest album, co-written with Brian Eno, is an effort to extend these ideas into musical form. Byrne stated in an interview that “These songs don’t describe an imaginary or possibly impossible place but rather attempt to depict the world we live in now. Many of us, I suspect, are not satisfied with that world—the world we have made for ourselves. We look around and we ask ourselves—well, does it have to be like this? Is there another way? These songs are about that looking and that asking... Sometimes to describe is to reveal, to see other possibilities. To ask a question is to begin the process of looking for an answer. To be descriptive is also to be prescriptive, in a way.”

This comment and the general direction of Byrne's multimedia project imply that if we think positively and surround ourselves with positive things, we can live relatively happy lives—or at least avoid despair. This is not going to help anyone. There is a great need today to look things square in the face.

Lyrics on *American Utopia*—a title that Byrne insists is not intended to be ironic—reflect this outlook. In “Every Day Is a Miracle,” he preaches peace and love: “Every day is a miracle; every day is an unpaid bill; you’ve got to sing for your supper—love one another.” In “Doing the Right Thing,” he asserts that “We’re only tourists in this life—only tourists but the view is nice.” In “Here,” he sings: “Raise your eyes to the one who loves you; it is safe right where you are.” In “Dog’s Mind,” his utopian paradise consists of humans who are more like dogs—without a care in the world:

*We are dogs in our own paradise
In a theme park of our own
Dreaming all day long
Happy all day long*

The themes and outlook are also disappointing due to the fact that Byrne has created more socially critical and politically aware music in the past. The most famous example is “Life During Wartime,” which appeared on the 1979 album *Fear of Music* and described some of the conditions and popular feelings toward the Cold War. That album also included the song “Air,” which drew awareness to industrial pollution and environmental degradation.

The music on the new album itself is reminiscent of the music he wrote for the Talking Heads in the middle and late 1980s, quirky rock music with at times comical vocalizations and funky rhythms. One can hear elements of all the musical styles he has explored over more than forty years. The tracks are short and succinct, recorded in his home studio.

Byrne has been very open about his music writing and recording process in recent years, writing a book that was published in 2012 entitled *How Music Works*. He typically begins with rhythms and track layering and only adds lyrics as an afterthought, based on how the vocalizations fit with the music in terms of its sound rather than having a clear artistic idea from the outset.

American Utopia features simple songs that contain clear verses and choruses and is generally easy to enjoy. The entire piece is aesthetically pleasing, but slightly darker than some of his previous solo works, which seem lighter and bouncier in comparison. The rhythm is still there, but one can pick out melancholic undertones that underpin Byrne’s general social outlook. The words appear to fit, but do not offer much to get excited about beyond superficial encouragement.

The album has generally received positive reviews. It is his first top 10 album on the Billboard 200, where it debuted at number 3 with the equivalent of 63,000 copies sold in the United States.

However, *American Utopian* received negative attention, even before it was released, from feminists who criticized Byrne for not including any women performers on the recording. One week before the album’s release, he provided a showcase to help promote the artists who appeared on the album and received responses like the following tweet, from *Guardian* music writer Lauren Martin: “David Byrne has a special place in my heart, but it seems like women don’t have a place in this *American*

Utopia.”

Gender or ethnic quotas are reactionary and inappropriate in every case, but particularly so in this one. Byrne has spent the last thirty years operating his own record label, Luaka Bop, which focuses on promoting musicians from around the world, especially from Central and South America, who are otherwise not heard due to the structure of the music industry.

Rather than defend himself and his long history of working with a diverse group of performers since the beginning of his career more than 40 years ago (Tina Weymouth played bass for the Talking Heads at a time when the majority of popular rock bands were all-male), Byrne, unfortunately, issued a foolish public apology, which included the comment that “it’s hard to realize that no matter how much effort you spend nudging the world in what you hope is the right direction, sometimes you are part of the problem.”

He further wrote that “this lack of representation is something that is problematic and widespread in our industry. I regret not hiring and collaborating with women for this album—it’s ridiculous, it’s not who I am, and it certainly doesn’t match how I’ve worked in the past.” One wonders how the musicians whom he employed must feel knowing that he regrets including them on his record, rather than filling slots based on identity.

In fact, Byrne has much of which he can be proud. Outside of writing and playing music, he has made significant efforts to fight on behalf of underpaid musicians and performers who historically have not received royalties when they do not have songwriter credits on the work they help create. He helped found the Content Creators Coalition in 2013, a group of musicians, authors and other creators seeking better terms for online use of their works.

Byrne has already begun supporting the album with a music tour in North America this year. He will continue this tour with shows in Great Britain, Australia and New Zealand coming later in November.



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