

P E R F O R M E R S

TALKING HEADS

By BARBARA O'DAIR

IN 1975, IN NEW YORK CITY, AT THE BACK OF A narrow, dark room called the Lower Manhattan Ocean Club, a triad of misfits tentatively took the stage. Their leader announced in a reed-thin voice, "The name of this band is Talking Heads," and then they launched into a devastating set. The bass was pumped by a moppet who stared from fretboard to stage front through doleful eyes and blond bangs. The drum kit

was pounded by a tousle-haired boy in a rugby shirt, whose unflinching ear-to-ear grin could be spied just above the hi-hat. Up front, the wiry singer pulsed in place. His guitar swung from his neck like a noose; his resemblance to Tony Perkins only added to the menace. The trio could have been dropped from an alien aircraft, or taken a hard left off the Yellow Brick Road. The effect was mesmerizing, and the sound—

Opposite: Talking Heads, 1977, (clockwise from top left) David Byrne, Chris Frantz, Jerry Harrison, Tina Weymouth; below: live at CBGB, 1977



spare, funky, full of quirky time shifts and peculiar warblings – was the future. No one had heard anything quite like it before.

Born into the artistic ferment of New York City punk, fashion and graffiti, Talking Heads began with the lineup of singer/guitarist David Byrne, drummer Chris Frantz and bassist Tina Weymouth, who had met at the Rhode Island School of Design in the early Seventies. Talking Heads soon joined the loose gang of New York new-wave and punk groups gathered around CBGB and Max's Kansas City. The only band on the scene to use a female player without fanfare, Talking Heads also set themselves apart by being hugely influenced by and indebted to American black music (a staple of the band's earliest sets – not to mention its very first hit – was Al Green's sexy, testifying "Take Me to the River").

Byrne, a Scots-born, Baltimore-bred working-class art-school dropout, had the good fortune to be a poetically gifted lyricist and songwriter who had a way with a hook and a love for both the eccentric and the authentic, and a possessor of British Isles-style pallid, dark-eyed good looks. He had a reserved charisma, and his lithe, sensual yet often awkward efforts to get funky only further endeared him to his fans. Weymouth, an admiral's daughter, had her own share of groupies, who were fascinated by the seeming conundrum of her small stature and powerful playing; her gamine grace belied a confident intelligence and strength that would prove to be more than a match for Byrne's in coming years. Frantz, an army brat, played the nice



guy; romantically involved with (and eventually married-with-children to) Weymouth, he appeared perfectly content to emit a neutral, friendly vibe. Electric tension trembled in front of the drums, though the rock-steady quality of Frantz's playing kept the wire grounded.

Talking Heads freaks waited impatiently for Sire Records (whose president, Seymour Stein, had declared them his favorite band) to issue the first LP, *Talking Heads: 77*, which would include "Psycho Killer" – a top request during live sets – and soaring odes to life like "Happy Day," "New Feeling" and "Uh-Oh, Love Comes to Town." Cute, cryptic, earnest, ironic, the debut LP was all that and more. Preceding its release, the band toured Europe with the Ramones; immediately after the album's release, Talking Heads set off to conquer America. The album reached the Top 100, unusual perhaps in a period dominated by the Eagles and Billy Joel.

Initially, the addition in 1977 of keyboardist, guitarist and second singer Jerry Harrison, who came with a fine prepunk pedigree from the Boston-based indie-rock group Jonathan Richman and the Modern Lovers and had earned a degree in architecture from Harvard, seemed to threaten the sanctity of Talking Heads' skewed pyramid. Once integrated into the group, however, Harrison proved to be indispensable and stuck with the band through thick and thin.

