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# BAD RELIGION

## Bad Religion is Burning

By Jack Rabid

**B**AD RELIGION HAVE NOT ONLY BEEN America's best and most exciting punk rock band for the last 17 years, since returning in 1988 with their third LP *Suffer*, but they've been the most lyrically fascinating as well. This combination of singer Greg Graffin and guitarist Brett Gurewitz's superior songs, Graffin's sensational singing, and such continually contentious lyrical matter has made them stand alone in a field of one in all three distinctions in the punk rock community. Indeed, not even the plethora of bands that have been inspired or influenced by Bad Religion have ever come close to them in any of these three characteristics. And since Gurewitz's return to the band after a seven-year absence, they've seemed completely and totally invigorated, nay, burning, once again, with all that's made them such a tremendous juggernaut of musical power on the one hand, and classic punk rock social critique on the other. In short, they're as inspiring now—to a music fan or musician who wants substance with their music as well as style and a great hook—as they were on their 1981 debut EP or their classic 1982 first LP, *How Can Hell Be any Worse*.

And with five of their first six LPs newly remastered and reissued, and a fierce new LP in *The Empire Strikes First*, there's rarely been a more opportune time to speak with the group's two principal songwriters. In particular, as the title of the new LP implies, Graffin and Gurewitz have unleashed an LP brimming not only with their usual killer melodies, "ooohs" and

"ahhhs" backing vocals, and speedy choruses to die for, but their words have never rung truer, or felt more consequential, than they do right at this moment, 24 years into their long and roundly respected career. (Note, with a gold LP in 1994's *Stranger Than Fiction*, they've long appealed to alternative rock fans in general as well.)

As I note in the interview below, I was quite curious and even looking forward to *The Empire Strikes First* more than even most of their LPs, because I was sure they'd have a lot to say on the current charged political climate—while using their perspective and long experience to speak in deliberative terms. And they didn't disappoint. This in turn led me to







STUDIO 305

Photo courtesy of Epitaph

anticipate this interview, and sure enough, with the slightest prodding, both Graffin and Gurewitz coolly and easily launched into the feelings that lay behind their new work.

Indeed, what fertile ground for a Bad Religion LP! Here we are buried in the severe fourth year of a Bush II administration that has betrayed every single campaign vow of moderate

Republicanism its leader made, and that instead has foisted on us a hard-right administration that's run roughshod over the environment, labor, constitutional rights, the public purse, and most egregiously of all, the concept of war as the last resort (not the first!); while also pursuing a religious slant that has the country's scientists signing formal papers of protest. All of

these have been topics discussed on their previous 11 LPs, so Bad Religion seems just purple with intelligent, unsuppressed, sarcastic rage on *The Empire Strikes First*. You won't be able to miss it on two of the three best songs, the spine-tingling "Let Them Eat War" ("that's how you ration the poor"), and the title track, which, by the way, makes

superb, and definitely intentional appropriation, of the old 1979 Eddie & the Subtitles L.A. punk favorite of their youth, "American Society," (Instead of "don't want to drown," it's "don't want to live."), and, as they reveal below, Agent Orange's old favorite "Everything Turns Grey." (The same Agent Orange that The Offspring admitted stealing



from for their first smash hit.) Biting lyrics such as "We strike first/Ahd we're unrehearsed/Here we go ahead, this day's the greatest show on heaven and earth/C'mon and get your money's worth!" send shivers to anyone contemplating the needless slaughter and destruction based on a false premise of sham self-defense.

But the LP isn't merely a referendum on a runaway, even nightmarish

Federal government that's divided its citizens worse than ever and turned the rest of the world's populaces against us. (More from the title track: "But even 10 million souls marching in February couldn't stop the worst/Ca-ca-ca-ca-couldn't reverse.") Nay, they address a number of other different, more general ideas as ever. For instance, if The Empire did nothing more than give us "Los Angeles is Burning," one of those great all-time Bad Religion songs (this LP's "American Jesus," "Atomic Garden," "Faith Alone," or "20th Century Digital Boy"), that would be fine. It's the perfect

vehicle for this band—call it "think locally, comment globally." They use the recent devastating L.A. fires from last autumn as a spur to critique the myopic human disregard for realities of the environment (a particular specialty of Graffin, with his newly minted Ph.D. from Cornell in evolutionary biology, and street-intellectual Gurewitz—this is one of Gurewitz's songs), pinning the destruction on human complicity where it belongs, even while weeping for it. (Nature's firewalls of brush have been built into and around in L.A. and San Diego outskirts by acres of new housing, making such disasters both inevitable and unstoppable.) It's not only a pertinent, everlasting subject that's a bridge to a denunciation of modern media infotainment; it's a monster song, with a chorus to match. Try to stop singing "When the hills of Los Angeles are burning/Palm trees are candles in the murder wind/So many lives are on the breeze/Even the stars are ill at ease/And Los Angeles is burning," and shudder at its greater

implications. Songs of this quality are enough to make one stay a rock fan forever, convinced forever of its crucial "burning" relevance in the hands of the best and most honest bands.

Oh, there's more! The extended coda of "Beyond Strikes Worse," long a Bad Religion treat (think Generator's "Only Entertainment," and The Process of Belief's closing "Bored and Extremely Dangerous") is another great moment, as is the plaintive plea of "Atheist Peace"—in a world of violent religion-related extremism and hatred. And the latter's sister track "God's Love" not only has one of their classic bridges, but is the latest in their theme of religious fundamentalist damage, going back to 1980's "Bad Religion," up through "Fuck Armageddon, This is Hell," "God Song," and "Operation Rescue." And the suicide bomber examination "Live Again—The Fall of Man" might be construed as a 2004 update on their first LP's opener, "Only Gonna Die" ("from our own arrogance"), which







Photo by Anarchy Alicia  
www.prattypunk.com

reminds, as "How Much is Enough?" once noted, that "our surfeit may well be our demise." And it is just as important to talk to Bad Religion about their music and songwriting process as it is to discuss their lyrical themes, past and present, since the two are so continually intertwined. Indeed, the two explain below how, now that their partnership has resumed, they use each other to vet their new songs. And they sound damn happy about it, too! So you have that dichotomy presented, of their influences both musical and lyrical.

And since this is my fifth interview with these folks going back to 1989, it's my latest chance to plead for a proper reissue of the disowned but now (interestingly enough!) more generally respected second LP, 1983's *Into the*

*Unknown*—though once again I don't think I had much luck in persuading them, even as the original vinyl copies of the LP continue to fetch three digits. No, songs such as "Chasing the Wild Goose" will sadly remain unheard to all but the tiniest minority of their biggest fans. In any case, Bad Religion have a lot to say, both about the new LP and their newly reissued old LPs, and of an even wider range of topics on their minds.

So let's get right to it. But don't forget to pick up this new LP, and its 2001 predecessor, *The Process of Belief*, for proof of how punks turning 40 can beat the tar out of younger groups that weren't even born when they made their first record, or for how blistering and vital they remain. And check out the improved new versions of their early LPs, they're all wonderful and thrilling records as

well!

*(This interview took place in the Epitaph Records conference room with myself and Gurewitz, taking a generous hour long break from running that powerhouse label—for which I am grateful—with Graffin joining us on speakerphone from his house in Ithaca, New York, on the day before leaving for another mammoth U.S. tour—which was also nice of him. Also thanks to Hilary at Epitaph for arranging this and setting up the phone thing so that we could all talk together.)*

**So let's talk first about the new LP before we get to the reissues.**

**BRETT:** I'm pretty proud of it, actually. It's hard to make a good record that will satisfy fans without being the same record you've done for so long. It has a lot of little nuggets of

goodness.

