

BEHIND THE CLASSICS



David Byrne, Tina Weymouth, Jerry Harrison, Chris Frantz

Warner Bros. Records

WRITTEN BY: DAVID BYRNE, BRIAN ENO, CHRIS FRANTZ, JERRY HARRISON AND TINA WEYMOUTH

RECORDED AT: COMPASS POINT STUDIOS, NASSAU, THE BAHAMAS, AND SIGMA SOUND STUDIOS, NEW YORK CITY, SUMMER 1980

PRODUCED BY: BRIAN ENO

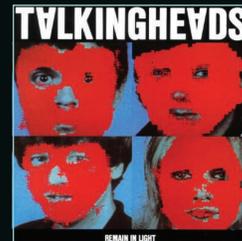
VOCALS, GUITAR: DAVID BYRNE

KEYBOARDS: JERRY HARRISON

BASS: TINA WEYMOUTH

DRUMS: CHRIS FRANTZ

FROM THE ALBUM: *REMAIN IN LIGHT* (1980)



“Once in a Lifetime”

TALKING HEADS

WHEN TALKING HEADS CONVENED in the Bahamas in 1980 to record its fourth album, the members were buzzing with new influences. The group had made its name with arty, angular New Wave, but now very different rhythmic ideas began flowing in from two distinct but related sources: the Afrobeat sound pioneered by Fela Kuti in Africa, and the burgeoning hip-hop scene in the quartet’s home base of New York City. The band determined to build its new songs from the rhythmic base up, plucking bits and pieces from improvisations over which frontman David Byrne and producer/co-writer Brian Eno would layer melodies and lyrics.

During one of those jams, bass player Tina Weymouth hit upon an ear-catching stop-and-start bass line. Her husband, drummer Chris Frantz, picked up on the groove and encouraged her to repeat it rather than expanding on it—just as a hip-hop producer would loop a bass line endlessly. “Chris was shouting, ‘Boom boom-boom, boom boom-boom!’” she later recalled. “He was very keen on it being simple.” The demo dubbed “Weird Guitar Riff Song” was almost set aside, as Eno didn’t hear much potential in it—but Byrne did. “There was a motion to just abandon

this one,” Byrne said in 2000. “But I thought, ‘There’s something about this. I’m sure I can write words to it that’s gonna make this work and pull it together.’”

Byrne had lately taken an interest in the voice patterns of evangelical preachers, and decided to try declaiming in that manner over the track. “I would improvise lines as if I was giving a sermon in that kind of a meter, in that kind of hyperventilating style, and then go back and distill that,” Byrne remembered. The lyrics he invented mined the vein of neurotic worry (and joy) about the trappings of modern life that had proven fruitful throughout Talking Heads’ work to date, but also ideas he had recently been reading about in books like Robert Farris Thompson’s *African Art in Motion*.

The verses trace a man’s growing disillusionment about the value of his suburbanite work and family life. (“You may find yourself in a beautiful house, with a beautiful wife/You may ask yourself, well, ‘How did I get here?’”) Meanwhile, the choruses and bridge, drenched in liquid imagery reminiscent of Fela’s 1975 “Water No Get Enemy,” assert that humanity’s essential needs remain the same as they ever were. Byrne has often said the lyric

was influenced by the Islamic ideal of surrender to God—the word “Islam” literally means “submission.” “He was mixing in all of those wonderful baptismal symbols of the washing with the water, the washing away of sin,” Weymouth observed in 1988.

Eno came up with the chorus melody, his onetime disinterest having been easily overcome by Byrne’s development of the song. Keyboardist Jerry Harrison added the bubbling synthesizer that streams throughout the track, as well as a climactic burst of distorted organ inspired by the Velvet Underground’s “What Goes On.”

“Once in a Lifetime” failed to dent the U.S. pop charts upon its release as a single in late 1980, but over time has become one of Talking Heads’ best-loved songs—aided by its memorable music video, its frequent use in movies and its use as a sample in hip-hop tracks like Jay-Z’s “It’s Alright.” But it is the original recording’s own combination of the intellectual and the spiritual, the cutting-edge and the eternal, that continues to intrigue and engage new listeners. “We felt the music was very transcendent and ecstatic, or it could be,” Byrne said, “and very ancient and modern at the same time.”

— Chris Neal