

“Feet on the ground, head in the sky”

## *Stop Making Sense* (1984): Talking Heads’ concert film still speaks to us

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Nearly 40 years after its premiere, director Jonathan Demme’s concert film *Stop Making Sense* (1984) has been restored and rereleased in theaters. The lively film documents the 1983 tour of the band Talking Heads, who were at the peak of their creativity and popularity. The familiar songs, the eccentric stage persona of singer David Byrne and the spirit of community and celebration that the film evokes have made it a longstanding favorite.

The nucleus of Talking Heads formed at the Rhode Island School of Design when Byrne (born in Scotland in 1952, moved with his family first to Canada and then to the US) met fellow students Chris Frantz and Tina Weymouth in 1973. Byrne and Frantz formed a short-lived band called the Artistics: the former on vocals and guitar, and the latter on drums. The band broke up, but the three moved to a loft in New York. There, Weymouth learned to play bass, and the trio formed Talking Heads.

New York was a center of musical ferment in the mid-1970s. Glam rock, funk and disco were thriving, and bands like the New York Dolls and the Ramones were laying the foundations of punk rock. Talking Heads played their first show as the opening act for the Ramones at the storied CBGB club. The band adopted the do-it-yourself, stripped-down ethos of punk but cultivated a nerdy, neurotic image. Their guitars sparkled and chimed, unlike the distorted blare of other punk groups. After gaining a following, they added Jerry Harrison (formerly of the Modern Lovers) to their lineup as keyboardist and guitarist.

The band’s debut *Talking Heads: 77* (1977) included their first hit, “Psycho Killer.” A subsequent partnership with producer Brian Eno yielded three

albums of increasing sophistication and musical diversity. The last of these albums, *Remain in Light* (1980), drew heavily on the influence of Nigerian musician Fela Kuti and incorporated elements of funk and disco. It is widely hailed as a landmark. The follow-up, *Speaking in Tongues* (1983), included the hit “Burning Down the House.”

The band’s lyrics underwent a parallel evolution. Talking Heads started out by drawing a line between themselves and the hippies and radicals who came before them, as was evident in questionable songs like “No Compassion” and “Don’t Worry About the Government.” The band explored themes of paranoia and isolation but also self-actualization. While not forgetting about things like war and terrorism, the band’s outlook became more broadly optimistic. Over time, their bemusement gave way to childlike wonder.

For *Stop Making Sense*, Demme filmed Talking Heads during their tour in support of *Speaking in Tongues*. The film opens with a tracking shot of Byrne’s white sneakers as the singer walks onto a bare stage. He puts a boombox on the floor, saying that he wants to play a tape. To the accompaniment of the tape (actually a drum machine offstage), Byrne performs “Psycho Killer.” The camera pans up, and we see Byrne’s intense and unnerving gaze, which resembles that of a cult member.

Meanwhile, the stage crew continues setting up equipment. Weymouth joins Byrne for the next song, “Heaven.” The crew members keep working, and a new band member joins the stage with each song. First Frantz appears, then Harrison. Five additional musicians join them, including singers Lynn Mabry and Ednah Holt, keyboardist Bernie Worrell (formerly of

funk band Parliament), percussionist Steve Scales and guitarist Alex Weir. This gradual accumulation of musicians makes for an increasingly lush, unusual sound and recapitulates the evolution of the band's own music.

When all the musicians have come out, the band plays "Burning Down the House." By this point, the stage has the atmosphere of a party. Everyone is dancing, having fun and brimming with energy. The five extra musicians are very much part of the group, not hired hands like the backing musicians at other big rock concerts. Each eggs the others on. Harrison dances with Mabry and Holt. Scales flirts with them. Byrne and Weir put an arm around each other. Frantz flashes his boy-next-door grin. The audience (and the moviegoer) is invited to join the celebration.

As the other musicians gradually join him, Byrne's initial menace subsides (but his weirdness remains). Refusing any attempt to emulate funk or R&B singers, he twitches, jerks and undulates like the awkward outsider he feels (or portrays) himself to be. He runs a circle around the stage, feigns a seizure and, during "Once in a Lifetime," raises his arms like an evangelist. In a bit of slapstick, he dances with a floor lamp. His oddball unpredictability suits the band's quirky music.

Byrne briefly leaves the stage to allow the Tom Tom Club (a band that Weymouth and Frantz led as a side project) to perform their hit "Genius of Love." When he returns, he is wearing an absurdly oversized, boxy suit that became a signature of the movie and of the band itself. Byrne has said that the suit was inspired by Japanese Noh theater and anti-naturalistic trends in Western theater. The suit heightens the sense of spectacle while simultaneously poking fun at it.

Demme's camera pans the stage throughout. The director favors long takes and wide shots, sometimes watching the stage from above, sometimes focusing on one performer from a low angle. But he avoids showing the audience until near the end of the movie. By that time, everyone is on his feet.

*Stop Making Sense* premiered during the first term of Ronald Reagan, who had ridden a rising tide of reaction to the White House. Reagan oversaw a vicious offensive against the working class, clawing back many of its hard-won gains. His administration embodied and promoted a stultifying atmosphere of individualism, money worship, nationalism and conformity.

Indifference, and even hostility, toward the poor and the homeless became acceptable in the upper middle class.

With its spirit of democratic inclusion, its strangeness, its genuine multiculturalism and its sense of community, *Stop Making Sense* was an implicit, although elliptical, rejection of Reaganite reaction. "In a culture that's so much about the individual, and the self, and my rights, to find a parallel thing that is really about giving, losing yourself and surrendering to something bigger than yourself is kind of extraordinary," Byrne recently told the *New York Times*. "And you realize, 'Oh, this is what a lot of the world is about — surrendering to something spiritual, or community or music or dance, and letting go of yourself as an individual. You get a real reward when that happens. It's a real ecstatic, transcendent feeling.'"

Today, *Stop Making Sense* also serves as a satisfying rebuttal of the concept of "cultural appropriation" — and of racist politics in general. Here are a group of musicians, black and white, with open minds and ears, jointly creating an exciting, multifaceted, transcontinental style of pop music. Rather than seeing national cultures as private property and seeking to profit from them, they are promoting creativity and communal joy. For this reason alone, the rerelease of *Stop Making Sense* is a welcome cultural event. Beyond that, the movie is introducing or reintroducing audiences to an outstanding concert film and to a band that found artistic and commercial success by crossing boundaries and creating a new musical synthesis. This movie should uplift audiences and inspire artists in any medium.



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