

After being run over by a car, Ted Kulczycky had one goal: recover enough to see Talking Heads' Stop Making Sense

The film was an instant classic upon its release and is seen as a master class on how to shoot and edit a live performance

BRAD WHEELER >

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After being hit by a car, Ted Kulczycky, a Talking Heads super fan, was given special hospital permission to go to a screening of their concert film Stop Making Sense.

MELISSA TAIT/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

“The last thing I remember is pushing the button to get off the streetcar.”

On Aug. 22, Ted Kulczycky awoke in the trauma unit at St. Joseph's Health Centre in Toronto with four broken ribs, two fractured hands, three cracked vertebrae in his neck, and a profound head wound that left him concussed and amnesiac. Seconds after stepping off a transit vehicle a block from his apartment in Toronto's Parkdale neighbourhood, he had been brutally run over by a car.

His wife, Serah-Marie McMahon, is an editor who works from home. After receiving a panicky call from an unknown woman at the scene on her husband's cellphone, she arrived to the horrific scene in minutes. "I thought he was dead," she says. Sitting next to her at the kitchen table in their cozy third-floor walk-up, Kulczycky elaborates: "With head wounds, there is a lot of blood."

When he came to in the hospital, he remembered that tickets were going on sale the next day for the world premiere screening at the Toronto International Film Festival of a new 4K restoration of his favourite film, the Jonathan Demme-directed Talking Heads concert film *Stop Making Sense* from 1984. Moreover, the band that broke up in 1991 was temporarily reuniting for an appearance at the TIFF premiere. "You have to get me those tickets," Kulczycky told his wife.

In his 2012 book *How Music Works*, Talking Heads frontman David Byrne wrote that music can get us through difficult patches in our lives by changing not only how we feel about ourselves but also how we feel about everything outside ourselves. "It's powerful stuff," Byrne declared.

Kulczycky managed to get a ticket to the sold-out screening. The film he first fell in love with as a 14-year-old had already changed his life more than once, and now it was about to play a major role in getting him on his feet and out of the hospital.

How did I get here?



With tickets to the screening of *Stop Making Sense*, the film Ted Kulczycky first fell in love with as a 14-year-old was about to play a major role in getting him on his feet and out of the hospital.

MELISSA TAIT/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Though Kulczycky had a ticket to the movie, the 53-year-old library worker was in the hospital's trauma unit, and there was no guarantee he'd physically be able to attend an event less than three weeks away.

Kulczycky had already seen the film more than 80 times in a variety of theatres since first attending a screening as a child in 1985 at the Bloor Theatre (now branded the Hot Docs Ted Rogers Cinema). Nevertheless, making it to the TIFF event became a driving force in his recovery.

"When a physiotherapist asked me if wanted to try standing, I told him I would," he says. "I knew the sooner I stand, the more likely it was that I was going to be allowed to go to this movie."

Tall and bespectacled, Kulczycky has a gentle, scholarly intensity about him. Because of his hospital-bed proselytizing about *Stop Making Sense*, it was not long into his

extended stay at St. Joseph's that all the doctors, nurses and other staff attending to him knew about the film and his urgent need to see it. "He had the whole hospital rooting for him to go to this thing," says his wife.



Ted Kulczycky and his friend Jesse Hawken (left) at a 1985 screening of Stop Making Sense.



Ted Kulczycky's friends Jesse Hawken (left) and Chris Cummings (right) have helped him during his recovery, including joining him for movies at the Hot Docs Ted Rogers Cinema.

MELISSA TAIT/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

He supposes seeing the movie at the age of 14 was the “right age.” By his third viewing, he began to notice a narrative within the frenetic energy, catchy songs, dynamic staging, costume changes and the coolly theatrical presence of Byrne. “The conceptions hook you a little bit,” he says. “I slowly realized that I loved this movie.”

Years later, during the pandemic, Kulczycky's life changed course and his fervour for the film reached another level when he decided to become what he calls the “*Stop Making Sense* guy.”

In the corner of his apartment sits an acoustic guitar he bought to learn how to play Talking Heads songs *Psycho Killer* and others. Near his desk is a *Stop Making Sense* poster and a shelf full of books by Byrne. A filing cabinet holds a treasure trove of band memorabilia and documentation.