Brian Eno, however, was a different story. Eno boasted an interesting career as a founding member of the

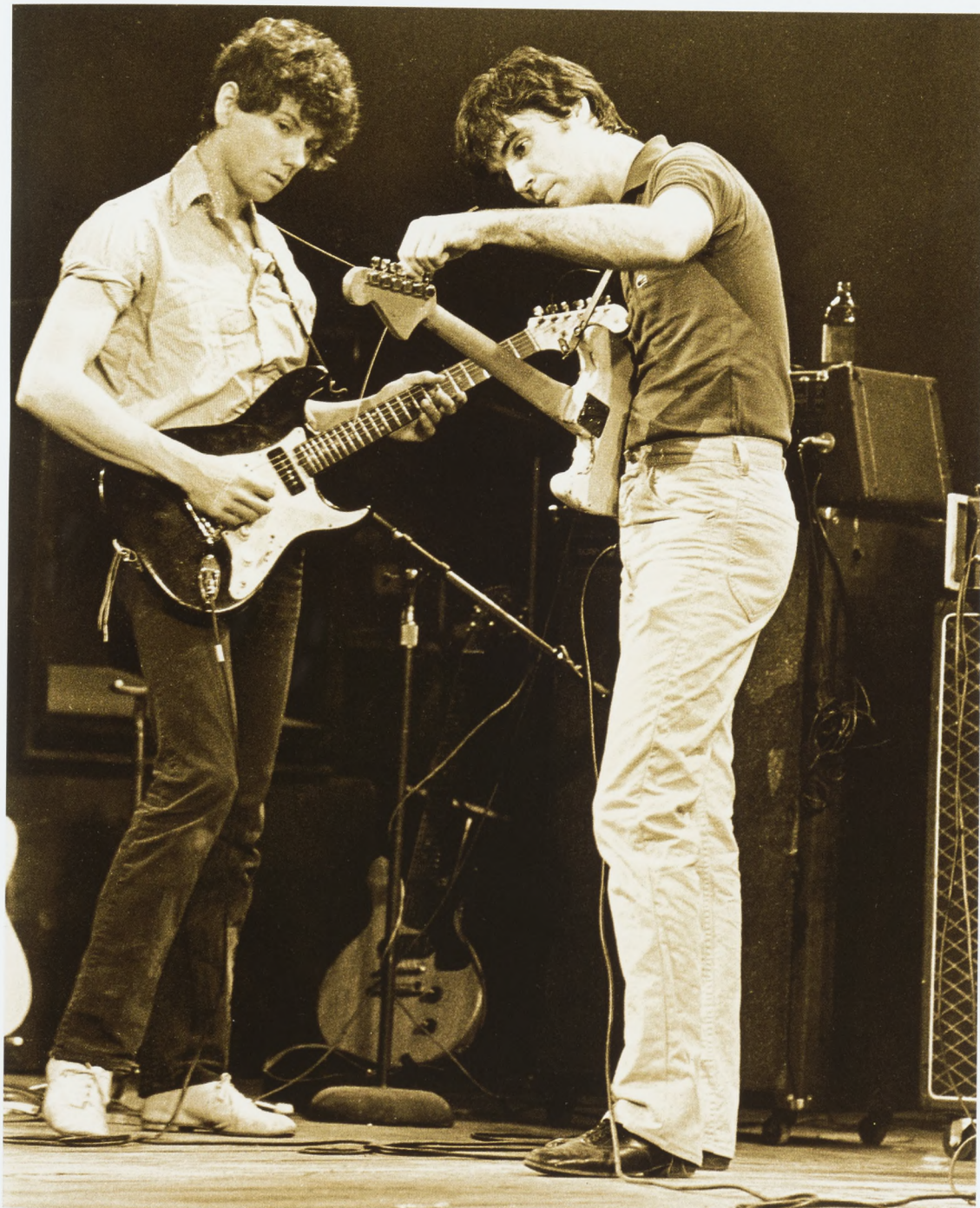


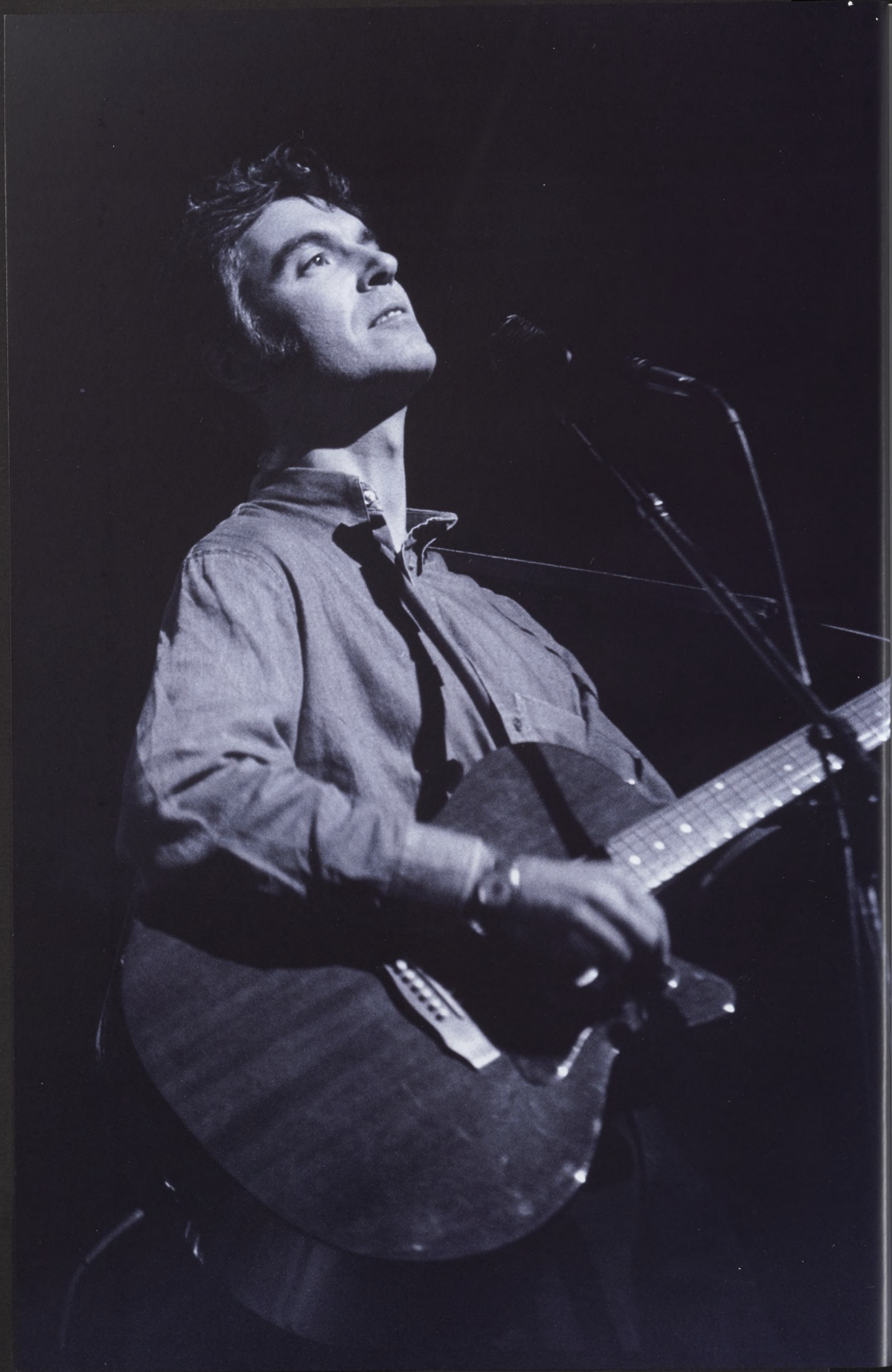
seminal art-rock band Roxy Music and as a solo artist in experimental and electronic music. Byrne, who was always hungry for new ideas and collaborations, invited him to coproduce the band's next record, *More Songs About Buildings and Food*. Made in the Bahamas, at Compass Point Studio, a far cry from the New York City streets and the first of many departures for the band, the album featured "Take Me to the River," along with other crowd pleasers like "Stay Hungry" and "The Girls Want to Be With the Girls."