I say in my review that "*Los Angeles is Burning*" is kind of the "American Jesus" on this album, or the "20th Century Digital Boy," an instant single. In fact, I heard it on the radio driving over here just now, on 103.1.

**BRETT:** Cool man, thanks. I like that one a lot and for me the true joy of that song was having Mike Campbell be on it, from Tom Petty & The Heartbreakers. He does all the lead guitars and the solo. That kind of Easybeats' "Friday On My Mind" [sings guitar part of the great Australian band's 1967 #16 hit] part. That's him and he plays the solo, also. He does the bridge and that ring. Now that you know, you go back and listen and go, "Oh my god, that's so Mike Campbell." Yeah, so I'm really happy with how that came out.

**Is that one of yours? My advance copy doesn't say who wrote what, but I guessed that was you, from my experience listening to your songs. I'm sort of at the point where I think I can tell, but sometimes I'm wrong.**

**BRETT:** Yes that's one of mine. If it's shamelessly poppy, it's probably me. [Both laugh.] **No wonder I like it so much. When I was here in L.A. six months ago, I was doing a Weirdos interview and their singer John Denney almost lost his house in those fires out here. He got back and there was a note from a fireman that said something like, "We saved your house."**

**BRETT:** Whoa! He's like "Who do I say thank you to?" It seems like there's this stupid environmental policy where the developers and the city planners just say "Fuck nature, we'll put millions of people in the desert where there's no water and steal all the water from everywhere else like the way L.A. stole the Owens River [See the late Mark Reisner's 1993



Photo courtesy of  
www.badreligion.com



Photo by Chapman Bashler



book, *Cadillac Desert; the American West and its Disappearing Water*] and later the Colorado River, and then later all the places that are natural firewalls we'll tear down and build tract housing." Is that an underlying message behind the song?

**BRETT:** Well, that's one. It's a very deep song and it's actually a political song. That's probably the top level, which is that L.A. is burning literally and does it terribly every two years. [Note, a week after this interview there were new wildfires south of Cerritos in L.A.] We just lived through the worst case of it and the disregard for nature and the hubris. The overbearing pride, if you will, of culture. On the other level, it's a comment on the way that people in this country have their world view tilted by the way reality is depicted on television, and using L.A. which is the media Mecca as the setting for a story about that.

I was really looking forward to getting this record just for the lyric shit, your band has always made me think about things of that sort, and this is a particularly crucial time for such issues, obviously, with the Iraq war, and the Bush administration.

**BRETT:** I'm pretty proud of the lyrics this year and I also think Greg's are some of his best

lyrics ever. He just wrote his thesis this year and he had a lot of notes and thoughts that were still very fresh that he could draw upon because he defended his thesis this year.

Yeah, he's Dr. Graffin.

**BRETT:** Yeah. I think because of that, those are some of his best lyrics ever. His lyrics were more concerned with those kinds of issues about belief and religion. My lyrics were far more political. But it makes for a nice dynamic on this record because you have religion and politics.

Which are intertwined at the moment?

**BRETT:** More intertwined now more than ever! It's two topics that have always been intertwined in our work. Right from our first 7-Inch. It was a little less sophisticated back then, but it still made for a good brew.

I actually tried to connect Greg's new song "Atheist Peace" to songs over the years like "Bad Religion," "God Song," and "The Voice of God is Government," and others like that.

**BRETT:** As we touch upon these timeless topics that we use every couple of years in the new record, rather than it getting stale, it almost feels like at least in terms of Greg's writing, he's really refined it, made an art of it. If you have an Atheist Peace instead of a religious war, it's quite brilliant. Who

would have thought about it other than Greg?

A lot of the interviews I've done lately, in part with The Pernice Brothers and Killing Joke and ones we are running with Poster Children and Modest Mouse.... With all these bands, such totally different bands, we don't introduce the topic, they've been going to leaps and bounds to say how moved they are by this being election year and how they want to do everything they can to be involved in the process and get rid of the current administration. My thought was, "Well, where was a lot of this comment two years ago, before the Iraq war, when the administration took office and showed its hand, so to speak. Bad Religion was one of the few bands that I thought was speaking out back then, on *The Process of Belief*, especially on "Kyoto Now."

**BRETT:** That record was written before 9/11 took place. And 9/11 was the reason that political dissent was silenced. Everyone was afraid to express anything negative about this country in the weeks and months just after 9/11. We, on the other hand, with our long history of dissent, did not hesitate. The record was critical of the U.S., but written before 9/11, and I actually watching it

[9/11] in the studio while I was mixing *The Process of Belief*, so it was already too late to comment on the current events. The interviews we did the week of 9/11, we weren't in any way pulling back as most people were back then. It's only just starting that it's more acceptable. I think the country's never been more conservative or more nationalistic than it is now. In my lifetime, certainly not. It's a swing to the right that's more extreme than I've ever seen. I can only hope that it's a pendulum and that the bright side will be that when it swings back left, it will swing back to compensate even farther than it's ever swung. I don't know if it works that way in politics. That would be nice.

There's such a power and money dynamic involved here, the forces of big business and big money siding with the Republicans for the most part [since their policies are tacitly more favorable to the wealthy and powerful] that you wonder if there's forces preventing that from happening.

**BRETT:** I think there definitely are and I think the current administration and the conservative power brokers are extremely sophisticated manipulators in the media, better than anyone before them. Certainly Karl Rove.

These people make Ronald



**"We had a Bush in power; the economy was fucked. He was cutting taxes for the rich and attacking Iraq. Now, it's 12 years later: the economy is fucked, we have a Bush in power. He's cutting taxes only for the rich and he's attacking Iraq. It's like 'Whoa! Wait a minute here! Is this deja-vu or did nothing ever change in the U.S.?'"**



Photo by Anarchy Alliance  
www.prettyandpunk.com

Reagan look like a piper.

**BRETT:** I'm telling you. No question. And George Bush. One of the things I found interesting is when the Iraq war began, I couldn't stop playing the Generator record you made back then. [Both Laugh] Now of course, that record's been newly reissued, with the two main tracks I'm referring to ["Heaven is Falling" and "Fertile Crescent"] as bonus tracks, so that they're there on the new CD even twice in case you missed it the first time. [Laughs]

**BRETT:** It's good for you to mention that, because we opposed the first Gulf War, a popular war, which was actually sanctioned by the UN, and did have an international coalition behind it, which this one did not. And yet we were still opposed to it. At the time I had my reasons, but I just didn't feel that it was worth risking American lives to restore monarchy. Most people don't mention that aspect.

**BRETT:** It had nothing to do with democracy. We basically put a king back on his throne. An oil sheik regime.

**BRETT:** Yeah, we basically put an oil sheik back on his throne. Well, the real interesting thing to look at it was...When was that, 1992?

1991-1992.

**BRETT:** We had a Bush in power; the economy was fucked. He was cutting taxes for the rich and attacking Iraq. Now, it's 12 years later: the economy is fucked, we have a Bush in power. He's cutting taxes only for the rich and he's attacking Iraq. It's like "Whoa! Wait a minute here! Is this deja-vu or did nothing ever change in the U.S.?"

I'm just glad that he doesn't have a son. [both laugh]  
**BRETT:** No shit! I guess the only other real difference is that there is no cold war anymore for this one.

**A slightly different context.**

**BRETT:** And much more dangerous to go out there unilaterally attacking helpless countries.

I wonder if the occasion of these reissues is a sort of chance for you to rediscover some of the oldest Bad Religion records or do you just normally play them anyway?

**BRETT:** No, I don't normally play them anyway, and I definitely have to rediscover them. What I found is that the one that I really like is No Control. That's the one that if you go back to all of them, really held up nicely for me. I like them all OK, I'm really proud of my body of work, but I thought No Control was pretty awesome.

