

Polymaths in Public: David Byrne

January 16, 2017

*"The **polymath**, nerd hero and Talking Heads singer didn't want to write an "aging rocker bio"; instead he penned this lively and wide-ranging collection of essays [Byrne's 2012 book *How Music Works*], addressing everything from the finances of a recent solo album to his evolution as a live performer and music's intersection with technology." - [Billboard.com](#), "100 Greatest Music Books of All Time"*



The quote comes from a long article put together by a large team of *Billboard* writers who somehow determined (voting? argument? arm wrestling?) that David Byrne's *How Music Works* was the 41st greatest music book ever written. Not as great, the team averred, as No. 16, Motley Crue's *The Dirt: Confessions of the World's Most Notorious Rock Band*, but still pretty great. In case you're wondering, No. 1 went to Bob Dylan's *Chronicles, Volume One*. Good call.

They're right too about Byrne's polymathic proclivities. He attended the Rhode Island School of Design and the Maryland Institute College of Art before chucking school and turning his attention to music. In 1975 he helped to found the seminal rock group Talking Heads. He continued to lead the genre-blending and -bending band throughout the 1980s. Along with the other Heads, he was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2002.

But rock music soon proved too limiting. Before the Heads disbanded, he made a quirky film set in Texas, *True Stories*, and staged and choreographed Jonathan Demme's influential concert film *Stop Making Sense*, still regarded as one of the best music films ever made.

In the two-plus decades since, he's founded two world music labels, won an Oscar for the soundtrack to Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor*, and worked on a ballet, two operas, and several movie and television series soundtracks.

We're leaving out countless collaborations and creative projects, most of which bring together different arts and artists in unexpected ways. That, too, is polymathic.