

FUSE

A BOMB PODCAST

MUSICIANS

David Byrne & Open Mike Eagle

SEASON 2 | EPISODE #5

David Byrne is a musician, composer, and producer, and the cofounder of the band Talking Heads. His recent acclaimed rock spectacle, American Utopia, toured the world and was adapted into a Broadway play as well as a concert film directed by Spike Lee. Byrne has received Academy, Grammy, and Golden Globe Awards, and was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2002.

Open Mike Eagle has over a dozen solo and collaborative projects to his name. He is the founder of Auto Reverse Records and co-founder of The New Negroes, a standup-meets-music variety show that explores perceptions of Blackness. Eagle's most recent album, Anime, Trauma, and Divorce, was released last year.

Chantal McStay Welcome to FUSE: A BOMB Podcast. Forty years ago, BOMB began as conversation between artists around a kitchen table in downtown New York. Today, FUSE brings you into the room to listen in on candid, unfiltered conversations about creative practice. Here's how it works: BOMB invites a distinguished artist to choose a guest from any creative discipline, an art crush, a close collaborator, or even a stranger they've admired from afar. And we bring them together. No host, no moderator, no interruptions, just two artists in conversation. For this episode, we asked musician and songwriter David Byrne which artist he'd most like to speak with. He chose hip-hop artist and comedian Open Mike Eagle.

David Byrne I'd recently heard some records, songs, things that Mike had done, and I really liked them. But I was also really intrigued. What world is this man coming from? I had lots of questions. What's his background? How did you arrive here? What are the influences? It was all kind of like, wow, how did this happen? So when you guys invited me to talk with someone I said, I would love to talk to Mike and find out more about how he does what he does, where it comes from, what he's thinking, where he's going, all that kind of stuff. I thought somebody would want to talk to you anyway, so let's just, let's put it on the record.

CM Open Mike Eagle has over a dozen solo and collaborative projects to his name. He is the founder of Auto Reverse Records and co-founder of *The New Negroes*, a stand up meets music variety show that explores perceptions of Blackness. Eagle's most recent album, *Anime, Trauma and Divorce*, was released last year. David Byrne is a musician, composer, and producer and the co-founder of the band Talking Heads. His recent acclaimed rock spectacle, *American Utopia*, toured the world and was adapted into a Broadway play as well as a concert film directed by Spike Lee. Byrne has received Academy, Grammy, and Golden Globe Awards, and was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2002. David reveals how he wrote the iconic Talking Heads song, "Burning Down the House," and the pair discuss gatekeeping in the music industry, anime as inspiration, and what punchlines can teach you about songwriting.

Open Mike Eagle It's so funny that you say, "How did he get here?" Because since I knew we were going to have this conversation, that question has been ringing in my head a lot. And I may find myself taking some pauses as I answer, because I have a little anxiety, because your music has been in my life for a very long time. One of my earliest musical memories, when I was like five or six years old, was...it may be, I think it's like the second song I ever remember hearing was "Burning Down the House," and always remember it because it scared me, David. The way that you sing the verses [vocalizes] like that literally frightened me. And, you know, "Once in a Lifetime" is literally one of my favorite songs ever. Like if I were to make an objective top ten list, that song would be on there.

DB Wow. Thank you.

OME Of course and I, you know, I don't know if there's a structure to how we go back and forth with questions or whatever, but you, as far as I know, you know, having started in that New York new wave scene. And I have experience hearing "Once in a Lifetime" just as a song, but I've also heard it sampled in hip-hop songs a couple of really notable times. Once was by Pete Rock and CL Smooth and another time was by Jay-Z. I am very intrigued to know how you feel about having been sampled and how involved you were in the process of those rap records being made off of your song.

DB Well, first off, I have no problem with being sampled. Of course, no problem if I get paid, but you know, morally or musically or whatever, no, I have no problem with it. It's part of how we make music now. And yeah, we don't just get inspired by some music we've heard. We can actually take a piece of some music we've heard and use that as a building block, I do the same thing. But often when I'm writing, I'll get a loop out of something and I'll work on top of that. And then eventually I'll replace the loop. Probably like a lot of people, I've learned that sometimes if I can replace it, it might save me a lot of money.

