

### Slimy yet grimy

Despite the relatively high quality of the Talking Heads' recorded output, they were always best represented by their singles, where they displayed their hookiest songcraft. The now defunct Heads' new anthology, *Sand in the Vaseline*, a generous two hour-plus two disc set, collects all the band's highpoints about as perfectly as one could expect.

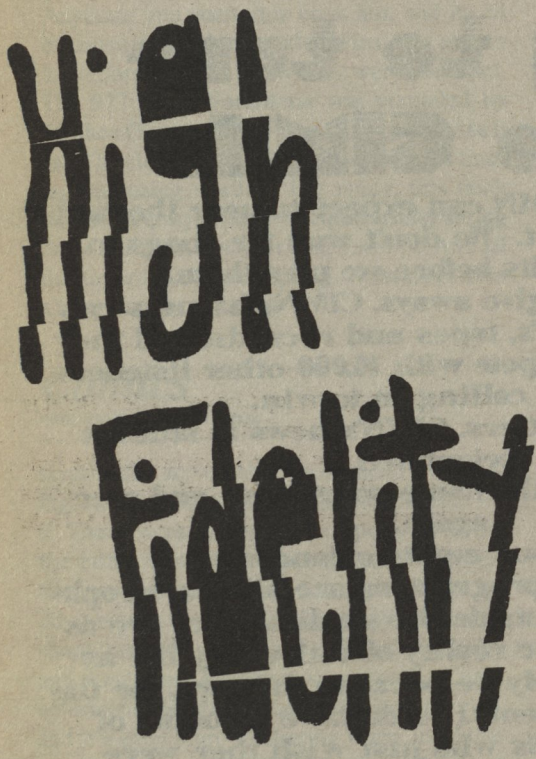
As is now the tradition with box set-type retrospectives, *Sand in the Vaseline* features a fair amount of rarities -- eight actually, four on either end. They're all interesting and insightful and don't particularly sound like odds and ends at all. Best of them all are "Popsicle" a *Speaking in Tongues* outtake, and "Sax and Violins," from the *Until the End of the World* soundtrack, which contains the inspirational lines "Mom and pop/ They will fuck you up/For sure."

When the band originally appeared in 1977 with the imaginatively titled *Talking Heads '77*, they essentially sounded like Television with a pop streak. Their odd, tightly syncopated guitar pop became increasingly complex under the production hand of former Roxy Music guy Brian Eno, who gave the band a suitable high-tech soundscape, which, like Peter Gabriel or Stevie Wonder, managed to somehow sound natural. The band's r&b/funk influences came forward for the first time on *Fear of Music* with a wonderful take of Al Green's "Take Me to the River," their first classic track. Though the Heads' first three albums were all compelling, their nervy sound was alien and imposing. The band righted this wrong with 1980's *Remain in Light* (one of the better albums of the eighties -- see thingy on this page), where the songwriting tightened and they became a pretty cerebral, rigid funk band. The two songs included here, "Once in a Lifetime" and "Crosseyed and Painless," are two of their finest.

Around 1982 the band gave Eno his pink slip and released *Speaking in Tongues*, a less adventurous recording that, nonetheless, was the band's strongest set of songs and avoided the weird filler that forever marred *Remain in Light*. "Burning Down the House," another wonderful single, is featured here. After the splendid soundtrack to *Stop Making Sense*, the Talking Heads lost the nervy, intense edge that gave their earlier stuff its punch and became a rather domesticated pop band. They still wrote catchy songs aplenty, however, ("Road to Nowhere," "Stay Up Late," "Wild Wild Life") and the progression seemed logical and mature. 1988's *Naked* once again found the band globetrotting. Though one of the best albums of that year, *Naked* drowns in session players and a vacuum-packed mix.

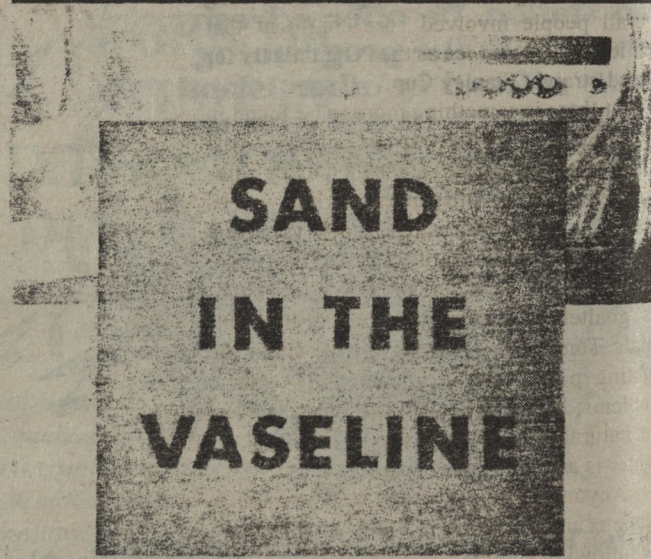
And that was all she wrote. The Heads' reunited in 1991 to record a few songs that proved this band is more than the sum of its parts, though they sounded chillier than ever.

The Talking Heads seem to have lost some of the sand in their vaseline in recent years, but *Sand in the Vaseline* collects the classic tracks that combined the two; even fanatics will be hard-pressed to find the expendables (but "City of Dreams" is one of 'em). *Remain in Light* and *Speaking in Tongues* are still great albums, but this is one of the two hundred or so best of all time, from one of the greatest bands of the last twenty years. ●



BY KIRBY FERGUSON

### TALKINGHEADS Popular Favorites



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