After tending bar for years at a downtown Irish pub, he went back to school to finish the philosophy degree at York University he had started in 1992. Currently enrolled

in the master's of information program at University of Toronto, he is working on a book and a podcast about *Stop Making Sense*.

“These projects are part of my journey of self-discovery,” he says. “All the creative things I was interested in all my life are now focused on through the lens of *Stop Making Sense*.”



David Byrne in a scene from *Stop Making Sense*.

JORDAN CRONENWETH/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Music at work

A master class on how to shoot and edit a live performance, the film was an instant classic upon its release. By using cameras tight on the musicians and dispensing with cutaway shots to the audience, an intimacy is achieved. Cinema audiences feel as if they are on stage with a beatific, cutting-edge band at the peak of its powers, led by a uniquely mesmeric singer. The effect is communal euphoria.

“You are immersed in this band and immersed in this show,” says York University ethnomusicologist Rob Bowman, who saw the Talking Heads’ tour stop at

Kingswood Music Theatre north of Toronto in the summer of 1983. “I’m not going to say the film is better than seeing the actual show was, but it is stunning.”

According to Bowman, musical performances engage people on a number of different levels and contribute to a physical and mental state of equilibrium.

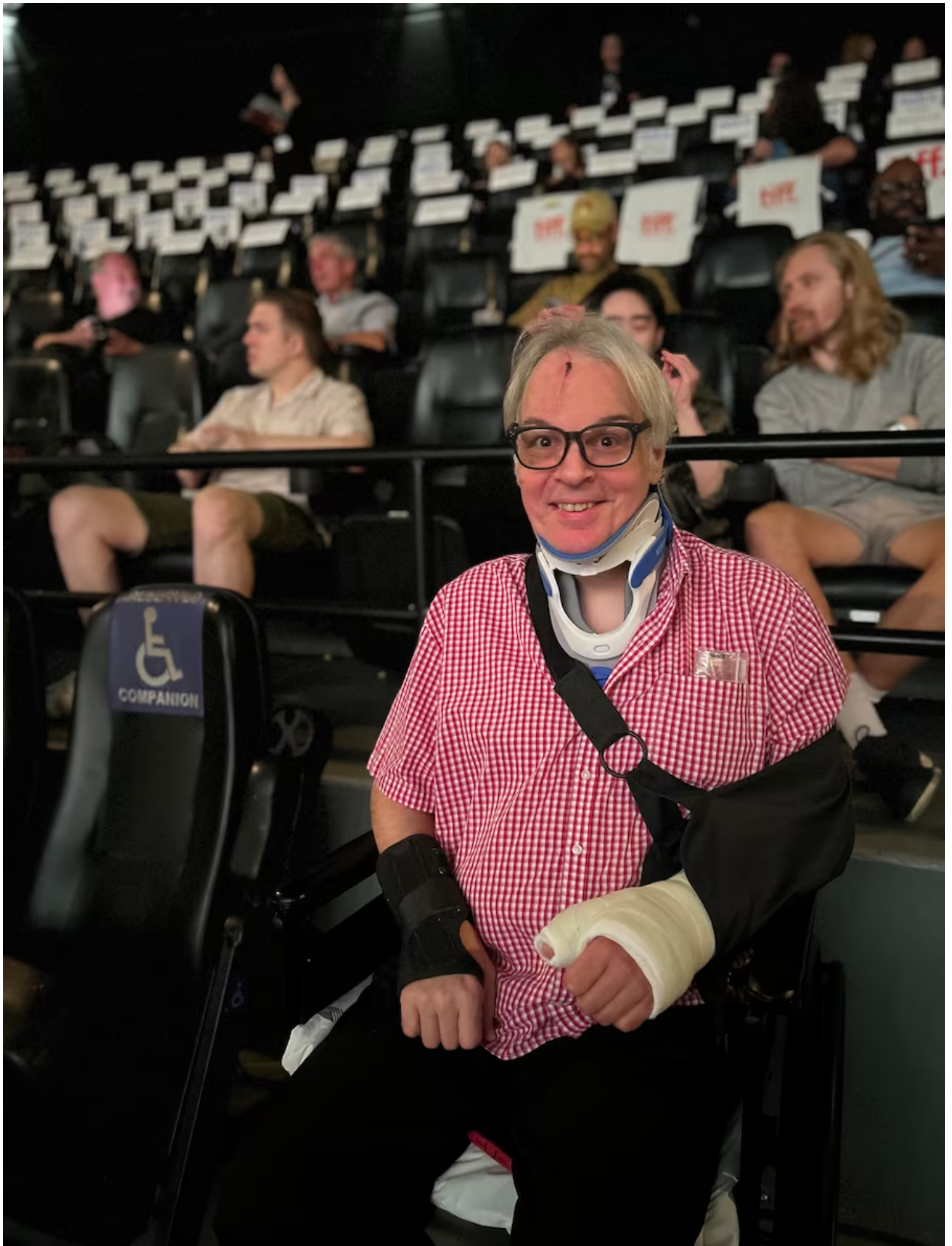
“Rhythmically an audience is in sync with the band, but it’s not just the beat,” he says. “It’s harmonic activity, it’s melodic activity and it’s changes in tempo that different parts of your body and mind can entrain with.”