OME Right? [both laugh]

DB So it's very flattering, because obviously it means somebody listened to your music, whether it is Jay-Z, which it might be, might not be, or it might be the producer or whoever is working with him or whoever is putting together the beats in the loops and whatever that he's working with, they might kind of grab that. Yeah, so I'm aware that there are people working on music who have very wide musical tastes. I've heard like Missy Elliott beats where I go, Wait a minute, that's like, that's like a Japanese record that he just sampled.

OME It's just, it's been—you know, and not to cut you off. I'm always fascinated by that, because I know that people who aren't in hip-hop sometimes have really pointed sort of...just in the way that they think about hip-hop. They don't think of it as quote unquote real music because of the sampling, and because it's not, you know, it's not a lot of

people playing chords and keys and guitars. It's a lot of using other people's records. And like I said, just you being a part of that new way of seeing that I know kind of coincided with the beginning of hip-hop, I just bet that you had like a unique kind of take on it, because your proximity to it was different than a lot of people's.

DB A little bit, there were a few years there where there was a kind of mixing and cross fertilization with different scenes of folks in the Bronx mixing with graffiti kids downtown. And then, like, art rock kids like myself, kind of, sometimes all in the same clubs or hanging out in the same places, which is, that's a really nice moment. I'm going to say that U-Roy—the Jamaican toaster, just passed away—and to many people, he's the father of rap and a lot of hip-hop, which is something that I didn't know my history,

OME You're illuminating that for me right now.

DB Apparently, he was the first person to kind of take the record tracks and kind of toast or rap over parts of the record. And then he got to be so good at it and so much in demand that people said, "We want to put out a record of you doing that, what you, what you've been doing at parties and, you know, street gatherings. We want to record that." And it became a thing. And some of...I forget who it was in the early hip-hop community here, but there were, there were definitely Jamaicans—

OME Yeah, for sure.

DB —in that, in that community. So it's very likely that that all came out that way. Anyway, anyway, that's another whole thing. Okay, I'm going to describe my creative process on "Burning Down the House," and then I'm going to ask you about your process. I think that one started with the band improvising, and we kind of came up with a couple of different sections of things, and we would basically then... we didn't have words, didn't have a melody, anything like that, but we kind of went in, because, "Okay, we're going to play this section for, whatever, 16 bars, and then we're going to go to this other section and we'll go back to the other one," that kind of. So we imagined a structure. Then I would improvise...not exactly the words, but I im-

provided just kind of where the words would fall, like the melody, or the [vocalizes], whatever, all that stuff. And I just sang whatever came into my head and I took that away. I said, “Okay, this’ll be my guide. I’m going to write words to that.” The words on that one, the verses are pretty much all non sequiturs. I mean, they don’t, there’s not, it’s not telling a story, but it has a unified feeling. And I thought, I can do this. I can make this work, and nobody’s going to question it. If they look at it objectively, they’re going to go, “This doesn’t make...we don’t know what you’re talking about.” But when you feel it, the way it’s sung, the way that words are put together, it has a feeling and people just go with it. And then the chorus, the “burning down the house” line, came from a P-Funk concert that I went to. George Clinton started—yes, I have to admit that.

OME That’s beautiful.

DB George Clinton started asking people in the audience...there was a chant that went up, “burning down the house, burning down the house.” I thought, Wait, he hasn’t used this in a song? He hadn’t, and so I thought, That is a great line. I’m going to use it. And yeah, so that’s, I mean, that’s what we do if we hear something like that. So I’m guessing this might be like you. Like, some of those lines that I had—watch out, you might get what you’re after—that might be the first line. Those are the kind of things that I might scribble on a notebook or scribble on a piece of paper and keep those and then I could draw on that. And I could go, Oh, that line, that’ll fit in here. In this room I’m in right now, there’s just piles of paper everywhere. Sometimes with, like, a little phrase that I’ve heard scribbled on the margin somewhere. I thought, Okay, someday I’m going to come back to that and that’s going to be, I’m going to find a place for that.

DB Okay, so, how do you work?

