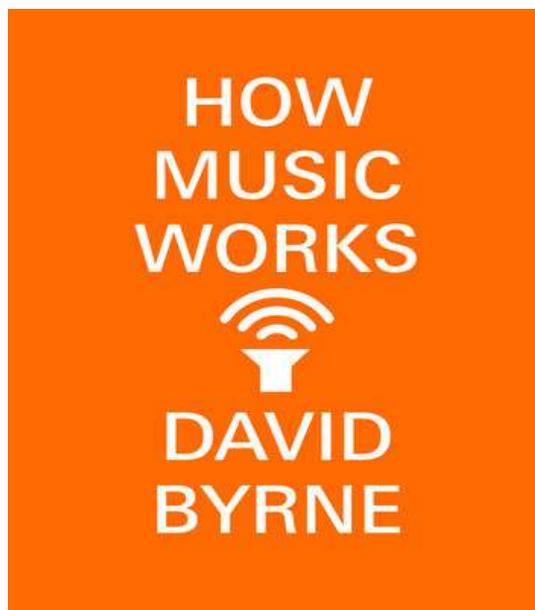




How Music Works

David Byrne

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Review by Camilla Fascina*

The treatise in ethnomusicology *How Music Works* by David Byrne is made of a series of essays about music with an autobiographical imprint which engages the reader. Byrne's personal view on the music system through his own music career enriches the book and offers a further layer of insight into the music industry. One of the most captivating moments of the book is the chapter titled "Creation in Reverse" where Byrne dismantles traditional beliefs on how works of art are born, offering instead his own perspective on the process of music creation. Noteworthy are his insightful comments on the adaptive aspect of creativity: he observes that the tailoring of a song is not simply an uncontrolled romantic outburst of passion that urges to be let out. He rather suggests that the creation might be determined by the context for which the work of art is intended.

Byrne explains, for example, how the sonic qualities of the concert room at CBGB¹ might have unconsciously and instinctively influenced the music he wrote. The furniture, crooked uneven walls and looming ceiling, made for great sound absorption and, he notes, allowed for uneven acoustic reflection qualities and lack of reverberation. These settings allowed the details of one's band to be heard. Moreover, given the reduced size of the room, one's gestures and expressions could be appreciated as well. He notices that the process of music making might have been influenced by the need to adapt to the context where the music would have been later played.

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¹ A famous New York City music club where some of his early music was first heard.



Caught up in these observations, Byrne digs further back in time to see whether other musicians had also written music to fit the acoustic contexts in which it was to be performed. He draws many examples, such as that of African music. He observes that it sounds that way because it was meant to be played out in the open and to be loud enough to be heard outdoors above dancing and singing. That same percussive music would be less effective in a cathedral, where a completely different kind of music developed.

In fact, western music in the Middle Ages performed in the stone-walled Gothic cathedrals evolved as modal in structure - often using very long notes – to best fit that kind of space. The reverberation time in cathedrals is very long: more than four seconds in most cases. Henceforth, a note hangs longer in the air and becomes part of the sonic landscape.

Interestingly, while examining the evolution of jazz music, Byrne points out that it was first performed in ballrooms in order to make people dance. It is for this reason that the instrumentation of jazz had to be modified so that the music could be heard over the sound of the dancers. Banjos, for example, were used because they were louder than acoustic guitars, and trumpets were loud, too. Until amplification and microphones came into common use, the instruments played were adapted to fit the situation.

By commenting on the changing nature of sound depending on the context, Byrne is looking at the functionality of music and how artists have adapted to the situations they are in. He later goes on to discuss the style of singing known as crooning which once again changed completely the scenario: when the first microphones appeared the pioneers of “crooning”, like Frank Sinatra and Bing Crosby, could introduce a brand new style of whispered singing thanks to mics that could carry their intimate singing.

