

Byrne hits high notes on 'Grown'

Now defined by his own genre, the ex-Talking Head ventures into opera with his new album, out March 16

By Aaron Shakra
Pulse Editor

I half-expected David Byrne's "Grown Backwards" to be a hip-hop album. After all, the musician, photographer, writer and digital artist's collaboration with X-Press 2 yielded "Lazy," a techno, beat-driven romp which hit No. 2 on United Kingdom pop charts in 2003.

Instead, we get opera. These two genres might ring of the label "eclectic," but the fact is, Byrne has transcended so many boundaries and borders during his musical career that the only genre he's in is his own. David Byrne is David Byrne.

CD REVIEW

"Grown Backwards" represents an organic fusion of a lot of the musical themes on Byrne's three previous "song" albums, including 1994's "David Byrne," 1997's "Feelings" and 2001's "Look into the Eyeball." The core band from Byrne's "Eyeball" album and tour — Paul Frazier on bass, Mauro Refosco providing percussion, and the Tosca Strings — remains intact. On the whole, the album is driven by strings and percussion, but on top of that, sections of these tunes include Indonesian gamelan instruments, a theremin and horn sections, not to mention Byrne on a number of guitars.

While Byrne's lyrics have always embraced life's contradictions, the 14 songs of "Grown Backwards" have a newfound power because they navigate these contradictions, finding both a middle ground and conclusion that just wasn't there before.

Furthermore, the tunes have stronger thematic linkage than previous albums. Here, the musician is clearly in love with life and looks at the details of the world with a newfound sense of awe and humbleness.



The cello-driven opener, "Glass, Concrete, Stone," has the singer reminding us that such things are "Just a house and not a home," and, later, "Nothing is impossible / When you're an animal / Not inconceivable / How things can change / I know."



such as: "I don't have any more problems / All of my worries are gone / Beautiful angels appear at my side / And corporate sponsors will act as my guide." In an earlier tune called "She Only Sleeps," Byrne calls out one of the album's best lines: "The world is queer / And the human is the strangest of all."

The tune "Civilization" is something that would amuse an anarchist. Accompanied by accordion, Byrne continually pokes at the song's subject matter: "Civilization, it's all about knives and forks," or, "Just be yourself / well that's what they say / but I barely knew who I was yesterday / I'm going to be that civilized guy someday."

"Dialog Box" is the album's most rocking tune. Wah-wah electric guitar and horns cross musical territory to the point where they're indistinguishable. The whimsical and bouncy "Pirates" is probably the album's musical highlight, with Byrne's downright Caribbean-sounding guitar mixing with interlocking string and percussion sections.

Weak spots on the album are the tunes "Empire" and "The Man Who Loved Beer." The latter has been kicking since 1994 and was actually on the Japanese import of his last release. This says nothing about the tune, but it sounds musically out of place with everything else. The same goes for the former, a cover by the band Lambchop.

And yes, there's opera. Byrne's approach to this is interesting, because he said the decision to record the arias "Au fond du temple saint" and "Un di felice, eterea" were because he believed they were ancestors of Western pop songs. Rufus Wainwright sings with Byrne on "Au fond du temple saint."

"Grown Backwards" will be available in music stores on Tuesday. David Byrne performs Friday on "Late Night with Conan O'Brien," which begins at 12:35 a.m. on NBC.

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This not need indicate complicated subject matter or a lack of humor, however. A tune such as "Glad" — easily one of the album's strongest — has lyrics woven around a simple theme: "I'm glad I got skin / I'm glad I've got eyes / I'm glad I got hips / I'm glad I got thighs / I'm glad I'm allowed to say the things I feel." Toward the middle of the song, Byrne hauntingly sings,



"I'm glad I got lost / I'm glad I'm confused / I'm glad I don't know what I like / I'm glad I got stoned / I'm glad I got high / I'm glad I found out / I'm all right."

This string-driven piece is not too intrusive but perfectly lends emotional resonance to Byrne's vocals. Total running time: less than two minutes.

Mako Miyamoto Graphic Designer/Illustrator

In interviews, Byrne explained that his process for creating the core tunes for "Grown Backwards" stemmed from humming melodies onto a microcassette tape recorder. This melodic approach lends itself perfectly to a string section, so it comes as no surprise that orchestral instruments have never matched Byrne's voice so perfectly.

The melodies, while often saccharine, work as disguise for the less-than-sunny subject matter. This is especially evident in "The Other Side of This Life," an over-the-top romp with the singer ironically delivering lines

'Void' re-creates nature struggle memorably

'Touching the Void' tells the story of two mountain climbers who face immense challenges during descent

By Ryan Nyburg
Senior Pulse Reporter

If nothing else, "Touching the Void" has successfully done what thousands of television news features have failed to do: Create a dramatization that feels real. A dubious honor, but an honor nonetheless.

Most dramatizations, by their very nature, feel fake and unwieldy. Unable to take much artistic license with the story, creators of such dramatizations tend to fall back on flashy camera tricks and melodramatic musical scores to express themselves. This only causes the dramatization to become further removed from reality. The whole process ends up being counterproductive.

MOVIE REVIEW

While "Touching the Void" is not completely bereft of ominously droning musical passages and cheap film school camera ploys, it keeps them to a minimum. The film also benefits from the propulsive nature of its subject matter. As far as stories about human endurance and survival through force of will go, this one is a doozy.

In 1985, mountain climbers Joe Simpson and Simon Yates traveled to the Peruvian Andes to climb the west face of Siula Grande. No one else had ever successfully made the 21,000-foot climb, but the two were able to

accomplish the ascent in a couple of days. But the fearless duo's real test began during the trip down when Simpson broke his leg. While trying to lower him to the bottom, Yates was forced to cut Simpson loose to save his own life. Subsequently, Simpson took a 100-plus foot drop into a deep glacial crevice. He spent the next few days crawling to the bottom of the mountain.

The story is told by those involved, using the standard talking-head interview format. Meanwhile, the entire

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