OME You know, for me, it really depends on the song. I have a few different ways of approaching a rap song, you know. One of them is that I hear a beat or something that I really like and I just spend enough time with it so that I can recreate it in my mind, and I can have it playing in my mind, even if I’m not hearing it and then a hook will come out of that. And I try to find some way to make whatever

hook melody I hear interesting or compelling with words. And then I try to pull some theme out of that to write lyrics to. Like, that's, that's one approach. Another is that I also have various notes. A lot of them are digital now, which is not great. I'm still, I'm embracing that, you know, having a bunch of notes on my computer, but I also miss having physical notebooks and things that I've hand-written out. But these notes, they are song ideas, or maybe a verse idea—like they're mostly premises. Like, I'll have a premise for a song. I think it's a lot like how stand-up comedians are, you know, they're people watching and they see something and it becomes a premise for a joke. I think that I operate in a very similar fashion in that I have premises for songs, and I try to...and then, if I hear a piece of music that I like, I'll see if, Oh, can this premise work over the song? Can this premise work over this song? But, it just kind of depends on whether or not the beat or the music speaks to something in me instantly where it causes me to generate a brand new thing, or if it's like, I like this. I want to use it. Let me see if one of these premises work.

DB I have done that occasionally, too. So, occasionally, I'll say, Oh, I'm going to write a song. I want to write a song about, wait a minute, from a dog's point of view, or I want to write a song, imagine a world where things have fallen apart and kind of the cities are...It's all urban warfare. The world I know, of going out to hear music and everything like that, that's a thing of the past. So I can write from that kind of premise. But I don't do that all the time. So when—I even wrote this down, I thought, I suspected that you in the same way that a stand-up comedian would have a premise for a section of things that that person would say, like they would say, "I'm going to talk about this." And like a comedian, when I hear your work, and I think probably other people too, they're going to naturally assume that this is from your own life, the things you're talking about, or your own life, but they might be wrong. Is some of it from your own life? Is all of it from your own life? Or is it a made-up person?

OME I guess the best way to ask this is like...and I'm not asking this just in terms of my own ego-type curiosity, but just like, what have you heard? Because I'm interested in meeting your question in terms of the work that you're familiar with from me, because I think that'll give me the best way to frame the answer.

DB Okay, I've heard a record, Dark Comedy. I've heard what I think is the new record which has "Black Mirror Episode" on it.

[CLIP FROM "THE BLACK MIRROR EPISODE" BY OPEN MIKE EAGLE]

DB I've heard that album. There's one in between, I think a record in between?

OME Yeah, *Brick Body Kids Still Daydream*, potentially.

DB Yeah, yeah, yeah. Which, I think the artwork on the cover of that is just beautiful.

OME Oh my gosh, yeah,

DB I want to ask about the artist that you work with to do the graphics and all that.

OME That was an amazing process, because I had the concept for that artwork, because that entire project is about the housing projects in Chicago that my family grew up in. Like not my immediate family, but my cousins and aunt and I lived about a mile away from there. So we spent a lot of time in this public housing complex that was really huge, and sometimes scary, and like no other place I'd ever been in my life. And it got demolished. The whole system is about like 16 buildings got demolished around 2000 or 2001. And nothing was put in that space. And it took me a few years to realize that, because I think in my mind—I was away in college at the time that it happened. I remember noting that it happened, but in my mind, I naturally assumed that if they were demolishing this housing complex, they were making the way for some new fancy development or some sports arena or something. But if you go to that spot now, it is a giant, empty field on the South Side of Chicago and is really, really stark. And I had a lot of feelings about that. And so I built the album kind of around the feeling that I had about knowing what used to be there and knowing that there's nothing there now, and I brought that concept to the artist and, you know, of personifying the buildings as people. And he, I mean, he just executed beyond my wildest dreams.

I think that that's part of the answer to your question, too, because if you look at the arc, from *Dark Comedy*, which I think is like my third album, to *Anime, Trauma, and Divorce*, which is the most recent one, which is I think my sixth album, I think, I have gotten more personal as I've made albums. I've started off having a lot of...a lot of my work was aimed outward and trying to provide social commentary and thoughts about what's going on in the world and the state of people and wealth disparity and racial injustice and, and little mundane things like about me washing dishes, and, and like, you know, that was my aim. But there had been this natural kind of course for me moving into making things that were a little more real to me. And before my last album—my last album was initially intended to be this, this treatise on anime and where that crosses over into Black culture, like that was where I was aiming, but then, you know, a lot of stuff in my personal life got really hectic. And I was trying to figure out how to like push through some really difficult things that were happening to me, and my therapist reminded me like, Hey. You're very fortunate in that you have this outlet in music to be able to communicate things and express feelings that people would kill to have the sort of outlet that you have. And it kind of occurred to me that I really wasn't taking advantage of it for that. I'd always been so, so conceptual in my approach that I wasn't putting, I didn't feel like I was putting enough of my actual self in the records. And so in my most recent one, it is very, like, it is very much about me, but I have to do it in a way where it's still entertaining for me, because there's a thing where if a person is too earnest in art, it like bothers me for some reason. I think it's just some hang up that I have. Because if you look at a song like "The Black Mirror episode ruined my marriage," like that's not something that literally happened to me, but it is drawing from a very real feeling I felt after watching an episode of *Black Mirror*, you know.

