All Ears with Abigail Disney
Season 2, Episode 6: David Byrne
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DAVID BYRNE: Well, you know, I go on bike rides a lot. The last one I did, we went to Staten Island and--sorry, Staten Island--I described it as a mixture of Wu Tang and Trump country.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: That's very funny.

DAVID BYRNE: That's maybe unfair, but it was beautiful. We had a beautiful ride.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: I'm Abigail Disney, welcome to All Ears, my Podcast where I get to go deep with some super smart people. This season I'm talking to good trouble makers. Artists, activists, politicians and others who aren't afraid to shake up the status quo. We'll talk about their work, how they came to do what they do, and why it's so important in hard times to think big. You can't think about solutions without being a little optimistic, and man oh man I think we need some optimism right now.

Well, I don't know about you guys but I'm up to here with all these grown men and women humoring a petulant old man by letting him kill democracy. I'm looking for a little bit of a palate cleanser, and I suspect maybe you are too. So consider your wish granted. This week we're going above the fray to talk to musician and artist David Byrne.

***American Utopia* Trailer**
RT: 20 seconds
TC in: 00:02
TC out: 00:22
What if we could eliminate everything from the stage, except the stuff we care about the most. Without cables or wires, what would be left? Well, it will be us, and you. That's what the show is.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: That's the trailer for American Utopia, Spike Lee's amazing film version of the concert David Byrne brought to Broadway last year. We are all very lucky Spike was able to get everything done just about 5 minutes before COVID shut everything down, just in time to give us something wonderful to relish from our couches.

American Utopia Trailer
RT: 13 seconds
TC in: 00:39

TC out: 00:52
As people. We're work in progress. We extend beyond ourselves through the connections between all of us.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: It couldn't be a better time to sit with American Utopia than now, because it manages to be a call to action that doesn't nag you, and a reminder of America's joyful utopian dreams for itself.

David Byrne is of course, most famous for his role as front man of the band, The Talking Heads, and as such, the soundtrack of my own happy college days. But he's more than that. He's had a long career in music and fine art. He's published books, designed art installations, directed a film. And when we spoke in September, we talked about how he's evolved as an artist and a person.

I will never forget walking home from the student co-op in 1978 with my new Talking Heads album tucked under my arm. I had never heard anything like it before, and once I'd heard David Byrne's wobbly, but assertive and totally unique voice along with the amazing complexity of those rhythms, I needed to hear much, much more. You have such a unique singing voice, so how, how did you develop that singing voice? Cause when you came along, I had never heard anything like that.

DAVID BYRNE: At first the only thing I was aware of is that I didn't want to sound like a, the kind of received version of what a rock and roll singer was supposed to sound like. I thought, well, there's other people who were doing that already. I have to...I have to find a voice that's kind of me. And it's also my generation. It's not, it's not adopting the kind of vocalism or mannerisms of another generation or another people or anything like that. So, it was a process, but that's, that's what I was aiming for.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: David Byrne was a very unlikely rockstar.

DAVID BYRNE: I felt very socially awkward and uncomfortable when I was younger. I was kind of incredibly shy. And yet I managed to make my way, despite that. And in fact, music was a big help that way. I could express myself getting up on stage and kind of blurting out the songs that I'd written. And that, that seemed fine. I didn't see any discrepancy between the two. In fact, in retrospect, I looked at it and thought, well, of course I had to get up and perform. I wasn't able to talk to people comfortably, but I found this other way that I could communicate and I jumped at the chance. I have to say that being. Shy and feeling a bit awkward that way.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Far from being a drawback, Byrne's off-beat social energy gave The Talking Heads it's uniquely cool rock & roll aura. They were often lumped in with acts like The Ramones, Patti Smith, and Blondie. But even within that world, David Byrne was an outlier.

Did you ever see yourself as fitting into a particular sort of school or were you just seeking to do something totally unique on your own?