**Any particular reason? Just**

**the music?**

**BRETT:** That's an overall really strong, consistent, high-energy punk rock record. Every time I sit down to write a Bad Religion record, I kind of revisit my old records...

**And immerse yourself in your catalog.**

**BRETT:** Yeah, a little bit to kind of give myself a sense of perspective.

**On the Stranger Than Fiction record, I remember you wrote a song loosely modeled after an Elvis Costello kind of song.**

**BRETT:** Maybe my favorite song I wrote. You're talking about "Stranger Than Fiction?" Another one that I wrote which I tried to model after that kind of thing, although I'm not as great a writer as him, was "Atomic Garden." That was my idea of Bad Religion doing an Elvis Costello style song. I think "Stranger Than Fiction" was more successful, although I like both songs. I really like "Stranger Than Fiction."

**I always thought it was the strength of Bad Religion's that it had influences beyond, say, modern punk rock. It's always shown in your writing more than modern punk bands that base of influence is so much narrower.**

**BRETT:** Oh yeah, I almost never listen to punk rock.

[Both laugh]

**I promise not to blow that up as a pullout quote. [Both laugh]**

**BRETT:** Thanks. I promised to be honest, though. I've always had diverse tastes. I listen to lots of kinds of music. You can't listen to one kind of music straight for 20 years. Now with punk rock we're in the third or fourth generation of it. I think the third generation at least. I know now that I've been listening to it for 25 years, though not much since 1982, I'm supposed to say I don't like what the kids are playing, because that's the way it always goes. But it does seem to me sometimes that it's fair for me to say that those playing punk today have less of a multi-dimensional influence which would by nature make their music somewhat more narrow.

**BRETT:** Right. I make it a policy not to say anything bad about







that yourself?

**BRETT:** Yeah.

**That must have been a trip.**

**BRETT:** It was fun.

**You must have been like 19 years old when you made the first album.**

**BRETT:** No, on the 7-inch, I was 17 and Greg was 15.

**And on the first album you were 18 and he**

the **was 16, right?**

**BRETT:** Yeah.

**Damn! [Brett laughs] You were babies.**

**BRETT:** I know!

**It's like looking at an old photo album and barely recognizing yourself.**

**BRETT:** Exactly.

**[GREG GRAFFIN JOINS THE CHAT, ON SPEAKERPHONE FROM HIS HOME IN ITHACA, NY:]**

**You'll be happy to know, Brett was just paying you a great compliment on your lyrics to "Atheist Peace."**

**GREG:** Oh, you were? Thank you, Brett!

**BRETT:** You're welcome. You missed every word of it. [all laugh]

**GREG:** These are some of Brett's greatest lyrics also on this album.

**Ah, synchronicity! I think this one is even more lyric intensive than your albums usually are. That's the first thing I noticed about it. The lyrics just attack the senses; you obviously both seem more inspired to write than ever in that sense.**

**GREG:** Yeah, well I've heard that too. One thing that I tried to do is to be very direct and concise, which, if you listen to an album like *Against The Grain*, that was almost the opposite approach—where I didn't care about concision at all, and I really just wanted to try to get as many vocabulary words as possible in a song.

**BRETT:** Such as rectilinear? Or sepsis?

**GREG:** I actually like that one. I like the use of rectilinear on

that.

**BRETT:** I do too.

"Rectilinear" actually came up in my new book. Hey Greg, guess what's out?

**GREG:** The new one by the Quicksilver guy?

**BRETT:** Yeah. [Greg laughs]

**GREG:** Too bad I'm going on tour in a couple of days, because I'll never carry that on an airplane.

**BRETT:** We're on the Neil Stephenson thing.

**GREG:** Yeah, Brett gave me the second book in the trilogy. Anyway, about the lyrics, I think it also has to do with the fact that I was doing a lot of academic writing last year, and that kind of influences you to be concise.

**Congratulations on your doctorate, by the way. I know you've been working on that for ages, at least since you put it on hold to start touring constantly like a decade ago.**

**GREG:** Thank you very much. It's been a long time since you've visited up here, but not much has changed since you were here last time. Except for now they call me doctor.

**Dr. Graffin.**

**GREG:** Nobody has to, I don't use it as a formal title.

**So gives us a concrete example of how that academic approach impacted this record.**

**GREG:** A song like "Atheist Peace," I don't think I could have written years before. I kind of shied away of the concept of Atheism even though we danced around it quite a bit. I find it to be a perfectly reasonable alternative. I think another thing is the level of confidence I have in my writing and having" foundation for my beliefs is at an all-time high right now. That doesn't mean I'm ripe for an



epiphany and of course I'll find that everything I believe in now is bogus some other day. They make a lot about graduating, moving on to another stage in life, and all those formalities of higher education. But it changes you. I'm sure any experience in any kind of institution when you pass a certain point, you just feel like a different person. All I can say is that this writing process felt a lot different than any other album, even during the time I was getting my bachelor's degree or my master's degree. Well I was telling Brett that I couldn't wait to get this record, just because I wanted to hear what you guys had to say about the current climate. It being a crucial time in our history much different from, say, any other of the last 24 years you've both been writing songs. [Greg laughs] In particular, as I was saying to him, songs like "Kyoto Now" show that you guys were speaking, even before 9/11, about the current administration's policies. Now it seems like you have a few more friends out there joining you in your descent. Like *Poster Children* have a couple of extremely critical songs on their new record such as "The Leader." It seems like the music community is finally starting to wake up to their responsibility to speak beyond just their opportuni-

new crop of punk rock bands. We won't go there, then. With your label here, that strikes me as being both prudent and generous. What is it like listening to something like *How Could Hell Be Any Worse* these days now that you've remastered and reissued it? You rather nicely namechecked it on the new LP, on "Los Angeles is Burning."

**BRETT:** I've gone through some different feelings about it, but now I think it's really cool. Maybe it's because garage is so popular now, but we really sound like a garage band more than a punk band.