OME Yeah, and those songs work because everybody recognizes those feelings, or those moments. And they go, "I know what, yeah, I know what he's talking about. I mean, it didn't happen to me exactly like that, but I know what he's talking about." And, okay, and I did get that, that the earlier things are a little more impersonal. I heard a kind of, as you said, a commentary or an analysis even of media and hip-hop, the world, the culture, social situations, and then, I guess, more recent things, you're kind of looking inward, looking at yourself

and questioning yourself and your own decisions. And it's—to me, it's incredibly brave and honest to put all that out there and kind of basically stripped down naked and go, "This is me and this is the stuff I deal with and this is the stuff I'm thinking." It's a hard, yeah, it's a hard thing to do, to break out of that objective thing, because I do that all the time and then kind of actually talk about, no, this is the stuff that I'm really going through.

[CLIP FROM "LEGENDARY IRON HOOD" BY OPEN MIKE EAGLE]

OME You know, one thing I definitely want to ask you about is, like, you've had a really robust career in music, and I'm wondering like for somebody who has the creative vision you have and, you know, I watched *Stop Making Sense* for the first time last night and I was high off an edible, and I was blown away. And I thought I knew what *Stop Making Sense* was, because I'd seen clips of it. You know, I'm gonna tell you this one simple thing, David, that nobody ever told me, all these years. Like, I knew *Stop Making Sense* was the concert film for Talking Heads with you in a big suit. Nobody ever told me the suit got bigger over the course of the show. Nobody ever told me that! So I had this incorrect psychological assumption of what it was going to be. And I watched it yesterday. And it was just absolutely mind-blowing. And I watched a little bit of *American Utopia* today, and I'm just seeing, like, the depth of the vision. And I see that you've been doing this now for years, and you've been able to maintain a sense of pure vision in a business that seems to always want to, like, attack that and dominate that. And I wonder for you what has been the key to maintaining the energy to be so creative, when I can only imagine there's been times when the business has tried to either push you away from that into like, Oh, you could just be, you could be a pop star. You could be Madonna, you could, you know, I see that as something that has probably happened. And I just wonder how you've been able to maintain your creative integrity so deeply for all of this time in the business?

DB Wow. Well, thank you. Yes, you're right, there was a period where this kind of, I don't know what you'd call it, the carrot was being dangled in front of me. Like, "You're on the ladder now. You can be a big star and be playing, doing this, if you just keep doing what you're

doing.” And at the same time, I thought, But I like being able to do different kinds of things. I like being able to change and I know I’m going to lose some audience if I do that, but I don’t want to be trapped in what I do. So I kind of stepped away from it a little bit, which for my mental and creative health, I believe that that was a good thing that I did. But yeah, it did result in some career ups and downs, some economic ups and downs. And there was a period when records were not selling so much. I went from playing, you know, nice, big theaters or whatever to playing little clubs, to kind of back where you started kind of thing. And I thought, Okay, but I’m still playing music, I’m still doing it. I’m going to keep doing it if I can. And eventually, maybe, I’ll find something or something’s going to click with people. Maybe not everything I do is going to click with people, but once in a while it does, and maybe that’s all I need. To just connect every once in a while. I can’t, like, write a hit song if somebody tells me to. But occasionally something happens. Occasionally I kind of...it comes together and I do something and people like it. That has, yes, that has saved my life. I’ve also been, I think, very lucky when I was coming up, playing with Talking Heads in a little club. And it was a period where a whole bunch of other bands were playing out. There was a little scene, the press came, the record labels came and signed everybody up, all that kind of stuff happened. And I thought, a year or two later, that wouldn’t have happened. Year or two earlier, it wouldn’t have happened. I just happened to be writing and performing at that moment. I was very, very lucky. That took me on a journey that paid for me to have a house and well, you know, all that. I don’t have that house anymore, but that happens too.

DB You brought some of the influences. You brought some of these things up, like anime, and I thought, Are there specific books or movies or things that you can mention that you go, “That had a huge effect on me”?