DAVID BYRNE: I never felt that we exactly fit any of those kinds of genres or schools that were tossed about. And at the time I found it very annoying when we were called a punk band or a new wave band or anything. I found it, I thought, we're our own thing. But then in retrospect, I realized that it's kind of useful as a way of alerting the public that there's something new out there. There's something different. So I thought, okay, shut up. This is gonna serve its purpose for a little while and hopefully that can be abandoned eventually.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: During the early years David Byrne made ends meet working at an advertising and graphic design firm. But no, he said he wasn't moonlighting as Donald Draper.

DAVID BYRNE: I would have probably loved it if I'd gotten a chance to write copy for ads and things like that. I would have been cynical, would have thought, oh, yes, I'm so clever. I can do this. I can manipulate people with my words, but, um, I wasn't doing that. I was just, it was a graphic design place and I was just helping set type and arrange the pretty pictures.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: The starving artist portion of the band's origin story was a short one. Long before Byrne got the chance to start writing copy, The Talking Heads was a sensation. Some of the hits were so popular over the decades that you don't even know you know them. Like "Life During Wartime,"

Sound up: Life During Wartime
RT: 3 seconds
TC in: 02:00
TC out: 02:03

ABIGAIL DISNEY: "Psycho Killer,"

Sound up: Psycho Killer
RT: 4 seconds
TC in: 01:09
TC out: 01:13

ABIGAIL DISNEY: "Once in a Lifetime."

Sound up: Once in a Lifetime
RT: 4 seconds
TC in: 01:19
TC out: 01:23

ABIGAIL DISNEY: His music always poked and prodded and even mocked fundamental American principles of prosperity, conformity, materialism. But in American Utopia there's an even more overt conversation happening, at times directly with the audience.

AMERICAN UTOPIA Local Elections Clip:
RT: 11 Seconds
TC in: 00:00
TC Out: 00:11
Local elections. The average turnout is 20% to give you a visual idea of what 20% looks like. Here are 20% of the people in this theater.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: In this moment in the show, he has a spotlight shines on 20% of the audience to underscore his point. It's a visual gag and it's very striking.

AMERICAN UTOPIA Local Elections Clip:
RT: 15 seconds
TC In 00:11
TC out: 00:26
These are the ones that vote in local elections. The ones up top are waving and laughing because well, they just decided your future and the future of your children. And you guys seem to be okay with that.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Byrne lets the audience know there are tables in the lobby where folks can register to vote right after the show.

So, you see art is like a necessary part of social change movements. Do you see yourself now as a part of social change?

DAVID BYRNE: I do see myself as being much more involved in maybe social change or civic life than I used to be. Which could be just the times we're living in. But I think it's part of growing older too, that when you're young, you're thinking about your own career and you're trying to figure out your life, what do I want to be? How do I do what I want to do? All these kinds of things that's preoccupying you. And then later you can kind of sometimes go wait a minute. I can engage with the wider world in some ways, which little by little found a way to do that. And part of me feels like that the way to do that is to show people what's

possible as opposed to telling them. If I put the, uh, the diversity and the joy and the collaboration and the community on stage for them to witness, I don't need to tell them the message here. They should be processing this on their own and they should get this kind of emotionally and intuitively, rather than me explaining it to them in a text.

A song is not an op ed piece.And it took a while to figure out how to do that in a way where the audience can sense my questioning and vulnerability and me asking these questions of myself. Rather than coming on stage and just giving them what I thought were all the answers.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: It must take some courage to offer vulnerability on stage.

DAVID BYRNE: Maybe, but I've been very lucky. I can afford to take that risk. I realized that if I'm trying to be too explicit or too didactic in what I'm saying, then it kind of closes off who can relate to it. And it closes off what it can be. You have to kind of leave a little bit of ambiguity and then people can find themselves in what you're, what you're saying and what you're writing.