Opposite, top: Byrne chats with Brian Eno, while B-52's (at left) Fred Schneider and Ricky Wilson schmooze Weymouth, Central Park; bottom: Performing with Busta Cherry Jones (far left) and Adrian Belew, 1980; below: Harrison and Byrne, 1977

Fear of Eno's renowned ego, combined with a general apprehension about messing with the purity of the quartet, put plenty of Talking Heads fans on alert. In fact, Eno created a ripple effect. Talking Heads' clear passion for American soul and funk eventually expanded into a wide embrace of African polyrhythms and other world musics, some of which would be incorporated into the band's next several records.

In 1979 the group came out with its third album, *Fear of Music*, an insular (all its basic tracks were





recorded in Frantz and Weymouth's Long Island City loft), driving, paranoid collection presaging the end of the decade and the ascent of the Reagan years. The recording offered a number of keepers, most notably "Life During Wartime," "Heaven," "Cities" and "I Zimbra," a multilayered, African-inflected chorale laced with guitar wizard Robert Fripp's machinations, a teaser track for things to come.

In many ways, Eno's presence had helped the band to the next level, a step away from the do-it-yourself ethos of the city's punk party to a larger worldview that incorporated new influences from faraway cultures. Talking Heads became the only rock group with roots in Seventies downtown Manhattan to move out of the neighborhood entirely, as it were. *Remain in Light*, the band's fourth recording, broke entirely from the old mold, expanding the group into a ten-piece professional funk ensemble that toured the world with the likes of Bernie Worrell on keyboards, Adrian Belew on guitar, Busta Cherry Jones on bass, Steven Scales on percussion and two backup singers, Nona Hendryx and Dolette McDonald. The group spread itself across whole stages with its wild carnival of sound, the members bobbing and weaving around each other in a joyous cacophony.

Also recorded at Compass Point, in 1980, *Remain in Light* was a breakthrough for Talking Heads. Celebratory in nature, and representing an immense shift from dark to light in tone, the tunes were nevertheless dense with rhythm and vocals. "The Great Curve," "Houses in Motion" and "Once in a Lifetime" (which gave the world the now well-worn lines: "And you may ask yourself . . .") all signaled Talking Heads' openness to the world around them and the new sounds they'd discovered with which to express their increasing fascination.

Beginning with *Remain in Light* (which marked the end of Eno's involvement), Talking Heads entered their middle, and most popular, period – even though they did not make another new album until 1983. Mostly, the members became absorbed in solo projects, one of which, Frantz and Weymouth's Tom Tom Club, spawned a disco hit, "Genius of Love," in 1982. When Talking Heads regrouped, they released *Speaking in Tongues*, their highest-charting album (Number Fifteen) that included their biggest hit ever, the Top Ten "Burning Down the House." Again they toured behind the record with a slightly expanded lineup and were documented onstage by director Jonathan Demme, in a tribute that became his acclaimed film *Stop Making Sense*. The movie's soundtrack, released in 1984, stayed on the pop charts for almost two years.

By this point, Talking Heads were in their mid-thirties, marrying and starting families. The group had proved remarkably resilient, as it grew and shrank according to artistic ambition and personal needs. Still, reports of rancor within its ranks persisted as success turned out to be more lasting than