To cap up the overview on how different contexts might have influenced the process of writing music, Byrne lingers on the impact of contemporary music contexts for private listening. Let us think about the birth of the Walkman portable cassette player in the late Seventies, up to the interior of our cars, the MP3 players and iPods. These contexts all allow us to hear a song with no acoustic distractions. Therefore, he comments, contemporary music might be a compositional response to these new devices since it works well acoustically in contexts of private listening experience and as a framework for much contemporary recorded music.

According to Byrne the relationship between music and context is reciprocal. Just as acoustics in a space determines the evolution of music, similarly acoustic properties – particularly those that affect the human voice – can guide the structure and form of buildings. Thus, some concert halls were designed so that a person singing or speaking from center stage could be heard, unamplified, even in the back of the hall. New York City’s Carnegie Hall, for example, as an environment was designed to fit the human voice and to offer that kind of sacred space that humans have found attractive for thousands of years.

In Chapter 2 Byrne retraces his whole music career. Particularly noteworthy are the initial observations dealing with his early years, as he began performing cover songs with his first band. Here he made his first attempts to put his own imprint on standard songs, his quest for innovative looks and styles, and his early endeavors to invent attractive poses for his stage presence that would make his show worth seeing.

The addition of this chapter is noteworthy because it shows Byrne's later thoughts upon his earlier experiences and his analysis on the shifts in his stage presence.

He then recalls the days when he began to write his first original compositions, such as *Psycho Killer* and *Warning Sign* hoping a band would be willing to perform them, or the day when, after auditioning at CBGB in New York, Talking Heads were offered an opening slot for the band “Ramones”.

His self-examination of his early career is honest and autocritical. This chapter is compelling as the reader is able to enter Byrne's mind as a young teenage neo-primitive rock star at pains with trying to build his own style.

Byrne devotes two chapters to the impact of technology, both analogic and digital. Considering that he has lived through the evolution of technology firsthand, he is a speaker that has more authority on this topic. The reader feels reassured by Byrne's knowledgeable presence. He analyzes how the introduction of the first recording techniques in 1878, as well as the ascendance of radio in the Twenties changed the way music is made in terms of both instrument playing and singing.



He provides a very detailed explanation of how the first Edison cylinder recorders, the wax cylinders, and the Diamond Disc Phonographs worked, as well as analyzing the advent of tape recording and tape machines, of Lps, cassettes, and of instrument technology.

Another moment of interest is when Byrne offers an intriguing look into the first “Tone Tests”. These were public performances on a dark stage where famous singers would appear onstage along with a Diamond Disc player. Both the Diamond Disc player and original artist would alternate and perform the same song, with the audience being asked to guess whether they were, at that moment, hearing the disc or the live artist.

Byrne reminds us that another factor which impacted the process of music creation was the limited running time of recording discs. The advent of supports such as 45s and 78s no doubt influenced the length of performances and changed writing styles. 78s were limited to fewer than four minutes (three and a half minutes for 45s) per side. Thus songwriters had to shorten their compositions, and jazz and classical players had to tighten their solos. Recordings not only tightened musical compositions but they also uprooted music from its place of origin, allowing foreign genres to be heard around the world.

Byrne speaks of the pioneering work of John and Alan Lomax who, using a large and bulky disc recorder, went to a Texas plantation to record Black people who would, they hoped, sing for them. This is known as field recording. They thus traveled thousands of miles to record the music of the American South for the Library of Congress. Due to the recording machine, the music of an otherwise unheard group could be given a voice and spread around the world.

Byrne then looks back to the revolution of digital technology and how it impacted music. He states that it began in 1962 when the phone company Bell Labs developed a technology that allowed sound information to be digitalized in order to find more efficient and reliable ways of transmitting conversations. Bell Labs figured out how to sample a sound wave and slice it into tiny bits that could be broken down into ones and zeros. An unforeseen consequence of this phone-related research was the emergence of digital-based audio technology that was eventually used in recording studios.

Byrne then considers the advent of CDs and MP3s. Though conceding that MP3 might have sacrificed the quality of the sound, and though missing his youth listenings on transistor radios, he nevertheless does not lament digital technology.