And then later on, after for some years, as I began to loosen up a little bit, I began to experience just this pure joy and performing and singing and making music. And I thought, I can still deal with these sometimes, uh, whatever difficult or confusing subjects, but I can do it in a way that, that simultaneously expresses the joy in the music. And I can do that. And I thought with music you can do that. You could have a, you can be saying conflicting things at the same time. You can convey a kind of joy in the singing and the performance in the music, but then the words can maybe be slightly melancholy.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: You know, you're making me think of Kurt's Schwitter whom you invoke in the show. Didn't he use trash and refuse and off throwings of everything and kind of reposition them as beauty?

DAVID BYRNE: Oh yeah, Kurt Schwitters is an artist. He used to make these collages out of found material, scrap paper and pickets and all this kinds of stuff. He did these kinds of sound poems in a made up language. And the most famous of these was one that he did called The Ursonate that ran for 40 minutes and you can hear it. There’s recordings of it.

Kurt Schwitters - Ursonate: [00:16:41]
RT: 8 Seconds
TC in: 00:26
TC Out: 0:34

DAVID BYRNE: It's got a rhythm to it. It actually sounds, it sounds kind of funny.

But there was a serious intent that he and the other artists who were, trying to break the strictures of kind of rigid thinking that they sensed was kind of taking their countries and the countries around them into a dangerous place.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: And they were right.

DAVID BYRNE: Yeah, they were right about that. And they thought that by doing this, these kind of nonsensical art forms, they might be able to inspire new ways of thinking and new ways of more openness in the world. Uh don't know how much they succeeded, but kind of, well, it communicated to me. I loved it.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Just like with Kurt Schwitters, Byrne's work is full of contradictions. And that's what I found watching American Utopia. There's an emotional complexity to the lyrics *and* the music. The show looks very stripped down and minimalist. No props, no set; just band members performing in silvery gray suits-- barefoot as they move around the stage. But the overt simplicity lies an incredible well of nuance and passion.

If you were describing the show to someone who had never seen it before, what would you say?

DAVID BYRNE: It's--it evolved out of a concert. So there's, there's a lot of music, but it has an arc to it, a narrative arc. There's a thread that goes through it. That takes it a little, that makes it a little bit more a work of theater than just playing one song after another, like we might do in a concert.

The band and I have figured out how to perform and all of us be completely mobile. The show really becomes about us moving about the stage and what we can do and how we can present ourselves to you and talk to you.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: You're like a living organism, all of you up there. It's fantastic.

DAVID BYRNE: Oh, thank you.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: How did you come to that choreography? How did you get there?

DAVID BYRNE: Well, I knew I wanted to work with the choreographer Annie B Parsons. I love the way she uses, I guess what you might call pedestrian movement. It's not like a ballet vocabulary or dance vocabulary. There's a couple of trained dancers on stage, but the rest of us, uh, we come from other areas and it's, that's not necessarily part of our toolkit, but we're willing to give it a try.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Right, right. I love the word pedestrian for it because it's not pedestrian in the sense of it being uninteresting. It's pedestrian in the sense of

being relatable, but what's so wonderful about the way Spike Lee shoots it is he kind of goes for the Busby Berkeley treatment a couple of times where he goes up there for that aerial shot straight down onto the stage.

And all of a sudden I'm seeing all the dance movements from this completely different angle. And it's really interesting and geometric.

DAVID BYRNE: Oh, thank you. Yes. Spike, uh, had seen the show from ground level, from the orchestra. And then I think the second time he saw it, he went up in the balcony and realized this is a completely different show up here. You start seeing all these patterns that were we're making and said I'm going to go even further. I'm going to go completely overhead, from behind, from the side. We'll show you things that as an audience member you could never see.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Oh, it's great. Yeah, I love that so much.

So, the title of American Utopia is interesting to me because, um, you know, in college, I took the utopian lit class and we were all explained the difference between a utopia with a U and a eutopia with a EU, um, was that a conscious, uh, distinction that you were working with when you named it that? And I probably should explain that when it starts with an EU, it comes from the Greek word for good. And if it starts with U, it comes from the Greek word for not. So when it's a U utopia, it is a place that doesn't exist. But when it's an EU eutopia, it's an ideal place and of course you say that the title is not ironic. And I just feel like, is that a bit of trickery on your part? It's not ironic because it doesn't exist.