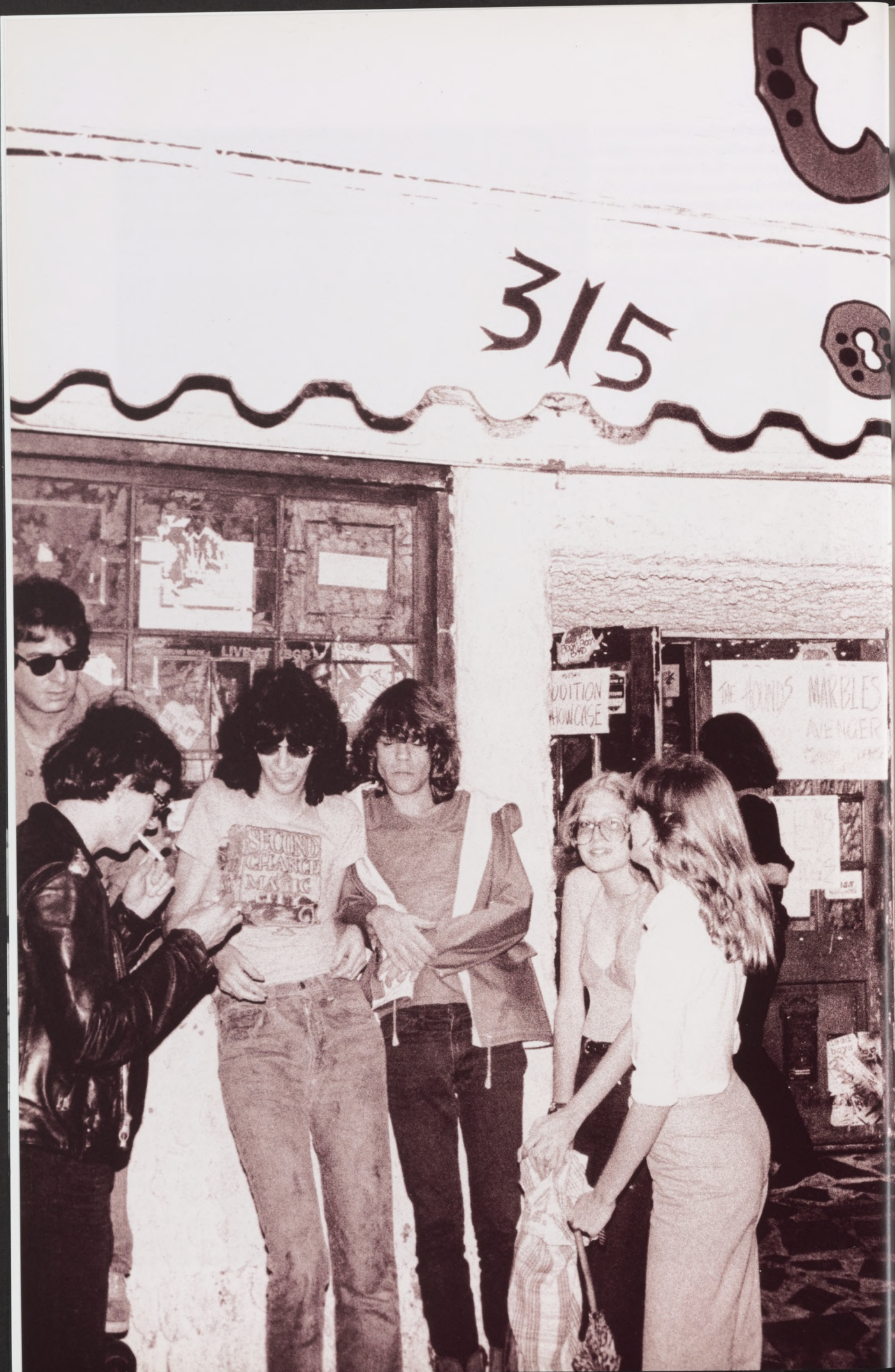
any of the members might have suspected back in 1977 at CBGB. As if a return to roots were just what the doctor had ordered, 1985's *Little Creatures* reclaimed the band's earlier simplicity – albeit with a great deal more polish from years in the studio – with stripped-down tunes dealing with parenting ("Stay Up Late") and group activities (the single, "Road to Nowhere"). The paens to domesticity, blissful or otherwise, clicked with listeners, giving the band its second of two platinum records.

Keeping his solo efforts aloft, Byrne directed a movie called *True Stories*, which, true to his signature style, portrayed (and even, in its quiet way, celebrated) small-town American eccentrics as ordinary people. At the same time, the film provoked questions that had plagued Byrne: Is this guy for real, or is he merely playing at being real? Indeed, from the very beginning, Talking Heads had caused confusion with some listeners who doubted their persona of odd innocence. To others, Byrne's lyrics and the band's eclectic sound represented an honest and hard-won appreciation of joy arrived at, possibly, after a long bout with alienation. Regardless, *True Stories* produced a soundtrack on which Talking Heads performed straightforward versions of songs sung by the film's characters and got a hit out of one of them (1986's "Wild Wild Life").