OME Yeah, so the kind of anime...there’s two kinds that really resonate with me. One is kind of, it’s a more traditional that’s called shounin anime. And those are like the power fantasy enemies. So like your *Dragonball Z*, your...Gosh, let me think of another one. *Full Metal Alchemist*. Gosh, but that’s not...that stuff is like, hero’s journey stuff. And I think it’s just really important for people who feel marginalized

or oppressed in any way. I think like that stuff resonates with them because it stimulates their imagination and allows them to imagine having power in situations where they don't feel powerful. So that's pretty straightforward, I guess. There's another kind of anime that always resonates with me and I don't know if it has an official name, but I like to call it trauma anime. They do this really interesting thing in a lot of anime where you meet a character, you meet a protagonist in episode one in a situation where it feels kind of like a slice of life. You're just seeing a person go through life. Like there's this one called *Tokyo Ghoul*. And in this world, it's a normal civilization, but within civilization, there are people who look just like you and me, but they can only survive by eating other people. And they go through the night and they do that and they try to leave no evidence of it. So people keep disappearing, and they know that there's people eating people, but they don't know who's doing it. Because it's very important for the people doing it to keep it a secret, but it's also, biologically, the only way they can survive. They can't, they literally can't eat anything else. And this show starts with you meet this kid in high school, he's like a nervous guy, you meet a buddy of his and they seem kind of socially outcast. But generally, you know, good-hearted boys, and this guy tells this other guy, this girl he got a crush on, and he's gonna ask her out and he does, and they go on like a lunch date. And he's kind of nerdy, and she's kind of mousy, but like he says he likes her and she says she likes him too. And it's this nice moment and they're taking a walk and they walk through an alley and then she tries to eat him. Right in the middle of this episode, and throughout the show you watch this change disturb him emotionally in every way that you can imagine. Like you see him unravel and become a different person based on this change. And the depth that these sorts of anime go resonates with me. It's just not the depth of character that you get in these stories, because a lot of American entertainment doesn't push the characters that far. Just psychologically and emotionally, you get to see humans just go places that you just don't see in other types of stories.

DB Wow. And I don't know those anime titles at all. I only know like Akira.

OME Akira is perfect. That's trauma anime for sure.

DB Yeah, I mean, I know that and *Ghost in the Machine*—

OME *Ghost in the Shell*, yeah.

DB *Ghost in the Shell*, the Japanese one, not the live action remake. And yes, and those are like world building. Creates a whole world that you just fall into as soon as you start seeing it. Then that brings me to filmmakers that do that. And I'm thinking of like, Terrance Nance, did the TV show I think a second season is coming.

OME *Random Acts of Flyness*, yes.

DB Yeah. Yeah. *Random Acts of Flyness*. And he did a film, oh, years ago. Something about her beauty. Oh, God, somebody is gonna know the right title of it. It's a really, really innovative film. And who else am I thinking of. Boots Riley?

OME Mm hmm. Yes. I love Boots.

DB He was—probably still is—a musician who would score, who did scores. And then, yeah, did this amazing...again, it's like a sci-fi film, but it doesn't start off that way.

OME Yeah, and it's just that same arc, like that same arc of, yeah, you following a guy and his economic struggles, and then you, you see this whole conspiracy with these horse people. And that is what I love. And that is, you know, like, that's the, that's the stuff that I strive to make musically. And the stuff that, honestly, I'm trying to make in TV, too. But it's just, it's been really tough for me to...you know, the gatekeeping is, is something else.

DB Yes. But I mean, I find it encouraging that he did it. Went from music to doing a film and I thought, Okay, it's not impossible.

OME It's not impossible.

DB Every once in a while somebody does it and you go, Look, look, yes, the gatekeepers were asleep, or out getting coffee or something.

When you're working, do you think of who's listening? Do you think of an audience? Do you have an imaginary audience that you're kind of directing what you're doing to or are you doing it just for yourself, and whoever hears it hears it?

