

“Remain in Light”--Talking Heads (1980)

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Essay by Kevin Buck (guest post)*



Album cover



Photo by Jean-Luc¹

Talking Heads formed in the mid-70s merging punk, rock and funk to lead the way in the New Wave² music genre. By 1980, they had three successful albums under their belt, but they believed that they had fallen into a rut and felt the need to shake off the mantle of so-called “New Wave.” The band’s music had centered on the writing and performance of front man David Byrne and all the band members, including Byrne, felt it was time for a change.

Byrne, drummer Chris Frantz, bassist Tina Weymouth and keyboardist Jerry Harrison converged on the Bahamas in early 1980 with no set material to record. The resulting instrumental jams, based on looping Afrobeat rhythms (pioneered by Fela Kuti), were intended as a blending of music genres from around the world rather than just an imitation. The results of these jams were played to Brian Eno, producer of their two previous albums, who felt the band was onto something different and special.

Several other musicians were included in the subsequent recording sessions including trumpet player Jon Hassell, guitarist Adrian Belew, singer Nona Hendryx and Robert Palmer on guitar as well as percussion. The recording process for the base instrumental tracks utilized long, overlapping loops of repetitive rhythms long before studio tools could support the process of what we refer to today as sampling.

Once the core instrumental tracks were laid down, the band returned to the states. Eno and Harrison spent time in the studio fleshing out the rhythms with solos and other overdubs while Byrne worked on the song’s lyrics. Again drawing influence from African music, David scatted improvised lyrics over and over into a tape recorder until he found what he wanted³. Most of the lyrics drew upon the vocal stylings of religious sermons including some challenge and response.

“Remain in Light” was released October 8, 1980 to critical acclaim and the album reached #19 on the album charts. The eight tracks on the album seem to have some sort of a common musical

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² A loosely defined music genre that included punk, rock and anything else that sounded different from mainstream rock.

³ Some music historians argue that the stream of consciousness lyrics were intended to either be more difficult to interpret or more open to interpretation, but no definitive answer has ever been provided by the group.

thread, but hard turns in rhythm and beat throughout the tracks force the listener to focus or feel like a different album has been swapped in.

Songs on side one of the album (“Born Under Punches (The Heat Goes On),” “Crosseyed and Painless” and “The Great Curve”) provide a rhythmic funk that attracted the attention of dance clubs worldwide, but also contained melodies over the beats that sounded clean and smart with soaring guitars solos by Adrian Belew using an early Roland guitar synthesizer. The pace feels frantic but never wild. It makes you feel like you are navigating a rushing river with the beat and rhythm pushing you forward. Just as you start to feel complacent, the shrieking guitar solos shock you back to attention.

Side two’s songs (“Once in a Lifetime,” “Houses in Motion,” “Seen and Not Seen,” “Listening Wind” and “The Overload”) have slower rhythms, some haunting melodies/choruses and introspective lyrics. The album’s most popular hit is “Once in a Lifetime.” Its “*You may find yourself / You may ask yourself*” lyrics resonated with anyone looking at their current location in life and wondering how it all happened. Something everyone goes through multiple times in their lives.

It has been almost 40 years since “Remain in Light” was recorded and showed the world how its many music genres could be merged and complement each other. Its odd rhythms and overpowering beats always seems to reveal something new to the listener, no matter how many times you have heard it before. The album continues to hold up under scrutiny, by each passing generation, and still serves as a roadmap on how to meld the world’s music together and dare to be different.

Kevin Buck is a music historian and the author of “A Concise History of Rock ‘n’ Roll” (Year of the Book Press, 2018). Visit him at <http://www.kwbuck.com>.

* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.