

WE ARE FAMILY SEASON 2 EPISODE 21: David Byrne

David Byrne: My name's David Byrne. And for me, family is beyond a blood connection, although there's definitely that, but also the connection with friends and colleagues and people that you see regularly and you work with, and we tend to think of those people as part of our family, not just the people that we're genetically related to. It kind of goes beyond that. It goes to a little community that we all create for ourselves.

Julia Dennison: Hello, and welcome to *We Are Family*. I am your host, Julia Dennison. And I am here with the musical legend that is David Byrne. You'll know him, of course, from Talking Heads, but he's also been an actor, filmmaker, and writer. And he's currently starring in his own show on Broadway, *American Utopia*, which has been called the best live show of all time. And I can confirm, it's truly an amazing experience. David, welcome to the show. Thank you for coming on.

David:

Thank you. Thank you. It's good to be here.

Julia:

So, let's talk a little bit about *American Utopia*. You released it as your first solo album in 14 years. What made you decide to turn it into this beautiful spectacle of a Broadway show?

David:

It wasn't initially my idea to turn it into a Broadway show. I was putting it together as a concert tour, which we did for a while. And some Broadway producers saw it, and said, "You have to bring this to Broadway." I didn't know who they were, but that planted the seed in my head. So, after that, I started thinking, well, how would I change it so that it works in a Broadway theater? Because it's a different world, it's a different set of expectations that the audience brings when they come to a Broadway show rather than, say, a music concert.

David:

Yeah. So I thought how can we change that? What needs to be changed?

Julia:

And it was so beautiful, just before we hit record, Sam, the producer, and I were just telling you about how emotional it really made us feel coming a little bit out of this pandemic that we've been in, to see *American Utopia*. It was just such a beautiful experience. And obviously, we're a parenting podcast here, so I always look at things through the lens of parenthood. And one of the themes I really loved from the show was the idea of how as humans we really love to look at other humans, and that's what we love to do most. And I feel like in a way that gets at the crux of why parenthood is so fascinating, and wonderful, and complicated, and hard at the same time. Can you talk a little bit about that concept of the need to look at other humans and how that influenced your production?

David:

I've come to realize that, as a species, we're social animals. There are certain animals that kind of live alone, and then they only get together to mate, and then they kind of go off on their own again. We're not like that, we're built to be social. And part of being a social animal means that you're kind of paying

attention to how other people are relating to you. We've evolved to really pay a lot of attention to people's faces, what they're communicating through their faces, through their body language, through their gestures, through the tone of their voice. That tells us how that person is relating to us and how we're relating to them, if they're listening to us, if they're feeling kindly towards us, if they're liking what we're saying or what we're doing, all those sorts of things. We've evolved to really kind of pay a lot of attention to other people, it's kind of how we survive. It's how we thrive.

And yeah, so I realized that, okay, how do we incorporate that into a stage show? And while one way of doing it is to take away everything else. So that's a lot of what we did, which sounds very simple to remove all the kind of instruments, and amplifiers, and bits and bobs, and microphones, and everything else from the stage, everything. That is a simple idea, but technically it's very difficult and very complicated to realize. There's a lot going on backstage that allows us to be on stage without any of that stuff.

Julia:

I figured that, it's one of those things where to have that simplicity is actually, I can imagine, quite challenging and a lot happening.

There was one moment that I wanted to hear a little bit the backstory, again because we're a parenting podcast so I'm always thinking about younger generations and kids, but you have a song on the album and in the show called Everybody's Coming To My House, and lyrics are, Now Everybody's Coming To My House And I'm Never Going To Be Alone. And you talked in the show a little bit how, for you, that was kind of a lament of wanting space and time to yourself. But then I think you spoke to some kids who saw it as the opposite, is that right?

David:

We invited a high school choir in Detroit, Michigan, to interpret the song, they did an incredible job. But what struck me was that their version, and I could say this in the show, they didn't change a single word, but somehow the meaning of the song was transformed... My version, it appears that I'm kind of being a little bit who I am and kind of being a little bit apprehensive about all these people coming over to my house, and how do I deal with that, and feeling a little socially awkward. The kids felt like, oh, no, let's invite more people over, let's invite everybody over. ~~Cough~~ Let's welcome them. And it was a much more generous spirit than my own. And so I thought that's wonderful. I don't know how they did that, but they really transformed it into something better than what I started with.