OME I began my career definitely thinking, just for myself. As my career went forward, especially when I started—I started doing a lot of work out here in LA, where I would do my music on comedy shows, and perform in front of a lot of comedy audiences, because compared to the underground rap audience I came from, I found that the comedy audiences were really listening to the words. And that was so exciting to me, because I hadn't really experienced people hearing the thought that I was putting into the words, because they weren't paying as much attention as these comedy audiences were. So I started from writing for me, and then after that experience, I started kind of trying to think about people more, but then I ultimately found that fruitless, and went back to just thinking about me, because what I found in my journey is like, I don't, just like this conversation happening and how it's surprising to me, because I'm like, How has David Byrne heard of me? I'm never sure who has or hasn't heard of me, and I'm never sure how they will. And so in my career journey that's meant all kinds of different people have found something in my stuff. And you know, that's out of the good fortune of me being able to continue to make music and people have found something in it, but it's not...I found it fruitless to try to think about audience, because there was too many different types of people in my audience.

DB Yeah, it sounds like if you were at comedy clubs...Okay, so tell me what you did. Did you have like a laptop with the, the beats and the music on it that you could hit and then go into something or...And then would you change it from night to night? Like say, Oh, I'm going to rewrite this section and see if it works better.

OME I wouldn't change the songs as much, but I would definitely change the songs that I would do. I would change my set list a lot, because there was this weird balance of depending on the comedy show. Like sometimes doing my funnier songs was not a good idea in a comedy show, because then it kind of felt like a pandering thing, sometimes. Sometimes it was better for me to do my more serious

stuff to provide some contrast for the comedy show. And that was something I always had to kind of feel out from night to night.

DB And the audiences were fine with that? They weren't like, Hey, where's the funny stuff?

OME No, because typically, it would be 75 to 80% funny stuff through the whole night and then just me doing music. I'd be the only person doing that. And I think that there's something about the way that I even go about writing serious songs that works in that arena.

DB That sounds great.

OME I have had some awful experiences opening for comics, but you know.

DB I can imagine it. Yeah, both you and a comic, you're just up there alone, and if they're not listening to the words, if they're not doing it, it's not working for them, boy, you know right away.

OME Here's a question for you. I was fascinated to find out that you founded Luaka Bop. I had no idea that was your undertaking at all. And that's also some music that through my life, like Tom Ze, Os Mutantes, like that type of stuff and like, because I listen to music the way that hip-hop producers do, I hear a lot of stuff and that stuff was always so good. I was blown away to find out that you started that label. And I'm wondering like, do you enjoy the business of music in that sense, in terms of trying to take something that's unknown or underheard, underappreciated, and put resources into it and trying to get it to where people hear it?

DB That part I love. To be honest, I'm not as involved in the label as I used to be. I have some records right now that I'm listening to that they're going to put out and I spent years putting it together. There's one that they just did with Pharaoh Sanders, the jazz saxophonist, and a young electronic musician in England called Floating Points, and they did a record together. And it is so beautiful. And I thought, Man, I hope people hear this. Because it's not, you know, it's not like a pop jazz record. It's not like he does beats. Well, if you know, Pha-

raoh Sanders stuff, “The Creator Has A Master Plan” and all that, it’s, it’s very spiritual. Anyway. Some of this Tom Ze, I heard that on vinyl. You know, we go into a record store. It’s just in Brazil, and I bought records blind. I looked at the cover, and I go, What the hell is this? It says samba on the cover, but it’s got barbed wire on the graphics. I thought, This guy has something to say. So yeah, I got it home, and sure enough, I just thought, Oh, my God, this guy is...he is totally out in the avant garde with anything that’s happening in this country, in Europe, whatever, he’s doing it. And of course, there were other people doing it, too. I thought, People need to hear this! You know, we’re very kind of inward looking. We think that everything happens around us. And I thought there were things going on there and in other places as well that make us a little more humble if we heard some of the things that other people were doing.

OME I want to just take a moment to really thank you for your approach to that. Because, you know, all throughout especially, you know, American rock music history, there’s been a lot of borrowing inspiration and sometimes outright theft of music that was made elsewhere or made by poor people, and a lot of times what I have not liked in a lot of American music history is that you can hear bands who you can hear very obvious Black blues inspiration from and they never point back to those people, and I’ve always appreciated how you have pointed out all of your influences, whether it be, you know, World Music [failla], whether it be dadaist poetry, there’s a certain reverence that I think just makes all the difference in the world in terms of how music goes forward, because it’s very easy to just make it seem like you’re just doing something new and just take all the props and run, but I’ve just always appreciated how much you’ve pointed at other people and really tried to shine a light where there wasn’t much.