The end result being? “It’s therapeutic, there’s no way around it.”

Jennifer Buchanan, a Calgary-based music therapist and author of *Wellness, Wellplayed: The Power of a Playlist*, says the right song at the right time can make you smile, cry or dance – even help heal a traumatized psyche.

“Our brain reacts to a positive emotional stimulus in the same way it feels positive physical stimulus, and there is no other activity that activates more areas of the brain than when we are immersed in music that matters to us.”

Start making sense



Ted Kulczycky attends the TIFF screening of *Stop Making Sense* at Scotiabank Theatre. Mr. Kulczycky was still in hospital at this point but he and his wife lobbied the sympathetic staff, who helped him reach the necessary milestones to be able to leave.

HANDOUT

An hour before the TIFF screening of *Stop Making Sense*, Kulczycky was granted a day pass from hospital and taken out in a wheelchair to Scotiabank Theatre. Wearing a sling, a neck brace and a Frankenstein scar on his forehead, he sat in the accessible seating with his friend Bowman (also with a neck brace, after emergency spinal surgery just weeks before).

They sat a few feet away from where the former Talking Heads would gather for a postscreening Q&A with the American director and *Stop Making Sense* fanboy Spike Lee.

During the screening, many in the audience danced to the music as if it were a live performance. In his mind, Kulczycky grooved, too.

“I think that there’s something about being in a darkened theatre with a lot of people, all focused on the same thing, with loud music and appropriate images that almost makes you forget yourself,” he says. “For me, it was a vacation from being broken.”

Kulczycky is now out of his wheelchair. And while not fully recovered, he was able to attend more than a dozen post-TIFF screenings of *Stop Making Sense* this month. He even got together with the four friends he first saw the film with, for a reunion screening at the same exact theatre.

He still has gaps in his memory about the accident. The driver has been charged, and a lawsuit is pending. Police were able to secure surveillance footage, but Kulczycky does not want to see it. “I feel like it might contribute to post-traumatic stress,” he explains. “Besides, I’d rather watch *Stop Making Sense*.”

Music as a lifeline

“Aretha Franklin helped keep me alive.”

York University music professor Rob Bowman, who recently celebrated the 10th anniversary of his double lung transplant, spoke to The Globe and Mail about life, death and listening to the music of the Queen of Soul.

“When I was waiting for my lungs, I had three or four days before I was going to be dead. I’d been told this by the doctors; I understood this. The whole time I had an iPod playing everything Aretha Franklin ever recorded, in order. For days, nurses would come into my room, bopping to the music. My doctors still talk about it.

“I was on life support, with 21 tubes in my body. I’m hooked up to a respirator – I can’t speak. I had Aretha going 24 hours a day for two and a half days until I got the transplant. I can’t say what the music did physically, but it helped me psychologically at least. And logic tells you that if you’re in a good space psychologically, it can only help you physically.”

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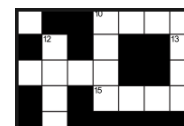
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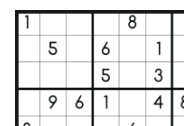
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