Julia:

It reminded me a little bit of something else you mentioned in the show about how babies' brains have hundreds of more neural connections than we do as adults, and then we kind of lose them as adults. And it does kind of make me realize that there is some inspiration to be had from these younger generations, just because their brains are firing in a totally different way than ours might be.

So, I'd love to talk a little bit about your childhood. You were born in Scotland, and then you moved to Canada, and you eventually settled in the U.S. at age 8.

David:

Yes.

Julia:

How much do you remember from that time period?

David:

I remember a little bit in Canada. Of course, I remember the snow. There was a lot more snow than there was in Baltimore. I remember some of my friends, I remember running around the neighborhood there, but that's about it. That's kind of the childhood memories.

Julia:

Do you remember that move to the U.S. when you were eight? Did that take some assimilating?

David:

Yeah, of course, I remember moving into a new apartment in the Baltimore suburbs. I remember going to a new school. And the Canadian school system, I think, starts a little earlier or is maybe a little more accelerated because when I got into the Baltimore public school system, I thought, oh, man, we've already covered this stuff. I can coast here for a while. We've already done all this.

Julia:

Can you tell us a little bit about your parents, what kind of parents were they? What were your mom and dad like?

David:

My parents were both Scottish, came from Glasgow. They were what in Scotland and other places would be called a mixed marriage, which in that context means that one family is Catholic and the other is Protestant. To many people, that may seem like it is of no consequence and, well, so what? But in certain cultures and countries, that does mean a lot. For instance, in Glasgow, where they're from, there are two football teams, football meaning soccer, and one is kind of for the Catholic fans and one is for the Protestant fans, it's kind of unbelievable to say that, but... Yeah. And you only need to look at the conflict in Northern Ireland to see how seriously people take this.

Julia:

Absolutely.

David:

So, that's my parents' background.

My father trained as an electrical engineer and then was hired by an American corporation, Westinghouse. That was part of a kind of phenomena at that time where the U.S. was, especially these big corporations were recruiting immigrants who were trained. So, places like Scotland who didn't have work for people like my father, they kind of lost out. They lost a lot of these people to the U.S. and elsewhere. So we ended up in Baltimore, living and growing up in... I grew up in the suburbs there.

Julia:

Did you stay in touch with your family back in Scotland?

David:

Yes, we would go, I think it was maybe every couple of years maybe, in the summers on school vacation. We'd go back to Glasgow and my parents would visit their parents. I'd visit cousins, and uncles, and aunts, and all of that, the kind of normal family thing. But we only got to do it every once in a while.

Julia:

What were your memories of those summers? Were they good summers?

David:

Yes, it was all fine. I remember... In retrospect, you realize how different their lives were from the lives, say, in suburban Baltimore. My grandparents' house was heated by coal fires, so you had to get up in the morning.

David:

And someone, whoever got up first, had to start a fire, and that's kind of how the house would get warmed up. And somebody would bring coal, the merchant would bring coal and there was like a chute outside the house that would dump it into the basement. I mean the same thing used to happen here in New York, but it stayed on in Glasgow for a long time.

There were other kinds of things I remember, I remember that to get gas to cook breakfast, let's say, you had to put a shilling in a meter and that would give you gas for a certain amount of time. It was like a parking meter or whatever, you got a certain amount... long enough to cook breakfast. You had to pay as you go.

David:

Glasgow, I remember, was black, the soot from all those coal fires.

David:

You could smell the coal everywhere. I grew to associate that smell with my grandparents and all my relatives, so I kind of liked that smell, but it made all the buildings black.

Julia:

Wow.

David:

Now they've sandblasted and cleaned the buildings there, it's a beautiful red sandstone all over Glasgow. But decades ago, the buildings were all black.

Julia:

So, now thinking back of your own childhood, what kind of a child were you like. And obviously you're hugely creative in your career now, was creativity something that your parents encouraged in you?

