DINNER FOR FOUR: St. VINCENT, DAVID BYRNE, DJ SPOOKY & I

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I grab an empty seat across from a quiet guy with a beret at the back of the shuttle bus to UTM after my Sheridan animation class. I plug my ear buds in and set my gold iPod Nano to shuffle. The horns of a David Byrne & St. Vincent song emerge from my ear buds.

I avoided their album, *Love This Giant*, because I never felt an immediate connection to it. Its weird, abstract feel overpowered and distanced me. But now feels like the right time to delve into their compilation—I enjoy abstract music in transit because it can’t be associated with a particular space. I run my finger along my iPod’s scrolling pad and the screen brightens. It reads “David Byrne & St. Vincent: Dinner for Two”.

My eyes widen as Byrne and Annie Clark’s voices subtly harmonize:

There’s something I should tell you
But we are never alone.

On the first listen I mistook them for:

There’s something I should tell you
*That* we are never alone.

I realize this misconception drew me into the song. It made me think about two people having dinner with a ghost or some other-worldly presence alongside them, and it inspired me to listen more and listen deeper. My fascination with this lyric brought about the song’s complexity.

*Love this Giant* is a horn-based compilation album by David Byrne and Annie Clarke (St. Vincent). Track three, “Dinner for Two” opens with a piece played with trombones, trumpets, a tuba and cornets. The music quiets down as the song moves into the first verse sung by Byrne in a first-person narrative.
What story is he telling? It seems harmless enough—a regular dinner party event where many have gathered. But something doesn’t feel right.

He sets up the scene: It’s evening and the guests arrive, just as the listeners arrive like guests to the scene. By mid-verse some production tricks become apparent: Every few beats the music abruptly drops and quickly resurfaces while Byrne’s voice remains untouched. Following these tiny drops, a handclapping sample forms a back beat leading into each chorus, while a subtle beat mimics the sound of footsteps moving closer and closer towards some sort of climactic moment. I recall a quote from electronic musician Ken Jordan: “There is a beauty in song that allows the listener to feel part of an alternate space as their own—the music takes them there”. Byrne’s consistent narration seems to bring the listener into the story by modelling the space with his words. The combination of descriptive lyrics and sound samples shape the home where they—and the listeners—are dining.

The beret guy turns to me.
I yank one of my ear buds out.
He says, “I can hear your music from here. It sounds different. What are you listening to?”
“Oh! It’s by David Byrne and St. Vincent. You should check them out.” I smile.
He nods. “By the way, I’m Paul Miller... some call me DJ Spooky.”
“Hey, I’m Jill.” I reply. I look at my iPod.
The first verse moves into the second with barely a pause. The horns play a groovy dance melody. Byrne sings of war scenes—events of “small arms fire” and guests “crawling across the floor.” The horns quiet and slow down as Clarke—a soprano—harmonizes with Byrne’s alto voice in the chorus: “There’s something I should tell you, but we are never alone.” Byrne suggests a war is raging outside their window. They are never alone—the battle is always near, no matter how distant it seems. The lyrics rest and an instrumental interlude takes over.
“So, which song are you listening to?” says DJ Spooky.
“This one’s called ‘Dinner for Two.’”
“Do you like it?”
“It’s odd, but the lyrics seem pretty compelling.”
“You’re just used to a certain style of music. Let the oddities draw you in,” he says. He turns around.
If you ignored these lyrics and listened to the musical composition alone you might dance and bob your head. The groovy rhythm and dynamic
instrumentation keep the tune exciting and infectious from start to finish. But while there’s a sense of narrative in the music—it starts out slow and quiet but steadily picks up pace throughout, mimicking a developing plot line—there is also a sense of awkward displacement. The bizarre combinations of sound give strange, off-putting vibes which, given the subject matter of the lyrics, no doubt intend to challenge the listener. Byrne has always been a rather strange musical enigma, and St. Vincent seems partial to weird effects in her own music. I believe the bizarre musical choices deliberately pique the listeners’ attention and force them to rationalize what they hear, rather than letting the underlying message slip by unnoticed with more familiar, “comfortable” rhythms and melodies.

Byrne suddenly sings a line about “tanks outside the bedroom window” and how they can avoid them if they obstruct views of the warzone into the home and do not look outside. It’s as if Byrne is addressing passive spectators avoiding the frightening prospect of “the war.” Whether at home or out in the world, Byrne seems to suggest young and privileged people, like “the famous author” at the dinner party, distance themselves from reality and ignore the truths outside their windows. They hole themselves up in fancy dinner parties instead.

Byrne and Clarke sing the two-line chorus again. The music escalates further—at this point it feels as if the song has actually sped up. The dinner party guests become restless as they have been at the party over night. Byrne sings, “Are you okay? Have you lived here long?” A jazzy horn-based instrumental hook takes control between the fourth and fifth verses. Byrne describes a girl changing into more comfortable clothing “underneath the staircase.” Are the guests getting comfortable with the terror and war outside? Are they getting comfortable in the chaos?

DJ Spooky taps my shoulder. “Where is the song taking you now?” “The oddities in the music are starting to match the oddities in the lyrics. I feel weird listening to this, but it seems like Byrne and St. Vincent have a powerful message underneath it all. I just haven’t figured out what it is yet.”

Clarke now sings in a juxtaposed tone to Byrne. While Byrne’s fervent alto voice soars, Clarke’s soprano sounds disjointed, dislocated, abrupt, alarmed, fearful as she cries out with Byrne, “When will we get out?”

As the song moves into the bridge, the two sing out the mental states of different people at the party:

Some of us losing it
Some of us breaking down
Some of us stick it out
Used to it now.

This vague feeling of losing stability seems to reflect pressures of society. Some weather the oppression, the media and images thrown at them, but others cannot handle it. They struggle to bear the real truth lying just behind the images at the doorsteps of most upper and middle-class citizens. There is this violent, chaotic structure behind the “dinner party” veneer—a sort of coping mechanism for the repression. People hide behind their “upper-class” social lives.

An instrumental hook with guitars, horns and mystifying production takes over. It transitions into the chorus, this time repeating with a striking difference:

Something I should tell you
But I’ve been waiting so long

Something has changed. As Byrne finishes the lyric, the horns burst with speed and volume. Byrne uncomfortably sounds the last words as if he has been trying to ask Clarke—or even me, the listener—the whole time, but just couldn’t muster it:

When it’s over with
Going our separate ways
How about you and me
Dinner for two

Byrne has collided with the repression. He knows he has been confining his feelings about society’s difficult truths, but he wants to start anew, at the roots of human contact where it all begins. He wants to reconvene at the foundations of personal relationships and eliminate the possibility of violence and repression within himself. In these final lines he has changed course; he has mustered the courage and will to break out of his comfort zone, to better himself and his relationships, to accept defeat from the repression and start over nonetheless. The sort of “war” Byrne and Clark depict now seems irrelevant; the emphasis is on the possibility for ending it, changing on a
personal level, and by extension a societal one. The bus pulls to a stop in front of UTM’s Instructional Building.

DJ Spooky rises from his seat. “It was great to meet you, Jill! Remember to let the oddities draw you in.” He rushes off the bus and disappears.

I hop off the Sheridan bus and wave goodbye to DJ Spooky. I feel strange as I look around at all the faces. They seem content. They seem oblivious.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wTZOlrqhm1E

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