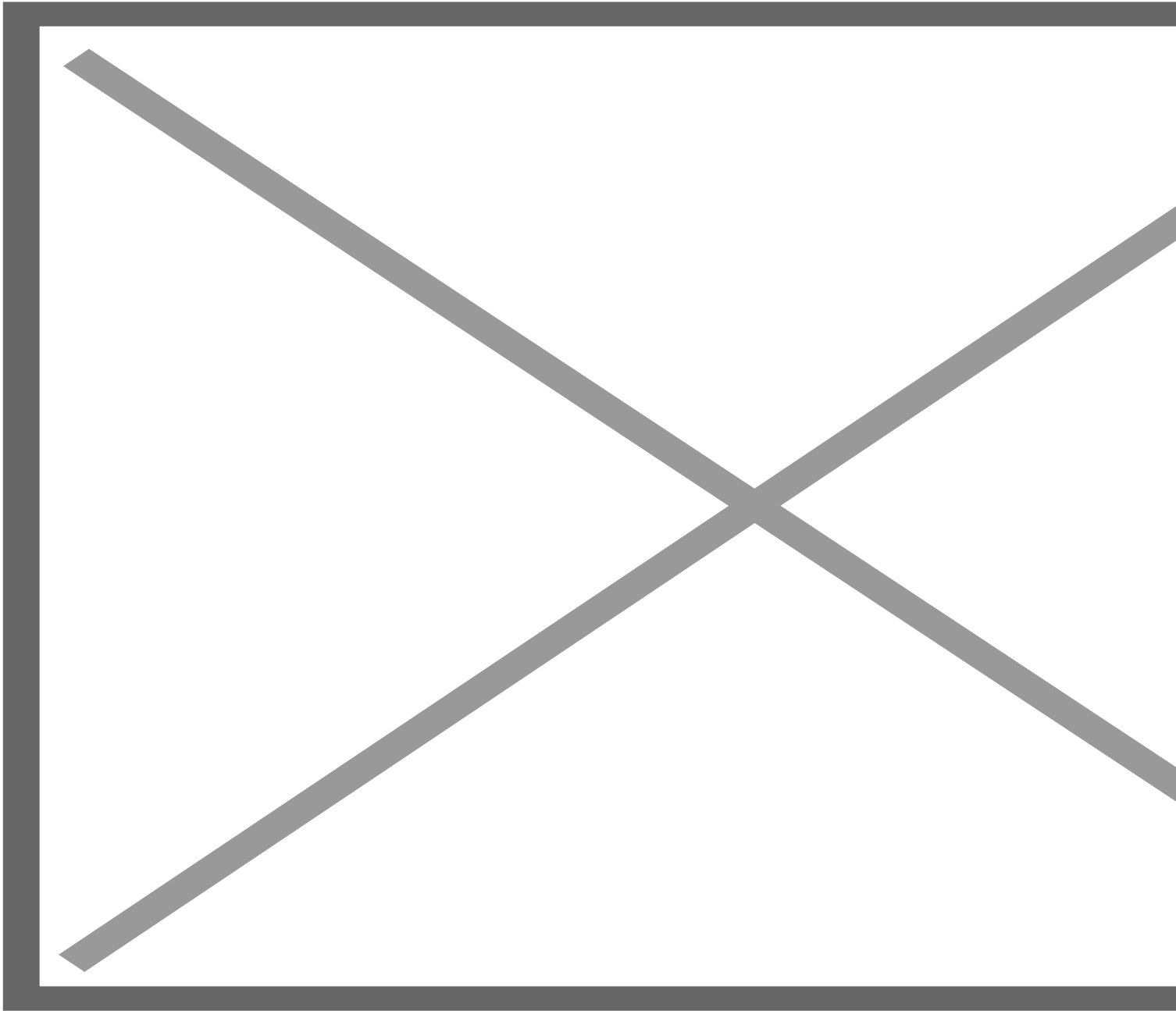


Music during wartime

David Byrne reminds me that however bleak things seem, singing and dancing together are morally serious acts.

by [Chris Thiessen](#) in the [August 2026](#) issue

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David Byrne, center, performs with his ensemble at the Dolby Theatre in Los Angeles (AP Photo / Chris Pizzello).