**A sped up one.**

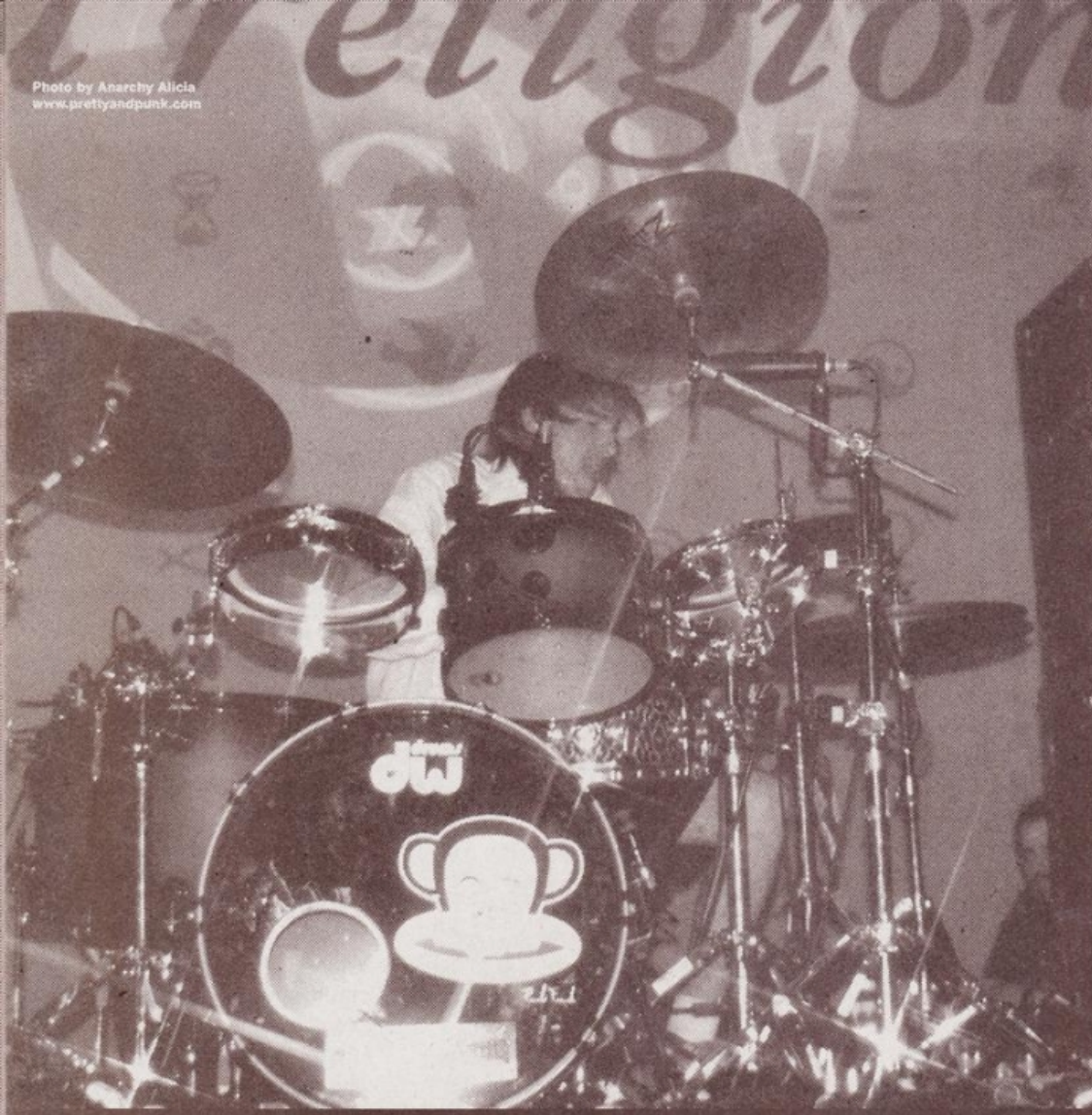
**BRETT:** I always used to think, "This sounds so crappy. It sounds kind of unprofessional and juvenile." I used to feel that way years ago about the time of the *Suffer* record, when I tried to make that record sound better. But now when I listen to *How Could Hell Be Any Worse*, I think, "Man, that's actually pretty cool!" I listen to it today and it sounds exciting and raw and I like it again. The remasters sound cool.

**All of them I thought were upgraded.**

**BRETT:** A lot louder, anyway. Digital dithering was just so crappy in like '88, when we started playing everything on CD. It mostly sounded grainy and quiet. We actually dug out the master tapes, not the multi-tracks, but the two tracks, to remaster it.

**Did you personally oversee**





ty. I imagined you guys chomping at the bit when you wrote for this record, judging from the thoughtful and sometimes sarcastic outpouring in songs such as the title track, "The Empire Strikes First." Does that seem likely?

**BRETT:** Well, I can't say I was chomping at the bit to write a record about the most dire state that my country's ever been in my lifetime. It almost makes me sad that I'm able to write this record, to be honest with you. When I set out to write a record this year, I knew what the theme had to be for me. What you said before about bands that are becoming awakened with responsibility, I'm not sure that it's a musician's responsibility [per se], but Bad Religion has always been of the mindset that music can be a force for social change. We've

never taken the fact that we have a voice for granted. We always try to use it as an important privilege, to say things that we thought needed to be said rather than just singing about a girlfriend.

**GREG:** I think the word responsibility does come up the most—

**Or opportunity.**

**GREG:** Well, opportunity, obviously, yeah. It's a great privilege to be in a position where people are going to listen to what you have to say. Correct me if I'm wrong, Brett, but I think the primary responsibility is just more to ourselves, to putting out quality material.

**BRETT:** There's no question about it.

**GREG:** I think Brett and I made a considerable effort this time to try to outdo *The Process of Belief* and we wanted to show people that that wasn't just a

fluke because Brett was coming back to the band, we were going back to Epitaph, we finished our major label play. It wasn't just a fluke, it was a spark of rejuvenation in the band and this is kind of a continued evidence for that.

**I thought *The Process of Belief* was the better of the two albums, but I totally agree with you about that spark, because I devoted 1000 words to that in my review of *The Process of Belief*, and I feel it in both LPs. I think both are equally valid.**

**GREG:** Equally valid? You mean in terms of the musical effort?

**Yes. As a critic, I get an awful lot of bad records.**

**[both laugh] Probably 25 bad ones a day! So to get a great album is really a privilege and a pleasure for me, in return, I don't take it for**

**granted as much as other people who don't have to sit through such a deluge of uninspired and mediocre music all day. I figured that more of what you were saying, that having the original collaboration restored, has really put a hot foot in the band. In that *Process* review, I talked specifically about all the different concrete and discernible ways in which Brett adds to the group again. He makes a good thing much, much better, both as a second, competing writer, as a backing vocalist—**

**BRETT:** As a lover and a friend. [Greg laughs]

**Right! Hà Hà. And his production expertise, too, and his way of making records in general. I just feel like the band is hitting all cylinders in terms of its impact in that**





EARLY DAYS  
Photo courtesy of Epitaph

regard both musically and lyrically again.

**GREG:** Yeah, I agree with you. In particular, again, a song like the title track, "The Empire Strikes First," aside from what I mentioned in my new review, I thought it was a virtual rewrite of "American Society" by "Eddie & The Subtitles."

[Greg laughs]

**BRETT:** It's "Everything Turns Gray" by Agent Orange.

Is it really?

**GREG & BRETT:** A virtual rewrite!

**BRETT:** It's definitely got an Orange County surf-punk thing to it.

In any case, I'm sticking with the Eddie & the Subtitles—you even use the same key chorus word, "drown"—but anyway, a sentiment like that song isn't commonly expressed at the

moment in music or the arts. You said you didn't look forward to writing this record, Brett, but to draw an analogy, I don't suppose Picasso "looked forward" to painting "Guernica" either.

**BRETT:** I think that's a happening analogy as an artist!

**GREG:** I never thought about it like that. The spontaneity of making art has to be acknowledged because if you try to set out to do something, usually you fuck it up, at least in my experience. And a lot of it is—**Square-pegged into a round hole.**

**GREG:** Yeah. [Laughs] A lot of it is you have a feeling, a sentiment, and you try to capture it in as many words as possible. Or in Bad Religion's case, in as many words in two minutes as possible.

**BRETT:** I look forward to writing every record with a mixture of

dread and anticipation, partially because when I sit down to write, I don't know if I'll be able to write something good. So I just hope I'm going to be able to. I've been very fortunate that I usually can crank out a couple of tunes that I think are decent that kind of takes the pressure off me and I can relax and write. The first song I wrote for this year, the first thing that came out that I thought was pretty decent was "All There Is." That's one of my favorite songs. The first song I wrote on Process was "Sorrow." It's very weird, because as a writer—just the writing process itself—is very un-Bad Religion, because it's very irrational. For me it's like I have to put myself in a vulnerable limbo to create a good song. That's the spiritual writing process.