One of the most intriguing parts of *How Music Works* is the chapter entitled “In the Recording Studio” where he uncovers the secrets of his recording sessions. He recalls his dissatisfaction with his first studio experience. In order to record his first proper record, *Talking Heads: 77*, Byrne was faced with the new recording philosophy that privileged the isolation of each instrument.

He remembers it as a miserable experience since nothing really sounded like the band was used to hearing onstage. Breaking down the purist approach of the acoustic isolation, Byrne decided to work with Brian Eno who suggested trying some fairly unconventional vocal-recording approaches, as well as recording their third album, *Fear of Music*, in the loft where the band rehearsed. Here they were able to play together, apart from the singing. Byrne thus comments: “We were finally beginning to capture what we sounded like live! Stepping outside of the acoustically isolated recording-studio environment wasn't, it turned out, as catastrophic as it was made to sound. Hmmm. Maybe those rules of recording weren't as true as we'd thought” (155).

For more practical readers or those looking for insider advice, the book is worth buying for the plain-spoken chapter *Business and Finances, Distribution and Survival Options for Musical Artists*. Here Byrne offers a very useful discussion of the music business and marketing, explaining how one can manage a whole lifetime in music while also commenting on the changing nature of the industry itself.

Contrary to pessimists who lament the decline of the music industry, Byrne affirms: “This changing landscape is not necessarily bad news for music, and it's not necessarily bad news for musicians, either. There have never been more opportunities for a musician to reach an audience” (218).



He reminds us that recording costs as well as distribution costs are approaching zero: an album can be made on the same laptop we use to check our email and distribution costs have dropped thanks to digital distribution.

He encourages musicians to think about the possibility of working outside of the traditional label relationship. Where there used to be one model, now Byrne sees six distribution models with different levels of artist control. Ranging from the artists who put themselves entirely in the hands of the label to the artists who do nearly everything themselves, Byrne examines in detail these six models, namely: 360° deal or equity deal, where every aspect of an artist is handled by producers; Standard Royalty deal; License; Profit share; Manufacturing and distribution (M&D) deal (also known as a production and distribution deal, or P&D); and finally, self distribution.

Any person interested in music will also find tips on how to create a happening, on music's physiological and neurological effects, on Byrne's latest collaborations, on updates concerning his recent correspondences and emerging technologies, as well as a chapter titled "Infinite Choice, the Power of Curation." In that chapter Byrne examines different ways we can discover music in the digital age with an engaging look at the algorithms of services like Spotify and Pandora. These algorithms, he explains, are created to fit data gathered on viewers' preferences and they can trend toward recommending some of the same music we had been looking for, or narrowing our exposure in order to meet our desires.

The book is deeply inspiring and thought-provoking for any reader, not only for Byrne's fan base. Music, far from being simply entertainment or sector-based, is an intrinsic part of everybody's life and this book surely makes us appreciate its practical value which, though hard to pin down, nevertheless shapes our daily routines. Despite the book's merits and the autobiographical aspects of the book actually offering an insider's perspective on Byrne's life in the music industry, it can be argued that this personal perspective sometimes detracts away from the analytical prospects with which the book began.

In addition, Byrne does not accurately represent some circumstances surrounding the band's life. For example, the lawsuit he filed against the members of his former band and Radioactive Records head and former Talking Heads manager Gary Kurfirst² is not mentioned in the book. Such omissions may cast doubt on the rest of the book and on the representation of other situations spoken about in the book.

Overall, *How Music Works* is an engaging read for anyone interested in Talking Heads or indeed in the music industry as a whole. Despite the personal perspective arguably oversaturating the book and the incomplete representation of certain key events, it ultimately provides a global view of the music industry whilst, at the same time, giving a look into the life of a prominent figure in the business.

² See Talking Heads Bio on *Rolling Stone* at <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/artists/talking-heads/biography>. Last Visited 17 December 2017.