I spend a good chunk of time and mental space thinking about popular culture—the songs we sing, the films we view, the stories we inhabit. I’ve spent years of my life responding to the witness of [Kendrick Lamar](#), [David Lynch](#), [Beyoncé](#), [Taylor Swift](#), [Bad Bunny](#), and on and on. And yet, I’m often stung by the perennial doubt as to whether any of it matters. Should I spend less time updating my Letterboxd watchlist and more time keeping up with every minute detail of US politics? Can our hearts *really* be changed by the melody of a song?

These are easy doubts to give into when our government is [defunding the arts](#), when [50,000 songs created by robots are uploaded to streaming services every day](#), when [Netflix CEO Ted Sarandos argues](#) that the model of people gathering together to watch a film in a distraction-free, sacred space is an “outdated concept.” Art, it seems, is consistently reduced to content for consumption and exploitation. Meanwhile, the forces of oppression and violence feel so inescapable and suffocating everywhere I look. How can we sing during wartime?

On the other hand, maybe singing is the only thing that matters.

On a recent Saturday, I walked into a memorial service to remember the life of a dear member of our church. As the service began, I joined my voice with the voices of so many neighbors to sing “It Is Well with My Soul.” Immediately I was reminded of why this matters, why we sing. We sing to join ourselves to one another, to remind ourselves that life and hope and resurrection persist even as we experience death and decay, war and destruction. We sing to belong to one another, and we create and engage with art to bear witness to that fact—to remind ourselves that the forces of dissolution need not drown us in despair.

As my friend David Dark often says, “Art is integration.” And as I sang “It Is Well” alongside my fellow human beings and in memory of a beloved human being who was no longer with us, I was reminded yet again of the way the Spirit is always at work, integrating and reconciling all things to one another through practices empire might call trivial, expendable, mundane.

You know the story of Joseph and Pharaoh, where Pharaoh receives two parallel visions as an assurance of the same truth? I had this same experience that Saturday. I left the memorial service contemplating the beautiful experience of singing together as a response to death. Then I joined a few thousand more neighbors, musician David Byrne among them, at Nashville’s Ascend Amphitheater for that very same task.

I was first introduced to Byrne’s prophetic witness at age six or seven, when a friend’s mom showed us a clip from the Talking Heads concert film *Stop Making Sense*. At the time I mostly saw the silly dances of a man in an oversized suit. But the existential questions Byrne asks in “Once in a Lifetime” have stuck with me for a quarter of a century: How do I work this? Where is that large automobile? Where does that highway go to? Am I right? Am I wrong? My God, what have I done?

Rather than make didactic arguments, Byrne’s lyrics open up worlds through dissection and analysis. This, I believe, is the prophetic task, one he has taken quite seriously across his 50-year career. So it is no surprise that, at the concert, I was reminded of the very same existential questions I have been asking myself about art and music and singing. Late in the set, Byrne returned to a 1979 favorite, “Life During Wartime,” a song [journalist James Verini once called](#) “an apocalyptic swamp-funk transmission in four-four time.” In it, Byrne describes realities that feel far too familiar in 2026:

Heard of a van that's loaded with weapons
Packed up and ready to go.
Heard of some gravesites out by the highway,
A place where nobody knows.

At a time when our neighbors are literally disappearing, what place is there for dancing or singing? These are the same doubts Talking Heads give voice to in the chorus:

This ain't no party. This ain't no disco.
This ain't no fooling around.
No time for dancing or lovey-dovey.
I ain't got time for that now.

In other words, this is serious, and—if we take these lyrics literally—the dancing, the singing, the art of togetherness are a waste of time. Yet Byrne and Co. find ways to dance about the darkness, to insist on life in the worst of times through art. Tears filled my eyes as Byrne and his motley crew of dancers and musicians transmitted their apocalyptic swamp-funk against a backdrop of news footage: ICE brutality and masked intimidation and the courageous resistance of those who show their face and stand with the oppressed. And to think that this song is almost 50 years old. “Same as it ever was,” Byrne sings in “Once in a Lifetime.”

I admit that “This ain't no disco” is a lyric that resonates more often with me nowadays than “It is well with my soul.” Being morally serious need not require utter solemnity. We need to create more space for singing together, dancing together, watching films together, telling stories together, creating together. In the face of death—whether personal or societal—such acts of perceived superfluity may be some of the only morally serious options we have. And it is through such acts that our souls can indeed be well.