



# THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

## Edinburgh Research Explorer

### How Music Works [Review of the book How Music Works, by D. Byrne]

**Citation for published version:**

Caldwell Brown, S 2015, 'How Music Works [Review of the book How Music Works, by D. Byrne]' Popular Music and Society. DOI: 10.1080/03007766.2015.1073035

**Digital Object Identifier (DOI):**

[10.1080/03007766.2015.1073035](https://doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2015.1073035)

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Peer reviewed version

**Published In:**

Popular Music and Society

**Publisher Rights Statement:**

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis Group in Popular Music and Society on 11/08/2015, available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/03007766.2015.1073035>

**General rights**

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

**Take down policy**

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact [openaccess@ed.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@ed.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



## **How Music Works**

DAVID BYRNE

London: Canongate, 2012

ISBN: 978-0857862501

358 pp., £25.00 (hb)

In recent years, several books have been published which discuss changes in the recording industry as a result of the digital revolution, exploring technological issues such as piracy, copyright, remix culture, playlists, etc. Many of these, such as Matthew David's *Peer to Peer and the Music Industry* and Patrik Wikström's *The Music Industry: Music in the Cloud*, aim to contextualize the present day by delving deep into the past. Barry Kernfeld's *Pop Song Piracy: Disobedient Music Distribution Since 1929* is a noteworthy example.

In *How Music Works*, David Byrne goes beyond providing a historical overview of music by adding personal observations. Best known for his work in Talking Heads, Byrne writes with authority. He was there. Fused with his passionate writing style, the book is a surprisingly exhilarating read, particularly with its vague title promising so little. He explains in the preface that "each chapter in this book focuses on a distinct aspect of music and its context" (9). While some chapters overlap, most work well on their own. In his own words, "the chapters are not chronological or sequential. You can read them in any order" (9).

In the first chapter, "Creation in Reverse," Byrne introduces one of the book's key themes. With recurring use of the word "ephemeral," he explains how music has continuously evolved through the ages, charting the transition from the concert hall to the home. Citing academic literature, he also discusses music in the natural world, going on to explain in the following chapter "My Life in Performance" how, like birds, he sings for pleasure.

In the third and fourth chapters entitled "Technology Shapes Music: Analog" and "Technology Shapes Music: Digital," the transitory nature of music is fleshed out in some

depth. It is in these chapters that Byrne's enthusiasm for music shines through. "Music tells us things—social things, psychological things, physical things about how we feel and perceive our bodies—in a way that other art forms can't" (94), he argues. His musical expertise, perhaps best illustrated by his frequent discussion of acoustics, permeates these chapters. Audio quality is much discussed here, where Byrne's affection for vinyl does not exclude him from impartial observations over the functionality of digital music.

It is 109 pages into the book before piracy is overtly discussed, and Byrne begins in affectionate terms. Elaborating on the perceived health benefits of music, he recalls how "you could make mixtapes that corresponded to emotional states, and they'd be available to pop into the deck when each feeling needed reinforcing or soothing. The mixtape was your friend, your psychiatrist, and your solace" (110). Such an insightful remark exposes how piracy has always been a part of enjoying music. In doing so, the need for music to adapt to new technologies is once again made salient.

This recurring theme is exemplified with speculation on the rumour that the size of CD's was forged by the then president of Sony ensuring it could hold his favourite piece of music (Beethoven's Ninth Symphony). Capturing the changing relationship between music and technology in one colourful example, Byrne does not dwell on the historical accuracy of this claim. Rather, he demonstrates that musicians have long been constrained by the physical limitations of evolving music formats and in particular, the duration of recordings.

Later chapters draw more closely from personal experience. Going into detail in the fifth and six chapters "In the Recording Studio" and "Collaborations," Byrne is at his most autobiographical. Making no assumptions that the reader is familiar with his work, the chapter more broadly documents what it was like to be a musician in the 1980s, including the significance of radio airplay and music videos. The behind-the-scenes discussion which is present throughout the whole book climaxes in the seventh chapter "Business and Finances."

Going into depth on four key changes in the music industry, Byrne asks “what is the purpose of record labels?” (218). In his discussion on music distribution models, he details six different models, drawing from sales data (with excellent figures and diagrams), including those from his own experiences in self-distribution. Citing other recent examples such as Radiohead and Amanda Palmer, this particular section is a real highlight of the book with its obvious contemporary relevance to shifting recorded music practices.

The related eighth chapter “How to Make a Scene,” finds Byrne at his most commanding, essentially mapping out rules for bands to succeed. With references to particular venues discussed in earlier chapters, much emphasis is placed on live performance. He notes for example that “it must be possible to ignore the band where necessary” (261), even sketching out maps of the much-discussed New York music club CBGB with wonderful reflections on this “scene.”

The book’s last two chapters (“Amateurs!” and “Harmonia Mundi”) are less focused than those noted above. In the former, chapter nine, Byrne continues dialogue about the context of music (a central theme throughout), with discussion over eclectic topics such as the 2011 annual operating budget for the New York Metropolitan Opera and “maybe the most successful music education program in the world” (292), which originated in a parking garage in Venezuela in 1975. Appropriately, the tenth and final chapter finds itself pondering how music *really* works, with reference to music theory. Astronomy also finds its way into this discussion, with Byrne noting “you might say that the universe plays the blues” (311).

Though often making reference to academic literature, Byrne draws predominantly from personal accounts. This allows the book to provide the sort of rich, detailed observation absent from most academic texts. Similarly, complex topics are well summarized, with his clear and concise writing style evident from the outset.

Naturally appealing to a broad audience, *How Music Works* will be of particular interest to researchers of popular music studies, music psychologists and ethnomusicologists. Additionally, the book will resonate with musicians (and aspiring musicians) as well as anyone working in the recorded or live music industry. The book will also, of course, interest fans of Byrne's music. Published at a time when digital music growth begins to inspire hope over the future of the recorded music industry, *How Music Works* acts as an artefact to bring together both older and younger generations of music lovers. In doing so, it encapsulates the cultural impact of the digital revolution, complementing academic books on the topic.