David:

I was a child who was...I had friends, but I was also very happy being alone and doing things on my own, whether it was drawing, or going exploring in the woods, or whatever it might be. I had no problem with that. And my parents did not push me into any of those kind of things. Like if they saw that I had an

interest in art, or drawing, or something like that, they didn't say, "Oh, oh, we're going to get you some lessons or anything." There was none of that, but they didn't discourage me either, which I think was very important. They just left me alone to do what I wanted to do. And I think that was really, really important for me that it wasn't like, "Oh, you're wasting your time doing that." There was no attitude like that. It was just like, "This is what David wants to do, let him do it."

Julia:

Just let him, yeah.

David:

Yeah. So I'd just go off into my room, or down to the basement, or wherever it happened to be, and I'd just spend hours kind of drawing.

Julia:

That's wonderful. You spoke to Amy Schumer on her podcast a little bit about the fact that you believe you might be on the autism spectrum. And I was wondering whether that was something you had at an inkling about growing up and what that meant for your career and your relationships growing up?

David:

It wasn't until I was older that a friend said, "David, do you know about this thing called the Asperger's, and this idea of the spectrum, an autism spectrum?" And she said, "This sounds like it describes you, some of this." And so I've had no I no idea growing up or anything, but when I read about this, I thought, oh, some of this I recognize, that I felt a little uncomfortable socially. I didn't quite know how to do things, and what to do, and how one was supposed to behave in certain ways. That I was, as I said, very happy being alone if that was the situation. I could kind of have this laser focus on whatever I was doing, whether it was drawing or making little models, or whatever kind of thing that I did at the time.

It wasn't until later on that I was told, oh, this was slightly unusual and that there's a name for this. Of course, so I realized, oh, yes, okay, that describes me. But for me, I also realized this was very mild and it was also something that, as I think happens with others, you kind of grow out of it over many years, or at least you grow out of certain aspects of it. I'm no longer as socially uncomfortable as I used to be. I hear funny stories from friends about going to, say, a party or a gathering with me, and then me just sitting there silently listening, or going off in the corner and kind of taking interest in who somebody else's book collection rather than engaging in conversation.

I never saw it as being a kind of disability or a problem for me. Of course, that's who you are, you just think that's who I am. I find, say, exploring somebody else's books very interesting. I felt maybe a little more comfortable talking with them, but I could kind of understand who they are by looking at their books. I think that being a performer was a kind of compensation for that. It allowed me to kind of put myself forward on stage and then I could retreat into myself when I came off stage. But it also allowed me to have an outlet that way to express myself in ways that I was not able to do socially.

Julia:

So, at the top of the show, you talked about the importance of family not necessarily being biological, but our village, our found family. As you moved away from home, who became part of your found family, so to speak?

David:

I went to art school after high school. And yeah, I had a couple of close friends that I hung out with, became roommates. I realized in retrospect that given that I was socially awkward, I would tend to gravitate towards people who were very gregarious and social.

Julia:

Interesting.

David:

Yeah, so I could kind of latch onto them and they would be the outward connection, and I could just be there and kind of listen and tag along.

Julia:

Ride their wave. I like that.

David:

Yes. It sounds a bit calculating when I describe it that way. And of course, if it was calculated, it was very unconscious. I was not aware that I was doing this. But in retrospect I look at it and go, oh, I see what you were doing. You were using your friends to facilitate being social.

Julia:

It makes sense.

So, I want to talk about you as a dad. So you were married in 1987, your daughter was born in 1989.

David:

That's correct. Yeah, yeah.

Julia:

Can you tell me about her full name, because it sounds very meaningful?

David:

Malu Abeny Valentine Lutz Byrne, that's her full name. She may have added more to it since then, I'm not sure. We gave her lots of options. And I think we told her at some point. "You can pick one of the other names if you want, it's really up to you." But she stuck with Malu.

David:

Of course, as with any parent, you kind of relive your own life, in some ways, vicariously through this young person who's discovering the world, and discovering other people, and discovering themselves. And you kind of forget what that's like. And this young person, your child, reminds you that you did this as well, you went through this same process and experience. And it's kind of wonderful to watch it unfold with them

Julia:

What kind of parent were you to Malu, how would you describe your parenting style?

