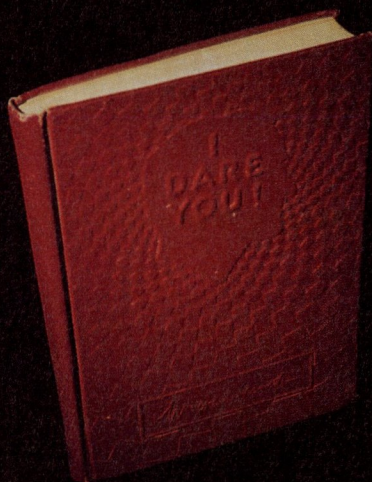


# Byrned In



David Byrne. *Summa Scientiae Mundi: I Dare You*, 1993



He is the intellectual rocker, a pop music star with a brain: David Byrne. Educated at the Rhode Island School of Design as an artist, Byrne has spent several decades fusing creative impulses in multiple mediums.

Although most famous as the leader of the Talking Heads, a trend-setting band in the '70s and '80s known for its "smarts," he also helped bring African and Latin sensibilities into the mainstream on his label Luaka Bop. Byrne has also made waves in video, photography, and filmmaking.

His new solo album captures the multifaceted man. Its title is simply *David Byrne*. Its release this summer is accompanied by personally created music videos and a European and North American road show making the rounds at venues small and large, indoors and out.

Byrne's songs and images are all generated by a man who trusts intuitive thinking – no matter how complex, contradictory, or elusive. His words and works embrace technology and terrorism, heaven and highways, and – more tentatively – digital life.

In an exclusive interview with *Wired*, Jeffrey Goldsmith joins Byrne in his downtown New York office, lined with photographs taken by the man himself. A Scottish-born New Yorker, Byrne is reserved but not shy. He pauses frequently, thinking in silence before he answers, carefully, a few chosen words at a time.

**Wired:** How do you think the role of artists will change in a digital world?

**Byrne:** Digital images and photos have done for graphic design kind of what samplers and sequencers and the same kind of technology have done for music. In a way, it's taken it out of the hands of the professionals so that anybody can play with it, at least in graphic design, which is great. In these images, of course, we are seeing a lot of stuff, like in news images, that get

manipulated in ways that are harder to detect than they used to be in montages and collages. That used to go on all the time, but now with higher technology it's even harder to detect when something has been subtly altered. So once again we have to be reminded not to trust photos, that they're their own thing. They're not a mirror of reality.

**Are you suspicious of this manipulatable quality of photography? In a political way?**

All images that appear in the press are manipulated in one way, shape, or form, whether they're by choice – by that image being chosen over another – or by cropping, or by digital manipulation. You're being manipulated a thousand different ways, and as long as you are somewhat aware of the fact, then there's not so much to be afraid of. But if you think that what you're seeing is the truth, then you're in for big trouble.

**What sort of truth can artifice help**

**your art reach that a lack of artifice can't?**

Sometimes when things are heightened so that they become somewhat artificial, they become psychological archetypes in a way. They become metaphors. They become more than just what you see in front of you. They stand for something else, and so you are actually dealing with other issues, either issues within yourself or how you relate to the world: traumas or things you're going through, how you feel about people, how you feel about things you love or things you hate or whatever. I think it helps you to deal with that.

**Is there an example of that which you are working on now, in the videos? In the music?**

Videos – none of them are real. They're all a little fantasy. None of them are a portrayal of what you're hearing on the record. I guess [Jean-Luc Godard] tried to do that in that Rolling Stones movie [*Sympathy for the*

## David Byrne talks. David Byrne photos. A Wired exclusive.

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By Jeffrey Goldsmith

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*Jeffrey Goldsmith (wordz@phantom.com) writes fiction and fact, and conducts interviews.*





David Byrne photographed by Neil Selkirk, May 1994, New York



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*Devil*] where they keep doing the song over and over and over again until it evolved into what the finished thing is. But now it'd be even harder to do because often you record one part and then later on somebody comes into the studio and changes another part. The other musicians aren't there.

**The artifice being that the song you hear isn't what's recorded, because it's recorded in bits and pieces?**

And what you see in a video is not a reflection of what's in the music either. It's always somebody pretending to sing, and what you are hearing is a prerecorded voice. But what's surprising – not all the time, but in many, many cases – is that you'd rather be fooled, you'd rather see and hear the phony version than hear the real thing. The phony one is more moving and strikes a deeper resonance than the real thing.

**Why do you think that is?**

Because that's what art is.

