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BAD RELIGION

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BAD RELIGION



FEW COULD ARGUE THAT BAD RELIGION isn't one of the most influential and defining punk bands in history. In 2005 they remain a commanding voice for a misguided generation. With 25 years of experience working as a band, they have assaulted more than a few administrations, wearing their political hearts on their sleeves and using mantras of sociopolitical punk rock like a ticking time bomb set to explode with angst, education and awareness in the faces of America's youth. They are the voice of a revolution, the dominating force behind a fearless insurgency and a helpless cry for action in the most detrimental times ever to face this nation.

Punk ethos in general has always revolved around scientific verification, regime change and, at the very least, provoking discourse. It is no secret that Bad Religion loathes the Bush administration and no surprise why they are livid as they watch current legislators make a mockery of the democratic process by continuing to dictate foreign and domestic policy based on fundamentalist Christian ethics - a cardinal sin in the eyes of Bad Religion's punk orthodoxy. With an impending energy crisis as we dwindle away fossil fuels, a war started on suggestion, and the fact that the almighty dollar looks more like the peso, Bad Religion approaches today's politics armed with an arsenal of intellectual treatises backed by a philosophical undercurrent that refuses to retreat. Their new album, *The Empire Strikes First*, is a direct and timely assault on the decisions being set forth by the Bush posse and echoes with sentiments of social unrest guarded by a rampart of dynamic melodies, infectious, speed-driven chaos and ear bleeding harmonies. But, true to Bad Religion form, it comes with a very concise message. Wake up, America.

In this interview Brian Baker, Bad Religion's guitarist (hailed as one of the greatest punk guitarists in America, dominating in bands like Minor Threat, Dag Nasty, Junkyard, Meatmen & Government Issue) delves into a bevy of pertinent topics regarding the band, the future of punk rock and the allegiance to writing a "soundtrack for the pissed off" majority.

*by Christine Erice
photo: Sean Murphy*

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Do you feel that punk music today vs. twenty years ago draws from the same need to question authority and challenge popular belief?

BB: I think that good punk rock does, but it is kind of hard to describe because punk rock is so ubiquitous today. Anything can be called punk rock, and I don't think that necessarily every one of our larger acts is spending time pondering life's complexities. There is a general overview. If you want to label a genre, then yes, I think that it is exploratory and the object is to point fingers at established mores and belief systems.

Is there a new definition emerging with the introduction of what kids today call punk rock music?

BB: It really is on a band by band basis. I mean, take the band Anti-Flag. Their priority is to wake people up. Offspring doesn't really know what their priorities are, I'm not really sure, but punk has always been fueled by lyrics. There were bad punk rock bands in 1979 just like there are bad punk bands now. It is really up to the individual. If people want to hear the normal, stock songwriting topic of "that woman broke my heart" that has pervaded the millennia, and it is being performed by people that have mohawks and eye makeup, if that is the punk rock that they are comfortable with then it's the user's responsibility. I still feel that the really good bands are the ones that sing about things that have some sort of social relevance.

In 2002 you welcomed Brett Gurewitz back to the band after a long hiatus. How has the structure of the band changed with the third guitarist? How do you all fit on stage?

BB: It doesn't affect me 'cause I just stay where I am normally. I can't hear him and I'm blind and I play without my glasses on,

so basically after a couple of shows I have to remind myself that he is not a security guard or somebody trying to tackle Graffin. For me he is sort of a smoky figure of authority on the other side of the stage, but factually, when he plays, it is just that much better, it doesn't just qualify as being louder or whatever, it's his unique vocal sound 'cause he likes to sing. I just think that it makes it a nicer, bigger piece of meat.

I heard that he only plays ten percent of the live shows, is that true?

BB: Yeah, about that. I think that it is cool to catch us when Brett plays, and usually he is available when we do California and hopefully he'll be able to make it to the San Diego shows. I mean, nothing against the people in Kentucky, but he usually only plays California shows. He runs the biggest independent punk label (Epitaph) in the world and he actually goes to work everyday, so when he is not touring with us it is not because he doesn't want to. We always have all of his equipment with us, so if he shows up it's like, "Hey, Brett's here!"

How have the band's priorities changed? Do you feel like your focus has shifted at all?

BB: I don't think artistically the focus has changed. What we are playing has only become more defined. I wouldn't trade this to go back to 1990 because I think that Bad Religion's best work has always been the next one to come, with maybe one exception of a bad record in 1998 (*No Substance*). They can't all be winners. The reasons that we do this are the same as when Greg and Brett were 15 years old. It is the most fun that a human being can have, and I am really proud about what we are singing about. The experience of doing it is just as valuable as it was when I was a child. I just can't do it as much 'cause my old bones just don't ride in a van that well anymore.

Are you still dealing with the same issues, for example, religion's ever increasing role in American politics?

BB: Absolutely. Refining the attacks. You hope that the longer that you do something the better you get at it, and especially with the state of the world, with the current administration and a half, I mean talk about the amount of fodder that we have to spur our creative juices. We are definitely hammering on the general topics of how societies interact, religion, rich vs. poor. This is what we care about and we picked a great time to yell about it.

What is your political agenda with the current tour?


BB: I think that Pennywise said it best when they said "Question Authority". People should be encouraged to fear dogmatic thinking and inspired to make their own conclusions about important global issues, and I certainly think that politics define that in this day and age. Hopefully, Bad Religion can continue to touch on relevant topics and provide a soundtrack for the pissed off.

What was the first show you ever played?

BB: My first show was with Minor Threat opening for Bad Brains in somebody's living room at a house that is ten blocks from where I live now. I was petrified, like you are on a locomotive and it can't stop, and all of the noise and sights. It was really overwhelming. A total adrenaline rush.

What is the most satisfying aspect of playing in Bad Religion?

BB: Well, for me it is standing in front of an enormous, loud guitar amp. It has always been the instrument, though I have been a songwriter in other bands and contributed in small ways to Bad Religion, the whole reason that I am on that stage is because of the noise coming out of those boxes. On an average tour the only time that I am truly



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Bad Religion's frontman Greg Graffin.
photo: © Jon R. Luini.

alone is on the stage in front of my amp. I have my own creative space. I know it sounds weird, but that has always been the highlight for me. Second to that is meeting people at shows that have really been paying attention, that is always a pleasure.

What would you hope would be most remembered about Bad Religion after the band is gone?

BB: The songwriting and the body of work. I think that Brett and Greg, to date, have written some of the most melodic and the most socially poignant punk rock songs ever. I also think that they had a lot to do with defining a certain sound in California. The harmonies and tempos. Things were taken, but Bad Religion really did help to define a style of music, and that is something to be proud of. Being part of something that helped to start a sub-genre in this world is amazing. Bad Religion, I hope, will be remembered for really great songs and socially conscious lyrics attempting to provoke some kind of thought. Change would be good too, but thought is good enough.

What do you think happens to us when we die?

BB: It's a light switch. It's over. What do you think happens when you hit a squirrel on the freeway? Do you think there is a squirrel party where they all hang out and have nuts somewhere special? It would be nice if there was a benevolent afterlife, but the armchair scientist in me says that when we die, we're dead. That is what I think.

What do you want written on your tombstone?

BB: I would like my name to be spelled correctly. (we both cackle for awhile) I really have not had the chance to ponder my imminent demise but I would like to see everything in upper case and properly spelled. Yeah, that would be nice. ●