David:

I seem to remember that I was the more... I don't know, not discipline, but I was the more restrictive parent. I was the one who was more restrictive about, "No, you can't watch more TV." Or, "You can't watch another Disney video." I was a little more kind of lay down the law in some kind of ways. I was okay with that. That's the way I felt. But in other ways, both my wife and I were incredibly tolerant. Malu would.... There was a period where she decided to wear a wig all the time. She could be a character like in a fairytale if she had a wig and hair that she could toss back and all that. And we just let her do that and she'd wear it outside and wear it around. I think the school, at some point, might have said, "Her head's getting really sweaty under there."

David:

But other than that, we kind of let her do whatever she wanted to do in that way. We let her express herself however she wanted to, she could explore how she wanted to be.

Julia:

I feel like there are so many conventional elements to being a parent, the boring, mundane, repetitive tasks that need to be done, the disciplining. How did you deal with that? Was that something that came easy to you? Were you really kind of into those sort of mundane elements of being a parent?

David:

To be honest, a lot of the mundane elements were really difficult for me, the kind of routine that you have to abide by. A child really likes a routine. Once there's a pattern, they kind of like to expect that to continue. And I think I also, as with a lot of first time parents, I was trying to figure out how do you be a parent? And there's plenty of books about it, but really you have to kind of figure it out for yourself as you go, which is not always easy. Yes, there's books, but the kind of instruction manual does not really come with the child.

Julia:

I know. I always say nobody's an expert in being parent. You can read up all you want and you can be an expert in the topic of parenthood, but nobody knows really what they're doing when it comes to being a parent.

David:

Yeah, yeah.

Julia:

But so you're now a grandfather, yes? I think your grandson's about three years old.

David:

Yes, I'm now a grandfather. Malu has a son who is about two and a half, something like that.

Julia:

What's your relationship with your grandson?

David:

We get along great. As often happens with grandparents, I get to play with him and we do things together and we have a lot of fun together, but I don't have to do a lot of the mundane stuff.

Julia:

Right.

David:

They live in a different town. They live upstate couple hours north. So I don't see them every day. It's not like we're neighbors, it's not like I get handed the grandchild and said, "Okay, grandpa, you're a babysitter today." I get to not have those responsibilities.

Julia:

That's the nice part I think about being a grandparent, so I hear anyway. What are some of the things you love to do with your grandson? Do you listen to music? Have you introduced him to your music at all?

David:

Yeah, a little bit. He knows that's what I do. I think he's seen me on a video or something like that, so he can imitate my dancing. Sometimes I'll play an instrument for him, but not necessarily sing. The singing part is, it's just the rhythm. A child will get a rhythm, like if you just play a rhythm on a guitar or something like that, the child will start dancing to it immediately. It's kind of amazing how it affects our bodies, how music does that. And they love it. They love it when you, say, start slow and then go faster and faster. That's really exciting. You can play an instrument and follow them from room to room. So, all those things.

Julia:

It's just wonderful seeing their whole personality take shape in their own individual way.

So, the last question that we always ask everybody on the podcast is, what are your hopes and dreams for your family for the future?

David:

Oh, hopes and dreams for family in the future... Probably like anything, we hope that we all stay connected, hope that we all can find happy, engaging lives for each other, and that we find a way to be kind to ourselves, to the rest of the people in our extended family. And that's what we can bring to the world.

Julia: That's a beautiful way to end this show. Thank you so much, David Byrne, for coming on the podcast. This has been such a wonderful chance to talk to you. Thank you.

David: Thank you very much.

Julia Dennison: Thanks so much for listening to my conversation with the incredible David Byrne, next time you'll hear what it's like raising teenagers, who also happen to be multi-Grammy award-winning musicians. I'll be speaking to actor Maggie Baird, mom to Phineas and Billie Eilish.

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We Are Family is presented by me, Julia Dennison, and produced by Sam Walker. Editing is by Vincent Cacchione, and thanks also to the rest of our production team at Pod People, Rachel King, Matt Sav, and Danielle Roth. We'll see you back here next week for more *We Are Family*!