DAVID BYRNE: I have to admit, I didn't know about the EU spelling. In retrospect, I probably would have chosen that over the U because that's kind of more the direction I was hoping to point.

I was contemplating the idea of doing little videos for all the songs and setting them in a kind of imaginary utopian community that was struggling and had its problems and it had his quirks and all the things that you can imagine. That never came to pass, but it led me to investigate a little bit of the history of these communities. There were lots and lots of them in the United States. The United States being a place that to many people for a long, long time, seemed to be a place where you could make a new start, where these kinds of dreams could be realized, and there were all these utopian communities. There's very few of them left. Some of them, I think, started to run into problems when they had idealistic ideas about sexuality and marriage and things like that, which that's whew.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Things can get messy.

DAVID BYRNE: Things can get messy and they often did. So I wasn't going there, but I love this idea that this country was a place where people could realize

things. And I thought that's-- it might not be in the constitution explicitly, but it's very much how people in the, in the past anyway, have perceive this country and it's, well, it's certainly, it's a deception, it's an illusion, but it's one that's very prevalent. It's getting beaten up a lot lately, but it's, surprisingly, resilient. The idea that we can make a life in our own imagination. And that that might actually get realized. And I thought, well, that's--the idea of that kind of hope and longing that we harbor within ourselves. I thought that's what I'm talking about.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: The show is so optimistic. Um, but it, but it doesn't shy away from pointing out the problems and the threats, especially, you know, the political ones. You only perform one song in the show that you didn't write, which is Janelle Monáe's "Hell You Talmbout." I'm just wondering, did you bring that song in?

DAVID BYRNE: For people who haven't seen it, it's a song that, very very simply, uh, names, people who have been murdered by police over quite a number of decades. And of course it goes pretty much up to the present day. And it basically just says, remember their names, say their name. Remember these people, these people whose lives have been taken unjustly. And I found it incredibly moving. I said to the band, I'm thinking that this might be the song that we do, at the end here. I happen to have her email, I'm going to write to her and see what she thinks.

And she, to my relief, she loved the idea, so I thought, okay, okay, I'm going to, I'm going to do it. We'll see what the audience thinks. And I found that it was also great because it wasn't didactic. it doesn't try to shame the audience. It kind of tells the audience, join us in this--remembrance.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Yes. In this bereavement.

DAVID BYRNE: Yeah. Join us in this.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Yeah. And, and did it, did it matter to you that the audience was going to mostly be white and mostly be well to do?

DAVID BYRNE: Oh, yeah. Yeah. I thought, oh, this is, this is pretty weird, but maybe these are the people who need to hear this. But also, I thought, the show builds up to point into this very kind of celebratory and then we hit them with that. And it's like, it's giving you all this pleasure. Now we're going to punch you in the stomach. And, um, for the most part, the response we were getting and from the audience was, we're really glad you did that. In the times we lived in, it felt absolutely necessary. I think we have to engage with what's going on in the world and hold a mirror up to that rather than just providing another bit of pleasure and entertainment.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: I'm so struck by the way the show ends with the road to nowhere because you know what the heck, when I first heard it, it sounded like, you know, yep, we're on a road to nowhere. Everything is bad. Look at the way we're chasing material things, but of course in the show, it's a party, it's an invitation, it's a festival we're on the road to nowhere and that's good news. Am I right to take it that way?

DAVID BYRNE: Yeah, no, you're absolutely--that's, that's a great example of what I'm talking about what music can do. You can have lyrics that say we're on a road to nowhere, which on paper sounds like, oh, that's pretty depressing, but then you put the music to it and it's joyous! Kind of like a New Orleans funeral, maybe. It celebrates the transience of life instead of it just being doom and gloom. In the concert we used to end with "Hell You Talmbout." But I thought, oh, you know, for Broadway, maybe we could just give 'em a, give 'em a little bit more sugar after that.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: You couldn't have picked a more perfect song to end it with. And by the way, adding little sugar at the end is just right for Broadway, where they invented the phrase, a little song, a little dance, a little seltzer down your pants. So, you know, perfect.