Well certainly all the personal events in your life, for of

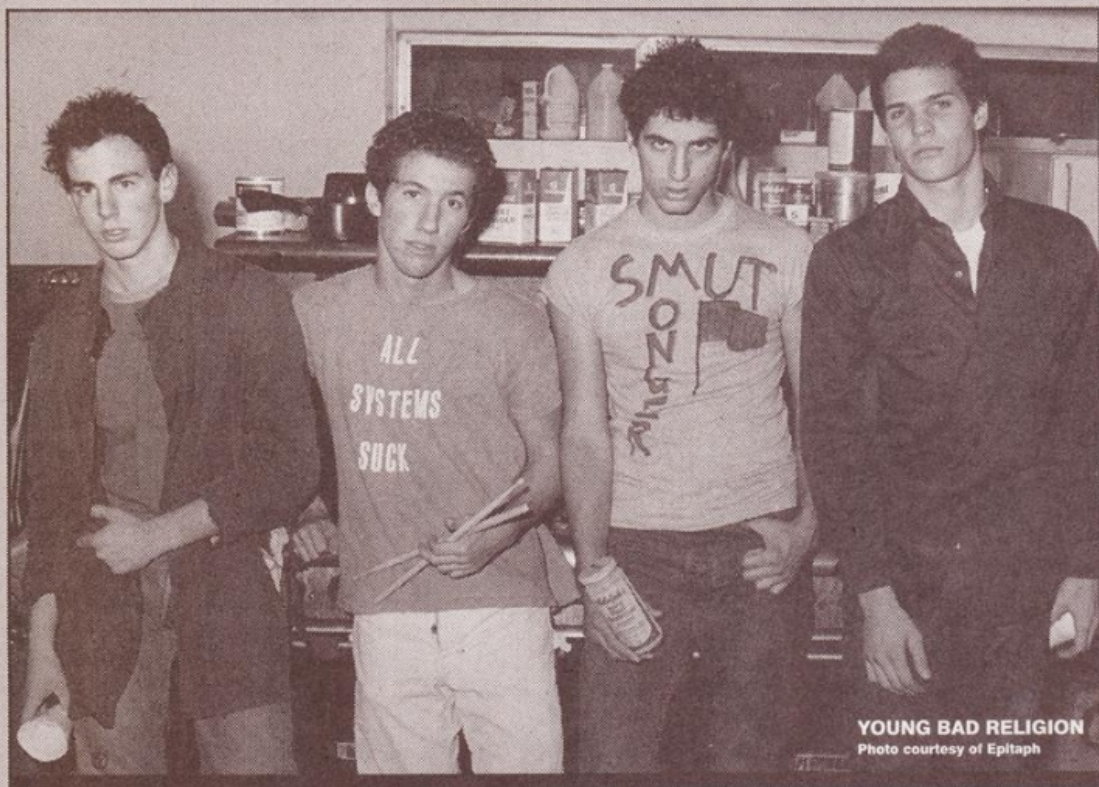
both you, you've been able to filter into the band. I'm thinking of "Two Babies in the Dark," 12 years ago, Brett, totally inspired by your becoming a father. But like you said also, the ability to speak generally will affect more people. I think that's been a big, consistent aspect of the band. It just keeps getting sharper. It must kick your ass Greg to know that Brett's going to come up with six or seven really great tunes then you want to keep up with him both musically and lyrically—which you didn't have the 7 years he was out of the band. And for you as well, Brett.

**BRETT:** He kicks my ass!

**GREG:** I've always said that the main reason that we have these good collections of songs is because Brett and I both know that the first person who's going to hear our ideas is our partner. I think Brett knows I'm his number one fan and I think he's a fan of mine. It puts a big burden of responsibility to try to impress him when I write something.

**BRETT:** I have to tell you that when Greg writes some tunes and plays them for me, he usually doesn't know which ones are great and which ones are just good. [Greg laughs] He'll go "Hey Brett, I got three or four songs. I don't really know what to think." And he'll play them for me, and I'll go, "Greg, two of those songs kick ass! And the other two are excellent Bad Religion songs." He'll say "Really?" And I'll say "Just trust me. [Greg laughs] That first one you played me is amazing. It's some of the best writing you ever did." And when I say that to him I set his mind at ease. I could hear one of his songs with nothing but piano and him singing, and I'll know from one time hearing it know that it is a great Bad Religion song. I can play him one of my songs and he can do the same thing for me, because he's picturing it with a background vocal





**YOUNG BAD RELIGION**  
Photo courtesy of Epitaph

Photo by Anarchy Alicia  
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arrangement, with a beat, the whole thing. We can both do that. That's one of the reasons we need each other, because quite frankly, the other guys in our band—not all of them, but most of them—I'll play them one of my new songs in demo form, and they'll be like "Uh." I'm like, "What do you mean?"

**GREG:** "I see where you're going with this. We can do something with that." [all laugh]

**BRETT:** It's very well known that we have a healthy competition that helps the records. I think what's less well known is that we're a support group for each other.

**GREG:** Yeah.

**BRETT:** A group within a group. We support each other and encourage each other.

**GREG:** Like you said, having all those years where Brett was out of the band and I wrote numerous songs... I was very prolific, but I didn't have his input, and that resulted in a far less streamlined approach to the Bad Religion album.

**BRETT:** He couldn't bounce them off me anymore.

**GREG:** Yeah. I learned a lot through that process about the importance of A&R, and Brett is an expert at it. I'm not. You

learn your shortcomings by doing. That's what I learned from that. It's weird, because I think I am a really a pretty good A&R person for Brett's songs, because I think I can picture myself singing them and I know how they're going to be delivered. It's usually when he knows it's a good a song that he wrote, that I just usually end up reinforcing that belief.

**BRETT:** I can't tell it's great until after Graffin sings the whole thing. I'll sing along with my songs, but I absolutely detest my own voice. [Greg laughs—Jack thinks better of mentioning the Daredevils single or Brett's solo turn singing on "20th Century Digital Boy"] Greg will attest to this. When we finally get together, I put some of my guitar in his songs, and he puts his voice on my songs, it's just a huge relief for both of us. [Jack laughs]

**GREG:** He's harder on himself than I am.

**BRETT:** It really does come together. We both write independently. For the last two records we spent more time than ever getting together after we got the first core of ideas—we usually get together in a songwriting conference and do

some recording.

**GREG:** We call it Bad Religion Summit Meetings. [All laugh] And it usually consists of Brett and I basically playing our demos for each other and then him putting guitar on my demo and me putting my voice on his demos.

**BRETT:** Then we do rehashing and refining.

**GREG:** That I think has aided tremendously, and that's something we could never do in the early days. Even when I lived in L.A. right across town, we didn't do that. [Laughs] Hey Jack, you know my mom right? I bought her a place out in the valley, so I've been spending a lot of time out there. So that's helped the process.