Naked (1988), which featured an assortment of Caribbean and African players, would become Talking Heads' last album of new material, though not necessarily by all of their own choosing. Over the next few years, Byrne became increasingly preoccupied with his own projects and finally, in December 1991, spilled to the press that the band was over. (The band members contend that Byrne officially ended the group in 1995.) Disappointed, its members scattered, only to bicker over a planned album project and tour that would not include Byrne. (They settled the situation out of court, and the plans went on.) Byrne continued to devote much of his time to his label, Luaka Bop, which he had founded in 1988 to gain audiences for Brazilian, Cuban and Asian artists, as well as his solo records. Harrison relocated to California and began producing such bands as Foo Fighters and Live to great success. Frantz and Weymouth released a new record with Tom Tom Club in 2000.

The foursome came together in 1999, when *Stop Making Sense* was released on DVD concurrently with a fifteenth-anniversary edition of the soundtrack. This year, they come together again to accept this well-deserved induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in recognition of their extraordinary contributions to popular music and the most singular achievement of bringing their wild, weird and wonderful vision to the light. In eleven records and countless live performances, and in the grand tradition of all truly great artists, Talking Heads forced open the sealed world of pop and made a large piece of it their own, and then ours. ✦

Opposite: Byrne onstage at the Beacon Theatre, New York City, 1991



LIVE FROM CBGB

*Hilly Kristal and Lenny Kaye recall
the early days of the Bowery dive
where inductees Talking Heads and the
Ramones, as well as countless
other punk bands, got their start*





HILLY KRISTAL: I opened CBGB in December 1973. The name stood for Country, Blue Grass and Blues. That was the music I was into and wanted to present. Back in the late Sixties, I'd had a club on Ninth Street, and then I had decided to look for a place around the Bowery because artists had begun moving into the area. This was pre-Soho, and three or four galleries had opened there and the lofts were cheap. I found the biggest bar on the Bowery – it was called the Palace. It stank; it was awful. I was paying six hundred dollars a month for rent, and there was a flophouse upstairs – used to cost three, four dollars a night for a bed. It had been a bar where derelicts used to line up at eight in the morning for their first white port or muscatel of the day: all lost souls, indigents, alcoholics.

So I started doing music there, mostly acoustic bands at first: country, bluegrass, blues, folk. One day, when I was on a ladder outside, Tom Verlaine walked by and asked me if I was interested in booking rock music. His band, Television, had a manager, Terry Ork, who was the one who really started badgering me. Around March 1974, he said that he'd like to put Television on at CB's on Sunday nights, because I currently wasn't open then, and that he'd put someone at the door to charge a dollar a head. So I agreed.

Television was horrible, just horrible. And nobody came, so I said, "No more." But Terry pleaded, saying he had another band, this one from Queens – and that's how the Ramones first started playing at CBGB. They were even worse. They were a mess.

Previous: Joey Ramone, Danny Fields (back, left) and David Johansen outside CBGB, 1977; the Patti Smith Group, at CB's, 1975, Richard Sohl (left), Ivan Kral, Smith; above: Elvis Costello guests with the Voidoids, Robert Quine (center) and Richard Hell, ca. 1978, at a CB's benefit for St. Mark's Poetry Project

Then there were the Stilettoes, who were actually good. Debbie Harry and Chris Stein were in the band, and the group was campy and fun.

Terry had a lot of friends; he knew a lot of people and managed to get them all to come to the shows. Eventually Television improved, in three or four months. The combination of Richard Hell, Tom Verlaine, Richard Lloyd and Billy Ficca was really quite special. Word got out and people started coming around, and the scene started growing. During the summer of 1974, there were so many rock groups wanting to play at CBGB that I established a policy requiring bands to perform their own original music because there were enough cover bands being heard out there and disco was getting too big and formularized.