**Because reading a novel isn't reading life?**

It's not a diary, and it's not a tape recording of everything that happened. Andy Warhol did a book where he gave a guy a tape recorder, and the guy just carried it around all of the time and recorded a week's worth of anything within earshot. It's a pretty damn tough book to read.

**If you made a video game, what do you think it would be like?**

I would attempt to make it more human – it would cheat and it would lie and it would make mistakes.

**I'd love to play a computer that cheated!**

It doesn't even have to cheat a lot. It could make mistakes and behave erratically. Imaginary adversaries that you play in a computer game shouldn't always make the right choice. They should sometimes fail; that would really confuse you.

**If you had a black box, a piece of progress that could do anything at all, what would you want your black box to do?**

Something that could clear your mind out instantly when you get kind of backed up or overwhelmed, kind of reset the counter to zero again.

**Is there an outdated technology that you could see making a comeback?**

I wonder a lot about Marshall McLuhan's statement that, as various media become outdated, they all of a sudden become an art form. As things used for mass communication become obsolete, people attach added importance to them, although they get used less. And you see that

happening. You see people buying books partly because they like them as objects; you see people buying old records, LPs.

**Do you think LPs will become incredibly valuable one day?**

I think some are already, because some of the music on them is very unlikely to be reissued on CD. Film is the same, in a way. Movie making, for the most part, is a totally outdated technology. It's all gears and sprockets and chemical baths and odd mechanical reproduction. There are various people who have grafted high technology onto it, digital dinosaurs or whatever, but the basic thing is real ancient tech. People go on and on and on about movies now as if they're an art – because people go to the movies less.

**You've been quoted as saying that stories and singing are tricks to get people to pay attention. What are we tricking people into paying attention to?**

I think often you don't know yourself, that what you're actually communicating is fairly intuitive, and the narrative is just a way of holding a person's interest while you slip in what it is you're really saying. Sometimes you don't even know yourself what that is.

**Do you know what you're saying?**

Not always. I don't always know what the song's about. Sometimes I know what it's about on the surface, but sometimes it's not until years later that I realize it's actually about something else, that the reason I wrote it was something else, and that what it's actually saying to other people as well is not what it's saying on the surface. That's true with a lot of stuff.

**MTV didn't exist when you started out. Has it affected your approach to music?**

I've seen MTV go through a number of changes. It has gone from being very embracing to very ghettoized to being very embracing again. They fluctuate back and forth depending on what they think is going to do well for them. MTV has changed the way people see things, receive images. People want a glut of images, but not all the time. I think, given the right footage, people can also get absorbed in something that's not edited to death.

**What's interesting about making videos?**

Rather than making a little movie, I think of it as being like an extension of the experimental film in the '50s and '60s and the early '70s, but thrown in front of a lot of people. I think it has almost nothing to do with filmmaking, you know, making narrative pictures. The aesthetic comes out of the world of advertising and experimental film.

**Do you think you'll ever make a linear, three-part narrative film that sticks to conventions?**

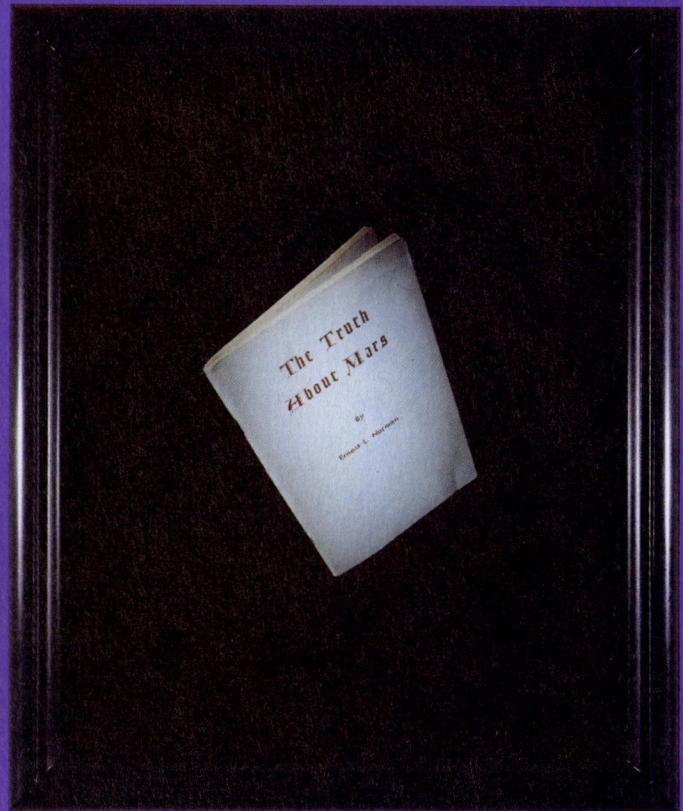
I'd love to do a movie that tells a story, but I don't think I could do a kind of Hollywood-style thing. I'm too much of a control freak. I don't like to call myself that, but the truth of it is that I'm used to having a certain amount of control over what I do.