So, so I feel like we've, we've watched you evolve over the years. The seventies and eighties, so much of your music was a critique of consumerism and mass production and conformity and those things. But you take those same songs and, and, the show ends up radiating a warmth and optimism, which is kind of a neat trick as far as I'm concerned.

Your views about consumerism have, have they changed at all? Your view of the American middle class and how did I get here? And the rest of that, I mean, have you, have you evolved in that way?

DAVID BYRNE: Yeah, I would like to think that I have a little bit more empathy now than I did in the past. That I can, I can feel people's longing and their desire for a nice house. I mean, that sounds really simplistic, but you know, a nice house. A yard. When I was a younger person you kind of reject all that stuff go, oh, that's a boring life. That's a dead end. But later on you can see that even though that's not my life, I can see the attraction in it. And I can also see the pain that people must feel recent decades as that possibility seemed to be further and further away.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Yeah. I mean, definitely it feels like an easy life to trash when you're 18 and you actually came from all that comfort.

DAVID BYRNE: Absolutely. I'm not, I'm not necessarily advocating for suburbia and big lawns and everything, but I understand that feeling. I can't just blithely trash, all those values.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: I'm so happy I'm older now. Cause yeah, I don't trash a lot of things anymore. I am, like you, have a lot more empathy than I used to have.

DAVID BYRNE: I think we all evolve. None of us are the same person that we were when we were younger. I hope so, I mean that--that's the possibility that we have as humans, that we can change that way.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: The film American Utopia is streaming now on HBO. And after you're done listening, subscribing, and telling all your friends about the podcast-- go watch it. And the show is coming back to broadway September 2021, so get your tickets now!

And-- American Utopia, isn't the only civically engaged work David Byrne is doing these days. He also started an online magazine and newsletter called Reasons To Be Cheerful, which shares stories of places where things are working very well indeed. Stories we don't get to hear much about in our heated times.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: Do you think there's a chance with things like Reasons To Be Cheerful to break that cycle of pessimism informing our politics?

DAVID BYRNE: I hope so. We've just been doing it for a year now, so we can't totally assess the impact yet. But that's a hope that basing policies on fear, making people feel fear and anger and anxiety. That's kind of paralyzing.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: What kind of feedback have you gotten?

DAVID BYRNE: We get really nice feedback. The negative feedback tends to be, wait a minute! This story isn't cheering me up as much as I was hoping. You guys have to work a little harder.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: You can find that at Reasons to be Cheerful.com. And this past year, his colleagues approached him with a new idea, a journalism series called We Are Not Divided. At first David was skeptical.

DAVID BYRNE: My reaction was, are you kidding? Do you not read the newspapers? What world are you living in?

ABIGAIL DISNEY: But since then he's gotten way on board. So if you want to read some great stories of people coming together across the great political divide, and I recommend you do, Go to We Are Not Divided on The Reasons to

be Cheerful website. And for other updates from Byrne, follow him on twitter @dbtodomundo.

And just to let you know, we're taking next week off. Stay safe, stay healthy.

All Ears is a production of Fork Films. The show was produced by Alexis Pancrazi and Christine Schomer. Lauren Wimbush is our Associate Producer. Sabrina Yates is our Production Coordinator. Our engineer is Veronica Rodriguez, Bob Golden composed our theme music. Additional music from Blue Dot Sessions. Audio from American Utopia courtesy of HBO. The podcast team also includes the VP of production Aideen Kane. Our executive producer is Kathleen Hughes. Learn more about the podcast on our website forkfilms.com. And don't forget to rate review and subscribe wherever you get your podcasts.

Thanks for listening.