At the time, popular rock had become increasingly complex and polished, and now there was a rebellion against that. With these new bands, there was a movement back to basics. I think it was a self-expression thing for most of those kids – Television and a lot of the others. They certainly couldn't play their instruments as well as the musicians I was accustomed to hearing. I'd previously managed the Village Vanguard and was used to hearing some really great jazz musicians – Miles Davis, the Modern Jazz Quartet, Thelonious Monk, Cannonball Adderley and Gerry Mulligan – so these CBGB bands were not thrilling to me at first. But soon I saw that many of them were doing something really interesting, that they had their own vision. Some-

times limited technical facility can give a group its own distinct personality as far as its instrumentation goes. And here it did: Some of the groups became exceptionally original.

Tom Verlaine and Patti Smith were friends and around the fall of 1974 used to meet nearby at Yonah Schimmel's Knishes Bakery. Patti and her manager, Jane Friedman, started coming down to the club. Arista president Clive Davis had expressed interest in signing Patti, so she needed a residency in which to showcase her band and decided to play here as a test. She and Lenny Kaye had played at Max's Kansas City before, but this was the first place her whole group played live, here at CBGB.

Patti and the band liked it here and ended up playing two sets a night, four nights a week, for quite a few weeks. Television was the opener for those shows. As a poet, Patti was already well known. As a rock singer, she was surprisingly good right from the beginning. She had magnetism, and her voice sounded great. From the first night, people came. The shows weren't sold out, but they were definitely very crowded, even for those days, when we had more seating than now. That was the beginning of a wider circle of people finding out about CBGB. Patti played until the late spring of 1974, and then Clive signed her to Arista.

Around that time, Talking Heads and the Shirts

tried out to play at my club on the same night – a Monday, CBGB's audition night. The Heads were quirky, obviously, but they played well and knew what they were doing. Chris Frantz was a very good drummer, Tina Weymouth played a definite bass line, and David Byrne was David – he played that crazy guitar style. I liked them right away.

After the Patti Smith residency, things started to cool down at CBGB. I figured I had to do something to keep the crowds coming in, so I decided to have a festival. This was midsummer 1975. I called it the Festival of the Top Forty Unrecorded New York Rock

Bands. I waited until there was literally nothing musical going on in New York City, after the Newport Festival, then I started taking out huge ads in the *Voice* and the *Soho Weekly News* – and at that time nobody took out huge ads.

The ads did the trick. All the early CBGB bands played, except Patti's, because she was recording. The Ramones, Blondie, Mink DeVille – countless groups. And everybody played at least twice, seven days a week, for three weeks. People came from all over, from *NME* and *Melody Maker* and *Rolling Stone*. The Japanese came, too. So CBGB and the bands playing here really got heard around the world, so to speak.

I don't think the punk bands played in order to become music-biz successes; they did it to express themselves. They just wanted to say what they wanted to

**Paul Simon visits
Television backstage
at CB's: (from left)
Simon, guitarist Richard
Lloyd, drummer Billy
Ficca, bassist Fred Smith,
vocalist/guitarist
Tom Verlaine, 1976**



say, in their own way. They stripped the music down to basics and then allowed it to grow from there. That's why punk rock was such a dramatic change from what was then being heard on the radio.

As far as my being there, that was an accident. I was here trying to do something else; these bands happened to be around, too, and I have always liked new talent. Maybe it all came together because I wanted to do for others what I wished had been done for me when I had tried to make it as a musician earlier on. Most bands' musicianship is much better these days, which makes it easier for them to get booked sometimes. But if a group has something to say, and that's the driving force behind its music, to me that remains the most important thing.

LENNY KAYE: One night in April, Hilly's dog was hit on the Bowery.

A saluki. Ran out between two cars and got clipped at the junction where Bleecker runs smack into CBGB's front door.

He was named Johnny; and Johnny – the protagonist of "Land" – was always Johnny, long before the dog. Johnny would live, and during that spring, playing our version of "Land of 1000 Dances," the world

gathered at our portal as the Johnnys moved their shadows across the walls of a Lower East Side bar.

Downtown. Manhattan: "Ob, look at this land where we am," declaimed Patti, and when we did, it became a time for retrospection and re-creation, a reminder of why we started listening in the first place. "There is not twilight on this island."