**I should mention I had breakfast today at Denny's.**

**BRETT:** Was Rodney [Bingenheimer] there?

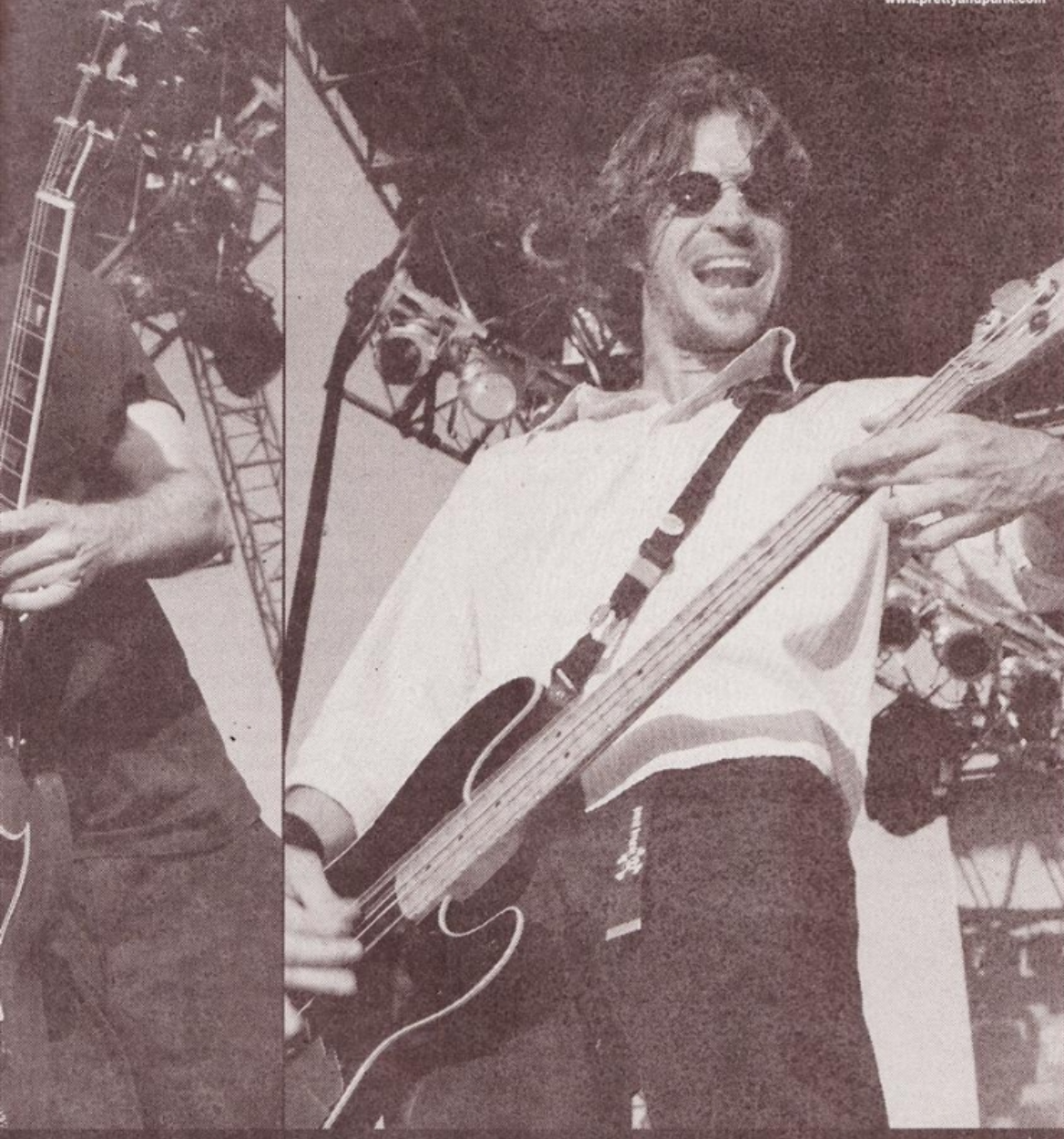
**I didn't realize that he goes to that particular one on Sunset not far from Vine. He ended up sitting at the table across from me. He sat down ten minutes after I did. I was like "Ha, what's the likelihood that!"**

**BRETT:** He's there everyday. **I went over and introduced myself at the end and said**

"Hey, I was on your show once in 1981. I'm sure you wouldn't remember me." He asked me what I was doing here and I said I was interviewing you guys. And you know what? He remembered the whole story of you giving him your first demo tape and stuff in 1981 and him immediately playing it on the radio.

**BRETT:** [Claps and imitates Rodney] "Alright!" [all laugh] I remember that! It's worth mentioning only because I've been rediscovering some of your earliest records by virtue of these reissues you guys have done. Because we're all 23 years older than when you





first released that first EP, and I bought it at Zed in Long Beach out here. In fact, your folks here at Epitaph contacted me, Brett, and I ended up sending a scan of the inside and outside fold-out cover for this reissue. Man, it's amazing how that stuff still holds up so well. How feral it sounds and yet not unpolished. You didn't even have your tonsils out yet, Greg!

**GREG:** I got my tonsils out halfway through How Could Hell Be Any Worse. [Jack, Brett and Greg laugh] I'm not sure if it was, it might have been... Weren't there about six months between the tracking of How Could Hell, Brett?

**BRETT:** I can't remember, man. I was too high. I have such a terrible memory of anything. I think [bassist] Jay Bentley would remember everything.

**GREG:** Yeah, except when he was blacked out. Which was the Suffer years. He doesn't remember Suffer through basically Against the Grain.

**BRETT:** He remembers just religious spots.

**There weren't any outtakes from any of those sessions worth putting on the records were there? I know a lot of your fans wanted to know why there weren't any bonus tracks of that sort, and I've been replying I thought you released every song you wrote and recorded back**

**then.**

**GREG:** Back then we didn't know what an outtake was.

**You just recorded everything you did and that was that, right?**

**BRETT:** And the tapes that we had were destroyed in a fire. They were in a vault at Gold Star Studios, which is where we mastered it.

**GREG:** Is that true?

**BRETT:** Yeah. The How Could Hell tapes aren't around anymore.

**GREG:** You know what, I'm actually upstairs in my bedroom right now, and I have a closet with four two-inch masters in it. But I think you're right—

**BRETT:** Oh, they're at your house! I always assumed that

they're gone. That would be awesome if you had them!

**GREG:** You know what I'm looking at them right now. It's "Faith in God," "Eat Your Dog,"—

**BRETT:** Dude! Let's mix that shit again!

**GREG:** "American Dream," "Voice of God," "White Trash," "Damned to Be Free," "Fuck Armageddon," "Doing Time," "Latch Key Kids" I think this is the album!

**BRETT:** Dude, we should bake those tapes, right?

**GREG:** Yeah!

**BRETT:** Because you have to bake them. I'm sure they won't play without being baked. We should bake it and we should dump it into a Pro-Tools HD rig.

**GREG:** That would be great.

**BRETT:** And then we'll have it. That will be awesome!

**GREG:** You know what's weird about this, Brett? We have "Drastic Actions" in here, too.

**BRETT:** You probably have the EP too, then.

**GREG:** No, we must have re-recorded...

**BRETT:** Right, we re-recorded "Drastic Actions" for the Public Service Comp.

**GREG:** Oh, right. Interestingly, it doesn't have the Peter Finestone sessions, though it's dated October 31st, 1981.

**BRETT:** We recorded that on Halloween? What?!?!

**GREG:** Yeah! [Jack laughs]

**BRETT:** I never knew that! That's awesome! That's a great little tidbit.

**GREG:** Because we got time. It was a holiday and everyone was off. We always got it from midnight to 6 AM.

**BRETT:** That's cool that you have those, man. Let's definitely digitize those and have fun with them.

**GREG:** Yeah, they're totally safe right now.

**Wasn't there some talk about remixing the second album too? [Brett looks confused] You know, that album that shall not be named.**

**[Greg laughs]**

**BRETT:** [Kidding] Oh, you mean Suffer?



No, I don't mean Suffer! Let me refresh your memory, kind sir. There's this album I bought in 1983, maybe it's

its time. [Greg laughs] **GREG:** I did an interview earlier and I was asked, "Are you embarrassed by any of your

music?" And I said, "Well if you think about what you were doing at the age of 15, you probably don't have to recall it, because it wasn't recorded for posterity." [Brett laughs] Everything I did is staring me in the face every day. About 50% of it is purely embarrassing. On that album there might be

some stuff that isn't embarrassing.

Like "Chasing the Wild Goose!"

**GREG:** Yeah, that's not totally embarrassing. There's a song on there that sounds like Jethro Tull mixed with Genesis with R.E.M.

**BRETT:** "Time and Disregard?"

**GREG:** Yeah, that's the one.

**BRETT:** What about the one that sounds like Journey meets Styx? [Greg laughs] "It's Only Over When You Give Up."

Those bands wish they wrote songs that good! That's a great song!!!!