DB Thank you. I discovered at one point—probably was not right away, but eventually I discovered that it really doesn’t cost you anything to give people credit. You know, it’s not like you give anything up. Since you were in these comedy clubs, were there any comedians whose work influenced you?

OME Most of the comedians that influenced me was stuff that I’d

been listening to before I even started performing in those kind of clubs. So a lot of people I never got to meet or work with, like, Steven Wright?

DB Oh, yeah, yeah, I hear that, I hear that.

OME There's like, a lineage of him that went through like Mitch Hedberg, and the most modern day equivalent is probably Anthony Jeselnik. Like, the whole thing they're doing is coming up with these little, like, mind exploding machines of one liners, ways that they can subvert expectations really quickly in these tiny stories and turns of phrase. That sort of approach to the craft of joke making and writing has influenced me a lot.

DB Wow. Yes, I can hear that.

OME What do you think of the current state of the music business in terms of the difference in revenue, I should say, that an artist can make since things are mostly digital now and how that effects musicians trying to make a living? I know you would only answer that from your perspective and how you see things, but I just, I'm interested because you've seen it develop and change so much over the years.

DB Yeah, I definitely have opinions about it. To give us some perspective, during the CD era, record companies were making money hand over foot, baby. It cost them, I don't know, 50 cents to make a CD after the first couple years, and they were still charging, whatever, \$15 for these things. This was just like, money was just pouring in. And it was totally unfair. They could have charged half as much for CDs as what they charged, and still done alright, but they'd established, you know, this level of price and people just kind of kept going at it. And I thought, You know, you're kind of asking for it here. I've spent some time kind of trying to figure out the streaming income, which is really hard to figure out. Record companies are now coming back up, they're making money. I have to believe that it's mainly a handful of very, very popular artists that are driving all that success. The emerging artists and artists on the kind of middle and lower tiers of whatever sales or streaming numbers, I thought, For them, it's very,

very hard to make a living. They're still making, you know—even myself too, make a living doing live shows. And maybe if a song gets licensed for a movie, or something like that. I thought, Okay, so that's really hard. It both shocks me, and really makes me feel good that when I, you know, when I'm just kind of browsing around and seeing what new music is out there, this incredible music, your music.

OME Thank you.

DB You know, the odds of people doing all kinds of stuff. And I thought, How is that possible? How is this possible that all these people are doing great stuff, and it must be really hard to make a living doing it? People must really love music. Because they keep doing it, in spite of the economic difficulties.

OME That's true.

DB I mean, it really is something that kind of is a, you know, a healing something that people need in their lives. And it feels like, for God's sake, it's so important to people, can we just like make a living doing it?

OME Yeah, because I think what has really changed in the short time I've been in the business is the path of upward mobility seems to have really changed. And with that path feeling more closed off, it's just, the revenue situation is tough now, because the streaming, the formulas they're using to come up with the streaming revenue, it doesn't scale down. If you only have 50,000 fans, if you're even lucky to have that, what you're going to be able to generate with them streaming your music, it's just not...it doesn't compare to when 50,000 people were paying, you know, 10 bucks a pop to have a listen to what you're doing.

DB Exactly. When they're paying 10 bucks a pop, you could pretty much kind of live on that.

OME Yeah, yeah.

DB And then that would allow you to do the next thing that you were

going to do. And now it's like, Wait a minute, so now I have to have 100 times more fans than what I already have. And I just thought, Well, what if my music doesn't have that kind of appeal?

OME Right? If it's not mass market?

DB What do I do? Doesn't mean there's anything wrong with the music. There's plenty of music that doesn't get, you know, recognized for years or decades or whatever. But it's still good.

OME We can have a pity party, for sure. Well, David, I'm gonna say just thank you for reaching out and speaking with me. It's really been...like, I don't use this word a lot, but it really feels like it's been a delight. I just appreciate it, and it's been really nice to talk to you.

DB And for me, yes, also a delight, and I hope that we can actually physically meet and have a drink or a coffee or something, someday.

OME Absolutely.

CM FUSE is produced by Libby Flores, Associate Publisher at BOMB. It is edited and engineered by Will Smith, with production assistance by Josh Dassa. I'm Chantal McStay, Associate Editor at BOMB magazine. Our theme music is "Black Origami" by Jlin. This project is supported in part by an award from the National Endowment for the Arts on the web@arts.gov. Subscribe to views on Apple podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you listen.

[CLIP FROM "ONCE IN A LIFETIME" BY TALKING HEADS]