Call it what you will – and lumpen punk rock fits as well as anything – but you do it for yourself first, for the person in you who wants to pick up a sounding device and activate the sleeping self. To find through music life's beating heart and then wear it on your sleeve, genre sewn on like military patches, signifying your company, your rank, your serial number. Battle scars, campaign ribbons, war wounds. And every once in a while, you get to raise a flag. *Corregidor*, man. I was there.

Television found CBGB. Hilly had toyed with country and bluegrass and blues before, and even while he continued to live in the back room with his pack of dogs, he gave the bands a space to set up on the left side of the room – as long as they didn't block the pool table.

Every Sunday night, Television would play. It was a good night to go for a hang because it was after the weekend flood tide, the bridge-and-tunnel waters receding and leaving mostly your fellow travelers on the shore, gasping for air and wriggling their tail fins. Everything was pretty cacophonous, erratic and jerky, teetering on the edge of grasp. Out of tune. On target.

The bands started to cluster. The fans, and most of them were the other bands, stayed to watch. Small world, isn't it?

Though it might have seemed insular to a wandering outsider, within the CBGB world everyone brought differing influenzas to the petri dish. Garbage-picking from the detritus of rock, the music leapfrogged a generation backward and forward, excavating scorned pop objects and hex-rated perversities. The bands were held together by philosophy alone – they were hardly alike in style, at least in these formative stages. The only time-share they cultivated was another way of looking at the world: good old Us versus Them.

Inbred and feeding on itself (though I'm sure it avoided Hilly's hamburgers from its kitchen, which is now the rear undressing room), CBGB became an exotic castle keep for this medieval morality play in the making. The bands that rooted there – stalwarts all, including Ye Talking Heads, the good Lady Blondie, those Knights of the Ramones Table, the

Below: Hilly Kristal at his club; opposite, top: Talking Heads, 1977, (from left) Jerry Harrison, David Byrne, Chris Frantz, Tina Weymouth; bottom: Blondie's Debbie Harry with guest guitarist Robert Fripp, 1978, at a CB's benefit for stabbed Dead Boy Johnny Blitz





aforementioned Sir Television and our humble selves – then rode off into the worldly night to seek fortune and frolic.

Self-propelled. Shot through the vortex of pop culture. *Whoeee!*

But even at its most projectile, you have to realize it's not you that's the pebble in the sling. It's your moment. Your arc is the distance it takes to carry this blip of history-as-it's-lived to someone who picks up a piece of it, a large chunk or a sliver that drops off along the way, sometimes unrecognizable, and makes it his own.

National acts still performed at Madison Square Garden; radio playlists had little to do with local music. But word spread that a home for the disaffected had been founded on an avenue where many had traditionally come to lie in the gutter, to eat and sleep on the street and to see what life was like when it started from scratch.

It wasn't just New York at the time. Everywhere I traveled in that Horses-drawn year, every city and interstate, there were pockets of people with mutual affections. Did I say afflictions? Stylistically, this simpatico spit off a myriad of directional signals, a survival of the fittest for accoutrements: slashed-and-burned clothes, motorcycle jackets, cranked guitars, overdriven rhythm. Wave that high sign and let the world know you gotta do it Your Way. But a few years later, when Sid Vicious sang the Frank Sinatra anthem as a flaming finale to punk-as-a-way-of-life (not that any of us wuz punk, see?), little did he know that it could never die, because it always reconfigures. New wave begets hardcore begets industrial begets

grunge. For New York, CB's begat Hurrah begat the Mudd Club begat Danceteria, the concentric circles of an earth movement in seismic pulse.

Cut up. Imprised. The lineage can be traced wherever you like, styles notwithstanding. The impulse to pick up a guitar, beat a drum, blow a horn, scream into a microphone, turn a table and ultimately stick your hand down your throat and pull out your heart for the universe to see, is ever replicating.

You never know where it's going to strike next. And that's what I remember most about those weeks in early '75: the possibilities endless. I'm standing outside the rock & roll club after we played, or Television played, two sets a night, Thursday through Sunday, sharing a smoke with "T" in the next-door hallway of the Palace Hotel, and looking up Bleecker Street as it starts its slow curve around the world. ✦