**BRETT:** Here, I'll reveal something. This is some really obscure, arcane stuff which is perfect for The Big Takeover [and Amp]. Do you know what "Chasing the Wild Goose" is? It's my version of "Who Will Stop the Rain" by Credence Clearwater Revival. It really was! So there you go.

**GREG:** "Billy Gnosis" was "Come On Take The Money And Run" by... uhm...

**BRETT:** Steve Miller Band.

**GREG:** Exactly, yeah!

**BRETT:** There's a Neil Young song on Suffer, but I'll leave you to find it. You know what I'm talking about, right, Greg?

**GREG:** Oh yeah.

**BRETT:** There's more than one,

but there's one that's very, very direct.

Believe it or not, I think there's some lyrical themes on that second album you guys have unfortunately disowned that fit into the Bad Religion catalog quite well, though.

**BRETT:** Oh, all the lyrics in there, yeah!

"Time and Disregard" has echoes even on the new album on that second to last song. And you could more indirectly link it to "Live Again—The Fall of Man" as well.

**GREG:** Wow. That's some good editorial sleuthing there. I never put those two together, but it came from the same person. "Time and Disregard" is about the environment. And "Live Again" was about suicide bombings.

I was saying to Brett that "Atheist Peace" is sort of Revisiting the old Bad Religion theme of the effect of fundamentalist religion on the public discourse is sort of solidly on the line of old songs like "God Song" and "Voice of God is Government" and "Bad Religion." Do you agree?

**GREG:** I think that's probably right. I've been wanting to save these things for many records and maybe I've finally found my groove.

**BRETT:** He found his voice.

**GREG:** With the crap you get better at it, if you take it seriously. I hope this exemplifies some of my progress.

Well you mentioned "Billy Gnosis," and I'm still waiting for the latest installment of Brett's lyrical "Billy" chronicles.

**BRETT:** We were going to do another Billy song, and we were going to call it the [New War] Part 1.

The prequel.

**BRETT:** Right, we didn't end up doing it 'cause we have enough long song titles as it is. We'll have to have another Billy someday. Kids on the [message] board want to know what

Billy Gnosis means. It's basically my tribute to Billy Pilgrim.

[Kurt Vonnegut's] Slaughterhouse Five, yeah. We've spoken of this in the past.

**BRETT:** The Kurt Vonnegut character. But then I use the name Billy in another song, but it's a more autobiographical song.

Sometimes I think he, that is you Billy, stands for the ultimate punk rock misfit archetype that Bad Religion sometimes visits in its songs, certainly on The Process of Belief, and Greg, some of the songs you wrote on the last two LPs before Brett rejoined, No Substance and The New America].

**BRETT:** That's a nice way of putting it. Sure.

Greg, what's it been like for you listening to the remastered versions of the old records. I asked Brett this. Is it like looking at snapshots of yourself from 20 years ago?

**GREG:** Not really. It might not have the same effect on me, because I play so many concerts a year, that before I go on tour, I go to my own private rehearsal—so that the week leading up to the tour, I basically put my CD player on random. And I have a five-disc changer, so the first thing that jumped out at me was just how much better it sounds. I always relive those snapshots in rehearsal. It doesn't have a nostalgic effect on me, because every year when we play those songs, I sort of give them a modern flair. I try to infuse modernity into them. The first thing that jumped out was the sound. It sounds great. It's reminiscent of analog recordings. That's a bygone era, the sound of analog. I guess that's the nostalgic part. It's the sound of the turntable without the scratches. That's certainly a thing you to get in a remastering session.

**GREG:** Yeah and I think we did a good job on that. Hey Brett,

## BAD RELIGION SUFFER



in the back of your closet somewhere, Greg! [Greg laughs] A rather misunderstood record called Into the Unknown that I recently said in my review inadvertently pre-dated the 1990s' alterna-rock explosion!

**BRETT:** [Kids some more] Yeah, does it have kind of a goth-prog vibe to it? [Greg laughs]

Hmmm. It may have!

**BRETT:** Ah, it seems to ring a bell!

Although, with a careful remix some of that can be slightly lessened.

**BRETT:** Hey Greg, I came up with a title of a record that we could do.

**GREG:** What's that?

**BRETT:** How Could Into the Unknown Be Any Worse. [All laugh loudly]

Maybe you should re-record the whole album without synthesizers. I've said this before: There are some great songs on there, and it's a pity it's the one record of yours your fans will never hear again if you don't find some way to reissue it in a manner that makes it more palatable to you both.

**BRETT:** [Playing with Jack's words, his tongue in cheek] Some of that soloing was the most misunderstood music of



who mastered it again?

**BRETT** was saying how much he liked *No Control* in retrospect listening to these.

**GREG:** It's funny, because that album, when it came out left such a bad taste in Brett's mouth, because he used a piece of outboard equipment that he hated that the guy talked him into. He was convinced that he had ruined the record. [Jack laughs] I think on hearing it again, he realized it's not really ruined at all.

**BRETT:** No, it sounds pretty amazing. It sounds really punk. **I always thought of that one and *Against the Grain* together as one hour-long album, they're both so aggressive, so furious.**

**GREG:** A lot of people call that the holy trinity.

**Oh, with *Suffer*.**

**GREG:** Yeah. So maybe today if we can continue this, we'll try to make a modern trinity with *Process of Belief*, this album and whatever comes next.

**An atheist trinity. [All laugh] What haven't I introduced that you guys would really like to talk about? What have you two been thinking about a lot lately?**

**GREG:** We're going on tour for the rest of the summer starting on Tuesday, so I can't say I've been focused on too many worldly things, because I've been trying to tidy things ready to abandon.

**BRETT:** I think I've been thinking on music more than anything else and I'm not going on tour. Basically the Iraq war, and all these books that have recently come out that reveal what an impotent job Bush is doing keeping our country secure. And just frustration and the general vein of conservatism that seems to be flowing through what is traditionally been an anti-establishment counter-culture—by which I mean punk rock. It's really been weighing heavily on my mind.

**GREG:** Well, Jack you've been doing a lot of interviews. Have you noticed that, 'cause when Brett and I got back from the

**"I think I've been thinking on music more than anything else and I'm not going on tour. Basically the Iraq war, and all these books that have recently come out that reveal what an impotent job Bush is doing keeping our country secure. And just frustration and the general vein of conservatism that seems to be flowing through what is traditionally been an anti-establishment counter-culture—by which I mean punk rock. It's really been weighing heavily on my mind."**

European press junket, I realized that almost every journalist overseas asked me, and probably Brett as well, why there is such a load of bands that call themselves punk here that aren't willing to speak or even state any opinion at all.

**Right, mostly, all of the anti-war or anti-establishment songs I've heard have been coming from bands that aren't particularly punk rock groups.**

**GREG:** Yeah, that's what they were saying, and they were asking me a lot about my opinion on that.

**Although, the people you came up with have been the exception—for instance the new *T.S.O.L.* album. The *Descendents* had one on their new album.**

**BRETT:** The people of our generation, right.

**We all saw *The Clash* when we were kids, so that's ingrained in our outlook of punk rock.**

**BRETT:** Some of us, like me, actually saw the Vietnam War on TV. We know what it's like. It's very odd for me to see young punk rockers who consider themselves dittoheads or fans of Rush Limbaugh. They consider liberal to be a dirty word and yet they consider themselves to be punk. This doesn't make any sense.

Liberals have been responsible for every meaningful reform in the United States in the last 100 years. What is punk rock about a reactionary conservative? It's almost like a bizarre, mutated version of straight edge that was never meant to be!