**You've heard the phrase "Information wants to be free." What do you make of that?**





*Summa Scientiae Mundi: The Secret Museum of Mankind*



*Summa Scientiae Mundi: The Truth About Mars*



I talked a little bit with some friends last night about books on disk. Press the button and you've got a copy for yourself. The same is true with music in that sense. A fellow I was talking with recently went to Ethiopia and brought back music they have for sale there, most of it on cassette. The record store is like a stall. They have their own copy machine, a double deck, a triple deck, or whatever. And they're given a copy of the master, a bunch of blanks, and covers. And basically, what they pay for is the cover, the packaging, because people won't buy it if it doesn't have the real cover. Color printing, with technology the way it is, is a little more difficult to do there than to just dub the cassettes. The cover is the thing that ensures that the person who originates the tape actually sees some money from it, not the music, not the information itself. In a sense, that process is very similar to getting music or films over fiber-optic lines, directly in a record store. The royalties would be part of your cost, but that gets back to the information being free.

**"Information wants to be free" might also mean information wants to be liberated.**

It wants it both ways, really. Some things demand to be disseminated. With other things, the most important aspect, almost attached to the information itself, is the notion that it remain privileged and secret. Once you take that off of it, the information itself is much less valued. It's the notion of it being special and secret and not for everyone that makes it exciting or interesting. Once it's freely disseminated, it loses that.

**I downloaded all of your lyrics from the Internet to prepare for this interview. [Editor's note: ftp to ftp.uwp.edu and look in /pub/music/artists/talking.heads.]**

I heard they're out there.

**It doesn't bother you that your lyrics have been sort of pirated?**

It doesn't bother me. Free or not free, sometimes I think that as information becomes more available to anyone who wants it, it's the intangible things that become more valuable. For instance, in music, a live performance would become a treasured thing because the other stuff you could have for nothing whenever you want it. So, when you really don't know what you're going to get, that becomes more valuable.

**Do you fear the possibility of genetically engineered human beings?**

Not any more than I fear a lot of things. I feel like those kinds of things are inevitable. We can't turn back the clock, we can't erase our knowledge of how to build an atomic bomb. We can't get rid of it. The thing is, what happens with that [knowledge]? Obviously, money will control it. Just as money and other factors control what happens to the bomb, with

nuclear waste; the same kind of things will happen with genetic engineering – and not always to the benefit of humanity.

**So technology is not in itself for better or for worse?**

The choice of where to invest the knowledge that's here, that's what can be for better or for worse. The myth of progress – the technological, industrial myth that our society was founded on – says that every new invention and every new thing that is brought forth is better than what was here before and should be put to use immediately. So it's neither good nor bad, but for a long time there has been the recurrent myth that it is always good, that it is never bad. What I'm calling progress is what I was taught in grade school, that progress means a bigger refrigerator.

**And robots to clean our houses.**

All that stuff. That's progress. It's all going to make things easier.

**But that stuff doesn't make life easier, does it?**

It's just more stuff.

**Well, would you buy a musical instrument that you could play directly from your head?**

Absolutely.

**What kind of music would your head play?**

It would put together little bits of everything I know so that a piece of music would, from one second to the next, contain sounds from just about anything I've ever heard, and then disappear again on the next note. It would be the ultimate sampler.

**Isn't that how you create songs anyway?**

In a way, in a way, but you intentionally limit your palette.

**Why?**

Probably out of practicality, because if

every other note was to be a different sound, a different thing, just the way you wanted it to sound, you'd spend *years* just writing one little short piece of music.

**If I offered to digitally record your voice in every possible mode of expression and use it as a synthetic singer of songs, thereby immortalizing your voice, would you accept?**

It sounds like fun. I would say that it wouldn't be me singing anymore. I'd be an instrument being played by someone else. Myself singing is only partly about the timbre of my voice and what it sounds like, but it's also about the choices I make.

**One of your songs mentions "a terrible signal, too weak to even recognize." And in another there's, "I'm living in the future, I feel wonderful." Is the future wonderful or are you getting terrible signals?**

[Laughs.] It's a mix, it's a mix. We're allowed to live with both of those impulses and try to somehow get a balance between the naïve notion that everything is going to be great in the future and pessimism. We try to walk between the two. ■ ■ ■







Sacred Objects: Human Placenta