**I said in an editorial once that rock 'n' roll itself was the ultimate liberal outbreak, because it was opposed by conservatives. Black people made it and we didn't want our white kids listening to that if we were conservative family values types!**

**BRETT:** Right. Good example. I find it very saddening and also very threatening and frightening that we have this. That punk rock, much of it is mainstream, and beyond mainstream now, that it actually has swung to the conservative side of the spectrum. Even when metal was mainstream, with groups like Def Leppard and Motley Crue, I'd very much doubt you'd hear these groups back in the '80s days of hair metal—I don't think you'd hear David Lee Roth sing how great Reagan is. [Jack and Greg laugh] Even that would have been shocking and he wasn't even punk. I don't get it. I've spent an enormous amount of time thinking about it. I'll admit, this is what I do. I don't have any simple answers, but you asked me what I was think-

ing about a lot lately. I heard kids say, "Hey, you should go to conservativepunk.com" or "Johnny Ramone is a conservative and he was in the first punk band ever." So there you go, punk rock has a "rich legacy" of conservatives. [Jack laughs] It's like, "Hey dipshit, Joey Ramone wasn't a conservative." And the fact that Johnny was...

**Broke up the band.**

**BRETT:** Yeah! Nobody got along because of that. Joey, Dee Dee, and Tommy weren't. The fact that this guy was conservative had nothing to do with the fact that he could downstroke on his guitar so well.

**GREG:** I know.

**I actually saw Joey Ramone sing at a Jerry Brown rally in Washington Square Park. He sang "Censorshit." So there goes that! [all laugh]**

**BRETT:** Right, Joey was very liberal and Dee Dee was very liberal. They wrote the songs, and Johnny never did. There's no such thing as a rich legacy of right-wing punk rock. Unless you're talking about Screwdriver, and that's always been the ugly antithesis underbelly to punk rock that we've always had to contend with it. **Yeah, but by an extreme minority before, and rigorously opposed even in England, when they became the white power band.**



**BRETT:** Right, and the nazi punks have always been rigorously opposed to the U.S. even when Jello [Blafra, Dead Kennedys] wrote that song [1981's "Nazi Punks Fuck Off"] back in the day.

**GREG:** I think a lot of the kids are totally confused because they see pop punk becoming so popular that it's almost—well it is mainstream—so then they think the only way to rebel against it is to be "what's the most unpopular viewpoint that we could possibly express as a punker?" [Brett and Jack laugh] I guess it's "I'm an ultra-conservative punk."

**BRETT:** It's to love the lord and vote for George Bush. [Greg laughs]

**Don't laugh, my mom, who is a lifelong Republican, said she admires Bush so much because, in her words, "He's a good Christian man." And my mom is far from dumb. That's what we have to contend with on a larger scale than the punk rock sliver of the population, I guess.**

**BRETT:** It's very frightening when you have the leader of the free world with his finger on the button, with a strong, strong conviction that what he's doing is right, and yet he doesn't read books and he's a born-again Christian. So where does his conviction come from?

**I don't even think he had a passport before he got elected. That's awful. If he did, he sure didn't use it.**

**BRETT:** His conviction comes from God. He prayed and God told him that what he's doing is the right thing. That's where he derives his conviction. That's frightening.

**That's messianic.**

**BRETT:** And it makes the war a religious war, because it certainly isn't about [Osama] Bin Laden. The fact is we're doing nothing to deter Islamic extremists, in fact we're doing everything to foam it and rally their cause, while we sidetrack our effort to fight terror by invading Iraq and getting ourselves deeper and deeper into a quag-

naire.

**JACK:** That's completely the thesis of the new Richard Clarke book, *Against All Enemies*.

**BRETT:** Yeah, which I read. **I finished it on the plane out here. He was the counter terrorism guy for the last several administrations, so he ought to know!**

**BRETT:** I had to have my political pontification. **Well that was my question, it allows you to speak unprompted by the interviewer. As a way of wrapping this up, when we were sitting here before you got here Greg, I was telling Brett how much I admire "Los Angeles is Burning" and he was talking about how aside from my initial thesis of the song, as being a comment on man's "hubris" thinking that we can outwit nature, particularly the Los Angeles area—**  
**GREG:** Ha ha! Yeah! That's right! Hubris!

**—with its complete lack of water sources, even after stealing the Owens River [a premise of the movie Chinatown as well] and the Colorado ever since. And now this tract housing where there used to be natural firewalls. He was talking about how there was a great deeper meaning in the song about the shallowness of the news media and how it reports things, I was also talking earlier about some other songs that hearken back to previous themes, and I think "Los Angeles in Burning" in that sense hearkens back to another song on the recent reissues, the closing track on Generator, "Only Entertainment" doesn't it?**

**BRETT:** Quite a bit! Yes! **The way the infotainment has completely co-opted actual information in our society.**

**GREG:** If you look to an average teenage kid during the enlightenment period a few hundred years ago, and you look at the activities that they

spent their time doing, it was dominated by reading—and of course today it's dominated by watching. That becomes reality for most people. How do they measure up to the images they are seeing on television and in the movies?

**BRETT:** What do you call it when the news media, rather than reflecting reality, actually conjure or create reality? I would call it propaganda. I wouldn't call it reporting. I'm really excited about the new video we're gonna be doing for "Los Angeles is Burning," because one of the images—it's going to be an animated video—one of the images will be the TV cameras. And instead of capturing the fire, the TV cameras will be spewing fire. It will be a very interesting and metaphorical depiction. **This speaks to what you were saying about politics, that if kids are confused—and not just punk kids—it's gotta be partly down to their wanting to be entertained by their information. And then getting a distorted view of information besides, it's like a double play.**

**BRETT:** I don't think you can blame the confusion on the media, though. It takes the very slightest amount of initiative. With the Internet and the amount of information out in the world that's available today, there's no excuse not to be informed.

**Yeah. That's a good point. Although it does also require curiosity in an age with an incurious president, as he's often described.**

**BRETT:** Exactly! You know, the [deposed Bush Treasury secretary] Paul O'Neill book describes him as incurious. **I know, I read that one too. I like reading the ones by the lifelong Republicans who served previous Republican presidents who were there in the inside of this administration, as opposed to some biased armchair pundit on either side. They have more credibility, even for all the**

**Bush attempts to discredit them. They just seem so vindictive at being criticized and having their truths revealed like that.**

**BRETT:** Me too! Why aren't the whistleblowers getting more attention? Everyone pays attention to right-wing whistleblowers, yet when a liberal president gets a blow-job, they're like "Hey, let's impeach him!" **It's pretty ridiculous, isn't it? Anything to add to that, Greg?**

**GREG:** I came across a book that you can read in only an afternoon. It's called *Godless Constitution*. This is by a history scholar from Cornell, who's an award-winning writer named Isaac Okramnick. It's a very short, little book, only about 170 pages, and it shows how the founding fathers, the true American fathers, struggled and spilt blood, so that we would remove all rhetoric of religion from the country's founding documents. And how corrupted they would feel if they were alive today! [all laugh]

**That's something I subscribe to myself, so that's fair enough.**

**GREG:** That's one of the most precious and important American legacies, I think and it's being trampled on.

**I agree. Especially since 75 years later we're still fighting the Scopes Monkey Trial, about letting our public schools teach evolution. It's insane! You're an evolutionary biologist Greg, so I know that it bothers you as much as me.**

**GREG:** Oh, there's no better example.

**Gentleman, Brett has an important record company I am keeping him from running, and Greg, you have an imminent tour to prepare for. Gentlemen, I thank you for your time and for your honesty, as Brett said.**

**BOTH:** Thanks Jack! [Greg and Jack talk hockey for a few minutes and then they hang up. Pity about the Rangers, they agree.]